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Tornare alle domande degli Antichi?

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## “Seeing for oneself”: The significance of Herodotus’ *Histories* for intercultural research

Flavia Monceri

### *Introduction*

This paper moves from the idea that the researcher’s position and the search for an adequate approach to (cultural) diversity, two core issues for the theory and practice of intercultural research, involve a number of difficulties because they are still usually addressed, if inadvertently, from within the exclusive framework of Western modern science. As is well known, according to such framework the researcher should strive to behave as an “unbiased neutral observer” (even when engaging in so-called “participant observation”), whereas cultures and the differences they show should be considered as research “objects”, whose boundaries might be more or less clearly individuated. This is not to say that other epistemic options are not available and/or performed, but only that they have been, and still are, silenced and marginalized because the discourse of “Western modern science” has been able to become predominant, to the extent that it still successfully presents itself as the only game in town (for a discussion see, among others, Mignolo 2011).

On the contrary, the two above-mentioned issues should be considered as recurring problems to which different and competing solutions can be given in any time and place. Therefore, a reading of Herodotus’ *Histories* with a special attention to his positions on those issues could be useful, at the very least, to debunk the idea that only a particular understanding of “science” and a particular version of the “scientific method” is the most correct one, and therefore the only viable option to conceive of whatever type of “research” in contemporary times. As a matter of fact, Herodotus’ *Histories* provide us with plenty of examples of intercultural encounters, and hence with

the possibility to rethink the figure of the “intercultural researcher” and the “intercultural method” from a different point of view not least because, from the perspective of modern Western science, and for all the attempts to “justify” Herodotus’ historical method as “fitting” to its 19<sup>th</sup> century positivistic accounts, his standpoint must be considered as pre-modern and therefore also pre-scientific, or not-yet-fully-scientific, for a number of reasons.

The importance of an intercultural reading of Herodotus’ *Histories* has already been stressed, among others, from the part of scholars interested in showing that «the Mediterranean world at the time of Herodotus was characterized by centuries of cultural contact and exchange» and that therefore «we should try to explore the ways in which the stories in Herodotus presuppose and reflect this long-term process of intercultural communication in the ancient Mediterranean world» (Vlassopoulos 2013: 50). Moreover, there are also scholars who state that «by demonstrating the extent of intercultural interconnectedness, and showing how that interconnectedness destabilizes every conventional notion of culture and politics as “fixed”, Herodotus encourages his audience to embrace the hybrid» (McWilliams 2013: 745). The notion of hybridity, then, would be a central issue in Herodotus’ work, although it has emerged in very recent times (see notably Bhabha 1994). If we consider these and similar positions, then, reading Herodotus to try and address, if not solve, some of the difficulties still affecting intercultural research seems to be justifiable, of course if we remain at the same time aware that in Herodotus’ times “interculturality” could be in all likelihood neither a “research object”, nor a “research field”.

### 1. *Herodotus and the “historian”*

As is well known, Herodotus is considered the “Father of History” for a number of reasons, among them the use of prose writing, instead of poetry, and the presence of a guiding question from which the “facts” of the past are investigated, interrogated and interpreted<sup>1</sup>. Anyway, as François Hartog

<sup>1</sup> See, among others, Jennifer T. Roberts: «It was said that Herodotus, born around 484 BC, moved the young Thucydides to tears by reciting parts of his works. To the groundbreaking Herodotus, then, the Roman man of letters Cicero gave the title *pater historiae*, “Father of History” – although he conceded that *The Histories* contained countless legends» (2011: 2). For a general introduction to Herodotus’ thinking and its relationships with the Greek culture of the times, see, among others, Bakker, De Jong, van Wees 2002; Dewald, Marincola 2006.

writes, we might legitimately ask ourselves: «Father, surely, but for whom and meaning what? For the ancients? Or for us, the moderns, inheritors of a historical culture fashioned by and through the Western tradition?» (Hartog 2000: 384). To be sure, if Herodotus can be considered the Father of history, it would seem a truism to state that he is indeed a historian, especially considering that «if the Greeks were inventors of anything, they invented the historian rather than the history» (*ivi*, 393). The point is that when we speak of history today we understand it in a very different way and this has an impact also on the individual who performs history, that is to say the historian. Today’s different understanding of history and the historian is not simply due to the fact that definitions change through time, but that *our* definitions are based upon very different presuppositions, which were elaborated, or rather constructed, in the period of Western modernity, systematized in the period of the Western Enlightenment, and institutionalized in the course of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. And although those presuppositions have been later deconstructed, together with all the “disciplines” they helped to create in the process, the idea is still alive that history should be a “science” and the historian a “scientist”.

As James M. Banner, Jr. highlights, although we can state that «history must start from a time beyond accurate knowledge, when history was oral chronicle, history of a kind more familiar to us – a means of securely recording and formally trying to understand the results of human agency in the past free from myth and fiction – originated in the era of Herodotus and Thucydides» (2012: 7). Anyway, this kind of history is not yet the one we are now familiar with, because «as a discipline – a distinct branch of knowledge possessing an agreed-on general subject matter, particular methods of inquiry and presentation, and specific canons of evaluation – history’s beginnings belong to the nineteenth century» (*ibidem*), due to the work of scholars such as Leopold Ranke. In fact, as Banner continues, «in addition to setting the agenda for historical research and practice for a century, Ranke and his successors [...] adopted an Enlightenment ideal of scientific, objective history arrived at through the application of evidence-based reasoning» (*ivi*: 9).

The construction of history as a “scientific discipline” was of course a very difficult process, not least because it required integrating the way Herodotus and other Ancient historians thought of, and performed, history, by means of getting rid of the difficulties inherent to that very integration. As a collateral outcome of such a process of systematization also the figure of the historian changed dramatically, becoming something very different

from the idea that the Ancients probably had of it. In fact, «the early professional historians of Germany made historical work a vocation», and «by establishing the standards and process by which historians would be trained and by creating the recognized, compensated occupation of “historian”, however the definition of that occupation might change, they enabled future historians to chart their paths of professional work» (Banner 2012: 9). But the dark side of this process was that it eliminated the possibility of alternative options, including the one that the Ancients’ different understanding of “doing history” might have provided the contemporary professional historians with. Be it as it may, the most important result of the process is that if we evaluate Herodotus’ conception of history and the historian moving from our current definitions, he paradoxically results the father neither of history nor of the historian.

So the questions arise: «If Herodotus is a historian, in what sense is he? And if Herodotus is not a historian, how should we define him?». From an overview of the literature, part of which I will briefly discuss in the following, it comes out that Herodotus is defined in very different ways, in addition to a historian: a *tourist*, a *reporter*, an *ethnographer*, an *anthropologist*, a *storyteller*, and so on. This seems to point to the fact that the way in which Herodotus understands his “research” [*historiê*] requires different but coexisting abilities, which in our times are considered instead typical of different “professions”. Of course, this depends primarily from the circumstance that in Herodotus’ times disciplines were not so sharply separated as they are today, especially in the Greek cities of Ionia, to which also Herodotus’ hometown Halicarnassus belonged. But this also points to a particular positioning of Herodotus, which can give us useful hints from an intercultural viewpoint, as we can deduce from the following passage by Jennifer T. Roberts:

The Halicarnassus of Herodotus’s day stood at the crossroads of East and West, sporting a mixture of Greek and native inhabitants and cultures. The locals were Carians, some of whom Homer said fought as allies of Troy in the Trojan War. Our sketchy information about Herodotus’s relatives includes both Greek names and Carian ones. [...] Herodotus’s way of looking at things was no doubt shaped and enriched by the mixed culture of his native city, as well as by the perils of the imperial mindset that Athens had taken over from Persia. The Greek cities of Ionia, moreover, were hotbeds of innovative and often audacious thought. In the absence of firmly established scientific methods, what we now think of as discrete intellectual disciplines – natural science, philosophy, psychology, theology – merged far more than they do today. [...] To this tradition of Ionian curiosity and scepticism Herodotus was heir (2011: 8-9).



In other terms, Herodotus was not only coming from a multicultural city, as we would define it today, but he could also experience daily intercultural encounters, which surely had an impact on his subsequent approach to “historical knowledge”. Put differently, the particularity of Herodotus’ “research” or “history” can be traced back jointly to the general non-disciplinary approach to the study of natural and human things typical of the Ancient, pre-scientific, world, and to his personal collocation within a clearly multicultural milieu, in which intercultural encounters were a plain fact of everyday life. This does not imply, of course, that an intercultural *attitude* was there as we conceive of it today: probably just the opposite. Since interculturality was kind of a routine embedded in everyday life, it might make sense to think of it as a given, so to speak, something that was taken for granted, but that did not necessarily imply the need to overcome an ethnocentric gaze.

In this sense, I agree with James Redfield’s (1985: 97) suggestion that it is difficult to consider Herodotus as an anthropologist in the meaning we give to such a “profession” nowadays. In fact, «Herodotus merely notes particular traits; he is not concerned with the functional, structural, or stylistic coherence of the cultures he describes» and he «notes points which distinguish this people from others, and especially points which a Greek finds odd, and therefore repellently interesting» (*ibidem*). Hence, from this point of view «Herodotus often appears as just such a “wondering stranger” or, as we would say, *tourist* [...], and his relativism seems just such a tourist’s relativism» (*ivi*: 99). In other terms,

the tourist, in fact, travels in order to be a foreigner, which is to say, he travels in order to come home. He discovers his own culture by taking it with him to places where it is out of place, discovers its specific contours by taking it to places where it does not fit. Tourism is thus both a proof and a source of cultural morale. [...] The tourist comes home with a new knowledge that he is at home, with a new appreciation of the only place where he is not a foreigner. Thus cultural relativism becomes ethnocentric and serves to reinforce the tourist’s own norms; since he is Greek it is proper that he continue to be Greek (*ivi*: 100).

In short, the tourist does not need to hold or to gain what we would name an intercultural attitude, since her purpose in travelling out of the boundaries of her “culture” does not primarily consist in engaging in intercultural encounters, but rather in visiting “strange” places and people, whose interest lies just in their “being so strange”. Indeed, this may even be an effective way to reinforce her sense of belonging to her home culture,

in which things are as they should be and not as “strange” as they are abroad. However, it seems also undeniable that Herodotus makes something more than a tourist does: he *narrates* his “stories” [*logoi*] in a written form and for a wider public than that including his closest relatives and friends, as tourists are used to doing, and in a sense this may allow to think of Herodotus as a “storyteller” (Roberts 2011: ch. 7; Griffiths 2006).

At the same time, it can be stated that Herodotus’ work has to do with what we call “ethnography” and that it contains ethnographical descriptions, not only because «at the time Herodotus was writing, there was no rigid separation between genres such as geography, ethnography, and historiography», but also because he «built on the work of his predecessors, especially Hecataeus of Miletus (author of a geographical and a mythographic work), to produce something more substantial: a collection of empirical data that lets Herodotus and his (contemporary and future) audience examine both the variety and the constants of human behaviour» (Rood 2006: 291). Hence, Herodotus’ ethnographical descriptions can be also considered as part of an attempt «to increase his audience’s understanding of how human behaviour is moulded by culture and environment and to encourage reflection on how difficult it is for one people to read another people’s set of different cultural assumptions with any certainty» (*ivi*: 304).

We can therefore conclude that Herodotus’ *Histories* clearly pertain to both history and ethnography. However, the fact remains that what Herodotus «records differs in many critical ways from our notion of history» (Lefkowitz 2009: 253). To take only some instances, «he tells us very little about economics and trade or political philosophies», «he only occasionally describes the buildings and landscapes that he has seen, and only if they are directly germane to his narrative», and «he did not rely on documentary sources»: in short, «in modern terms he is more like an investigative reporter than a professional historian», and «essentially the accuracy of his narrative depended on the accuracy of his informants, including his own eyes and ears» (*ibidem*). This characterization of Herodotus as a “reporter” can be surely added to the ones already mentioned above. But the point is that the set of different labels available to try and define Herodotus and his work are not yet able to help us give any answer to the question concerning the reason why it should be so important to state what kind of “professional researcher” Herodotus actually was.

Although this was not the case in the intellectual context in which Herodotus lived, answering this question is important *for us* today in order to correctly collocate him within *our* view of “science” and his work within

the range of what can be properly defined as “scientific research”. According to such view, namely, a historian, an anthropologist, an ethnographer, a reporter and even a storyteller all have detectable and separate features defining the borders of their “profession”, as well as of their research abilities and limits. Herodotus, in this sense, is the representative of a world in which such borders among different kinds of research were not as relevant as they are for us today, because there was no fixed definition of “research” and “science”. However, stating that, according to our standards, Herodotus cannot be identified once and for all as a historian sounds somewhat weird, especially because it implies discarding Herodotus’ self-identification as a historian because he performs *historiê*. Conversely, if we decide to accept Herodotus self-identification we find ourselves in a sense obliged to acknowledge that it may exist a different way to conceive of history, one which is not bounded to be faithful to the particular version of the “scientific worldview” that became dominant only many centuries after Herodotus’ life and work.

To sum up, from what I have been saying so far it can be concluded that Herodotus is surely not an unbiased neutral observer and that he claims to be recognized as a historian not on the basis of some already established notion of history (which was of course not yet there) or of a codified research method shared by a “scientific community”, but merely on the basis of his self-identification and self-presentation to the readers as a historian. From this point of view, I agree with Hartog when he states that in the *Histories* Herodotus «in the service of no particular power, with his very first words [...] begins to define and claim the narrative form which begins with the use of his own name», in the sense that «he is the author of his account (*logos*) and it is this account that establishes his authority», although – obviously – «the paradox lies in the fact that, at the same time, this newly claimed authority has yet to be fully constructed» (Hartog 2000: 393).

## 2. *Cultural diversity and historiê*

As I have already mentioned, in Herodotus’ times intercultural encounters seem to have been something embedded in everyday life, transforming the experience of cultural differences and diversity in a given. This seems to apply also to the distinction between “the Greeks” and “the Barbarians” that we find mentioned at the very beginning of *The Histories*:

Herodotus of Halicarnassus here displays his inquiry [*historiè*], so that human achievements may not become forgotten in time, and great and marvellous deeds – some displayed by Greeks, some by barbarians – may not be without their glory; and especially to show why the two peoples fought with each other (Herodotus 2003: 3).

According to Hartog, such «distinction had appeared between the sixth and fifth centuries, starting with the Persian Wars, which territorialized the Barbarians geographically and gave them a face: that of the Persians» (2000: 393). But Herodotus did not simply accept and reproduce such already established distinction. He «went even further [...] in constructing a political rationale for distinguishing between Greeks and Barbarians, which also offered a political perspective on the Greek past», to the extent that «the word “Barbarian” came to signify not primarily, or necessarily, barbarism (cruelty, excess, laxity), but political difference», in that it «separated those who chose to live in city-states from those who never managed to get along without kings» (*ibidem*). Indeed, it can be stated that in general «the way Herodotus integrates geographical and ethnographical information into his narrative of imperial expansion highlights the political aspects of scientific inquiry», especially if we take into account that «Herodotus was writing from the point of view of the invaded Greeks, not the invading Persians», and that therefore «it may seem significant [...] that Herodotus holds up his narrative of the Persians’ imperialist march by lingering on the customs of those who succumb to or resist them» (Rood 2006: 294).

If this already sheds a light in and for itself on the unavoidably “participating” and even “culturally biased” nature of Herodotus self-positioning as a researcher/historian, it also allows to further elaborate on his more general view of the world he decides to narratively reconstruct in his *Histories*. As a matter of fact, he «sees the world as a place dominated by the motion of cultures as they intersect and overlap» in space and in time, in the sense that «people and cultures move across geographic space, and all peoples and cultures move through time», to the extent that «the world of *The History* is fluid in both the physical and chronological sense, a view that highlights the concepts that we now encompass in the word “hybridity”» (McWilliams 2013: 746). Of course, Herodotus “observes” and “reconstructs” such hybrid world from a specific, culturally biased, viewpoint – that of a Greek – allowing to maintain that «the *Histories* is a Greek book for Greeks about Greeks and others and it makes Greek sense of the others» (Redfield 1985: 102). At the same time, however, it can be also stated that «Herodotus’ account of the earth extremities encourages readers or listeners to think through and question their own preconceptions», to the extent that at some

specific points he «relativises notions of superiority», for instance when he notes that «the Egyptians call all those who do not speak their own language “barbarians” (2.158.5)»<sup>2</sup>, so suggesting that «Greeks are barbarians to Egyptians just as Egyptians are barbarian to Greeks» and, more generally, encouraging the latter «to think about how other cultures view foreign peoples, and so how they as Greeks appear in to others in much the same way that foreign peoples appear to Greeks» (Rood 2006: 298).

Beyond this general remarks about Herodotus’ attitude towards cultural diversity, the most relevant question is that concerning the method and tools he adopts to exercise his inquiring gaze on differences and diversity. From this point of view, the Greek notion of *theoria* seems to be the most relevant one to start addressing that question, in that it broadly indicated «the activity of those who cross borders to seek knowledge», an activity that «brings cultures into conversation with one another» (McWilliams 2013: 747). As Redfield stresses, «*theoria* has a particular meaning of going to see the great spectacles, the international games and festivals of the Greeks, sometimes as a member of an official party – but the word was also used in the general sense of going to see another country» (1985: 98). For his part, Herodotus «was neither the first nor the last Greek to spend some part of his life improving himself by visiting foreign parts» and, as it seems, he «was interested in natural wonders and imposing monuments, but he had a special interest in the life of the peoples, in what we would call their culture» (*ibidem*).

*Theoria*, however, was also «a term adopted by the philosophers for their own activity» (Redfield 1985: 102) and this, in my opinion, allows to clearly link the activity to “go and see” other places to the apparently static activity to search for the truth through thinking. What connects both activities with one another is an understanding of knowledge that does not keep the intellectual activity of thinking separated from those involving the senses, especially the sight. The very same word chosen by Herodotus to characterize his endeavor, *historiê*, bears witness of the basic inseparability of thinking and seeing. In fact, as Hartog stresses, the word *historiê* «(the ionic form of *historia*) is an abstract word, formed from the verb *historein*, to inquire», which «in all the meaning of the word, means to go and see for

<sup>2</sup> For the reader’s reference I quote the passage of the *Histories* to which Tim Rood refers: «The construction of the canal in the time of King Necos cost the lives of 120,000 Egyptians. Necos did not complete the work, but broke it off in deference to an oracle, which warned him that his labour was all for the advantage of the “barbarian” – as the Egyptians call anyone who does not speak their language».

oneself», and «expresses more a state of mind and an approach than a specific field» (Hartog 2000: 394). Moreover, «*historia* is derived from *histôr*, which is related to *idein*, to see, and *oida*, I know» (*ibidem*), so linking inquiry, sight and knowledge. More generally, it should not be forgotten that «epistemologically, the Greeks always privileged seeing (over hearing) as the mode of knowledge», that therefore «to see, to see for oneself, and to know were one and the same thing» (*ivi*: 286), and that this had important consequences also for the definition of the “historical method” based upon *autopsy* [*autopsia*], that is to say upon “seeing for oneself”.

Now, if it is true that there is a preference for sight over hearing, it follows that «autopsy is regarded as the safest method of verifying the truth, with the examination of eyewitnesses playing a supporting and supplementary role, or serving as a last resort, since no historian can have first-hand knowledge of all the events that they present, even if they are concerned with writing contemporary history» (Miltios 2016: 1). Beyond that, «the distinction that Herodotus makes between what he himself has seen and what he has learnt from his sources affirms the notion of the superiority of sight over hearing» (*ivi*: 3). This may lead to state, to formulate it in Nino Luraghi’s words, that for Herodotus «personal experience and reasoning are stronger argument than “what people say”» and that «from a fifth-century Greek, such a position should not be surprising» (2007: 143).

Actually, many instances can be found in *The Histories* in which Herodotus claims the authority coming from having seen things for himself. When speaking about Egypt in general, at the beginning of Book Two, he writes: «So I not only believe the people who gave me this account of Egypt, but my own conclusions strongly support what they said. I have observed for my self...» (II.12; all quotations from Herodotus 2003). Later on in the course of the Book, he clearly marks the passage from direct experience to reliance on the words of others:

Up to this point I have confined what I have written to the results of my own direct observation and research, and the views I have formed from them; but from now on the basis of my story will be the accounts given to me by the Egyptians themselves – though here, too, I shall put in one or two things which I have seen with my own eyes (II. 99).

Subsequently, Herodotus carefully annotates another methodological shift when writing that «so far the Egyptians themselves have been my authority; but in what follows I shall relate what other people, too, are willing to accept in the history of this country, with a few points added from my

own observation» (II. 147). In all of these cases, Herodotus stresses the primary role that *autopsia* plays for his historical research, a role which seems not to be granted to an equal extent to what we would refer today as “written sources” or “source references” (for a wider discussion see Luraghi 2007). Indeed, even when he relates things heard by his local informants, or by “other people”, such as those mentioned in the last quoted passage, he feels somewhat compelled to explicitly state that there are also a few things that he can add having seen them for himself, as if this would be the better way to claim for the reliability of his work, which is in fact, as already mentioned, based on the exclusive authority of the historian – Herodotus himself.

Among other things, the stress on *autopsia*, that is to say on sight and seeing, as a legitimate and indeed privileged method to gain knowledge, and hence also to assess “historical truth”, presupposes the idea that «the persuasive power of the image is greater than that of words», as well as that a two-way relationship can be established between «sight and a person’s frame of mind», because «visual impression can, to a large extent, influence and shape one’s mental state and, conversely, one’s mental state can have a decisive influence on the way in which one perceives and assimilates reality» (Miltios 2016: 9). Just because of such a two-way relationship, it cannot be claimed that sight is able to provide the observer with a totally reliable, “objective” knowledge, for «the observer must be able to analyze and decode the visual signals that they gather» (*ivi*: 10), and indeed «there are numerous occasions in the *Historiēs* when the characters do not understand, or misinterpret, the visual information they receive» (*ivi*: 9).

In other terms, Herodotus seems to be well aware that, although *autopsia* is the most adequate method to perform *historiē*, it is not without its limits. They originate from the fact, to formulate it in contemporary terms, that in order to *know* human individuals rely on their senses, especially but not only sight, which however do not provide them with an immediate knowledge of reality as it is, because the mediation is needed of an *interpretation* performed moving from a complex process of reconstructing the perceived stimuli on the basis of previous knowledge and experience and by and through the mental schemata already elaborated at the individual level. Moreover, this complex interactive process is further complicated by the fact that individual knowledge and experience are influenced by collective, group, or “cultural”, knowledge and experience that define, at least to a certain extent, the correct interpretative frameworks through which sensory stimuli ought to be properly reconstructed in a meaningful picture of reality. Just therefore, as Miltios underlines:

As a historian, Herodotus may recognize the importance of autopsy in the effective conduct of his research, yet as a writer he takes care to alert his readers to the fact that information that is gathered through the faculty of sight is not always unquestionably reliable. In key episodes of his narrative, Herodotus has his characters misinterpret what they perceive and shows that the cause of the problem is located in the inadequacy not of sight itself but of its subject, the observer, whose ability to decode and interpret the visual information they receive correctly is largely determined by their knowledge and experience as well as their current psychological state (2016: 13).

Also Emily Katz Anhalt stresses the central role of interpretation in Herodotus' *Histories* in her analysis of «four stories in which the display of a woman affects male power relationships» (Katz Anhalt 2008: 269). In her opinion, «because they emphasize, collectively, the unreliability of visual perception and the consequent necessity for accurate interpretation, the four tales address a tension in Herodotus' own methodology between the use of visual evidence to corroborate historiographical assertions and the difficulty of interpreting such evidence correctly» (*ivi*: 277). As a consequence of the fact that «visual evidence is not in and for itself sufficient for accurate knowledge, all four instances of the calculated theatrical display of a woman implicitly validate the interpretive role of the historian», who «knows the truth of the event and reveals it to the reader» (*ibidem*). This surely seems to establish a difference between history and tragedy, and possibly also the superiority of the former over the latter, leading to the idea that the authority of the historian is related to the truth more than that of a tragedian (see *ivi*: 278). But it should not be forgotten that interpretation plays a key role also in the specific form of reconstruction that history is, which is performed by a particular individual – the historian –, through particular means – in this case especially *autopsia*, albeit not exclusively. Among other things, this seems to radically question, from the very beginning, the truth claims of any historiographical research.

#### 4. Conclusion

The method of *autopsia* seems to be Herodotus' preferred one to address facts of the past that are relevant to the present and its burning questions. Among other things, this points to the circumstance, clearly formulated by Hartog, that there is a «distance between “an interest in the past” (which exists everywhere under various forms, collective and personal) and the



emergence of “historical thought” which is, I think, above all concerned with the present» (2000: 386) and that properly constitutes Herodotus’ interest. This is maybe one of the main reasons why we can consider Herodotus a historian as “we” understand it, despite all differences, in that he shows that historical research, although concerned with “things gone”, always moves from an interest in those things that is located in the present of the researcher, who just therefore can never be a completely unbiased observer. Beyond that, it should also not be forgotten that if “seeing for oneself” should be preferred to any other tool, despite its clear limits, this has also consequences as to the understanding of what kind of “reality” is to be considered relevant enough to be recorded as a “historical fact”.

At least to a certain extent, it could be stated that “historical facts” worthy of investigation are only those to reconstruct which there is still the possibility to rely on *autopsia*, that is to say on a personal, and therefore unavoidably biased, experience involving the senses, especially sight, and hence the body, beyond the mere application of the faculty of reasoning on what is no longer “present” making use of “sources” you cannot verify personally. Among other things, this approach might be surely useful to rethink the inconsistencies of “our” idea of history as that “science” or “discipline”, which must preferably have to do with a “past” no longer accessible to our lived experience, if it has to provide us with a truthful picture of “things gone”. In fact, the problem of this definition of history lies in the circumstance that it conceals the plain fact that historical events are not something we simply observe, but something we construct by means of interpretative operations that are always located in the present time. In short, history is never the representation of the past as it was, but the *reconstruction* of it from the point of view of the present incorporated, at least to a certain extent, in the gaze of the historian.

Above all, however, the method of *autopsia* is very important to rethink contemporary notions of interculturality and intercultural research, because a deep reflection on the presuppositions of such a method shows that a research activity able to lead to reliable, if only temporarily, knowledge entails necessarily an aware active participation of the concrete individuals acting as researchers, who must have “seen for themselves”, at least to a certain extent, in order to state that they “know”. This seems to be something inescapable for intercultural research, in that interculturality basically implies experiencing difference and diversity, in a word “otherness”, through interacting with “the Others”, that is to say those who

know better the “facts” concerning themselves because they have seen, experienced and lived them.

Now, it can be surely stated that trying to apply *autopsia* as a method for contemporary intercultural research implies first of all recovering the essential value of various forms of “travel” and “encounter”, in order to gain “new” knowledge by experiencing difference and diversity in a direct and reciprocal way through interacting with the so-called “Others”. But in order to do this, it seems necessary to move away from the idea that the experience of otherness, cultural diversity and the like might be actualized exclusively, or even mainly, relying upon an already acquired knowledge, compliant with the requirements of the “scientific method”. This approach has already led to some mistakes, including the establishment of specific tools to approach cultural diversity through an abstract activity of comparing cultures that takes still too much frequently the place of *autopsia*. In other terms, “comparison” mistakenly appears as an unbiased tool to deal with cultural differences, because it limits itself to individuate, observe, collect, categorize and analyze similarities and differences on the basis of the codified scientific method.

More in general, the adherence to the still prevailing view of “science” leads to individuate the main goal of intercultural research in the “comprehension” of the difference between “us” and “them”, trying to address and solve the difficulties posed by this issue *before* going and seeing for oneself. Of course, many authors stress that understanding “the Others” is functional to answering questions about “the Self”, and that therefore intercultural research always implies a two-way exchange. But the point is that the researchers, that is to say “we”, are expected to formulate even the question(s) concerning the Self in scientific terms, that is to say within a self-consistent framework in which even the Self is already positioned in a codified culturally biased way<sup>3</sup>. The method of *autopsia*, on the contrary, might be deployed without making the question(s) about the Self explicit, letting new and more reliable knowledge emerge, if paradoxically from the viewpoint of Western science, *in the making* of an intercultural encounter, that is to say from the very operation of seeing for oneself.

<sup>3</sup> In my opinion, a careful rethinking of this and a number of other core issues of intercultural research would surely benefit, together with other sources, from an in-depth engagement with the presuppositions and perspectives of *Critical intercultural communication studies*, for an introduction to which see Nakayama, Halualani 2010.

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## Abstract

*This paper aims to show the relevance of some of Herodotus' ideas for two core issues of contemporary theory and practice of intercultural research, that is to say the researcher's position and the search for an adequate approach to (cultural) diversity. Such issues are still usually addressed, if inadvertently, from within the exclusive framework of Western modern science, although they can be considered as recurring problems to which different and competing solutions can be given in any time and place. Herodotus' Histories suggest a different solution, based on the method of autopsy (‘‘seeing for oneself’’), so questioning the idea that only a particular understanding of ‘‘science’’ and the ‘‘scientific method’’ is the most correct one and therefore the only viable option to conceive of ‘‘research’’ in contemporary times.*

**Keywords:** Herodotus; intercultural research and researcher; *autopsia* (‘‘seeing for oneself’’).

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