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Herodotus and The Histories: Accounts of Intercivilizational Contact

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Abstract

The globalization of the earth, the old colonial dream of the sixteenth century, is still a challenge to historical understanding. In the contemporary debate, comparative history and global history have gained increasing interest as we try to explain the four parts of the planet in an overview, which allows us to think about the world, modernity, and universal history in a different way than a simple European expansion in Africa, Asia, and the Americas. The theater of observation has become global when it relates Japan to China, India to New Spain, Portugal to Spain, Britain to the Netherlands to Indians, Malays to Javanese, East to West.

The plurality of initiatives, dialogues and cross-cultural exchanges have not only occurred during capitalist modernity. If universal history was born with the New World, the contacts, influences and interactions occurred in worlds of another magnitude that had become intertwined through multiple contacts arising from their condition of neighborhood.

Towards the fifth century B.C.E. the Greeks and the high civilizations, whom they called barbarians, played a leading role in this game of transfers from East to West. In *The Histories*, by Herodotus, he realizes the interactions between one and the other through the comparison of political systems, ethnographic characteristics and religion, with which he explained the causes of similarities and the peculiarity of differences. Therefore, *The Histories* maintains an approach that allows us to observe the creation of worlds and how to think about them.

In *Alien Vision*, Arnaldo Momigliano states:

The notion of a barbaric wisdom gained consistency and acceptance among those who considered themselves Greeks (...) The intellectual influence of the barbarians was, however, felt in the Hellenistic world only to the extent to which they were capable of expressing themselves in Greek.¹

¹ Arnaldo Momigliano, *Alien wisdom. The limits of Hellenization*. (USA: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 7.

Keywords: The Histories, Comparative History, Global History, Politics, Ethnocentrism, Otherness.

Introduction

The aim of this paper is to study the contacts, influences, and interactions in the Hellenistic world between the Greeks and those outsiders whom they² called barbarians: Egyptians and Persians, but also others, such as the Scythians. The stage, the great theatre of events is *The Histories* by Herodotus of Halicarnassus (circa 480-425 BC), a work considered to be the starting point of history.

Observing the circulation of ideas, the game of exchanges between the Greeks and all other peoples, Herodotus compares the incomparable³ by representing the Greek condition in the mirror of the barbarians⁴. The Greek fact is not a fortified and inaccessible bastion but a melting pot where all the colours of the Hellenistic world are bathed, for in analysing the multiple filiations or neglected bifurcations between Greeks and barbarians, Herodotus poses a challenge to Eurocentrism.

How was the polis and democracy defined as a policy of free men, in the face of the tyranny of the *Megas Basileus* in the immense East, or in the face of the nomadism of the ferocious Scythians, sons of transhumance? Where did the oracle, the names of some gods and the Greek rites come from, if not from the transfer of Egypt from the pyramids and the endless Nile?

At the intersection of these worlds, the West and the East, Herodotus wrote a story full of crosses, contacts, and influences. He did so by comparing nearby societies in time and space, which is why his procedure of comparative analysis deals with the connections between civilizations that are close in time and space; different, but contiguous and contemporary, which he studied by distancing himself from his condition as a Greek, in order to explain the reciprocal influences and cultural affiliations, unknown and even denied by the Greeks, with the aim of showing the series of transcultural exchanges throughout the Mediterranean.

In this sense, by studying the exchange links between ancient civilizations he advocates a procedure of comparative analysis that defines, through the play between similarities and differences, a hypothesis on the relationships and filiations of Hellenization.

² Roger-Pol Droit. *Genealogie des barbares*. (Paris, Odile Jacob, 2007).

³ Marcel Detienne. *Comparer l'incomparable*. (Paris, Le Seuil, 2009).

⁴ Francois Hartog. *El espejo de Heródoto: Ensayo sobre la representación del otro* (Buenos Aires: FCE, 2003).

Therefore, the essay opens with the study of his historiographic operation: the exploration of the Greek condition in particular. It then goes on to study politics and then religion separately: the circulation of connections, the importance of influences between different civilizations. Later, a joint analysis is undertaken on the comparisons and units of analysis, and above all, the explanation of the interactions or correspondences. Finally, the conclusion addresses the value of the historian's procedure for contemporary debate at a time of the re-emergence of comparative history (crossover, connected, transnational) and global history (*histoire globale*, *histoire mondiale* or world history).

Thus, in studying these cross-cultural exchanges between peoples and civilizations, the author takes a renewed look at the use of political and religious comparisons from Hellenocentrism to the fifth century BC. This way of looking at history that is so much his own allows us to revisit the past and the relationships between distant and different worlds, which despite the wars and conquests were able to shape something new out of the above: the melting pot of Hellenic civilization, with the colours of oriental civilizations.

Herodotus Inquires of the Greeks

Author of *The Histories*, or *The Nine Books of History*⁵, Herodotus of Halicarnassus had a historiographic method that combined the knowledge of logographers about the critical revision of Greek myths — even though he maintained a causality attributed to the gods about certain events that seemed to him to be of divine ascendancy, with the oral testimonies of his many informants and witnesses. He sought them everywhere (listening to them just as he did) in order to project by studying the present and past from the oral evidence, a veil of authenticity over the “representation of reality,” in the sense that Auerbach⁶ attributed to it. All this through the writing of history: *historie*, in the Ionian dialect; or *Historiae*, in the Greek of Athens.

His journeys, observations, enquiries, questions, and range of interests led him to include economic, political, social, and cultural aspects, both Greeks and of other peoples, as a kind of universal history of the time (between 550 and 479 BC).

⁵ A late Alexandrian publisher divided Herodotus' work into nine books, which were progressively numbered and whose titles were the names of the Greek muses griegas (*Clío*, *Euterpe*, *Talía*, *Melpómene*, *Terpsícore*, *Erato*, *Polimnia*, *Urania* y *Calíope*). The edition referred to and from which Herodotus' quotations are taken is *The Histories*. Transl. Robin Waterfield. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998).

⁶ Eric Auerbach, *Mimesis. La representación de la realidad en la literatura occidental* [1942] (México: FCE, 2011) 9-30.

This method was based on the knowledge he acquired during his voyages through Central Greece, the Peloponnese, Macedonia, Syria, Babylon and Egypt, which also makes him a witness⁷; on his doubts and questions, which prove his facet as an analyst and represent the basis and route of all his “research”, as in his fruitful conversations with the Persian scribes or Egyptian priests, for example, whose wisdom came from the northern and eastern regions of the ancient world, where, unlike in the Greek world, there was a long tradition of preserving documentary knowledge in archives.

Thus, the oral tradition (“Of all the many stories that are told about Cyrus’ death, this one seems to me to be the most trustworthy”⁸); the direct experience (“I myself have seen these mines”⁹); the fundamental role of his informants and witnesses (“I know that this is what happened, because I heard it from the Delphians,”¹⁰ or “This is what the priests at Thebes told me”¹¹); consulting texts on the subjects he had to deal with or reading them by the Egyptian priests,¹² corroborating the evidence and even the survivors of the past in his time, the enormous curiosity that in Herodotus founded his doubts as well as his questions, and the observation of “almost contemporary” history, were the qualities that served him to write his work.

In questioning the actions with a critical sense and scepticism: (“I am obliged to record the things I am told, but I am certainly not required to believe them – this remark may be taken to apply to the whole of my account”¹³), his aim was to expose the causes of the wars between the Greeks and the ‘barbarians’, safeguarding from oblivion the achievements of both.

Herodotus, a “Master of Truth,” according to Marcel Detienne's expression, is the one who preserves the memory of the actions of men, safeguarding not only the actions of the heroes but also the values, the culture, the civilizing features that emerged in the framework of the *poleis*, the glorious cities of the H elade, at the time of the Medical Wars.

Five centuries before the birth of Christ, Herodotus referred to the Greco-Persian Wars when he wrote in the first preamble to his Histories:

⁷ Herodotus, II, 99.

⁸ Herodotus, I, 214.

⁹ Herodotus, VI, 47.

¹⁰ Herodotus, I, 20.

¹¹ Herodotus, II, 55.

¹² Herodotus, II, 100.

¹³ Herodotus, VII, 152.

Here are presented the results of inquiry carried out by Herodotus of Halicarnassus. The purpose is to prevent the traces of human events from being erased by time, and to preserve the fame of the important and remarkable achievements produced by both Greeks and non-Greeks; among the matters covered is, in particular, the cause of hostilities between Greeks and non-Greeks.¹⁴

These are the characters of one of the most important comparative investigations of the ancient world, which was assembled through the links between peoples, cultures and civilizations (“Greeks,” “Hellenes,” or “Europeans,” as well as “Persians,” “Asians,” or “barbarians”) like a kind of global history of the ancient world. “Nothing like it had ever been attempted before, neither among the Greeks nor among the other nations they knew,” observed Moses Finley, highlighting that this investigation proposed to lunge “first in the breach of ethnocentrism and then in the destructive backlash on their own traditions.”¹⁵

As such, the first fascination which *The Histories* provokes is that of its comparative perspective. Noting this condition, Momigliano considered that Herodotus influenced “other Greek and later, Roman writers who explored the customs of other countries and who also, as natives, explained to Greeks and Romans the characteristic features of their own countries.”¹⁶

Herodotus’ comparisons are the result of the relationships between the Greeks and other peoples, whose proximity made them share the vast space of civilization which characterized the Greek world: its forms of government, beliefs, literature, art, and religion.

The tension between identity and otherness¹⁷ surfaces even in the contrasting relationships between Greeks themselves, attending from the start to their obvious similarities, but also to the difference in their dialects, the sense of a belonging to a polis, political organization, forms of government, the codification of laws and the meaning of justice, the links of solidarity between community members, and the moral codes or religious practices that existed in not only continental Greece, but also in the Greek poleis of the Mediterranean.

¹⁴ Herodotus, I, 1.

¹⁵ Moses Finley, *The Ancient Greeks*. (England: Penguin Books, 1991), 111.

¹⁶ Arnaldo Momigliano, *De paganos, judíos y cristianos*. (México: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2011), 30. “En escritores griegos y más tarde romanos que exploraron las costumbres de otros países y que también, como nativos, explicaron a griegos y romanos los rasgos característicos de sus propios países.”

¹⁷ Jean-Pierre Vernant, *La muerte en los ojos: Figuras del Otro en la antigua Grecia*. (Barcelona: Gedisa, 2001).

Nonetheless, this tension existed particularly between the Greeks and those they considered barbarians: Persians, of course, but also Egyptians, Phoenicians, Scythians, or Thracians, among many others who lived outside Hellas and who appear in Herodotus' narration. The Greeks had a sense of themselves, notes Finley, "as contrasting and distinct from the barbarians."¹⁸

Regarding these relationships, contacts, and transmissions, Momigliano observed that the Hellenistic period (from the fourth to the first century BC) was characterized by:

an intellectual event of the first order: the confrontation of the Greeks with four other civilizations, three of which had been practically unknown to them before [Romans, Celts, and Jews], and one of which had been known under very different conditions [Iranian civilization].¹⁹

Nonetheless, this "intellectual event," meaning Greek proximity to and discovery of their neighbors in the region — "confrontation" along with mutual "discovery"²⁰ between Greeks, Romans, Celts, Jews, and Iranians, and later "Germans and Arabs,"²¹ — was a historical and cultural phenomenon that had occurred much beforehand. For example, the Greeks already had formidable relationships with the Persians and the Egyptians. These relationships constitute one of the most significant intellectual events of the ancient world, which Herodotus observed through comparison.

Although Jean-Marie Hannick has argued that in Greek antiquity the comparative method had been used by Greek historians intuitively, without being theorised²², an approach that has been endorsed by Chloé Maurel in her *Manuel d'Histoire globale*²³, I consider *The Histories* makes use of comparative logic, specifically between (1) political and patriotic elements — for example, poleis, democracy, citizenship, laws, or homeland; and (2) ethnographic and religious elements — for example, nomos, language, customs, ethnic origin or religion.

¹⁸ Finley, *The Ancient*, 35.

¹⁹ Momigliano, *Alien wisdom*, 2.

²⁰ Momigliano, *Alien wisdom*, 2.

²¹ Arnaldo Momigliano, *Ensayos de la historiografía antigua y moderna*. (México: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1997), 18. "Germanos y árabes."

²² Jean-Marie Hannick. "Brève histoire de l'histoire comparée." In G. Jucquois et Chr. Vielle (dir.) *Le comparatisme dans les sciences de l'homme. Approches pluridisciplinaires*. (Bruxelles: De Boeck, 2000), 301-327.

²³ Chloé Maurel. *Manuel d'histoire globale. Comprendre le "globale turn des sciences humaines"*. (Paris: Armand Colin, 2014), 9.

With these units, Herodotus assembles an analytical framework for his narration. Without it, culture would remain impenetrable; using it, it is possible to observe a world characterized by a “reciprocal exclusion”²⁴ between Greeks and barbarians.

Neighbours in dispute for the surrounding space, both the “Greeks”, “Hellenes” or “Europeans,” and the “Persians,” “Asians” or simply “barbarians,” would be the central actors in one of the most important comparative investigations (“of both the Greeks and non-Greeks”²⁵) of the entire ancient world. By creating a *continuum* of human events that made it possible to order the past around a human temporality, when myth or legend contained timeless or circular cycles, and to establish a temporal sequence of events that spanned two centuries of Greek history (from the middle of the 7th century BC onwards), Herodotus recorded the vast civilizing space that included the Mediterranean Sea as well as other neighbouring seas: The Aegean, Ionian and Black seas, whose waters bathed cities, towns and civilizations on three different continents, which together made up the world as we know it today.

It is in this territory marked by the comparison between Greek identity and the rest of the known world — or by the systematic contrast between its forms of government, beliefs, literature, art, religion and the normal values of Greek civilization, which in the mirror of the ‘barbarian’ world not only recognised its undeniable superiority, but also the reaffirmation of its identity — that the comparison is placed between peoples, cultures, political and thought systems on a civilizational scale. Therefore, when identifying this fundamental feature, Arnaldo Momigliano considered that Herodotus “influenced Greek and later, Roman writers who explored the customs of other countries and who also, as natives, explained to Greeks and Romans the characteristic features of their own countries.”²⁶

In *The Histories*, the comparison allows him to experiment indirectly, to contrast rival cities and empires, or between a system of thought and different cultural codes, as well as through the contrast between the same forms of social organization and shared identity codes, making it possible to explore the diverse or the different, in an effort to think of the Other from a concrete or particular frame of reference: one's own identity.

²⁴ Carlo Ginzburg, *Threads and Traces: True, False, Fictive*. Transl. Anne C. and John Tedeschi. (California: University of California Press, 2012), 215

²⁵ Herodotus, I, 1.

²⁶ Momigliano, *De paganos*, 30. “Influyó en escritores griegos y más tarde romanos que exploraron las costumbres de otros países y que también, como nativos, explicaron a griegos y romanos los rasgos característicos de sus propios países.”

This comparison has been approached through the logical premise of investigating identity in the face of otherness, the contrast between which has regularly been favorable to the former, who, through contact, emerged victorious from the denouncement of the latter; however, this also allows us to observe a form of comparison through the elaboration of units of analysis, or the criteria that will be used for the comparison, which Herodotus did not expressly formulate but which constitute the architecture of all his work:

1. Political and patriotic comparisons: the *poleis*, democracy, citizenship, patria;
2. Ethnographic and religious comparisons: the distinctive features of Greek civilization, whether ethnic origin or religion.

These are the units of analysis that Herodotus formulated in his history of the Hellenistic world.

Comparing Polis, Democracy/Nomadism, Tyranny

Political comparisons occupy a prominent place in Herodotus' work, although at first glance they seem to be a feature shared by Greek historians. The way in which men should govern themselves: monarchy, oligarchy, tyranny, democracy, or the issues of general taxation, income, local independence or empire, and the coexistence of radically different political systems: that of Athens and that of Sparta, for example, — also considering the forms of government of other peoples located outside the H elade — were for them an invitation to comparison. For this reason, from Euripides or Isocrates to Polybius, via Plato and Aristotle, to name but a few, there are discussions on the respective merits of one or another political regime.

In Herodotus, however, political comparisons have a privileged role, and like ethnographic and religious comparisons, they allow us to find similarities and differences between the Greeks themselves, as well as between them and the 'barbarians'.

In the case of the comparison between Greeks and 'barbarians', when he wrote about the Scythians, "theirs is the most recent race on earth"²⁷, and in an approach similar to that of the naturalists of the 18th and 19th centuries, or the geographers of the first half of the 20th century, Herodotus' analysis starts from the geographical and climatic characteristics of the Scythian territory, with the intention of explaining a social formation of "a nomadic tribe living in Asia"²⁸, in the north of the Mediterranean world, beyond the straits, on the western shores of the Black Sea, which would later become the shores of modern Bulgaria, Romania and Ukraine.

²⁷ Herodotus, IV, 5.

²⁸ Herodotus, IV, 11.

Although brave, daring, and indomitable in battle, the Scythians were for Herodotus a nomadic people who did not sow or cultivate. For the historian, the Scolotos, whom the Greeks called Scythians, are:

Since they have no towns or strongholds, but carry their homes around with them on wagons, since they are all expert at using their bows from horseback and since they depend on cattle for food rather than on cultivated land, how could they fail to be invincible and elusive?²⁹

Nomadism, a characteristic feature of the Scythians, becomes the great difference that can be seen in the mirror of political comparison. The basis of the politics and government of the Greeks, the place from which the great intellectual transformation of Greek thought, science, philosophy, literature (poetry, tragedy, comedy, or prose), or the culture and arts that had founded the peculiarity of the historical importance of the Hélade, did not exist in the young nation of the Scythians. When Herodotus said: "they have no cities built," he meant that among the Scythians there was nothing comparable to the polis.

However, this difference did not only exist between Greeks and 'barbarians'. Herodotus had noted this condition among the Greeks themselves, regarding the Macedonians³⁰, who in the eyes of some Greeks — even though their language, customs and religion, or the etymology and mythological genealogy, placed them as one of the Hellenic branches — were not proselytising Greeks or entirely Greeks.

This consideration of the Macedonians survived until the 19th century, when Niebuhr and Grote, for example, saw in Alexander, — who became king of Macedonia, head of the league of all Greek states, king of Asia Minor, pharaoh of Egypt, great king of the Persian Empire and rajah of the north-western territory of India, and at whose time the greatest rivers of the world: the Nile, the Indus, the Tigris and the Euphrates; or the greatest cities of the ancient world: Athens, Sparta, Memphis, Babylon, Susa or Persepolis, were all gathered under his sceptre — nothing but the "brilliant barbarian"³¹.

What is the reason for this lack of clarity about the identity of the Macedonians? At the beginning of the 5th century, Macedonia did not yet have the political autonomy that had existed in the Hélade for a long time: the *polis*.

²⁹ Herodotus, IV, 46.

³⁰ Herodotus, VIII, 136-144.

³¹ Wenceslao Roces, "Presentación." In J. G. Droysen, *Alejandro Magno*. (México: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1988), VIII. "Bárbaro genial."

Grouped in a several thousand kilometers long ellipse, the Greek colonies were located throughout the area of the H elade, but also along the coasts of the Black Sea, in the southern parts of modern Italy, Spain and France, and as far as Africa (Libya, Egypt and the entire Nile Delta), in a passage that ran from the Pillars of Hercules to the Phasis (which flows into the eastern end of the Black Sea, in what is now Georgia).

In this immense extension, the thousand and a half cities and colonies that made up the H elade were built, however, with the type of constitution coming from the metropolis, that in the formation of the city, historical circumstances were added to the influences of the environment.³²

Therefore, the Greek city, in terms of its urban character (mainly rural, although it grouped the community and allowed the construction of all the religious and civic buildings), but also in terms of its sense of political entity, was the place where, above all in the agora (a marketplace that served for commercial transactions, but also a public square where news was known, where politics was discussed and where currents of opinion were formed), the small group of free citizens met in plenary assemblies: the people's assemblies. In its classic sense, the polis meant: "an autonomous state, which governs itself".³³

Being a citizen of a *polis* meant being a member of the Greek community, being within the highest form of human coexistence — "man is by nature a being-for-*polis*," formulated Aristotle — but it also meant being free. In Greece, pan-Hellenic solidarity and the unity of civilization were manifested in the political arena, so the liberation and independence of the individual was inherent in the character and nature of the city. The *polis* was able to become a political organism as it encompassed all the groups (*genos*, *fratrias*, tribes) that made it up and occupied a given territory, and which "was designated by a word that came to mean all the people who inhabited it, *demos*"³⁴.

But just as the *demos*, or the people, was the body of the members of the city, the figure of the citizen was also the centre of the whole political figure. For this reason, the democratic project was based on the idea of the freedom of the citizen, even if the freedom concerned the community of citizens in general, in strong solidarity with the autonomous character of the city and with state sovereignty. "The fact that the community was the only source of the law," says Finley, "was a guarantee of freedom".³⁵

³² Gustave Glotz, *La Ciudad griega*, (M xico: UTEHA, 1957), 1.

³³ Finley, *The Ancient*, 55.

³⁴ Glotz, *La Ciudad*, 10. "Se designaba con una palabra que pas  a significar el conjunto de gentes que lo habitaban, *demos*."

³⁵ Finley, *The Ancient*, 59.

For the Greeks, the Persians were thus ‘barbarians’ not only because they were not Greeks, but also because they lacked democracy and were not born into the *polis*. In other words, they were not citizens and free men — just as the Greeks considered their own slaves, without whom there was no art, science, or Greek state, as F. Engels warned in *Anti-Düring* — but subjects of a king.

And this was the very danger posed by Darius, who, at the time of the first Medical War, had given orders “to reduce Athens and Eretria to slavery and to bring the captives before him”.³⁶

Although “this contrast between Greek freedom and Asian despotism was largely illusory,”³⁷ for Herodotus the glorious *poleis* were the antithesis of the Persian Empire,³⁸ as they constituted one of the fundamental features of Greece's historical development and the essence of Hellenism. In the light of the political comparison, we see, on the one hand, a people divided and dispersed into innumerable small communities, governed by their free autonomy, united by the idea of democracy and freedom, politically differentiated but grouped together in a community of civilization;³⁹ and on the other, a complex of different nations, united by the conquest and the strength of the weapons that had created the Persian Empire, united by means of humiliation and subjugation,⁴⁰ whose most representative figure was the great king, considered not only to be a king of kings, but also of a divine character.

Therefore, the passion for independence, the prestige and autonomy of the Greek *poleis*, regardless of their size, population, wealth, makes them sovereign states, but also a patria to which the Greeks offer themselves and whose efforts are devoted to the relief of Greece.⁴¹ Thus, compared to the vast Persian Empire, the creation of the immense Orient, the citizen has the patriotism of a local character and the vitality of his small *polis*; compared to the Persians, or 'barbarians', who live under the yoke of the despotism that usually deifies the *Megas Basileus*, Herodotus portrays the image of democracy and the citizen; and as opposed to slavery, he contrasts the figure of the free man.

In this regard, Vernant said:

³⁶ Herodotus, VI, 94.

³⁷ Josep Fontana, *Europa ante el espejo*. (Barcelona: Crítica, 2000), 12. “Este contraste entre la libertad griega y el despotismo asiático era en gran medida ilusorio”

³⁸ Herodotus, VI, 11; VI, 43; VI, 45.

³⁹ Herodotus, VIII, 102.

⁴⁰ Herodotus, VIII, 135.

⁴¹ Herodotus, VII, 103-104; VIII, 144.

Certainly one cannot speak of otherness without adjectives: it is necessary to distinguish and specify in each case the precise types of otherness: what is other in relation to the living creature, the human being (*ánthropos*), is to be civilized, the adult male (*anèr*), the citizen.⁴²

All this, in addition to shared religious rites, the meaning of cultural practices, values and skills, the sharing of funeral traditions, language or customs, identity defined by opposition, or the construction of what it meant to be Greek, represents in Herodotus, the great historian of the Peloponnesian Wars, two units of analysis that are the core of his comparisons. They are both ethnographic and religious: Greeks/Barbarians, the original features of Hellenic civilization, whether ethnic origin or religion, as well as political and patriotic. Thus it is Citizenship-Freedom and Slavery-Servitude, the *poleis*, citizenship, *patria*.

Comparing Identity-Otherness and Religion

The ethnographic, religious, and political comparisons that he used are the result of the relations that brought about contact between the Greeks and other peoples, perhaps more ancient, but undoubtedly neighbors and contemporaries, whose proximity made them share the vast civilizing space of the Mediterranean, which from the bottom of the world was stirring up the whole of the Mediterranean world.

Because the Mediterranean “is not even a sea,” as Fernand Braudel points out, “it is, as has been said, a ‘complex of seas,’ and seas, moreover, dotted with islands, cut by peninsulas, surrounded by branched coasts. Its life is mixed with the land”⁴³, defining the liquid spaces and continental strips of three different continents. This is the fate of this *Mare Internum*, Braudel said, as it is “immersed in the widest range of emerging lands in the world: the great, gigantic, unitary continent,” Euro-Asian, which he considered to be a “planet on which everything circulated precociously.”⁴⁴ Three continents “each of which is the name of a woman:”⁴⁵ Europe, Libya or Africa, and Asia, which together constituted the world studied by Herodotus, through the units of analysis.

⁴² Vernant, *La muerte*, 16. “Desde luego no se puede hablar de alteridad sin calificativos: es necesario distinguir y precisar en cada caso los tipos precisos de alteridad: lo que es otro en relación con la criatura viva, el ser humano (*ánthropos*), es ser civilizado, el varón adulto (*anèr*), el ciudadano.”

⁴³ Fernand Braudel, *El Mediterráneo y el Mundo Mediterráneo en la época de Felipe II* [1949] (México: FCE, 1953), 13. “No es siquiera un mar (...) es, como se ha dicho, un “complejo de mares”, y de mares, además, salpicados de islas, cortados por penínsulas, rodeados de costas ramificadas. Su vida se halla mezclada a la tierra.”

⁴⁴ Fernand Braudel, *Memorias del Mediterráneo. Prehistoria y antigüedad* [1996] (Madrid: Cátedra, 1998), 34. “Inmerso en el más amplio conjunto de tierras emergidas que pueda haber en el mundo: “el grandioso, el gigantesco continente unitario”, euroafroasiático, al que consideraba un “planeta por el que todo circuló precozmente”.”

⁴⁵ Herodotus, IV, 45.

Herodotus considers the relations that arose from the Greeks' contact with other peoples by way of ethnographic and religious comparisons. However, the relations between “Greeks,” “Hellenes” or “Europeans,” as opposed to “Egyptians,” “Scythians,” “Persians,” “Asians” and above all “barbarians,” as he usually defined them all, were extremely complex and came from very far away in the Mediterranean world, especially as regards the identity and otherness of each other, and were built up according to the situation and the form of contact.

“The concept of otherness, although vague and excessively broad,” Vernant said, “does not seem anachronistic insofar as the Greeks knew it and used it.”⁴⁶

However, even though they never called themselves — and in their own language — “Greeks” (a name that comes from the Romans, who called them *graeci*; while in Homeric poems they often appear under the name of Achaeans, some of whom later received the names of Ionians and Aeolians), they identified and recognised themselves as members of the same civilizing community under the name of *hellenes*.⁴⁷

This connection, which by classical times was known by the collective name of Hélade, because it brought together all the Greek peoples settled around the Mediterranean and Black Seas, and especially in the southern part of the Balkans and the Aegean, despite its homogeneous characteristics, never really represented an absolute identity.

Accordingly, the tension between the identity of the Greeks and the otherness of the other peoples emerges from the disparate relations between the Greeks themselves, taking into account at first the obvious similarities, but also the differences between them: the differences in dialects, the awareness of belonging to a polis, political organization, forms of government, the codification of laws and the meaning of justice, the bonds of solidarity of a community, the moral codes or religious practices that existed in continental Greece, particularly in the specific case of the Athenians and Spartans or Lacedemonians, but also in the Greek polis and colonies located throughout the Hellenistic world.

⁴⁶ Vernant, *La muerte*, 16. “El concepto de alteridad, aunque vago y excesivamente amplio, no parece anacrónico en la medida que los griegos lo conocieron y lo emplearon.”

⁴⁷ The author of the *History of Hellenism*, and who coined the latter term, considered: “The *Hellenes* of this era are, compared to the nations of Asia, nations of old culture, a young people. The Hellenic name gradually brought together a whole series of scattered peoples, twinned by affinity of language. Their history is marked by the achievement of their national unity and the failure of their political unity”. Droysen, *Alejandro Magno*, 4. “Los helenos de esta época son, comparados con las naciones de Asia, naciones de vieja cultura, un pueblo joven. El nombre helénico fue aglutinando poco a poco a toda una serie de pueblos dispersos, hermanados por afinidad de lenguas. Su historia se cifra en el logro de su unidad nacional y en el fracaso de su unidad política.”

But above all, this tension between identity and otherness existed in the relations of the Greeks with those civilizations and peoples whom they themselves considered 'barbarians': Persians, of course, but also Egyptians, Phoenicians, Scythians, or Thracians, among so many others that run through Herodotus' narrative and that were outside the borders of the H elade, even if they were within the Mediterranean World.

For all those whose mother tongue was not Greek, the category of 'barbarians' served to group them together, for not only were they incomprehensible to Greeks (Herodotus himself was monolingual: he knew only the oral Doric dialect that was his birthright and the literary Ionian he used in writing his *historie*⁴⁸), "but also - [and] many Greeks came to believe it - of an inferior nature"⁴⁹. Accordingly, Finley points out that the Greeks had an idea of themselves "as opposed to the barbarians."⁵⁰ A counter-figure invented expressly to serve as a contrast, Fontana considered in relation to the image that the Greeks elaborated of themselves, "looking at themselves in the deforming mirror of the Asian barbarian". For this reason, he considers that the concept of "Greek" has been constructed at the same time as that of "barbarian."⁵¹

From this perspective, Herodotus' *Histories* recodes and translates the otherness or "the mirror" of the representation of the other⁵²; defining by opposition to the 'barbarian' world the identity of Greek civilization, from the political and moral needs arising from the Medical Wars. However, Herodotus does not condemn the 'barbarian' world.

⁴⁸ Herodotus has often been criticised for not mentioning the presence of interpreters and the problems associated with translation. The so-called "father of history" (Cicero) was not, however, a philologist interested in the nature of language and oral or written communication. It is even probable that he did not know how to speak any language other than Greek, but, as a Greek and a traveller in the ancient Mediterranean world, he must have been exposed to various dialects of Greek and been aware of the differences between Greek dialects as well as between languages, and of the presence of connoisseurs of the languages spoken at the time, whether in the Persian or Egyptian dominions or in the thousands of Greek colonies, who served him as interpreters in his enquiries. In this sense, although he may well have been monolingual, his cosmopolitan outlook enabled him to grasp the different languages and the problems related to language, whether in the conversations and dialogues he describes between people speaking different languages (Egyptian or Persian, for example), or between those who told him something, or even read or translated something for him (e.g. 1.86.6, 2.154.2, 3.19.1, 3.38.3-4, 3.140.3, 4.24) Concerning the construction of the pyramid of Cheops, whose walls bore witness to the cost of feeding the workers, he wrote: "And if I remember well what the interpreter who read me the signs told me..." (2.128.6). Gammage, Sonja, "Herodotus and language", *Akroterion* 54 (2009) 161-169. Harrison, Thomas, "Herodotus' conception of foreign languages", *Histos* 2 (1998) 1-45

⁴⁹ Finley, *The Ancient*, 17.

⁵⁰ Finley, *The Ancient*, 35-36.

⁵¹ Fontana, *Europa*, 10-11. "Una contrafigura inventada expresamente para que les sirviera de contraste (...) mir ndose en el espejo deformante del b rbaro asi tico."

⁵² Hartog, *El espejo*, 8. "El espejo"

On the contrary, he builds an observatory that allows him to identify — by distancing himself from his own codes, avoiding as far as possible the Greek familiarity that led to the vision of the 'barbarian' — the peculiarities and originality of the Egyptians and Persians, to whom, among all the 'barbarians', he dedicated the greater part of his work; thus locating the evident differences, but also the unknown analogies of these with the Greeks.⁵³

To avoid Greek assumptions about the “barbarians,” Herodotus positioned himself at a distance from his own Greekness. This permitted him to find not only the obvious differences between the Egyptians or Persians and the Greeks, but also the still unremarked-upon affinities between the Greeks and these “barbarians.” In bringing their similarities with the supposed original features of Greek civilization into play, he relativized important differences and the conception of the “barbarians” versus the Greeks; he hung a bridge linking the analogies of one group with another. Just as Frazer, centuries later, would do with *The Golden Bough*, Herodotus had brought the barbarians “close to home.”⁵⁴ Annoyed by this occurrence, Plutarch would call him *Philobarbarian*.

Herodotus establishes a use of ethnographic comparison associated with the similarities and differences between neighboring and contemporary civilizations, cultures, and peoples. This is the unit of analysis that allows the historian an analytical framework without which a culture is impenetrable, becoming also an essential part of analysis and research.

This comparison makes it possible to make known what is unknown in the H elade, relating it and even familiarising it with a different world, almost completely alien, strange and above all, foreign. Because it gives meaning to a distant reality, to an older civilization: the Egyptian one, neighbour of the Greek world, still alive although with the ancient glory worn away by the passage of time. “Familiarising ourselves with a past whose daily appearance is elusive,” as Ginzburg points out, is an “apparently banal operation, which in reality presupposed a profound break with the historiographic tradition born in Greece.”⁵⁵

⁵³ Above all, Athenians, and Spartans or Lacedemonians. Herodotus linked the latter directly to the Persians (VI, 59) and assimilated them to the Egyptians (VI, 53; VI, 60). This view of the 'barbarians' would have consequences. In the libel attributed to Plutarch, *De Herodoti Malignitate* (On Herodotus' Malignity), he considered that the latter had fulfilled the objective of preserving the achievements of the 'barbarians', but not that of impartially preserving the achievements of the Greeks. Although excessive, this is a testimony of discontent towards a history full of relations and influences between Greeks and 'barbarians'.

⁵⁴ George W. Stocking, *After Tylor*. (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1995), 147.

⁵⁵ Ginzburg, *Threads*, 215.

The discovery of these original and specific attributes of a different world, must be made known to be equally valued, through the affiliations between the H elade and the ‘barbarians’. “With what objective curiosity, with what polite attention,” Herodotus “examines that distinct and paradoxical world that contradicts his Greek habits at every step”⁵⁶.

Deeply impressed by the immense Nile, the funeral and religious rites, the daily customs, the variety of the pantheon of its gods, the brilliant monumental architecture or the vastness of his culture and the magnificence of his civilization, Herodotus dedicated an entire book, *Euterpe*, to explaining the originality and the extraordinary impact of Egypt on the known world and, above all, on the Greeks.

Religion had interested him greatly, and he went around the world collecting myths, rituals, and customs, so that, from a religious comparison about the Egyptian origin of the names of the Greek gods⁵⁷, Herodotus tells a surprising passage:

The names of almost all the gods also came to Greece from Egypt. My enquiries led me to discover that they are non-Greek in origin, but it is my belief that they came largely from Egypt. With the exception of Poseidon and the Dioscuri (as I have already mentioned), and also Hera, Hestia, Temis, the Graces, and the Nereids, all the gods and their names have always been found in the country of Egypt. Here I am repeating what the Egyptians themselves say.⁵⁸

When Momigliano noticed this extraordinary filiation, which does not deal with generic similarities but with those that express historical relations, he considered:

As an attentive traveller and a follower of the comparative method (which doctors of the time used to explain climatic differences), Herodotus created a model for the investigation of religion. He explained the similarities between the Greek gods and the Egyptian gods by stating that the Greeks had derived their gods from Egypt.⁵⁹

⁵⁶ Mar a Rosa Lida de Malkiel, “Estudio Preliminar.” In Herodotus, *Los Nueve Libros de la Historia*, (USA: W.M. Jackson INC, 1972), 9. “ Con qu e objetiva curiosidad, con qu e atenci n cort s”, Her doto “examina ese mundo distinto y parad jico que contradice a cada paso sus h bitos de griego!.”

⁵⁷ Herodotus, II, 43; II, 45.

⁵⁸ Herodotus, II, 50.

⁵⁹ Momigliano, *De paganos*, 30. “Como viajero observador y como adepto del m todo comparativo (que los m dicos de la  poca utilizaban para explicar las diferencias clim ticas), Her doto cre  un modelo para la investigaci n de la religi n. Explic  las semejanzas entre los dioses griegos y los dioses egipcios afirmando que los griegos hab an derivado sus dioses de Egipto.”

Thus, the historian who was looking for answers to his questions in the land of the pyramids and the ancient pharaohs, found a sort of genealogical link between Egyptians and Greeks that made it possible to explain the peculiarities of the arts (such as poetry⁶⁰) and above all the religion of the Greeks (processions, religious offerings, the origin of oracles and the origin of the names of the gods⁶¹, such as that of Herakles⁶²) from a complex game of influences and borrowings that they had received from Egypt.⁶³

This is a discovery of the originality of the civilization and religion of the Egyptians, considered Greek by the Greeks themselves, which was made possible through the comparison, in this case, of religion. Religious, ethnographic, political, and patriotic comparisons are the units of analysis that permit Herodotus to understand the grand “intellectual events” of his era, through the similarities and difference between cultures and civilizations that existed close together in time and space.

Conclusions

In our days, the increase in the number of researches on transoceanic and terrestrial explorations, imperial wars, colonial conquests in the four corners of the world, in particular from the long 16th century (1450-1650) to the 21st century, the era of capitalist modernity, has elevated the importance of the cultural dimension of the world's interlinkages to highlight the connections, interactions and comparisons on multiple scales between colonized societies and colonizing metropolises, between discovered and pretended worlds, between dying and revitalised empires.

However, none of the authors escapes unscathed from war, conquest, or occupation.

⁶⁰ Herodotus, II, 58.

⁶¹ Herodotus, II, 50; II, 144-146.

⁶² Herodotus, II, 42-45.

⁶³ This is the subject of the "Black Athens debate", based on the three volumes that Martin Bernal published in 1987, 1991 and 2006: *Black Athena: the Afroasiatic roots of Classical Civilization*. He argued that the origins of ancient Greece were to be found in Egypt, Phoenicia and the Semitic civilization, so that these gave the Helad (and to a greater extent Western civilization) an indelible stamp: Afro-Asiatic roots (as opposed to Indo-European roots, as had been considered in classical studies) which Bernal called "the revised ancient model". Herodotus' reading of Egypt contributes to this debate on the influences and correspondences between cultures and civilizations in the ancient Mediterranean world. About the debate, Morabito, Vittorio, "È l'Africa Nera all'origine dell'Egitto e della Grecia Antichi? Confronti sull'affrocentrismo e su «Atena Nera», *Africa: Rivista trimestrale di studi e documentazione dell'Istituto italiano per l'Africa e l'Oriente*, June 1999, Anno 54, No. 2 pp. 264-275.

Although domination permeates all relationships, it also helps to define ephemeral, conjunctural or long-term historical formations, as well as to explain and understand the relationships and interactions⁶⁴ of actors who occupy very different social and cultural positions (even within their own culture and society) and whose practices and representations are defined in the mirror of otherness, miscegenation and the circulation of ideas, expressing themselves less in conditions of equality than through conflict.

However, this plurality of initiatives, dialogues and cross-cultural exchanges has not only occurred during the era of capitalism. In their own way, small worlds, on a smaller scale than world history, have created these relationships and transfers, even before the birth of colonial empires and nation states.

Thus, the history of ancient civilizations, which gravitated around the Mediterranean Sea, on the borders of the H elade with the East, was investigated by Arnaldo Momigliano, who, in his work *Alien wisdom. The limits of Hellenization*, studied the historical-cultural phenomenon that took place between the 4th and 1st centuries BC when five civilizations came into contact and interacted: Greeks, Romans, Jews, Celts, and Iranians.

He showed how the Greeks, proud and sceptical of foreigners, strangers, outsiders maintained a relationship of closeness and neighbourliness with all other peoples, knowing and evaluating their neighbors in terms of their own culture, and publicizing an unusual fact: the international circulation of political ideas, religious beliefs, identity references, specific positions of familiarity and alienation between the culture of one and the other.

This setting, recreated with other participants a century earlier, gave Herodotus the opportunity to make comparisons. So that it seems that comparative history has not made ancient history a subject of study, as if intercultural relations were a feature of the modern world and had happened only once in the past. Hence, Herodotus' work has hardly been studied from this perspective, when comparisons between Greeks and barbarians have been made throughout the nine books of *Historiae*. It is curious to note that two centuries ago, Hegel considered Herodotus to be a representative of immediate history; for the philosopher interested in the life cycle of the spirit, the historian of Egypt, Babylon and Greece was, when writing history, a contemporary. After all, the historian who travelled through the northern regions of the H elade may not be a foreigner in the land of comparative history.

⁶⁴ Alessandro Stanziani. *Les entrelacements du monde. Histoire globale, pens e globale. XVIe-XXIe si cles*. (Paris: CNRS  ditions, 2018).

A restless traveller, Herodotus explored the world at the time of the Peloponnesian Wars. What he knew directly, as well as the data, witnesses, and testimonies that he found in his travels around Greece and the lands of the ‘barbarians’, constituted the evidence to corroborate the truth of the events. His ability to observe, his fine reasoning and his vision of the whole were abilities only comparable to his talents as a conversationalist.

A contemporary of Socrates, perhaps the greatest conversationalist of the ancient world, Herodotus assimilated the knowledge of witnesses, survivors of deeds, Egyptian scribes, and Persian sages, who transmitted to him the memory of their refined civilizations, much older than the Greek one to which he belonged. As Ginzburg said, like venial knowledge, historiography also had a knowledge based on the reconstruction of events not directly witnessed, allowing us to know beyond, or instead of, direct experience; thus, establishing the border between reality and fiction, the true and the false. From this historiographic practice emerged his work, which is considered the beginning of historical narration in the Western tradition.

However, is the comparison of Herodotus, a comparative method, quietly emerging in the framework of ancient historiography? Although Momigliano has pointed out that he has been a “follower of the comparative method,” particularly because of his research on religion, the problem is that the historian never explicitly defined what he was doing and even less did he reflect on it in more abstract terms, with the tools that the philosophy of his time would have allowed him. In short, his comparison is not like the comparative methods that were later put into practice in the human sciences, be it by the *Settecento*, the Enlightenment or during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, but rather a comparative procedure that, nevertheless, allows one to examine similarities and differences between two or more facts or phenomena, to draw conclusions and explanations of the causes that foster both similarities and differences between them.

This comparative procedure has three fundamental and unprecedented characteristics in Western historiography. Firstly, it is a modality based on the explanation of similarities and differences between distant but contemporary societies and civilizations. Secondly, it is based on criteria or units of analysis that are both ethnographic and religious: Greek/Barbaric, and political and patriotic: Citizenship-Freedom and Slavery-Servitude. With them, the historian had tools without which a world, like his, was completely incomprehensible; for it is these units that finally point out what is compared and how it is compared. Thirdly, being a comparison located in synchrony, and being based on units of analysis, the historian built bridges to explain the differences between the Greeks themselves (the Macedonians, for example) or the H elade and the Persians and Scythians, but also the similarities with other ‘barbarians’: the Egyptians, for example, allowing him to shape the contours of identity in the face of otherness, pointing out the peculiar features of the Greeks themselves, but also all the wisdom of the ‘barbarians’ who were present among them.

Egypt is the best example of the fact that these similarities are not generic but specific, and the explanation for them is based on a deep historical relationship: the origins of the Greek religion are to be found in the nebula of the 'barbarians', which is the land of the Nile. Therefore, when investigating two religious institutions that have taken place in two or more nearby environments, the historian observes the originality of one and its influence on the other, revealing, then, affiliations, influences, imitations, and transcultural borrowings on a civilizing scale.⁶⁵

Based on these three factors, this comparative procedure made it possible for him to organise his work to the extent that it also enabled him to understand the ancient Mediterranean world. Thus, the Hellenic condition, the fact of being Greek in the whole of civilization, was observed from the specific contrast, whether Scythians or Persians — since, as Plato said: “one cannot conceive or define the Self except in relation to the Other, with the multiplicity of others”⁶⁶ - which results in a positive and glorious image: the *polis*, democracy, freedom, and all the qualities of Panhellenism which, at that moment of the collision of the Medical Wars, is delimited, recreated and exalted as the fruit of contact between civilizations.

For this reason, the figure of the Greek was created from the reflection of the figure of the ‘barbarian’: “The other as a component of the Self, as a condition of one's identity.”⁶⁷ Perhaps for this reason, what “we could call the comparative method of ethnography,” as Momigliano recalled, “vindicates Herodotus.”⁶⁸

⁶⁵ This has been studied through a diversity of approaches (sometimes used at convenience to shelter any kind of practice), which however have given rise to original essays in recent years under the name of global, world, connected, crossover, world-history, and even *microstoria*. See, Serge Gruzinski. *Les quatre parties du monde. Histoire d'une mondialisation*. (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2006). Romain Bertrand. *L'histoire à parts égales. Récits d'une rencontre Orient-Occident (XVIe-XVIIe siècle)*. (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2011). Patrick Boucheron (Dir). *Histoire Mondiale de la France*. (Paris: Seuil, 2018). Sanjay Subrahmanyam. *Aux origines de l'histoire globale. Leçon inaugurale de la Chaire d'Histoire Globale de la première modernité*. (Paris: Librairie Arthème Fayard/Collège de France, 2014). Sebastian Conrad. *Historia global. Una nueva visión para el mundo actual*. Trans. Gonzalo García. (Barcelona: Crítica, 2017). Jürgen Osterhammel. *La transformación del mundo. Una historia global del siglo XIX*. Trans. Gonzalo García. (Barcelona: Crítica, 2019). Carlo Ginzburg. *Historia nocturna*. Trans. Alberto Clavería Ibañez. (Barcelona: Península, 2003). Giovanni Levi. “Frail frontiers?”, *Past and present*, 242, 2019, 38-49. <https://doi.org/10.1093/pastj/gtz037>

⁶⁶ Vernant, *La muerte*, 38. “No se puede concebir ni definir el Mismo sino en relación con el Otro, con la multiplicidad de otros.”

⁶⁷ Vernant, *La muerte*, 36. “El otro como componente del Mismo, como condición de la propia identidad.”

⁶⁸ Arnaldo Momigliano, “The place of Herodotus in the history of historiography”, in *Studies in Historiography* (Los Ángeles California, University of California Press, 1990), 140.

Therefore, when observing the meaning of these relationships of/to/different, one can see how this knowledge starts from familiarity as well as from estrangement, closeness, or distance: the similarities/differences, identity/alterity, explain the relationships, affiliations, borrowings and influences between Greeks and ‘barbarians’ in the ancient Hellenistic world.

After all, as Carlo Ginzburg recalled, “we are all strangers to something and someone.”⁶⁹ It's a way of questioning how to be foreign, strange, different,⁷⁰ each is the ‘barbarian’, the ‘savage’ or the ‘primitive’ of the other; each is the ‘pagan’, the ‘heretic’, the ‘infidel’ or the ‘idolater’ of the other; each is the ‘oriental’, the ‘black’, the ‘Indian’, the ‘redskin’ or even the ‘white’ of the other; each is the ‘underdeveloped’, the ‘inferior’, the ‘unequal’, the ‘abnormal’, the ‘outcast’ of the other.

Hence, the explanation of the causes of similarities and differences between Greeks and ‘barbarians’ also explains the contacts, influences, and interactions between those who were contemporary and neighbors in the ancient Hellenistic world. Thus, by allowing us to understand the procedure of historical comparison — by penetrating the explanation of the similarities and differences, that is the nucleus of the comparison — the units of analysis used by the historian of Halicarnassus allow us to assess a type or model of comparative history in classical historiography, showing us what he compared and how he did it. That is why comparative history and global history should look back at Herodotus’ *Histories*.

⁶⁹ Carlo Ginzburg. *Ojazos de madera. Nueve reflexiones sobre la distancia*. Trans. Alberto Clavería. (Barcelona: Península, 2000), 11.

⁷⁰ Sanjay Subrahmanyam. *Comment être un étranger. Goa, Ispahan, Venise (XVe-XVIIIe siècle)*. Trans. Myriam Dennehy, (Paris: Alma Éditeur, 2013).

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