

Studies in Documents

Herodotus and the Written Record

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After the fall of Troy, so legend goes, a group of exiled Phoenician soldiers, led by the hero Cadmus, settled in Boeotia, the central region of mainland Greece. These settlers brought with them "various matters of learning," said one ancient commentator, "and, very notably, the alphabet, which in my opinion had not been known to the Greeks before."¹ At first, this chronicler said, the literate newcomers simply used the same alphabet as other Phoenicians, but as their spoken language evolved, so too did the shape and use of their written letters.

The frank expression of the narrator's personal opinion about the origins of alphabetic writing in Greece is the key to his identity. He was Herodotus of Halicarnassus, now acknowledged as "the father of history." In the middle of the fifth century B.C., Herodotus produced a garrulous, opinionated, and wide-ranging survey of what was then the known world. The ostensible subject of his *History* was the extended conflict between Greece and Persia, which had been in its last stages when he himself was a boy, but in fact his scope was much broader. In telling the stories of the great Persian kings — Cyrus, Darius, and Xerxes — and of the Greek heroes who rose to meet their challenge — Themistocles and Leonidas — Herodotus set down his historical account so "that time will not draw the color from what man has brought into being." With the instincts of a natural story-teller, he recorded as many "great and wonderful deeds, manifested by both Greeks and barbarians," as came his way (1.1). These "great and wonderful" stories, together with those describing more mundane occurrences, tell us much about that formative time in western civilization.

Of particular interest to archivists are the descriptions Herodotus gives of the role of written records in the ancient world. Writing was still a relatively recent invention: alphabetic literacy had arrived in Greece around the eighth century B.C., barely 300 years before Herodotus. Writing represented both a new technology and a new mentality, and the people of Herodotus's world were still discovering what it was useful for. Writing made possible the storage of information outside the human mind, and the consequences of that straightforward achievement were enormous. Humans no longer had to rely solely on their own memory, and on various devices (such as rhythm and ritual recitation) to enhance that memory, in order to preserve useful information

over long periods. Writing could “remember” large amounts of data, and particular ways of expressing an idea could acquire a measure of fixity and permanence. At the same time, thought became more dynamic, since ideas could be set down and saved while the mind moved on to think of other things. Information recorded for one purpose could be put to a variety of other purposes, unforeseen at the outset.²

Herodotus’s observations about these and other uses of written records can thus provide us with a new way of looking at the role of writing, both in his day and in our own. He was a literate man, but he was not himself actively involved in the creation of records for administrative purposes (in government, commerce, or the like), the most common practical use for writing. Thus, his perceptions of the record-creating process and the usefulness of written documents in human society are broader than they might otherwise be. If modern archivists study the *History* to understand why human culture made records in the centuries when writing was first available, they obtain a perspective on those same motivations today. What has changed and what has endured among these attitudes towards records? We understand our own holdings and process better if we examine the earliest uses for written records.

In making such an inquiry, however, we must use Herodotus carefully. If he was the father of history, he has also been called the “father of lies.” His notion of history was far from the contemporary one. To be sure, he and his present-day successors have much in common: both identify varying accounts of events, select those versions that seem most plausible, and then weave the facts together into a coherent narrative. The modern historian, however, is relentlessly skeptical of evidence, disinclined to accept anything without rigorous standards of evidence. Today, scholars are more likely to take to heart the motto of Leopold von Ranke and the other “scientific” historians of the nineteenth century, attempting to penetrate to the heart of *wie es eigentlich gewesen* — “as it really happened” — through criticism of their sources.³

Herodotus, by contrast, who lived from 484 to 420 B.C., may seem gullible and fantastic to modern readers. He is often more interested in repeating exaggerated tales for their own sake than in achieving hard, scientific accuracy. Whenever he finds a good story he tells it, even if he knows (or suspects) that it might not be “true,” in the modern sense. He is hopelessly digressive, setting off on long tangents — engrossing in themselves — that leave the modern reader wondering just what he is driving at. Unlike Thucydides, his successor a generation later, Herodotus sometimes disregards altogether the orderliness of chronology, and he is forever backtracking. He writes in an openly heroic style, and regular intervention in human affairs by the gods and fate he takes for granted. With a literary licence akin to that of Shakespeare, he records word for word speeches for which there was never any reliable text. He is as much a genealogist, geographer, ethnographer, and travel-writer as what would now be classed a historian, and his accounts often strain credulity.⁴

Even so, Herodotus has much to tell us about the uses of written records in the ancient world, and thus he helps illuminate what might be called the prehistory of the archival profession. He is describing the “contact period” between human culture and literacy, and thus he helps us to understand both the content and the context of writing. His observations help us to ponder the archivist’s most fundamental questions. Why are there archives? Why do humans create records, and why do they keep them? For us, his work is at once primary and secondary source, though that modern distinction would

have been foreign to him. He personally witnessed none of the events he recounts, but he was able to visit battle fields and examine them more or less undisturbed. Almost certainly, he was able to talk about the Persian wars with living veterans. He has a useful proximity to his subject, and he thus gives us a clear window into the past. If we study his narrative for the impact of records and writing on his society, we enhance our appreciation of that impact in our own. Through his eyes, we see the world of documentation more clearly.

Allowing for a measure of mythic elaboration, Herodotus's account of the arrival of literacy in Greece was fundamentally accurate. The Greeks had indeed adopted the script of an earlier people, an origin recognized in the practice of referring to the letters of this first alphabet as "Phoenicians" or "Phoenician things" (5.58). Herodotus claimed to have seen for himself three separate inscriptions written in these archetypal "Cadmean letters" (5.59). He was apparently unaware of several important modifications the Greeks had made in this system of writing, including the crucial addition of five other symbols (themselves Phoenician in origin) to represent vowels. He knew nothing of earlier Mycenaean syllabaries or other notational systems, though he had been in Egypt and had seen hieroglyphic and hieratic inscriptions. Still, perhaps because his own work was written down, he was eager to describe the origins and uses of the records which were, by his own day, becoming common.⁵

Written records performed many mundane, practical functions in the world of Herodotus, and this emphasis on the practical has formed much of the basis for our subsequent understanding of the genesis of archives. Records usually had an official, administrative function, accomplishing tasks for which the unaided human memory was simply too unreliable. For remembering information in detail and calling it back to mind when needed again, even after a long period, a record had many advantages. Foremost among these practical purposes was keeping track of financial accounts. As Xerxes marched his army into Greece and was entertained by his allies there, Herodotus said, his hosts "turned in accounts" as a record of expenses (7.119). Since feeding so vast an army was a major undertaking, costing in one case "four hundred silver talents" (presumably a great sum), one witty observer commented on how fortunate it was that "King Xerxes was not accustomed to eat *twice* a day" (7.118 and 120). No less than today, records of financial transactions constituted a significant portion of all written documents.

Records could also be given as receipts for money held for someone else, and by tacitly agreeing to accept such records as authoritative, society invested them with an enforceability which purely oral agreements lacked. Because they were set down in an objective form before any dispute might arise, these records stood for the trust between the parties in a powerful and binding way. Ignoring them was unacceptable because it violated the trust of which the record was a tangible reminder. To illustrate the seriousness of honouring receipts, Herodotus related a cautionary tale about an important "test case" for written documents. An unnamed citizen of Miletus had deposited some money with a certain Glaucus, a Spartan with a reputation for honesty, and had taken receipts in exchange. Glaucus promised to return the money to whomever presented the documents, but when the Milesian's sons did so, Glaucus pretended to know nothing about it. Scheming to keep the money for himself, he consulted an oracle for help. The seer told him not only that he must honour the written "tallies" and return

the money, but also that even planning such a deception was as bad as actually carrying it out. Glaucus relented, but he was cursed nonetheless: "at this moment there is no single descendant of Glaucus, nor is there a household that bears [his] name." For the benefit of those who might miss the moral of the story, Herodotus concluded, "So a good thing it is not even to form a thought about a deposit, save only the giving back of it" (6.86). Multigenerational curses may not await those who ignore modern receipts, but we still recognize their potency as overt expressions of obligation.

In Herodotus's day, no less than in our own, written records also supported the general administrative purposes of government, beyond the purely financial. Public agencies of all kinds were then, and they remain, significant producers and preservers of documents. Large, complex problems demanded recourse to records, records that consolidated information and served as the basis for making decisions. Herodotus's illustration of this use for records also concerned the Milesians, residents of a city on the Ionian coast. The citizens there had been so beset by warring internal factions that their territory had fallen into chaos, and they sought mediation from outside as the only way to resolve the turmoil. They called on the Parians, residents of an Aegean island, to serve as arbitrators of the dispute. Adopting the view that what the Milesians needed most was sound administration and that prosperity alone could bind them together, the Parians sent agents throughout the Milesian territory. "Wherever in that country, with its desolate and ruined households, they saw a well-worked farm," Herodotus said, "they wrote down the name of the owner." When the survey was complete, they assembled the disputing factions, read off the names of the successful farmers, and declared that they, "whose fields they had found well worked, should administer" Miletus. The decision was based on the presumption that "these men would look after the public interests as they did their own" (5.29).

Records apparently played only an incidental role in this story; nevertheless, they served an important purpose. Written records were essential for keeping track of a complex administrative and political task. The Parians might have tried simply to remember the names of the good husbandmen, but their mandate was too extensive in geography and too prolonged in time for that method to work efficiently. Too many different emissaries were at work, and writing was the best method for making useful comparisons among them. The written records could be collated and compared with one another to reveal patterns that might not be apparent to any individual agent or to the whole body of them. In the same way, the record-keeping process itself, because it necessarily took time, added a deliberate aspect to the whole business. Herodotus was describing a feature that would become a constant in the making of records: government's using them for a practical purpose in public administration, supporting the decision-making process. Familiar extensions of this motive in the present — environmental impact statements; perhaps, gun registrations or even tax returns — highlight the continuity between ancient and modern record-keeping practices.

Records may also be critical in the enforcement of laws, and Herodotus offered several examples of the legal usefulness of records. He cited no specific instances of written law codes as such, but he did describe the role of records in legal process. During the reign of Deioces, king of the Medes, the parties to legal disputes had to "write down their suits and send them in to him." Deioces, who was described as "very exact in his observance of justice," would decide each case on the basis of these written

briefs and send out his decision (1.100). In this context, writing may have been intended as a way of guaranteeing impartiality, ensuring that the king would be influenced only by the merits of each case, not by the rank or influence of the litigants. Records produced as part of judicial proceedings are more numerous today, and their forms often underline their ability to speak in lieu of in-person witnesses. Documents beginning with such phrases as "Now comes X, who deposes and says," or "The petition of X humbly showeth," or even the ubiquitous "Know all men by these presents" combine the identifiable speaking voice of an individual with the fixity and apparent reliability of writing.

Records could also serve other legal purposes, including the determination of stable property lines. In describing the complex geographical configuration of Asia Minor, Herodotus noted a pillar, set up by Croesus (he of the legendary wealth), "declaring in its inscription, the boundary" between Phrygia and Lydia (7.30). Markers of this kind, not always inscribed in such detail, have been used in many other times and places as well. In the New England states, for example, town boundary lines have been indicated since the seventeenth century by an upright granite slab with the first initial of the two adjacent towns carved on opposite sides. Using written records to fix boundaries became even more common as literacy spread: modern property deeds contain precise descriptions and measurements. The average homeowner probably has little need to refer to these descriptions, even when buying or selling, but the necessity of establishing them in a permanent and dependable form is never doubted. Legal records of this and other kinds still comprise a significant portion of the documentary universe.

Beyond these financial, administrative, and legal records, however, the most common official and practical use for records which Herodotus noted was communication over long distances. Sending a message from "here" to some far-distant "there" was often made easier and more certain by relying on writing rather than the unaided memory and oral transmission. Most often in Herodotus, the examples of such communication had a diplomatic purpose. By supporting complex negotiations with allies or enemies, writing accomplished what could not be done so easily in person.⁶ Amasis, a king of Egypt, and Polycrates, ruler of the island of Samos, for instance, achieved a short-lived alliance with an exchange of dispatches (3.40-43). Darius himself wrote out instructions to his general, Megabazus, outlining the campaign against the Greeks on the European side of the Hellespont (5.14), and when Megabazus wanted to send an oral message that had authority equal to this written one he had to use seven men with "the most distinction after himself" (5.17). The Greeks, too, negotiated among themselves by means of detailed written documents and letters (6.50).

Long-distance communication depended on some means for carrying it into effect, and Herodotus described what may have been the world's first postal system. Xerxes sent word of his defeat at the battle of Salamis back to Persia by means of a kind of ancient Pony Express. Relay riders were stationed a day apart from one another, each one taking the dispatch, riding all day, and then handing it on to the next man in line: "than this system of messengers," Herodotus commented, drawing an implicit comparison with the gods, "there is nothing of mortal origin that is quicker." In praising the efficiency of this system, Herodotus coined a phrase that may have a familiar ring to modern ears: "And him [that is, each messenger] neither snow nor rain nor heat nor

night holds back for the accomplishment of the course that has been assigned to him” (8.98).

Herodotus’s descriptions of long-distance communication provide several insights into modern records. The messages (so intimately connected with writing that we even call them “letters”) which he described were predominantly official, and that remains a common characteristic today. Modern government archives, like those of cultural, educational, and business organizations, are full of such records, produced by bureaucratic agencies. Official entities do what they do in large measure by writing to other entities and individuals, and those administrative communications form the central holdings of many archives. As access to literacy spread, however, and writing became a more democratic phenomenon — society now expects that virtually everyone will be able to write — personal communication through writing became possible. These documents, too, are central in many archives, especially in fonds of personal papers preserved for their historical and research value. What is more, Herodotus gave us an early insight into how the technology available for transmitting written communication affects the uses to which the writing is put. Xerxes needed an efficient, rudimentary postal system, and he could establish one because he was the king. As literacy spread, that system too was democratized. Given later developments — the fax and xerox machines, for instance — technology had a multiplying effect on the speed, efficiency, and uses of written records. The technology that is available may even determine the kinds of records that are *not* made, as in the case of the telephone.

Herodotus recognized the usefulness of writing for interpersonal communication, but he also knew that it could be problematic. Because writing fixed a message in time and space, a written document that seemed objective and straightforward could also be full of paradoxes. In the generation after Herodotus, Socrates would complain (in the dialogue *Phaedrus*, set down by Plato) that writing represented “no true wisdom, . . . but only its semblance.” Written words “seem to talk to you as though they were intelligent,” the philosopher said, “but if you ask them anything about what they say, from a desire to be instructed, they go on telling you the same thing for ever.” Even worse, once something is put in writing it “drifts all over the place, getting into the hands not only of those who understand it, but equally of those who have no business with it; it doesn’t know how to address the right people, and not address the wrong.”⁷

Like Socrates, Herodotus knew that writing was full of ambiguities. Since a written document could not be cross-examined as a speaking person could, it might be used not to inform but to deceive. Themistocles, the Athenian general who led the resistance to the invasion of Xerxes, knew this too. Both sides in the war were vying for the help of the Ionians, descendants of Greek settlers who had colonized the Aegean islands and the adjacent mainland coastal areas of present-day Turkey. Most Ionians sided with the Persians, their powerful near-neighbours, but the Greeks sought their aid on the grounds of common ancestry. Themistocles used the ambiguity of writing to enlist their help, or at least to minimize the potential harm they might do to the Greek cause. He sent men to the “drinkable-water places” where Ionian ships put in for resupply, and he had them cut written messages into the rocks there, urging the Ionians to abandon Xerxes and join the Greek side. His plan was clever: either the Ionians who read the messages would be persuaded to rebel against the Persians, he reasoned, or Xerxes himself would see the messages and distrust his allies, withholding them from the order of battle (8.22). As it

happened, only a few Ionians defected to the Greeks (see 8.85), but a more important point had been made: writing could send a deliberately confusing message as well as a direct one. Writing was not always so straightforward as it appeared to be.

Writing could also be useful for sending messages in secret, and Herodotus provided several examples of how written records promoted secrecy. There was a danger in committing anything to writing since, if the document were intercepted, secrecy would be lost. Histiaeus, who had been made Despot of Miletus by Darius, learned this lesson when he sought through secret messages to stir up a revolt against his benefactor. The King's brother intercepted these letters, read them, and then sent them on to their original destination, having meanwhile profited from knowing what plans were afoot. When the revolt came, the loyal forces "killed a great number ... when they were thus revealed" (6.4). Still, writing out a message and smuggling it to a confederate could be safer than entrusting it orally to a messenger, who could be bribed or tortured into talking if apprehended.

Because of the possibility of such discovery, special care was needed over secret communications, and Herodotus found several instances of such security precautions. These stories present the historian at his anecdotal best, and we may well doubt whether any of them actually happened. Their very dramatic content, however, highlights the problem Socrates complained of; namely, writing drifting "all over the place" and getting into the wrong hands. In one case, a Mede named Harpagus plotted with Cyrus to overthrow the King and install the young man in his place. "Because the roads were guarded," a secret message had to be smuggled through by some "contrivance." Harpagus took a hare and split open its belly, leaving the fur intact. Next, he inserted "a paper on which he wrote what he wanted," stitched the animal back together, and entrusted it to a servant, disguised as an innocuous huntsman. The servant made it past the guards along the road and delivered the message to its intended recipient (1.123; the text of the message itself is at 1.124).

The secretive and deceitful uses of writing in this case did not end there. Cyrus resorted to a second subterfuge to accomplish his revolt. In a ruse to enlist the help of the otherwise loyal army, he wrote out a document (on a papyrus roll or a strip of leather) containing instructions to the soldiers. He read from this document aloud, pretending that it had come from the King, but not letting anyone actually see it. The bogus royal document ordered the troops to assemble fully armed, and it appointed Cyrus their leader, with instructions that the army obey him in everything. Thus established in his usurpation by an apparently authoritative charter, he won the army to his side and seized the throne (1.125-126).

The nature of ancient writing materials could facilitate secret communication. One of the most common media for record making was a simple block of wood, covered with wax. Such inexpensive tablets — we use the same word today to denote an ordinary pad of paper — remained in use well into the Middle Ages, and they were widely employed in the ancient world for keeping accounts and other records. Because of the way they were constructed, they could support secret messages. Demaratus, a former King of Sparta temporarily in league with Xerxes, learned of the Persian's intention to invade Greece and, for reasons about which Herodotus could only speculate, he sought to warn his former countrymen. Faced with the difficulty of smuggling a message out of far-off Susa, Demaratus took an innocent-looking double tablet, scraped off the wax, and wrote

his warning on the wood. He then covered the tablet with wax again, so that it “would have nothing to tell the guards on the roads.” The apparently blank tablets, which were common enough so as not to arouse suspicion, passed through the checkpoints successfully. On their arrival in Sparta, Leonidas’s wife cleverly suggested removing the new wax, thereby revealing the important intelligence (7.239).

More often, Herodotus succumbed to the temptation to be melodramatic when talking about secrecy. In one instance, a traitorous Greek communicated with the Persians by writing out messages and wrapping them round the shafts of arrows, which were then shot to a prearranged spot in the Persian camp. The treachery was discovered only when one arrow misfired, hitting a Greek soldier by mistake (8.128). Even more striking was the story of Histiaeus, the same general whose efforts to incite revolt against Darius had been intercepted by the Great King’s brother. During that plot, Histiaeus needed to get another message through enemy lines, and he devised an ingenious plan after seeing a man with a tattoo. Taking one of his slaves, he shaved the man’s head, tattooed his incitement to rebellion on the bare pate, and waited for the hair to grow back. The slave was then sent through the lines with no instructions other than that, on arrival, to have his head shaved again. This was done, and the revolt (ultimately unsuccessful) took place (5.25).

Herodotus’s inability to resist a good story is evident here, and the modern reader may well doubt whether any of these events actually happened. Still, Herodotus told these tales to make a graphic point about the uses of secret writing in a world that was still getting used to the very idea of writing. The elaborate encoding of messages in modern warfare, not to mention the transmission of deliberately misleading messages — “disinformation” — show that these motives survive in the present, even as the means for ensuring secrecy have become more varied. Diaries written in cipher and personal letters in shorthand or signals exchanged by two knowing partners offer similar evidence of these multiple layers of written communication. No less than in the past, humans often want to have it both ways: not only the fixity, permanence, and reliability of text that comes with writing, but also the security of the message’s not falling into the wrong hands. As Socrates predicted, writing does not always represent “true wisdom.” Sometimes we see only its semblance.

In the ancient world, writing performed many practical functions. Herodotus did not end his consideration of writing there, however, recognizing that written records could address larger, emotional needs as well. The act of writing something down seemed to invest it with a potency and force it might not otherwise have. Cyrus’s pretending to read a letter from the king whose throne he coveted was a successful trick in part because the soldiers entertained such respect not only for the monarch, but also for his written instructions. A letter purporting to be from the king carried the authority of the king himself, and it was even enhanced by having been written out. Thus, writing could often have a symbolic meaning, of which Herodotus offered several examples.

Documents with a royal pedigree naturally carried the most weight, and in one life-and-death situation Herodotus proved his point. Oroetes, the Persian viceroy in Sardis, had risen to power through questionable tactics, including the unjust murder of Polycrates, his predecessor. Darius sought to avenge this injustice by Oroetes “before he does the Persians any further mischief.” An aide to the king came up with an ingenious plan, founded on a recognition of the power of written documents. He wrote

out several dispatches, sealing each with Darius's seal, and carried them to Sardis. There he read each one aloud to the viceroy's bodyguards, noting that "their reverence for the dispatches was great." After the routine royal letters had been disposed of, the agent slipped in two new dispatches. The first ordered the bodyguards to drop their weapons and abandon the service of Oroetes. Accustomed to obeying the king's written instructions, they did so. The second ordered them to kill Oroetes, and this too they did unquestioningly. Respect for the written records made the guards' "reverence for the words in them even greater" (3.128). A speaker urging rebellion orally would probably have received a very different treatment.

The symbolic power of written words was also evident in less dramatic ways. Foremost among these was the making of commemorative inscriptions. Bravery in battle and other heroic deeds were rewarded and remembered by carving the heroes' names on stone pillars or "tripods" (that is, three-legged pots). These inscriptions would endure long after the people thus commemorated were dead, and their noble deeds would thereby remain accessible to human memory. Most likely, few of those whose names were thus recorded could themselves have read — let alone have written — these inscriptions. Nevertheless, preserving their names in this way guaranteed them a kind of immortality: descendants and even strangers stretching across generations would be reminded of the deeds of their forbears if their names were recorded. Writing was useful in this way because it provided a means to overcome the passage of time and forgetfulness.⁸

Herodotus's *History* abounds with examples of writing used for these commemorative purposes, both by the Greeks and by their 'barbarian' opponents. Three separate sets of inscriptions were erected to honour the Greeks who fell at Thermopylae (7.228), and Herodotus said that he himself knew the names of many more warriors who were "worthy of the record" (7.224) — a redolent phrase. Those who fell in a sea battle with the Phoenicians were accorded "the privilege of a record on a pillar" in the marketplace at Samos, and the honour was redoubled in their case because each of their fathers' names was also recorded (6.14). Sometimes, the location of an inscription could intensify the glory attached to it: Persian defectors to the Greek side were honoured with an inscription on Delphi itself, adding a kind of divine sanction to "those who had destroyed the barbarian" (8.82). Visitors to modern-day war memorials — statues set up in town squares bearing the names of local citizens who served in the two World Wars, for example, or (even more dramatically) "The Wall" of black marble in Washington, D.C., containing all the names of the more than 50,000 Americans killed in the Vietnam War — are familiar with this ancient practice of using writing to remember service to one's country.

The Persians too followed the custom of erecting written memorials to their heroes. Mandrocles, the engineer who had built a bridge of boats across the Hellespont, thereby allowing the Persian army to invade Europe, was remembered in this way. Darius commissioned a painting of the scene, complete with an honorific inscription, and he dedicated it in the temple of the goddess Hera (4.88). Like the Greeks, the Persians rewarded bravery with commemorative writing, as in the case of a citizen of Samos who had seized a Greek ship during the battle of Salamis. For his exertions, he "had his name put on the roll of the King's Benefactors." This was a distinction that has apparently served as the ancestor to various kinds of honours list, including the annual

roster issued by the Queen of England; even school honour rolls for children keep this practice alive. More tangibly, the hero of Salamis also “got the award of a great deal of territory” (8.85).

Using writing to commemorate distinguished service was a duty to be taken seriously in the world of Herodotus. Considerable effort went into determining who merited such honours, effort that began with the King himself. Amid the turmoil of the fighting at Salamis, the decisive confrontation in 480 B.C. which eventually led to the Persian withdrawal from Europe, Xerxes positioned himself on a high hill. With many other practical matters on his mind, he still observed the required procedures for honouring bravery. “As often as Xerxes saw any of his own men perform some great action in this sea fight,” Herodotus said, “he would inquire who it was had done it, and his clerks wrote down the trierarch [that is, the seaman], with his father’s name and his city” (8.90). The practical and the symbolic combined in this act of record-making. Writing the names down immediately assured that they would not be forgotten during the confusion of battle, but the motivation for remembering the names through writing was to honour the bravery and preserve the memory of the citizens. In this case, the honour was expanded even further by identifying each man’s father and city.

A more precise form of remembrance was the writing of historical accounts, the very enterprise in which Herodotus himself was engaged. The modern notion of historical sources was, of course, absent from his intellectual world, but he recognized nonetheless that writing could be put to historical purposes. In his long digression about Egypt (virtually all of Book 2), Herodotus went into some detail on the origins and character of the singular Egyptian method of writing. He observed that the people of the Nile had two different kinds of writing, “one of which is called sacred and the other common” (2.36).⁹ Such duplication seemed cumbersome and inconvenient to a Greek, accustomed to a simple, single alphabet, but the historian concluded that it derived from the Egyptian tendency to be “excessive” in their “reverence for the gods” (2.37), even reserving a special form of writing for them. He also noted that “the Greeks write and calculate moving their hands from left to right, but the Egyptians from right to left” (2.36). Regardless of these peculiarities, the Egyptians used writing to become “great in cultivating the memory of mankind,” Herodotus said approvingly: they were by “far the greatest record-keepers of any people with whom I have had contact” (2.77).

Herodotus knew that written records could be used as historical sources in part because he himself had relied on them in preparing his *History*. Though his own travels and conversations constituted the bulk of what we would call his “research,” he also used written documents when he found them. Two such occasions are identifiable in his work, both in cases where he presented long descriptive lists. In neither instance did he say precisely where he got these materials, but the level of detail suggests that he was relying on official Persian documents or archives of some kind. By using written records in this way as a more reliable form of historical memory, he was, probably unwittingly, setting history off down the document-based road it has traveled since.¹⁰

The first of Herodotus’s written sources was a description of the satrapies or provinces of the Persian empire (3.90-96). The peoples inhabiting each region were itemized, together with the tax assessment they owed Darius each year. More extensive was the second document (7.60-99), a description of all the cities and nations that joined the Persians in invading Greece, a force that amounted to 1.7 million men — and

one woman: Artemesia, who succeeded her husband as commander of five ships and who “of all the allies gave the King the best counsels” (7.99). Precisely where Herodotus had found this detailed catalogue he did not say. He probably used the painting of the invading force dedicated to Mandrocles, the bridge-builder (4.87), and he had also inspected a more complete list Darius had left behind on “two pillars of white stone and engraved on them letters, on the one Assyrian, on the other Greek, listing all the nations he had led thither.” Originally set up at the Bosphorus, these pillars were subsequently moved to Byzantium, and Herodotus presumably saw them there (4.87).¹¹ By relying on written records “in cultivating the memory of mankind,” Herodotus underlined the purpose he had set out for himself in the opening sentence of the *History*, guaranteeing that “time may not draw the color” from the past.

Writing also played a role in overtly religious ceremonies, adding an air of special authority and even solemnity that was absent from exclusively oral transactions. Herodotus offered several examples of the religious uses of literacy. Most commonly, writing was used to record oracles. Like most of his contemporaries, Herodotus accepted oracles as the ordinary means by which divine intentions were transmitted to humans. These divine communications were delivered orally, with a seer speaking the god’s words while in a trance. Typically, however, the words would be written down so they could be consulted again later or used for other purposes.¹² Oracles given in Athens but pertaining to the fate of Sparta, for example, were written out so as to be carried there (5.90). Another written oracle predicted an earthquake at the shrine of Apollo on Delos, a natural disaster that portended the coming clash between Greeks and Persians (6.98).

Oracles could be ambiguous, however, depending in large measure on what their recipients wanted to hear, and sometimes writing might help to clarify that uncertainty or at least appear to do so. The Athenians, for example, had received two different messages from the god on Delphi concerning their naval defences. One prediction was harsh and pessimistic, while the other “seemed to be kinder than the earlier” one. Hoping for the best, the envoys wrote this second one down and brought it home to Athens. There Themistocles interpreted it as a prediction of Athenian victory and used it to rally his troops (7.142; the two conflicting texts are given in 7.140 and 7.141).

Writing an oracle down did not remove all ambiguity, however, as the case of an exiled Athenian named Onomacritus demonstrated. Characterized by Herodotus as “an oracle-monger and an editor” of divine pronouncements, Onomacritus was not entirely ethical, having been banished from his home city after getting “caught red-handed” slipping his own predictions into a group of authentic oracles. He was brought to Xerxes by those urging the invasion of Greece, and he gave shrewdly selective readings from his collection. Whenever he encountered a prophecy unfavorable to the Persians, “nothing was said of that.” Instead, “he picked out the most fortunate” predictions and was thus instrumental in leading Xerxes to the decision to invade (7.6). Uncharacteristically, Herodotus did not moralize here, but since the conflict between Greece and Persia ultimately left so much sorrow in its wake, his sadness over this deceitful use of writing was undiminished. At the same time, he also made a subtle point about the emotional potency of writing. Like the forged communications of royal provenance noted earlier, these written oracles commanded enough respect from all quarters to be worth tampering with or slanting to an unintended purpose.

The world of Herodotus seems far removed from our own. We are not accustomed to receiving direct communications, whether oral or written, from the divine powers. Written records still have important religious uses today, however, evident in the definitive collections of scripture — here again, the word itself underlines an apparently inevitable connection to writing — accepted by various world religions. Records are even incorporated into religious ceremonies, especially in the Judaeo-Christian tradition, such as carrying books in processions and kissing them as part of liturgical practice. No less than the practical reasons for making records, the symbolic, commemorative, and religious motivations for record making have continued to develop along the lines first traced by Herodotus, when writing was still new.

The distance in time and mentality from Herodotus to the present, however, cannot diminish the relevance of his observations on written records and the role they play in human affairs. For archivists, these observations provide the occasion to reflect on some of the larger questions that underlie their daily professional tasks. Archivists spend their time and talents preserving, organizing, and making available the recorded information of mankind. In doing so, they consciously rely on the origin and retransmission of those records, their provenance, as the decisive element in understanding them. A study of Herodotus and his *History* can give archivists the opportunity to reflect on why information is recorded at all; why there is anything on which we may work our professional magic. Ultimately, despite the passage of 2500 years, nothing is more immediately relevant.

Notes

- 1 All quotations from Herodotus used here will be from *Herodotus: The History*, translated by David Greene (Chicago, 1987). Quotations will be identified by book and chapter number, and the citation will be given in parentheses in the text; the passage quoted here is 5.58.
- 2 The origin and spread of writing and the impact of literacy are discussed in William V. Harris, *Ancient Literacy* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1989), esp. ch. 3, and Eric A. Havelock, *The Literate Revolution in Greece and Its Cultural Consequences* (Princeton, 1982). I have explored some of the implications of these developments for archivists in "On the Idea of Permanence," *The American Archivist*, 52 (1989), pp. 10-25, and in *Understanding Archives and Manuscripts* (Chicago, 1990), pp. 7-10.
- 3 On the difficulties of applying the Rankean formula to ancient history, see M. I. Finley, *Ancient History: Evidence and Methods* (New York, 1987), ch. 4. For a general discussion of the problems of historical understanding, see Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream: The 'Objectivity Question' and the American Historical Profession* (Cambridge, 1988).
- 4 The secondary literature on Herodotus is, of course, huge. For a useful overview, see David Greene's "Introduction" (pp. 1-32 of the edition of the *History* used here) and Susanna Stambler, "Herodotus," *Ancient Writers: Greece and Rome*, ed. T. James Luce (2 vols.; New York, 1982), p. 1, pp. 209-232. See also the "Introduction" to an older translation (the so-called de Selincourt-Brun edition) in *Herodotus: The Histories* (New York, 1972), pp. 7-37.
- 5 For a brief discussion of Herodotus's version of the origins of literacy, see W. W. How and J. Wells, *A Commentary on Herodotus* (Oxford, 1964), p. 2, pp. 26-27; hereafter cited as "How and Wells." Unlike Homer, Herodotus wrote down a fixed text of the *History*, though like earlier Greek works it was meant to be read aloud; see Greene, "Introduction," 15. For a comparative view of Homeric composition, see G. S. Kirk, *The Songs of Homer* (Cambridge, 1962), and Michael N. Nagler, *Spontaneity and Tradition: A Study of the Oral Art of Homer* (Berkeley, 1974).
- 6 In one case — that of Darius's negotiations with the Scythians — Herodotus described diplomatic discussions carried out by the repeated exchange of oral messages only, without the benefit of written instructions. Herodotus called this process "long and endless," suggesting that he thought such a manner of proceeding less efficient than writing; see 4.125-126.
- 7 Plato's *Phaedrus*, trans. R. Hackforth (Indianapolis, 1952), pp. 275B-275E. It is interesting to note in this connection that Plato presented the thought of Socrates in dialogues, literary transcriptions of oral speech that were themselves "near-oral" in form and thus reassuring to a culture not yet fully at home with literacy.
- 8 On commemorative pottery, see the two works of J. Boardman: *Athenian Black Figure Vases* (New York, 1974) and *Athenian Red Figure Vases: The Archaic Period* (London, 1975). Harris, *Ancient Literacy*, pp.

- 221-22, discusses written remembrances of the dead, pointing out that these writings provided the ancients something they otherwise lacked: the notion of a pleasant afterlife.
- 9 In fact, the Egyptians of the period Herodotus described used three different forms of hieroglyphic writing, two of which were identified as "God's script" and the other a more common, shorthand version; see How and Wells, 1:182.
 - 10 For a discussion of the written sources Herodotus used, see How and Wells, p. 2, pp. 51-152; see also the "Introduction" to the de Selincourt-Brun translation, pp. 22-28. It is worth noting that the Greek word "history" itself (*historia*) meant first and foremost research, or gaining knowledge through systematic inquiry, rather than the study of the past.
 - 11 How and Wells, p. 2, p. 152.
 - 12 Harris, *Ancient Literacy*, p. 55, concludes that the question of when writing was first used in oracular practice is "apparently unknowable," but he does believe that it was well established by Herodotus's day. See Harris's further discussions of the religious uses of records, op. cit., pp. 82-83, pp. 124-25 and pp. 218-22.