

THE WISDOM OF HERODOTUS

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Just what part wisdom plays in science it is hard to say. It is not large. Science is knowledge, but knowledge is power only when it has an admixture of a very different thing,—wisdom. A man is not wise because he knows a lot of things. He is wise when he knows the relation between them, not alone in a review of the past as Virgil has it,—happy is he who has been able to discern the causes of things, —but especially in his comprehension of the present and in his forecast of the future. So long as education is confined to the acquisition of knowledge it is working at only a small part of a man's destiny and the practical results are,—in the most important affairs of life,—disappointing. Wisdom is very old in the world, much older than science, even as its conception occurs to the mind without much thought of its definition and without critical analysis. Just in proportion to a man's capacity to travel back over the history of thought and his ability to keep on the trace of science amidst a maze of other activities of the mind does science age for him. It merges insensibly first into knowledge and then into wisdom and there's where we find it in Herodotus. Now knowledge "is the state of being or having become aware of truth," while science is gained by "systematic observation, experiment and reasoning, co-ordinated, arranged and systematized." If our historical student, going backward, takes notice when he abandons the Latin word, science, for the Saxon word, knowledge—or the middle English and Icelandic,—the dictionary says, when he steps across the barriers insensibly imposed by the evolution of thought on our conceptions,—he need go back only two or three generations,—he will find his horizon broadens. Though it may grow more distant and dim when the conceptions of science and

*The references not otherwise indicated are to *Herodoti Historiarum Libri*, IX ed. Dietsch-Kallenberg (Teubner).

knowledge merge the same thing happens when knowledge merges with wisdom in the seven wise men of ancient thought.

In this sense science may be co-eval with wisdom, but neither science nor knowledge are co-extensive with wisdom and the Greeks, knowing all this, invented a word for which we have no equivalent, which is broader than them all,—*sophrosyne*,—a word we have almost adopted in our own language without being able to translate it and Herodotus had this more in mind than wisdom alone when he told the story of Cræsus and Solon, of Cyrus and Astyages, of Xerxes, of many another historical figure so dim to us now but for his pages.

Cyrus claimed¹ to be the favorite of the gods, because of his lucky escape from ravening beasts when as a babe he was exposed on the mountains of Media and carried home by a shepherd to his wife who had lost her own suckling. Astyages, his wicked grandfather, who had thrown him to the beasts of the field and the birds of the air, was stricken of God, not on account of his manifold sins, but because he appointed Harpagus, whom he had mortally, horribly, incredibly injured to a position of trust. To slay a man's only son and cut him up in steaks and roasts and set the cooked meat before the unsuspecting father and after he had partaken of it at the feast to tell him on what he had dined and then appoint him generalissimo of his armies, is to us all incredible. Indeed this might need the interference of God to bring it about and His intercession to make us believe such a story or similar episodes in the archives of the Atreidæ and others. The primitive creed that every thing is in the hands of God helps greatly our comprehension, but we of the western world read of such things in the pages of Herodotus, not with absolute incredulity because of the enormity of the deed, but with revolt at the thought of such folly, such absolute absence of wisdom in the ruler of an Oriental empire, not inconsiderable even before Cyrus. We know man can be a cruel beast, more cruel than any beast, but even now we can't reconcile ourselves to the idea a man can be a fool and sit long on any throne. It seems to us Cyrus was not so much favored of God in having been saved from wild beasts as in having such a grandfather as Astyages. Whatever the truth of the tale, we see peeping through it the motif in the philosophy of the ancient Greek that no wisdom, however effective in action, can provide for the fortuitous arrangement of atoms or of events in the world or in our world.

¹*Herodoti Historiarum Libri, IX* ed. Dietsch—Kallenberg (Teubner), 107 seq.

Herodotus heard the story, we infer from what he says, from the Medes and Persians perhaps a hundred and fifty years after it could have occurred. Now much may be said of his critical acuteness in sifting the sources of history I have already urged. He stands a little aloof from the story of Cyrus' birth and exposure and bringing up. It is the common stock out of which heroes and prophets are myth-made. So we may be privileged, if we are skeptical, to believe that Cyrus was the herdsman's son and had the wisdom of the serpent not alone in taking the advantage of a fool on the throne of Persia, but in starting the tale of his being in the royal line of descent, without which nothing of the kind was possible for a candidate of royal honors in the Persia of his day. But why should Herodotus have believed that Astyages could have been such a fool and still have had the astuteness to preserve his ascendancy over the wild and unruly tribes of the Medes in the mountains and the Persians of the plains, until he had ruled thirty-five years? Well, stories of this kind were not absent at all from the legends of ancient Greece. The fact is that such tales were believed by the Greeks and became current coin for the historian, but unlike similar tales among primitive people, the Greeks rested theirs on a quite plausible theory of religion and of all things Herodotus was a religious man, to whom philosophy and religion were synonyms. If an irresponsible God rules the world by interference more or less direct in the affairs of men why should not He and his satellites, the gods or the fates, produce such prodigies as a miraculous fool on a shaking throne? Then they go on to show how Nemesis introduces folly and madness into the minds of supremely fortunate and supremely powerful men. We sometimes call it paresis, but on the whole this does not cover the ground. The Greeks may have missed the pathology of it occasionally, but far better than we, they knew the disease of the mind which leaves no track at autopsy. Why should not Astyages have ordered his grandson killed because of a dream? Did Napoleon prate of his destiny, his star, for effect only? However that may be, it arose out of the inmost chambers of the soul. Why should not Astyages have played the part of an incredible fool in his dealings with Harpagus? The modern mind, it is true, is resistant to such suggestions but back of the Greek, back of Herodotus stood his philosophy, his religion.

The gods of the Greeks were too much like men not to be jealous of them, thought the Greek. There is still no quarter of the inhabited globe where riches suddenly acquired or prosperity long continued does actually make such an absurd fool of a man as in Italy

or Greece today. Our vulgar *nouveaux riches*, hard enough on the sensibilities of their fellow countrymen, can neither in France nor in England nor in America be placed in the same class with them, but in all there is that loss of the sense of proportion—of the just value of things, which is the inevitable result when human nature is exposed to certain strains and stresses of life without compensating supports of philosophy furnished by one's environment or by quite exceptional fibre in one's moral nature,—by nurture or nature. Practically we are all of us *nouveaux riches* in chrysalis. Evidently the ancient Greek thought just so and he took refuge in a mysticism to explain it and with this as a background the psychological element in the etiology stands forth as the literature of no other age has exhibited it. We see out of what have sprung a hundred wise saws familiar to the copy books of our youth. "Pride goeth before a fall." "Him whom the gods wish to destroy they first make mad"—with riches or with power. The hand of God must have been laid on the man at the start that he by his prosperity should have gradually and silently and subtly lost the very faculties by which he or his ancestor had secured it. The "sophrosyne" of the Greeks was the antidote their philosophers wished to instill into the souls of men to turn them from this path to ruin. It is a term we cannot translate, but as near to "wisdom" in functioning of mind as can be conceived. We find the Father of History impregnated with this philosophy. It was the atmosphere in which he lived. How can a man escape that? If he has any message at all for the men of his generation his literary product must be suffused with it. If he thinks he has a message for any future age there is only a chance in a million that he is not mistaken.

The preponderating chance at the time for the confident prophet is that his message, so pressing for his own environment, finds no one at home seventy-five generations later and that the prophet's confidence is a touch of that very insanity of which we have been speaking. It is only as looking backward we see it was no mere chance alone that has put the apothegms of Hippocrates and Herodotus in our text books. We see it is because our civilization followed a certain path along which Greek wisdom has here and there bloomed. Events might well have pursued other paths, the chance of battle at Marathon or Lepanto, at Platæa or Vienna, or the mere accident in their shaping which does not so strike our imagination and appeal to our homicidal nature as what happens on fields of battle and we would not have been what we are. Another turn of the card

and the wisdom of Herodotus would not have interested us at all. It is that turn of the card that did happen, many turns of many cards, which the Greeks saw as Nemesis which affiliates us with their philosophy, the fortuitous sequence of events which they visualized in a less teleological way also as the Fates. Immutable as they at one moment visualize it, at the next it is the intervention of a jealous god which guides Astyages along the path to destruction. Such inconsistency still exists in the thought of our time, the tag ends of controversy of another generation as to fore-destination and free will, so let us not stop to wonder at the contradictions of Greek thought. For Herodotus, like the devout in our day, it was the hand of God. For Democritus and for Lucretius and for us materialists who are their heirs, it is the fortuitous aggregation of atoms and events. What Herodotus wrote for the men of his day goes home to us here thousands of years afterwards, thousands of miles away in a land, travelled man as he was, Herodotus never dreamed of. I am not much of a believer in immutable truths, but this wisdom of Herodotus comes very near being one of the eternal verities if there are such things.

Herodotus drives the lesson home in many other passages. Some one may show sometime he has perverted the springs of history in doing it. They have tried hitherto to show that he has, but they have not succeeded; still they may. I do not know about that, but the lesson is a good one and can never be too often illustrated. We know the story of Cræsus and Solon. It is one of the tales of Herodotus which has found its way into our reading books. It was the wisdom of Herodotus, it was the wisdom of his day, it is the wisdom of ours, still with many illustrations in life all around us, in history in the making. When Herodotus told of Solon's unheeded warning to Cræsus that for all one's riches and power the world must wait until the man died to pronounce him happy, he was but echoing the lines of Euripides:² "Let no one be held happy before his death." On this with all the skill of his art he based the sketch, which remains to us as the history of Cræsus, the story of his vast riches, his overwhelming vanity, his readiness to venture at war with a great conqueror inured to arms and backed by a disciplined force of devoted and hardy slaves. From the blazing fagots and the swirling smoke of the pyre on which Cyrus bound his captive rose the cry: "Oh, Solon, Solon, Solon." And that cry saved his life, his life and

² Euripides: Trojan Women ll. 509-510.

nothing more. I know no lesson in all the homilies, temporal or secular, ever preached, aimed to inculcate wisdom in the sons of men, which has so deserved to have a career in the world, not for its worldly wisdom alone, but also for the dramatic force with which the lesson was driven home. It was 561 B. C. when Cræsus came to the throne and it was 546 B. C. when Cyrus sacked his city of Sardes and probably took him captive then, after he had established that gold coinage of which last year such a rich find was made there by American archæologists.³

After Cyrus had snatched him from the flames, curious to know who Solon was, and finding Cræsus suddenly (a little too suddenly, it seems to me) become a wise and a good man, honoring the gods at least, he asked: "Who in the world induced you to make an attack upon my territories, you, who have hitherto been my friend?" "O King," humbly said the chastened plutocrat, "I have done this for your glorification and for my shame. The reason of it is that the god of the Greeks tempted me to wage an offensive war against you. No one is such a fool as to prefer war to peace, for in the former sons bury their fathers, in the latter fathers bury their sons." This the man snatched from the burning said when the smoke got out of his eyes. Did the prisoner of St. Helena see that truth written on the South Atlantic skies? Does the hermit of Doorn get a glimpse of it through the fogs of Holland? Now what arguments did the jealous god of the Greeks insidiously instill into the mind of the exultant nouveau riche to lure him on to his destruction? We will wave the oracles aside, deceptive enough for a mind already deceived. They stand in the foreground of Herodotus' tales with omens and dreams. We refuse to give them importance. It was the statecraft of the Lydian monarch, master of vast resources, who had already yielded to the temptation to overpower the neighboring states of his Asiatic Greek kindred. He heard of the rise of the Persian power in the hinterland and he determined to attack it before it overwhelmed him. Though Herodotus does not say so, we know what all his counsellors except Solon, told him. We have heard it in our day. Prepare for war if you wish peace and when prepared for war strike at any one you think you see making ready for war before he is your equal. The man of business chimes in. Do unto others as others would do unto you and do it first. It is smart and its neat perversion of our ethical maxim makes it funny. That's the way the god of the Greeks led him into a delirium and Solon saw his

³ *American Journal of Archaeology*, Oct.-Dec. 1922, vol. 4, p. 389.

state and did not know what was going to happen, but went off muttering the wisdom of Herodotus and Plutarch, copied the sayings of Solon and the sequel, as Herodotus put them in his histories, and they both have handed them to us. I do not know why history should be written at all, except possibly for nursery tales, unless bearded men can find in it some such wisdom as the Father of History thus lays at our feet. All the people who make history tell us that the annalist is necessarily a liar. Why should the historian not try to be a moralist?

It would be perfectly easy to show how this motif in the histories of Herodotus is an ever recurring one hidden in the consciousness of the annalist,—perhaps unconsciously back of some of the tales, but the modern reader should not graft on it a sprig from the ethical tree of Christian life,—be good and you will be happy. Not all are happy in after life,—after a life of wickedness. Herodotus knew this. Modern homilies know it, but these are less familiar with the non-success of virtue and occasionally admit that disaster of religious ethics,—the mystery of evil. Herodotus and his Greeks however looked life steadily in the eye. Cypselus after a life of un pitying wickedness, cruelty, treachery and bestiality, after reigning over Corinth for thirty years, ended his life happily and his son Periander became his even more cruel successor in the tyranny.⁴ Herodotus drops the remark, almost incidentally as to the beast of Corinth,—having reigned thirty years and having ended the web of life happily his son Periander succeeded him in the tyranny.

So it was not because the moral sense of the gods was injured that they dealt heavily with Astyages and Crœsus, stripping them of their wealth and power. It was because their immoral sense was injured, the sense of jealousy that mortal man could rise so high as to suggest a rivalry with them. That was the, to us, degrading symbolism the Greeks threw over the fate of men losing their equilibrium when raised on high, but it was nearer to the truth than our own, it was more of a mental problem to them than a moral one. It is a psychological phenomenon of idealistic ethical values which has served to obscure the truth and hide the facts. Ethics had little to do with their gods. It seldom had much to do with primitive religion. It still remains no part of theology in the stricter sense. Ethics was a part of their philosophy, not of their religion. So far as it was not pure oriental fatalism it was because these unfortunates of Herodotus were sinners against wisdom—sophrosyne— that they fell from

⁴ *Herodoti Historiarum Libri*, v. 92.

power. The mystery of evil, the problem which has haunted us since the Church more and more insistently has coupled theology with ethics, had no mystery for them. One must not forget the clinging to oriental fatalism in all this and at the same time to an arbitrary deity exercising his functions quite aside from the interposition of natural law. It lingers with us yet. With bowed heads and crushed hearts we still say, Thy will be done, Inshallah, Kismet, Nitshevo. No virtue, no wisdom even, can forestall what the Fates allot each man ran through all Greek thought as it runs through ours. Napoleon talked about his star. It is the favorite attitude of triumphant effrontery. Yet the greatest of all the conquerors had at last insight into just what the Greeks meant when they insisted the gods were ever laying snares for the victorious, but they realized only too late they were in the toils. Napoleon knew there was no halt for him. He must move on or perish at home when his country had become enamoured of him because of his activity. Torpor meant ruin. Cæsar exposing himself unguarded to the tyrannicides daggers, Cæsar with the world at his feet preparing for the Parthian war, knew it was to come to this at last. What difference whether he died from the dagger of a "friend" or from a Parthian arrow? It was better than the stones of a disenchanting rabble at Rome. Napoleon carried his vial of poison with him, but failed to take it at the right time. Perhaps something of the kind moved Cyrus, the King of Kings, to perish in a foolish war against a petty barbarous people on his northern frontiers. Victory had nothing in it for him except the death he found and perhaps sought. It is not to be wondered at that the Greek mind wandered between the Kismet of the Asiatics, the snares of the gods, and the sins committed against "sophrosyne." For us the latter is the only moral, the experience of life and the history of three thousand years allows us to draw.

One of the stories referred to more frequently than other incidents in the pages of Herodotus was that of Xerxes weeping⁵ at the review of his countless host after they had crossed the Hellespont. Doubtless concealing or not understanding the true cause of his emotion he said he wept because the thought came to him that in a hundred years all that vast multitude would be dead, so brief is human life, but Artabanes assured him that there was not one of them but would in his life be so miserable that he would wish to die rather than to live. It is the misfortunes and sufferings of life make it seem long and life becoming burdensome death is the desired refuge, but life in reality is short. This is the opening thought of

the Aphorisms of Hippocrates as they have been arranged from his works by some unknown hand. It has been easy for a German scholar to point out the curious parallels in the thought of Euripides with some of the Hippocratic writings. We have found the saying of Solon appearing in Herodotus and unacknowledged of course in the lines of Euripides in regard to the uncertainty of happiness for men. I might have also shown the parallel of fathers burying their sons instead of the reverse, which we have found in Herodotus, perhaps also from Solon, is reproduced as well in *The Trojan Women* of Euripides, and here we are reminded of Hippocrates as we enter upon the subject of euthanasia at the door of the disgust for life. This too penetrated all Greek thought. It is absurd to suppose it borrowed always from one by another. Let us see if we can trace it to its origin in the life of primitive man in the pages of Herodotus and elsewhere.

They say that General Sherman, who had a wealth of human tenderness at the bottom of his rugged soul, became wearied beyond endurance with the band playing *Marching Through Georgia*, and being like many tender-hearted men somewhat short in temper in later life, would break out in wild profanity whenever he found he must listen to it again. We shall have no reason to wonder that Dr. Osler was overcome with a similar feeling towards the passing jest that made him so unwillingly famous among the laity. He had a right to be dumbfounded and disgusted that an idle turn of phrase made him responsible for a thought which is embodied in the history of thought, as it is easily to be found at almost every turn in its ancient and modern records. Herodotus⁶ relates the Thracians mourn over the new born babe entering a world of sorrows and they rejoice at the death of those dearly beloved as they are departing for rest or happiness ever more. Is not this a much more logical and unselfish attitude than that of the Christians who profess a belief in beatitude after death, but mourn when their friends, whom they enjoy, are torn from them by it and dread its approach to themselves as the King of Terrors? It is clear that Herodotus has exposed the springs of desire and despair, which lay at the heart of primitive man, unsmirched by the contortions and tergiversations of our civilization, as it lies at the heart of modern men. In a way we may say that this is an underlying cause why aged relatives are frequently killed by savage tribes and life and death regarded merely as a choice between evils that are known and the possibility of unknown evil, it is true but the probability of rest.

⁶ *Herodoti Historiarum Libri*, VII, 46.

⁷ *Ibid.*, v. 6.

That petty barbarous people on his northern marches, against whom Cyrus threw himself in the foreline of battle were the Massagetæ.⁷ Herodotus relates how Cyrus, after having made himself master of all hither Asia and much of northern India, forming one of the largest empires the world has ever seen, perished miserably in an attack on this tribe, dwelling along the Araxes river and his incidental account of this people supplies us with one or two items of interest in ethnology and even in medicine, but also introduces us to the mainsprings of the ethics in the philosophy of the Greeks and Romans which looked with indulgence on suicide, practised by so many of the stoics though not countenanced by all of them, and universally abhorred by the populace. The exigencies of the state prevents anyone from putting into action his belief that any particular one of his fellow men has lived long enough, but the moralists of these early organizations almost invariably commended the man who came to that conclusion as to himself and acted accordingly. The conviction that life is unbearable has its roots then in the earliest records of mankind and it is only in our day we have seen a strong moral sentiment against the practice of suicide rather ridiculously enacted into statutes, but of course no state could exist whose individuals preferred not to await the conviction and convenience of others in this matter of killing the sick and aged. Herodotus says, however, of the Massagetæ, "there is no specified time of life for it, but when a man gets to be very old all his relatives gather around him and use him and also with him sheep and goats as a sacrifice to the gods." In the previous paper on Herodotus in this journal I have alluded to a like rumor he relates of a people in further India, who kill and eat their relatives before they are unfit for food, but with the same sad convictions as to the worthlessness of life. With interested motives such as this it is a little surprising to hear of the survival of such people, with convictions and practices apparently unchanged, into comparatively recent times.

We get another hint from Strabo.⁸ According to him it is mentioned by Menander in a lost play and there existed a law in a state, probably more advanced in organization than the Massagetæ, embodying the unfortunate joke of Osler in a statute. Menander makes one of his characters say: "Phanias, that is a good law of the Cæans. Who cannot live comfortably, let him not live miserably." It is another instance of the fact to which I have so often drawn attention, there is no modern joke whose counterpart can not be found

⁷ *Ibid*, I. 201.

among people of the ancient civilizations, which, though ancient are still our own. Strabo says the law ordained that those above sixty years of age should be compelled to drink hemlock in order that there might be sufficient food for the rest. Ceos is an island in the Aegean. It is said that once when they were being besieged by the Athenians a decree was passed to the effect that the older persons, fixing the age, should be put to death and that in consequence the besiegers retired, —whether horrified at the cruel order or discouraged in the attempt to take a place whose citizens were so resolute to defend it.

Diodorus Siculus⁹ tells how at Meroe in Ethiopia the priests of the gods who were the most powerful of all men send whensoever they please to the King telling him to put himself to death, as such is the pleasure of the gods. Many of the ancient tyrants, Nero as to Seneaca, it is said, gave the same gracious privilege to some of their courtiers who were annoying. But Ergamenes bred in the Grecian discipline was the first to disobey the order at Meroe. He went there and cut the throats of all the priests and did away with that and many other customs. It was a bloody but a necessary step toward the better organization of society, for it is easy to see into what abuses the impulse of primitive men to escape the evils of life lead them. It would not be superfluous in the interest of sanity in the world to take the modern medical defenders of euthanasia by the hand and lead them back to Herodotus and the paths of historical experience which diverge from him in order to show them the evils their own limited intelligence would inaugurate as a new refinement of a late stage of culture.

It would not be uninteresting to refer to some of the data with which modern ethnology furnishes us on this subject, to the implications of which Herodotus opens his pages. From these it is quite evident that very horrid practices prevailed with a background of the principles of euthanasia and we have found evidence they secured entrance even into the statutes, at least the practices of the islands of the Aegean which nursed the infancy of the civilization of which we are the heirs. But this record can be found so much more fully set forth in some of the volumes of Frazer's *Golden Bough*, that I shall seek for it no further than the few notes I have on hand. Hale¹⁰ had already told us many years ago that when the Fijis were sick, man, woman or child, of a lingering disease, their friends "wring their heads off or strangle them." He was told by the missionaries

⁸ Strabo: x. v. 6.

⁹ *Diodorus Siculus: The Historical Library of*, tr. by G. Booth, London, 1814.

they knew of only one natural death, all the others having been strangled or buried alive. Even before this, Irving¹¹ had culled from the pages of the Fray Roman Pobre Hermito that in the Antilles, at the time of Columbus' voyages a dying Cazique was strangled out of respect and, if the cacique in other cases was willing, such favors were extended to others he wished to honor. As to the Fijis, Mayer¹² has more recently said that they believed that as they were at the time of death, so would they be in the world to come and they frequently requested to be strangled or buried alive. The Ahts¹³ of Vancouver and the Tasmanians¹⁴ abandoned the old and sick and deformed, and babes so afflicted were thrown by the Spartans into the nearest duck pond. The subject of euthanasia in medicine has a rather sombre background in modern ethnology as well as in the Wisdom of Herodotus.

¹⁰ Hale, Horatio: *United States Exploring Expedition, 1838-1842*. Philadelphia 1846.

¹¹ Irving, Washington: *Voyages and Discoveries of the Companions of Columbus*. Philadelphia, 1831.

¹² Mayer, Alfred Goldsborough. *Popular Science Monthly*, June 1915.

¹³ Sproat, Gilbert Malcolm: *Scenes and Studies of Savage Life*. London, 1868.

¹⁴ Roth, H. Ling: *The Aborigines of Tasmania*. Halifax, England, 1899.