

**Helen's Autopsy: A Forensic Approach to Myth in Herodotus' *Histories***  
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I'd like to start by explaining the title of my talk: "Helen's Autopsy, A Forensic Approach to Myth in Herodotus's *Histories*." Herodotus wrote *The Histories* in the 5th century BC. He is sometimes called the Father of History, because he was the first person to attempt to document the past factually, based on evidence, and he was the first to call that process 'Historie', which is the Greek word for 'inquiry'. As for Helen's autopsy, there is no autopsy as we would understand the word. Autopsy, or *opsis* in Greek, means to be an "eyewitness," and it was one part of Herodotus 3-step method of inquiry. I called his approach 'forensic' because Herodotus is the first known writer to apply a method for testing the factuality of the information he recorded. His 3-step process included: *opsis*, his own eyewitness account; *akoē*, gathering oral information from people he interviewed; and *gnōmē*, his analysis of his findings. *The Histories* documents the Greco-Persian wars, a half-century long conflict between Greece and Persia, and Herodotus spent decades traveling the Mediterranean recording firsthand accounts of the war, speaking to record-keepers, and visiting monuments and significant sites. But he didn't just record what he learned, he added meaning to his narrative in the way he presented it, using symbols, epic language, and thematic structuring. One way he add layers of subtext into his work is through the use of mythic material, and this is why we are looking at how he presents Helen of Troy in *The Histories*. Herodotus mentions Helen four times in his work; examining where Helen appears in the text, and how her characteristics affect the

interpretation of the text, not only demonstrates Herodotus' revolutionary approach to thinking about the past, but also reveals his investment in trying to affect what is happening in his own time through illuminating that past.

Why choose Helen? I wrote my master's thesis investigating the ways Helen is represented in archaic and classical Greek literature; this is an extension of that work. As you know, Helen was once kidnapped by/or ran away with the Trojan prince Paris, and the Greeks started the Trojan War in order to get her back. That war and its aftermath are the subjects of Homer's epics. I found that certain literary themes are attached to Helen, beginning in the *Iliad*: she is consistently linked with both memory and storytelling, and also with the limits and fallibility of memory and representation. She is also strongly tied to mourning. Almost every time she speaks in the *Iliad*, she is using traditional mourning phraseology, and she closes the epic with a funeral song. So the question is, why is Helen the prize at Troy? She is not the real prize; the real prize is to be remembered after you die. If you die honorably, in victory, you will achieve a kind of immortality in the songs and stories about your heroism. The Greeks called this *kleos*, or glory, and it represented the epitome of the martial ideal in Greek culture. In the *Iliad*, Helen essentially represents our struggle with our own mortality: she is the one who can confer the only kind of immortality possible for us, through storytelling.

In the *Odyssey*, and in the other works I examined, Helen is still a storyteller, and still represents a kind of anxiety about the powers and limits of representation in story.

Because she is an essentially ambiguous figure, she also tends to act as a kind of pressure point in the texts that she appears in, often leads to questions that change the texts' meaning. I found that Herodotus uses Helen for two purposes in *The Histories*. One, Helen serves to link his work to the authority of the epic past that she represents. And two, Herodotus uses Helen to subvert the meaning of his own narrative, to question the societal value of celebrating war heroes and *kleos*, even as he himself is singing their praises.

Herodotus sets out his objectives in the first line of *The Histories*:

“This is the publication of the research of Herodotus of Halicarnassus, so that the actions of people shall not fade with time, so that the great and admirable monuments produced by both the Greeks and barbarians shall not go unrenowned, and among other things, to set forth the reasons why they waged war on each other.”<sup>1</sup>

Examining this first line alone shows the revolutionary nature of Herodotus' thinking: he rejected verse in favor of prose—he was the first Greek writer to do this; he breaks with the tradition of calling on the muses to tell him the truth, instead naming himself as the author of his own work; he declares that not only warfare but also man-made monuments are fit subjects for renown, and he includes the accomplishments of the barbarians, or Persians, in the scope of history. This line illustrates why examining even the briefest anecdotes in the *Histories* can yield surprisingly complex subtexts. So, although Helen appears only briefly in *The Histories*, Herodotus is able to tap into her powerful

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<sup>1</sup> All Herodotus cited from Walter Blanco's translation

symbolism to raise questions about Greek identity and ideals, and how those were impacting contemporary Greek society as he wrote.

Helen's appearances bracket the *Histories*, by appearing in the first and last of the nine books. She appears in Book 1, when Herodotus explains the cause of the long-escalating hostilities between the Persians and the Greeks as originating in a series of stolen brides between East and West. To do this he reimagines the myths of the goddesses Io, Europa, Medea, and finally Helen, removing their magical trappings and proposing that these goddesses were simply young women who had been kidnapped by opportunistic men. While the kidnappings of Io, Europa and Medea would go unavenged, Helen's kidnapping by Paris leads to the Trojan War, the first military engagement between West and East. Herodotus does not question whether the Trojan War happened, only its true circumstances. In the beginning of the *Histories*, Herodotus uses Helen to link the mythic and the human worlds—she is the mythic immortal at the center of a true human event, the Trojan War.

The second time we see Helen is in Book 2, where Herodotus uses her to demonstrate his forensic approach to looking at the past. After spelling out his three-step method of autopsy, inquiry, and judgement, he subjects Helen to the process, with results that definitively break with epic tradition. Herodotus is describing his travels in Egypt, where he comes upon a unique temple in Memphis that he believes to be dedicated to Helen. He says:

“There is a temple of the so-called Foreign Aphrodite in the precinct of Proteus. I suspect that this temple belongs to Helen...in part because of a story I heard that

Helen had stayed with Proteus, but mostly because the temple is named for the Foreign Aphrodite. You see, no other temple to Aphrodite is called foreign.” [2.112]

Herodotus interviews Egyptian priests who tell him an alternative to the famous kidnapping story that started the Trojan War. They say that Paris stopped in Egypt on his way to Troy, and upon learning that he carried a kidnapped queen, the Egyptian King Proteus sequestered Helen in Egypt, sending Paris to Troy empty-handed. When the Greeks arrived at Troy, they refused to believe that story and destroyed the city. Herodotus says “it seems to me that Homer knew this story, but that it wasn’t as suitable to his epic as the one he used.” [2.118] He pushes the analysis further, saying:

“I myself agree with [the Egyptian priests’] version of the Helen story for the following reason. If Helen had been in [Troy], she would have been returned to the Greeks whether [Paris] liked it or not, for neither [King] Priam nor his relatives were so addlebrained that they would risk their city and their own lives and the lives of their children just so that [Paris] could live with Helen.”

Herodotus wasn’t the first to claim that Helen wasn’t at Troy. Helen’s complicated tradition had by the 5<sup>th</sup> century yielded a figure who was simultaneously reviled as history’s most infamous adulteress and worshipped as a goddess of marriage. Whether or not there was a temple to her in Egypt, Helen did have her own temple in Sparta, where scholars believe young girls would pray to her and leave votives in hopes of getting her help finding a good husband. Possibly it was this gradual recuperation of her immortal

status that yielded a new line of narrative about Helen, removing her blame for abandoning her home and family and starting a war, and remembering her instead as the daughter of Zeus, the world's most beautiful woman and Sparta's greatest queen. Writers in the 5th century began mentioning a second, phantom Helen who was really responsible for the war at Troy, while the real Helen had been chastely hidden away. The lyric poet Stesichorus famously composed an ode claiming that Helen herself told him that she didn't go to Troy, and caused him to go blind until he defended her name. However, Herodotus was the first to argue, based on evidence, that Helen was never at Troy, that the historic battle for her recovery was senseless, and, just as important, that Homer had known this, and chose to lie about it.

Helen, as his forensic subject, again serves as the bridge between epic and history with the three-step process of 1) autopsy: observing of the temple of the Foreign Aphrodite; 2) inquiry: the testimony of the Egyptian priests, who claimed their records documented when Helen's husband Menelaus came to Egypt to retrieve her; and 3) his own judgment about what he learned there. In a way Helen proves the truth of Herodotus' history like a muse would, both demonstrating his technique and linking his words to a deeper mythic tradition. Thus Herodotus accomplishes multiple objectives with his presentation of the "Helen in Egypt" story: he corroborates his own authority as a historian, frames his method in readily accessible mythic terms for his audience, and formats his own work in the Homeric paradigm.

The last time we see Helen, she appears the final book of *The Histories*. There Herodotus invokes an old myth about Helen as a child, and the time she was kidnapped

by the hero Theseus, who stole her from Sparta, planning to hide her in Attica until she was old enough to marry. In a familiar mythic pattern that would repeat itself years later when Helen was abducted to Troy, retribution for her kidnapping was fierce, when Helen's divine brothers instantly raise an army and invaded Attica to retrieve her. Herodotus reminds readers of this story in an anecdote when he is recalling the heroes of the Greco-Persian Battle of Plataea, the battle that marked the turning point in the war in the Greek's favor. Herodotus is recounting who the bravest warriors of Plataea were and what city-state they hailed from, when he notes that the bravest Athenian warrior to die in the battle came from a town called Decelea. He is reminded then that:

...even the Athenians admit, the people of Decelea once performed a service that has benefited them through the ages. You see, in the distant past, [Helen's brothers] invaded Attica with a large army to retrieve Helen. Not knowing where she was hidden, they ransacked all the villages, whereupon, the story goes...[the King of Decelea], who was angry about Theseus' outrageous behavior and fearful over what might happen to all of Attica...disclosed Helen's location [so she could be returned to Sparta]... Because of this, Deceleans who visit Sparta are given front seats at all events to this day and are charged no fees; and in the latest war between Athens and Sparta...although the [Spartans] ravaged the rest of Attica, they left Decelea alone. [9.73]

This anecdote about Decelea is important because it is one of only two times in *The Histories* that Herodotus mentions "the latest war between Athens and Sparta". He is referring to the Peloponnesian War, the devastating war between the former allies that

was tearing the Greek world apart. Here Herodotus uses Helen's myth to create a depth of field, a way to telescope the Trojan, Persian, and Peloponnesian Wars so that each impacts meaningfully upon the other. Herodotus chooses his details carefully here, so that Helen's myth, which could be interpreted as adding further glory to the battle by comparing it with Troy, instead casts a shadow on the scene.

Helen's name was synonymous with the Trojan War, but Herodotus remembered that Helen did not only cause an epic conflict; she was also the reason behind the first pan-Hellenic alliance, the originator of the Greek identity: the Spartans, Achaeans, Myrmidons, and others only really became "the Greeks" when they first joined forces to war on Troy in Helen's name. Likewise, it was through the power of alliance that the Greeks were able to finally expel the Persians. The Helen-Theseus story specifically highlights a time of mythic Spartan-Athenian cooperation for the greater Greek good, one that easily parallels real and recent cooperation in facing the Persians. Through the lens of Helen, it is easy to see Herodotus interjecting a commentary on the devastating political relations between Athens and Sparta occurring as he wrote.

The Helen-Theseus myth has further subtext. The hero Theseus had lately been embraced as Athens' iconic founder, and even could be considered an avatar of Athens itself, his image transformed from a troublemaking trickster into an eminent statesman. But Herodotus recalls the earlier Theseus in *The Histories*, his sole appearance equates him with the infamous bride-thief Paris: he kidnaps Helen and begets a war. To quote one scholar:

“...[The parallel] must have been highly suggestive for Herodotus’ original audience... what at first sight could seem a fleeting glimpse at mythical subject matter...in fact represents a challenge to Athenian ideology...”<sup>2</sup>

Thus Helen’s myth here frames a subtle accusation of Athens for hubris and even duplicity, contrasting times the Athenians chose the high road of cooperation in past conflicts with Sparta. Still, scholars note that Herodotus made an interesting choice here, because another version of this myth, which he was certainly aware of, ends differently, with Athens destroyed by Helen’s brothers. By rejecting that version, and including a story that highlights the triumph of cooperation, “Herodotus implies that contemporary Athenians might still save their city.”<sup>3</sup> Moments like these highlight how Herodotus’s account of the past is a fundamentally different form of thought from the Homeric epic past. Herodotus captures a moment of interaction between the past, the present and the possible by drawing a conjectural line from what has happened to what could happen in the future.

Helen is especially compelling here in her symbolic role as memory-keeper and mourner. Herodotus has set himself to the task of remembering, of creating a permanent record of an era. However, he was clearly aware of the friable nature of his task, how memory is a construction, that is as much about what is forgotten as what is remembered. Civic memory was an especially problematic issue for Athens. The city-state had re-

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<sup>2</sup> Baragwanath, 293

<sup>3</sup> Flower and Marincola, *ad* 9.73.2

imagined itself repeatedly over a tumultuous century, with leadership that sometimes deliberately chose civic forgetfulness in forging its chosen identity. For example, there are so few records to be found from the era of Athenian tyrants, who ruled not long before Herodotus was born, that scholars have suggested that those records were deliberately suppressed, in order to forget Athens' past under tyranny and identify Athens as historically democratic. The scholar Nicole Loraux went as far as to call the Athenian phenomenon an 'institutional ban on memory'<sup>4</sup>.

Issues of civic memory impacted artistic culture as well. When the playwright Phrynicus produced a play called *The Capture of Miletus* about a Greek city that fell to the Persians, Herodotus writes that the play caused "the whole theater audience [to] burst into tears...[Phrynicus] had to pay a fine of a thousand drachmas for reminding [the Athenians] of their own misfortunes and a law was passed against ever again exhibiting that piece. [VI.20] This punitive reaction was not lost on other tragedians, who afterwards largely focused on mythical subject matter, and chose "positive" endings when they wrote on Athenian subjects.<sup>5</sup> Herodotus himself was forced to negotiate between the pressures of politics and memory in *The Histories*. Everyone knew that the Greeks had recently suffered a massive loss against the Persians in what came to be called The Egyptian Disaster. Although thousands of Greek soldiers perished there, Herodotus

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<sup>4</sup> Loraux, *Divided City*, 147

<sup>5</sup> *ibid*

compromised in *The Histories* by naming only a single warrior who died in that conflict, aware that “that would be enough to remind his readers of the debacle”<sup>6</sup>

Likewise, when recalling the Battle of Plataea, Herodotus’s single mention of Helen is weighted with unspoken meaning. Although Herodotus says almost nothing about the Peloponnesian War in *The Histories*, by coupling it with Helen’s myth, he shadows that reference with grief. The Greek victory at Plataea that he is celebrating, is for a city the Spartans had recently destroyed themselves in their conflict with Athens. Helen is a symbol not only of glory but also of lamentation; with Helen’s name, Herodotus reminds his readers that Plataea recently became a Greek funeral pyre. And although he would not live to see it, soon enough, the favored town of Decelea would also fall to the Spartans.

Herodotus summoned Helen and her brothers out of the age of heroes to gloss the story of Plataea with a Homeric sheen. Yet the scale of that epic subtext only underscores how untenable the glorification of war is for a civilized society. In his *Histories*, Herodotus pays tribute to a time when Greeks fought together to expel the existential threat of the Persian invasion. In his own time, he witnessed the societal cannibalism of war among Greek city-states, and the total failure of the martial ideal of dying for glory. Herodotus uses Helen to call attention to the paradox, and to deploy memory as a tool for change. Helen’s misadventure with Theseus reminds Athenians that their self-image is a construction, one with easily-exposed seams. Herodotus reminds the Spartans that their martial heroism can be undone in a generation, by their own children. When he parallels

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<sup>6</sup> Hornblower, 139

the wars that defined the Greek identity, the ancient Trojan and recent Greco-Persian Wars, with the current Peloponnesian War, he provokes a question of “how will this conflict shape a new Greek identity?” Is there any song that Helen could sing to remember its warriors as heroes?

Homer conjured the legendary beauty of Helen to limn the pain of a warrior’s sacrifice with meaning. Herodotus conjures her to remind his readers that the epic ideal of dying for glory that she stands for belongs in the past. Herodotus looked to history as an opportunity to connect our past and future selves. He brings Helen with him on his quest to learn from the past to shape the present—pointing out that real beauty for humanity is the ability to learn from the past and the wisdom to act upon that knowledge. Perhaps Helen, an icon of uncanny mutability—the fallen woman who became a goddess—represents the best possible muse for this ideal of reinvention.

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