

Herodotus and the Major Sanctuaries of the Greek World¹

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In 1981, John Ferguson published an article entitled ‘Herodotus as a source for the study of Greek religion’. This article was typical of a renewed interest in problems connected with religion that was evident also among classicists in those years. With the material he gathered, Ferguson showed in an impressive way the richness of information regarding the history of religion enclosed in Herodotus’ *Histories*. No other literary work from the Archaic or Classical age offers a comparably broad spectrum of detailed evidence, none opens such a wide perspective on the diversity not only of Greek but also of alien religions. In recent times, Herodotus’ ethnographic accounts of the religions of Egyptians, Assyrians, Persians etc. have received even more attention than what he says about Greek religion – one only has to mention the fundamental studies of Francois Hartog (1980), Fabio Mora (1985) and Walter Burkert (1990).

In spite of the fact that Burkert in his essay on ‘Herodotus as a historian of alien religions’ comes to the conclusion that ‘the most interesting questions... [seem] to lie outside the closed system of relations of Greek religion’ (cf. Burkert 1990, 3),² in the following it is my intention to focus precisely on the Greek religious system as documented in Herodotus, and point especially to one aspect that seems to me not to have received enough attention so far. I intend to ask if and to what extent the many Greek sanctuaries and temples that were an accepted component of Herodotus’ world formed parts of a coherent religious network. Was there anything like a ‘mental map’ of a sacred landscape of Greek sanctuaries in Herodotus’ world? It will not be possible to give a comprehensive answer to this question in the space of this paper, and I am myself at the beginning of this investigation. Therefore, what follows is to be understood as a collection of preliminary observations, still very general in character.

¹ I would like to thank J. Nicols and N. Luraghi for their patience in translating my text into English. For discussions of the topic I am grateful to K. Freitag, M. Haake, and M. Jung. The dissertation of Bowden (1990) on Herodotus and Greek sanctuaries has never been published; but cf. nevertheless Bowden 2003.

² On Herodotus and Greek religion in general see now especially Gould 2001 and Mikalson 2002. On the religion of Herodotus cf. Harrison 2000.

Addressing Greek religion means addressing *polis* religion: ‘The *polis* provided the fundamental framework in which Greek religion operated’. With this statement, Christiane Sourvinou-Inwood has aptly defined the main character of Greek religion (Sourvinou-Inwood 2000, 13). Greek religion was primarily *polis* religion or *ethnos* religion. Religion and cult reflected directly the political world of the Greek *polis* and were characterized by its same variety and diversity. With his many indications and references, Herodotus offers us a particularly good insight in the variegated world of *polis* religion, and at the same time he communicates a comprehensive view of its geographical extension. However, at first sight this looks more like a mere juxtaposition of disconnected entities than a cohesive and organized whole.³

All this is well known and requires no further elaboration. In order to approach the question of the existence of a sacred landscape, it is necessary to turn away from considering the *polis* the locus of religious activity *par excellence*, and concentrate our attention on the embeddedness of *polis* religion in a much more complex system of relations. On this point, I refer again to Christiane Sourvinou-Inwood: ‘Each *polis* was a religious system which formed part of the more complex world-of-the-*polis* system, interacting with the religious systems of the other *poleis* and with the Panhellenic religious dimension’ (Sourvinou-Inwood 2000, 13). In the following I intend to show that by including in our perspective the mechanisms of this interaction it is possible to reach at least a tentative solution to the problem we are dealing with. In so doing, I will confine my attention to the Panhellenic religious dimension.⁴

In the article referred to before, Walter Burkert (1990) correctly underlined that Herodotus appears to be essentially sceptical in theological matters. Typical of this attitude is a passage in Book 2, where Herodotus explicitly refuses to narrate ‘divine things’: τὰ θεῖα πρήγματα, τὰ ἐγὼ φεύγω μάλιστα ἀπηγέεσθαι (Hdt. 2.65.2). In spite of his eschewing theological speculation and confining his attention primarily to the concrete manifestation of religious beliefs, besides a number of references to cult practices of single *poleis* and *ethne*, Herodotus also provides hints of a Panhellenic religious dimension. The opinion on the origins of the Greek *pantheon* expressed in Book 2 already points in this direction. There Herodotus says that it was Homer and Hesiod who first ‘taught the

³ This aspect finds its expression in the great number of religious festivals of the political communities in the Greek world; see Cartledge 1985, 98-9.

⁴ An instructive example for the Panhellenic religious system is exemplified in Xenophon’s *Anabasis*; cf. on this point Price 1999, 1-4.

Greeks the descent of the gods, and gave the gods their names, and determined their spheres and functions, and described their outward forms' (2.53.2; cf. Thomas 2000, 216-7).

For our purposes it is irrelevant if and to what extent this statement covers Herodotus' religious scepticism or his doubt regarding a certain theogony. It is important to note that in spite of all diversity not only in the field of politics but also in the field of religion, we can see in Herodotus the traces of a Panhellenic level of perception, which was important for Greek religious thought, independent of Herodotus' personal opinions. Such a Panhellenic perspective became relevant especially whenever the sense of common heritage and solidarity among the Greeks had to be emphasized. Therefore, Aristagoras of Miletus could invoke the θεοὶ Ἑλληνιοί (Hdt. 5.49.3) just as Socles of Corinth (Hdt. 5.92η) and Hippias of Athens (Hdt. 5.3.1). In 480 the Athenians rejected the Persians' offer of peace 'out of respect for Zeus Hellenios' (Δία Ἑλληνιον αἰδεσθέντες) (9.7α); and Hegesistratus of Samos at Delos in 479 called the Greeks to continue the war against the Persians in the name of the 'common gods' – θεοὶ κοινοί (Hdt. 9.90.2).

This Panhellenic perspective on the world of the Greek gods was a necessary presupposition for the formation of a sacred landscape of a Panhellenic breadth, that overstepped the borders of the single *poleis* even though its foundations lay in a religious world dominated by *polis* religion. The *Theoí Hellénioi* were located in a world of sanctuaries whose coordinates were defined by a shared religious self-perception of the Greeks. It was a specific religious world that did not consist simply in the sum total of a multitude of temples and sanctuaries, but was distinguished by the existence of some sanctuaries whose reach went well beyond a purely local dimension, and that were respected even by the non-Greeks.

The special element that granted cohesion to this system was Panhellenic recognition and – the other side of the coin – Panhellenic accessibility. Regardless of the administrative competence of particular *poleis*, *ethne* or amphiktyonic bodies, these sanctuaries were perceived by the Greeks as their common property. This perception comes to the fore already in the speech reported by Herodotus (Hdt. 8.144), by which the Athenians in the winter of 480/79 evoked the unity of the Greeks in the face of the Persian threat. Addressing the Spartan ambassadors who were then present in Athens, they explicitly stated that they were not going to be the traitors to the common Greek cause, τὸ Ἑλληνικόν. Then, the Athenians go on to define more precisely what τὸ Ἑλληνικόν is: besides common blood and a common language (ὄμαιμόν τε καὶ ὁμόγλωσσον) sanctuaries and sacri-

fices are especially singled out as something that identifies the Greeks (θεῶν ἰδρύματά τε κοινὰ καὶ θυσίαι; Hdt. 8.144; cf. Konstan 2001 and Hall 2002, 189-204).

The first clause of the Peace of Nicias, in 421, is probably to be referred to the same sanctuaries. According to Thucydides, it said (Thuc. 5.18.2): ‘As far as the common sanctuaries are concerned (περὶ μὲν τῶν ἱερῶν τῶν κοινῶν): there shall be a free passage by land and by sea to all who wish it, to sacrifice, travel, consult, and attend the oracle or games (θύειν μαντεύεσθαι θεωρεῖν), according to the ancestral customs (κατὰ τὰ πάτρια)’ (cf. Hornblower 1996, 471-2 *ad loc.*). Even though this ruling has to be seen against the background of contemporary struggles between Athens and Sparta for control over Delphi, the sentence περὶ μὲν τῶν ἱερῶν τῶν κοινῶν suggests that the clause referred to a wider group of sanctuaries. Obviously this clause guaranteed a special protection for those sanctuaries that were commonly perceived as being particularly important for all the Greeks.

It is noteworthy that here, just as in the speech of the Athenians reported by Herodotus, no further detail was necessary to make clear which sanctuaries were referred to by the words τὰ ἱερὰ τὰ κοινά, although the clause of the treaty would have required more precision on this point. Obviously there was a general agreement on this point, and this consensus was perceived by the Greeks as uncontroversial and binding. This point can be further clarified by reference to a passage in the *Dissoi Logoi*, an anonymous rhetorical treatise from the early fourth century (on this text cf. most recently Bringmann 2000). In a discussion of the plunder of temples (τὸ ἱεροσυλέν) we read: ‘I leave aside the property of the single poleis (τὰ ἴδια τῶν πόλεων). But is it unjust to take away the common property of the Greeks (τὰ κοινὰ τᾶς Ἑλλάδος) from Delphi and from Olympia ... and to use it in war, when the barbarian threatens Greece?’ (DK II 90.3.8; cf. also Robinson 1979, 118-9, 183).

This juxtaposition of τὰ ἴδια τῶν πόλεων and τὰ κοινὰ τᾶς Ἑλλάδος confirms in the clearest way the perception rooted in Greek mentality of the existence of a special group of sanctuaries that were considered Panhellenic and were very consciously singled out from the multitude of the *polis* cults. I have discussed these passages in order to show that the idea of τὰ ἱερὰ τὰ κοινά in Classical Greece was not based simply on an unspecified emotional sense, but on the contrary was connected very precisely with specific sanctuaries that formed as a whole a sacred landscape and were inscribed as such on a mental map in the Greeks’ minds.

How can we concretely imagine this world? It is relatively easy to define the typolo-

gy of these sanctuaries. Besides the places where the great Panhellenic games took place, we have to do mainly with oracular sanctuaries and healing cults. However, even mystery cults such as those in Eleusis and Samothrace could belong to the group. Furthermore, we should also mention sanctuaries that were not primarily Panhellenic, but nevertheless represented a focus for integration, also of a political nature, that went beyond the border of the *polis*, such as for instance the amphiktyonic sanctuaries or the cult places of the various Greek *ethne*. For reasons of space I have to confine myself to this general definition, but it would be very interesting to discuss the relationship, if any, between the specific cultic functions of a sanctuary and its Panhellenic character.

A concrete definition of specific sanctuaries as parts of a Panhellenic sacred landscape is much more complex than this admittedly very general typology of sanctuaries. As we might expect, such a sacred landscape is never described as a whole in the ancient sources. It merely constitutes, to borrow a concept from German literary theory, the ‘unstressed background’ of a narrative. Therefore, a comprehensive view, that will of necessity always be incomplete, can be extrapolated only from a comparative scrutiny of individual cases. Here Herodotus’ *Histories* take pride of place. No other Archaic or Classical author offers such a rich corpus of evidence for the question we are dealing with. I intend to present some examples of this, and finally to concentrate more closely on Herodotus himself.

Independently of its historicity, Herodotus’ famous narrative of the consultation of the Greek oracles by Croesus king of Lydia before his war against Cyrus of Persia shows in the best way that there clearly was a group of Greek oracles that were definitely more prominent than all other oracles – if I may use this expression, they played in a division of their own (Hdt. 1.46-50). In Croesus’, or Herodotus’, times, these were, besides Delphi, Abai in Phokis, Dodona in Epirus, the Amphiaraion and the Trophonion in Boeotia, Branchidai by Miletus and the sanctuary of Zeus Ammon in the oasis of Siwa in the Libyan desert. In order to find out which one was most trustworthy, Croesus tested them by having the same question asked of all of them, a question whose answer only he knew. The fact that Delphi came out as the winner underlines the prominence of this sanctuary that emerges also in the rest of the evidence.

At the same time, the list of the oracles that Croesus tested according to Herodotus shows the breadth of this network of sanctuaries, that in spite of being in competition with one another were also regarded as in some sense belonging together. This is made clear also by the story of the foundation of the oracle of Zeus at Dodona narrated by

Herodotus (Hdt. 2.55; cf. Nesselrath 1999 and Bichler 2001, 174-6, and also Burkert 1985, 124-5). Two black doves flew from Thebes in Egypt, one towards Libya and the other towards Dodona, and caused the foundation of an oracle of Zeus in both places. Thereby the two famous oracular sanctuaries located at the farther borders of the Greek world were connected with each other. It would have hardly been possible to take a broader geographical span to underscore the systematic connections between these two sanctuaries and at the same time to delimit the extension of the cultic landscape of the Greek world.

Admittedly, we do not have to regard the list of the oracles interrogated by Croesus as a complete list of all prominent oracles of those times. However, it is striking that for instance the sanctuary of Apollo Ptoios in Boeotia, famous for its rich Archaic remains (cf. Schachter 1981, 52-73; Schachter 1994, 11-21), is not mentioned in the list. Also absent is the sanctuary of Zeus at Olympia, that was an important oracular cult at least in the Archaic period (Str. 8.3.30; cf. Sinn 1994). On the other hand, oracular sanctuaries whose importance in later times, as far as it is possible to tell based on the evidence, seems to have been rather limited, find a place in the list (cf. Funke forthcoming).

This leads us to the problem of fixing Herodotus' perspective in time. And of course, this problem relates directly to the problem of the truthful or fictive nature of his report. This last question is less relevant for us, though, for even a fictive narrative would have to be embedded in a plausible context, that is, in our case, in a real sacred landscape. It is more difficult to tell whether Herodotus' list is to be taken as representative of his own times or of the mid-sixth century. Distinguishing 'narrative time' from 'historical time' in Herodotus is famously hard (on this topic cf. the general remarks by Darbo-Peschanski 1993). Locating in time a sacred landscape that forms the background of one of his narratives is often possible only based on external evidence. However, this complex of problems has to be left aside here for reasons of space.

If we analyse the list of the oracles interrogated by Croesus against the background of late Classical or even Hellenistic conditions, we can at least observe that the prominence of Greek oracular and healing cults could change radically in time and was always dependent on the ever-changing situations and even fashions. The group of the most prominent sanctuaries was in no way unchangeable: rather it seems to have undergone modifications dictated by the historical context. This should come as no surprise, since success and failure in this field could be measured very easily, as Croesus' test shows (cf. Funke forthcoming). Healing cults will probably have been exposed to the same mech-

anisms, but they are more difficult to localize in Herodotus' sacred landscape, since their role in Herodotus' work is not nearly as prominent as that of the oracular cults. One reason for this might be that in his times healing and oracular cults were still closely connected, and only with the expansion of the cult of Asclepius in the late fifth century came to be more strongly differentiated from each other (Aleshire 1991).

It is easier to grasp the role of the sanctuaries that hosted Panhellenic competitions. Since the late sixth century at the latest, the so-called *perihodos* had developed, that connected the Panhellenic games of Olympia, Delphi, Nemea and Isthmia (see Festus, p. 236 [Lindsay], s.v. *perihodos*, on the meaning of the term *perihodos* and cf. on this topic Funke forthcoming). These four sanctuaries represented a stable and remarkably constant element of the sacred landscape of the Greeks. It is therefore noteworthy that Herodotus mentions only three of the four, and never talks about Nemea. Just as Herodotus, other contemporary sources seem to ignore Nemea, a fact that is very difficult to explain. However, it is clear that in the Panhellenic sacred landscape there was some sort of ranking, that in turn corresponded to the higher or lower prominence of each of the sanctuaries, and in this ranking Nemea seems to have occupied one of the last positions (cf. Funke forthcoming).

It is time to conclude. The few examples I have discussed should have shown clearly that Herodotus' *Histories* reflect a sacred landscape that existed as a mental map in the minds of the Greeks and oriented their thoughts and actions. However, Herodotus offers us only a partial insight into a much more complex religious world. At the very least, he gives us a typical sample of this sacred landscape, whose structure could be approached in a comprehensive way by making use of further, especially archaeological evidence.

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