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Do ancient historians tell us more about myth than real events?

Cicero, in *Leg.* 1.5, presents us with a conundrum: in the same breath he refers to Herodotus as 'patrem historiae' ("father of history") and accuses his Ἱστορίαι ("Histories") of being full of 'innumerabiles fabulae' ("countless yarns").[1] This is the tension that pervades Ancient History: the battle between the 'exaggeration'[2] of the poets that has seeped into history, and 'το σαφης'("the truth").[3] I will focus on multiple historians across Greece and Rome. It is also worth noting at this point how all of our figures are men, so really we will be asking what male historians told us.[4]

It is crucial to define what we mean by myth. There are two interpretations, both of which we will test historians with: incorporation of blatant myth, along the lines of Rhampsinitus playing dice in Hades,[5] but also unlikely events, or 'μυθοδες' ("the fabulous")[6]. This question attempts to perform a litmus test on ancient historians using these two words of Thucydides: 'σαφης' ("the truth") and 'μυθοδες' ("the fabulous"). Our issue comes when we experience a grey area between the two. Overall, ancient historians inform us much more about real events than myth, and often myth is used to persuade us of their interpretation of events.

Herodotus is the most criticised ancient historian.[7] We can get a picture of his reception in the classical world through the title of Plutarch's work, '*De Herodoti malignitate*' ("The malice of Herodotus"). The allegations are that at best Herodotus is a rambler, who fills his narrative with unlikely or unverifiable events, such as dreams in 1.107.1 and 1.108.1, and at worst adds these into his narrative to inject some 'μυθοδες'. However, against our first test – blatant myth – Herodotus is quite successful: whilst he indulges in telling us these tall-tales, such as how the Nile might flow from an ocean surrounding the Earth,[8] he shows an appetite to evaluate their likelihood of being real events,[9] even challenging his sources in front of us at points, such as 2.54.2 and 4.8.2. In fact, the only times Herodotus uses the word 'μυθος' ("myth" or "story") are in 2.23 and 2.45.1, both to point out unlikely events.[10] Against our second test – unlikely events – Herodotus struggles more: because of the infusion of myth into his narrative, although he is not peddling false stories, his narrative is consequently clouded by possibilities and rejected views, making it hard to see the Thucydidean-style 'truth'.

However, we can be confident both that the events of the Persian War Herodotus described were broadly true, and that Herodotus, even if he was inventing,[11] had no incentive to make the whole thing up.[12] Herodotus engages in myth, at the expense of real events, but stills tells us of real events.

Thucydides conversely goes about his history in a 'matter-of-fact tone',[13] telling us in 1.22.2 how central 'ἀκριβειᾳ' ("accuracy") is to his narrative, even at the cost of 'μυθοδες' ("the fabulous"). At

[1] Translation from (Cicero 1998)
[2] Thuc. 1.21.1, 1.10.3
[3] Thuc. 1.22.4
[4] (Gould 1980)
[5] Hdt. 2.122.1-2
[6] Thuc. 1.22.4
[7] (Momigliano 1958)
[8] Hdt. 2.21
[9] E.g 2.23, another example is 2.122.2
[10] (Baragwanath and de Bakker 2012)
[11] E.g. Accusation in *Div.* 2.116 about Hdt. 1.53
[12] (Rhodes 1994), (Dewald and Marincola 2006)
[13] (Rhodes 1994)

times Thucydides is even said to be of the standard of a 'modern historian'.[14] However, Thucydides' dogmatic pursual of the truth leads to issues, particularly with regards to our second test of unlikely events: when there is not a verifiable truth, either due to differing opinions or a lack of sources. We see the former in Thucydides 1.22.1: Thucydides cannot claim the speeches are reproduced verbatim, instead he has pieced together the main messages, often from others' reflections on the speech. Given the rhetorical depth of these speeches,[15] and how scholars have poured over them for years analysing even the smallest words, we have to question whether we can count Thucydides' reconstruction as 'real events'. Additionally, Thucydides seems to struggle when there is not a clear truth to be told. Whereas Herodotus is more comfortable holding differing opinions,[16] Thucydides often ends up, by trying to chase the truth, having close encounters with myth: such as his mention of 'Cyclopes' in Sicily in 6.2.1. Thucydides certainly tells us a great deal about real events, however his pursual of the 'truth' ends up dragging him into the area of myth and unlikely events, forcing us to decide whether we trust an exiled Athenian general to write an impartial, "real events only" history.

Polybius takes up the ancient historian mantle arguably with even more fervour for the truth than Thucydides, passing both of our tests. He criticises a fellow historian Timaeus for his lack of grip on the truth, and even goes as far to state the necessity of 'recording the real speeches made'.[17] He is interested in the practical benefits of history, and so feels he must focus on real events to ensure there is a genuine didactic element.[18] He even acknowledges the existence of our grey area in 3.4, stating how disaster can turn to victory and vice versa, meaning his analysis is incomplete. Overall, this makes Polybius a clear communicator of real events, and of the rise of Rome.

Livy, our final historian, also shares Polybius' dislike of myth. In 34.2 onwards, he actually pitches two politicians, Cato and Lucius Valerius, against each other on the subject of women's freedom, the former utilising myth and stories whilst the latter refutes this with reference to historical events such as the Sabine Women.[19] However, Livy also shows an appetite for nostalgia – his history is about the fall of the morals of Rome – and unlikely events, such as in 1.pr.5. He portrays this as allowing himself to be removed from the troubles today and see the truth more clearly, however in 1.pr.8 he begins to wander into the territory of 'Mars' founding Rome. He states he will attach 'no great importance' to this, but as with Herodotus, the very presence of myth in the narrative leads to less airtime for real events. Livy is set on finding the truth like Thucydides and Polybius, however his method of reflecting on the past leads to some more Herodotean moments.

Now we have looked at all our historians, we can draw a key comparison that helps explain each's relationship with truth and myth. All of the historians have one thing in common: an idea that history should be about causes, and through an understanding of those causes, readers should learn.[20] History aims to explain why the present is like it is, something mythology, and poetry, also aim to do.[21] In fact, Herodotus and Thucydides (both early prose writers)[22] in their attempts to

[14] (Rhodes 1994)
[15] E.g. The Melian Dialogue, 5.85.1
[16] E.g. Hdt. 1.5.1-2
[17] Plb. 12..25
[18] (Walsh 1961)
[19] Livy 34.5.8
[20] Hdt. 1.2.1, Thuc. 1.22.4, Plb. 1.1, 4.2 (Hau 2016), Livy 1.1
[21] (Swain 1923), (Philips 1978)
[22] (Dewald and Marincola 2006)

understand events include Homeric elements, such as subject matter and storytelling structure, as well as elements of Tragedy.[23]

From this we can see that Cicero may answer the question we opened with in De Oratore 2.51, where Antonius (speaking for Cicero) claims the study of history is the 'business of the orator'. The reason why this question of myth versus real events even exists is that we cannot simply label everything true or false: a grey area, which Thucydides struggled with, exists. Therefore historians have to weave their narrative and persuade us as the audience of their interpretation, like orators, like poets. To do this they employ different tactics: Thucydides, Polybius and Livy aim to tell the truth, and gain our appreciation for their rigorousness. Herodotus, called the 'prose Homer' in Halicarnassus,[24] conversely seeks to win us over by his style,[25] something he was appreciated for in the classical world.[26] As Swain puts it, 'the historian is a mythologist who is believed'.[27] Really Herodotus is conducting a different type of history, more of a cultural inquiry which is bolstered by myths, which help explain why real events happen, such as Cyrus' actions in 1.204.2. Historiography, as Griffiths puts it, is 'ultimately storytelling'.[28]

To conclude, different ancient Historians indulge in different levels of myth, Herodotus and Thucydides being at either ends of the spectrum. After Thucydides historiography swings much more towards his version with the likes of Polybius and Livy. However, from a further examination of what history is, particularly through Cicero the rhetorician's lenses, we can see that a dogmatic pursual of the truth is not always possible, and where ancient historians diverge is how they attempt to persuade us of their analysis of events: some by the assertion of their truthfulness, Herodotus by his attempt to provide a richer cultural background to his narrative. Overall, ancient historians for their time and sources do an admirable job of telling us about real events, and often use myth to bolster their narrative.

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[23] (Joho 2017) (Baragwanath and de Bakker 2012)
[24] (Hornblower 2006)
[25] (Griffiths 2006)
[26] Dion. Hal. *Thuc.* 5.331
[27] (Swain 1923)
[28] (Griffiths 2006)

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