

WITH HERODOTUS IN IRAQ

BY JUSTIN MAROZZI

When, in 2003, I started researching a travel history of Herodotus, the fifth century B.C. Greek historian, I had no idea he would take me to war in Iraq.

Turkey's Aegean coast was on the itinerary, not least because this was where the Father of History, as Cicero dubbed him, was born, in what is now the resort town of Bodrum. Greece was required travel as well to immerse myself in his cultural homeland: from the island of Samos to which he was likely exiled, via Athens, Delphi and Thermopylae to Olympia, Corinth, Sparta, Mycenae, Macedonia and beyond. Egypt was a given too because this was the country that most fascinated him on his pioneering travels. No wonder he devoted almost a third of *The Histories*, his one-volume masterpiece, to his travels and discoveries there.

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Iraq was very different. Initially it was not Baghdad but Babylon, the ancient desert city Herodotus described with such exuberance that attracted me to the war zone. Under a pitiless sun, a Polish archaeologist took me on a guided tour around the ruins, charting the latest round of damage inflicted on the city. She told me terrible stories of troops filling sandbags with earth containing archaeological fragments, of armoured vehicles crushing sixth-century-B.C. bricks, of looters gouging out pieces of dragons from the original foundations of the Ishtar Gate, and of digging, leveling and graveling for helipads on this unique historical site. For anyone who cares about history, it was profoundly dispiriting.

I wasn't expecting to find much Herodotus in Baghdad. After all, the city didn't exist in his time. Yet during 18 months working as a consultant for a British security company operating across Iraq, I discovered extraordinary parallels between the Persian Wars that Herodotus recounted and the

Iraq War two-and-a-half millennia later. The most pithy? Hubris, as Herodotus warned so eloquently, tends to lead to nemesis. I think he would have been aghast at the adventure in the Middle East and the terrible loss of life it entails. In his own words, "No one is fool enough to choose war instead of peace—in peace sons bury fathers, but in war fathers bury sons."

Herodotus provided constant—and often heartening—company in Iraq. Just as he depicted a seismic clash of civilisations during the Persian Wars, the world's first encounter between dictatorship and democracy, so I witnessed an often disturbing confrontation among the different cultures in Iraq. Iraqis, Americans and the British all had high—perhaps unrealistically high—hopes of each other. When these expectations were disappointed, there was a widespread tendency to dismiss the other side and take refuge in stereotypes. Depending on who you were with, the talk was of lazy Iraqis, backward Muslims, arrogant Americans or imperial Brits.

None of this would have surprised Herodotus. "Everyone without exception believes his own native customs, and the religion he was brought up in, to be the best," he wrote. It was—and is—human nature. Hence, the desire, for example, to spread democracy, practise jihad—and, in the case of evangelical Christian leaflets that sprouted up around Saddam Hussein's former republican palace—denigrate Islam. Reading Herodotus, a voice of moderation, tolerance and profound humanity, was always a relief and a refuge from the ugly stereotypes that war brings. He was a multiculturalist ahead of his time.

Now, after the best part of five years on the road clutching a battered Penguin edition of *The Histories* wherever I have traveled, from sunlit Greek islands to snow-dusted Baghdad, my Herodotus journey has come to an end. Strange as it may seem to say of someone who has been dead 2,500 years, he has become something of a friend. I'll miss him enormously.

Justin Marozzi, G'95, is travel writer, historian and journalist who lives in London. His most recent book is The Way of Herodotus: Travels with the Man Who Invented History.