

HERODOTUS

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Herodotus by George C. Swayne

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GEORGE C. SWAYNE

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HERODOTUS

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BY

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LATE FELLOW OF CORPUS CHRISTI COLLEGE, OXFORD

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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA

INTRODUCTION.

So little is known for certain regarding the life of Herodotus, "the father of history," that it may well be a subject of congratulation that he has not shared the fate of Homer, the father of poetry, in having doubt thrown on his individual existence.

He appears to have been born about the year 484 before Christ, between the two great Persian invasions of Greece, at Halicarnassus, a colony of Dorian Greeks on the coast of Asia Minor. His family was one of some distinction. From his writings alone we should know that he received a liberal education, and became familiarly acquainted with the current literature of his day; and the epic form of his great prose work, besides numberless expressions and allusions, bears witness to the fact that the Homeric poems were his constant study and model.

His early manhood was spent in extensive travels, in which he accumulated the miscellaneous materials of his narrative. He visited, in the course of them, a great part of the then known world; from Babylon and Susa in the east, to the coast of Italy in the

west ; and from the mouths of the Dnieper and the Danube in the north, to the cataracts of Upper Egypt southwards. Thus his travels covered a distance of thirty-one degrees of longitude from east to west, and twenty-four of latitude from north to south—an area of something like 1700 miles square. It was an immense range in days when there were few facilities for locomotion, and when every country was supposed to be at war with its neighbours, unless bound by express treaties of peace and alliance. He travelled, too, it must be remembered, in an age when robbers by land and sea were members of a recognised profession,—very lucrative and not entirely disreputable : when (as we shall see hereafter) disappointed political or military adventurers took to piracy as a last resort, without any sort of compunction. “ Pray, friends, are you pirates,—or what ? ” is the question which old Nestor puts to his visitors, in the ‘ *Odyssey*, ’ without the least intention either of jesting or of giving offence. A voyage itself was such a perilous matter, that a Greek seaman never, if he could help it, lost sight of land in the daytime, or remained on board his ship during the night ; and at a later date the philosopher Aristotle distinctly admits that even his ideal “ brave ” man may, without prejudice to his character, fear the being drowned at sea. The range of our author’s travels is, however, less wonderful than their busy minuteness. He is traveller, archaeologist, natural philosopher, and historian combined in one. He appears scarcely ever to have concluded his visit to a country without exhausting every available source of information. Personal inquiry alone seems to have satisfied him, wherever it could be made ; though he consulted carefully all written materials within his