Plurilingualism in Traditional Eurasian Scholarship

Thinking in Many Tongues

Edited by

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BRILL

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CHAPTER 1.3

A 5th-Century BCE Greek Historian Discusses the Pelasgians and the Origins of the Greek Language

Herodotus, Histories

Filippomaria Pontani

In Homer, heroes and characters of different cities and countries understand each other without the need for interpreters or translators. In the course of his wanderings, however, Odysseus does encounter people "speaking other tongues"; and the same happens during the travels (also mentioned in the *Odyssey*) of other mythical characters such as Mentes, Nestor, and Eumaeus. In the *Iliad*, the plurality of non-Greek languages is evoked by Iris when describing the Trojan army in the following terms (*Iliad* 2.803–804; see also 4.437–438):

> full many are the allies throughout the great city of Priam,
> and tongue differs from tongue among men that are scattered abroad.

In this somewhat contradictory frame, Homeric poetry leaves only a marginal role to the term and concept of "barbarian," which then becomes prominent in Greek culture after the great watershed of the Persian wars (492–478 BCE), most notably in fifth-century Attic tragedy.[1] Joining the linguistic aspect with the ethnic and cultural one, *barbaros* now covers a wide range of non-Greek tongues and utterances, which are sometimes rudimentarily reproduced on the Athenian stage by means of cacophony, solecism, or unusual acoustic effects: the monody of the Phrygian slave in Euripides's *Orestes* is perhaps the best-known case, while Aeschylus's *Suppliant Women* (119, 130) at Argos probably spoke Greek with a strong Egyptian accent (see also the confused utterances of the drowning *Persians* in the slightly later choral lyric of Timotheos).

In Sophocles's tragedy *Women of Trachis* (1060) Heracles contrasts Greece with the *aglossos ge*, the "tongueless land," an undifferentiated ensemble of territories where Greek is not spoken. It is only in comedy (and especially in the late fifth-century author Aristophanes) that inserts of foreign languages acquire a specific function and visibility: plurilingualism is here funny and

1 See Pontani's discussion of Strabo in Chapter 1.7.

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conducive to laughter or sarcasm, sometimes colored by a touch of "tabloid xenophobia." However, even in these instances, knowledge of the mimicked or satirized language can rarely be assumed: in some cases, scholars still debate if the "strange" words actually reproduce a foreign tongue (e.g., the "Persian" inserts in Aristophanes's *Acharnians* or the "Triballian" words in his *Birds*) or simply render camouflaged Greek or a sort of incomprehensible gibberish.

This broader context is important as a general frame of reference for the fifth-century historian Herodotus of Halicarnassus, the father of ethnography, who worked and wrote most of his *Histories* at Athens during the acme of its "golden age": while never developing a full-fledged theory of language, Herodotus did devote an acute interest to the main linguistic features of the numerous populations he mentioned throughout his *Histories*. Herodotus was a native of Caria, and scholars still debate whether he had any knowledge of Carian or Aramaic; he probably used interpreters during his journeys to Egypt and to other parts of the world. On the other hand, we know for sure that his slightly later colleague Thucydides, author of the *History of the Peloponnesian War*, did not know any foreign language, never mentions interpreters, and—focusing on the political history of Greece—displays comparatively little interest in language altogether.[2] Throughout the fifth century, the only well-known Greek who is credited with proficiency in a foreign language is the Athenian general Themistocles, whether he learnt Persian (the language of his enemies) out of genuine interest or as a purely strategical move.[3]

Turning to Herodotus, whether we stress the element of the "Greek vs. barbarian" opposition in him, or whether we regard him as *philobarbaros*, especially in his earlier books (this is the object of a long-standing academic quarrel), his *Histories* represent our primary witness for a number of elements:

First, the regular use of interpreters, which is clearly presupposed by the manifold commercial and cultural contacts of the Greek world with the surrounding nations: these men are often slaves, hardly ever Greeks (many of them Carians, Lydians or Lycians; in the whole of Herodotus we only find one Greek speaking a word in Persian, in 6.29.2), and they are rarely presented as meaningful individuals *per se*, but rather as technical "instruments" of communication;

2 In the *History of the Peloponnesian War* 2.68, Thucydides describes how the Ambracians had acquired their Greek; in 3.94.5 the Eurytanians "speak a language which is almost unintelligible and eat their meat raw" (trans. Warner).

3 Thucydides 1.138.1; Plutarch, *Life of Themistocles* 29.5. Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of the Philosophers* 8.3 attests that the sixth-century philosopher Pythagoras knew Egyptian, but this information must be handled with caution.

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the role of the interpreters will be slightly more relevant in Xenophon's *Anabasis* (early fourth century).

Second, the focus on the problems of the correspondence between Greek and foreign words, both in terms of existence or lack of exact equivalents (etymology is often applied), and particularly when it comes to proper names of places and gods: Herodotus's statement that "almost all the names of the gods came to Hellas from Egypt" (2.50) is debated, but it probably points to an original contact that went beyond the mere onomastic aspect, and involved the main features of the pantheon; in his surprising relativism, Herodotus also tells us that (2.158.5) "the Egyptians call 'barbarians' all those who do not share their language."

Third, the inclusion of language as an integral feature of a foreign culture: India has many different nations and as many different languages (3.98.3); the Gelonoi speak a language half-Greek, half-Scythian (4.108.2); the Ammonians "are colonists from Egypt and Ethiopia and speak a language compounded of the tongues of both countries" (2.42.2); the Aethiopian Troglodytes "speak a language different from all others, it is like screeching of bats" (4.183.4); the Dodonian women "speak like birds" (2.57); the Atarantes "are the only men known to us who have no names" (4.184.1); the Scythians use many metaphors in their language, "it is therefore in a figurative sense … that the Scythians and their neighbors call the snow 'feathers'" (4.31.2); "all Persian names end in *-s*" (1.139: a false statement in itself, but the symptom of a "scientific" interest in formal aspects of grammar).

Herodotus has often been charged with a superficial interest in languages in and of themselves, in issues of miscommunication that may arise in interpersonal contact, in the problems and the dynamics of interlinguistic communication. Recent research (Miletti) has demonstrated that, on the contrary, Herodotus writes much about the contribution of language to the definition of every single civilization he encounters, and displays a genuine enthusiasm for the vocabulary (if not the structure) of other tongues—a comparative and open perspective, that will not bear fruit in the fundamentally monolingual speculation on language that will impose itself in Greek quarters after the later fifth century.

In book one of the *Histories*, Croesus, the king of Lydia (a region of Eastern Asia Minor) attempts to gather information on the various populations of Greece in view of future alliances against the Persians: the Athenians are for him a "Pelasgic" people, who unlike the Spartans always dwelled in the same place. The historian speculates on the Pelasgians' ethnic origin by dealing first and foremost with their language: this is a remarkable example of ethnographic inquiry that focuses on language as a distinctive feature in order to establish

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proximities between different populations. The importance of this step in the use of language as a tool in the Greek construction of ethnicity, and in the reconstruction of a remote past (note the focus on the permanence of fossilized linguistic features in marginal groups), has often been highlighted in modern scholarship.

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Greek Text

Herodotus, *Histories* 1.57–58, adapted from Herodotus, *Historiae*, vol. 1, *Libros I–IV continens*, ed. H.B. Rosén (Leipzig: Teubner, 1987), 36–37.

Ἥντινα δὲ γλῶσσαν ἵεσαν οἱ Πελασγοί, οὐκ ἔχω ἀτρεκέως εἰπεῖν· εἰ δὲ χρεόν ἐστι τεκμαιρόμενον λέγειν τοῖσι νῦν ἔτι ἐοῦσι Πελασγῶν τῶν ὑπὲρ Τυρσηνῶν Κρηστῶνα πόλιν οἰκεόντων, οἳ ὅμουροί κοτε ἦσαν τοῖσι νῦν Δωριεῦσι καλεομένοισι (οἴκεον δὲ τηνικαῦτα γῆν τὴν νῦν Θεσσαλιῶτιν καλεομένην), καὶ τῶν Πλακίην τε καὶ Σκυλάκην Πελασγῶν οἰκησάντων ἐν Ἑλλησπόντῳ, οἳ σύνοικοι ἐγένοντο Ἀθηναίοισι, καὶ ὅσα ἄλλα Πελασγικὰ ἐόντα πολίσματα τὸ οὔνομα μετέβαλε—εἰ τούτοισι τεκμαιρόμενον δεῖ λέγειν, ἦσαν οἱ Πελασγοὶ βάρβαρον γλῶσσαν ἱέντες. Εἰ τοίνυν ἦν καὶ πᾶν τοιοῦτο τὸ Πελασγικόν, τὸ Ἀττικὸν ἔθνος, ἐὸν Πελασγικόν, ἅμα τῇ μεταβολῇ τῇ ἐς Ἕλληνας καὶ τὴν γλῶσσαν μετέμαθε. Καὶ γὰρ δὴ οὔτε οἱ Κρηστωνιῆται οὐδαμοῖσι τῶν νῦν σφεας περιοικεόντων εἰσὶ ὁμόγλωσσοι οὔτε οἱ Πλακιηνοί (σφίσι δὲ ὁμόγλωσσοι) δηλοῦσί τε, ὅτι τὸν ἠνείκαντο γλώσσης χαρακτῆρα μεταβαίνοντες ἐς ταῦτα τὰ χωρία, τοῦτον ἔχουσι ἐν φυλακῇ. Τὸ δὲ Ἑλληνικὸν γλώσσῃ μέν, ἐπείτε ἐγένετο, ἀεί κοτε τῇ αὐτῇ διαχρᾶται, ὡς ἐμοὶ καταφαίνεται εἶναι· ἀποσχισθὲν μέντοι ἀπὸ τοῦ Πελασγικοῦ ἐὸν ἀσθενές, ἀπὸ σμικροῦ τεο τὴν ἀρχὴν ὁρμώμενον αὔξηται ἐς πλῆθος τῶν ἐθνέων, πολλῶν μάλιστα προσκεχωρηκότων αὐτῷ καὶ ἄλλων ἐθνέων βαρβάρων συχνῶν· ὡς δὴ ὧν ἐμοί τε δοκέει, οὐδὲ τὸ Πελασγικὸν ἔθνος ἐὸν βάρβαρον οὐδαμὰ μεγάλως αὐξηθῆναι.

4 According to the "Pelasgic theory" (which was widespread in ancient times and has found some echo, if in modified versions, even among modern scholars), in ancient times Greece was called "Pelasgia," and the various local populations of Greece were in fact "Hellenized Pelasgians," i.e., Pelasgians (non-Greeks) who became Greek by adopting the Greek language, originally spoken only by other tribes such as the Dorians.

5 There is a great controversy over the name and the identification of this city: the reading "Creston" (Κρηστῶνα) points to a little-known town in Thrace (North-Eastern Greece), with the "Tyrrhenians" being identified with the inhabitants of Lemnos; the alternative reading "Croton" (conjectured by Niebuhr, but already known already to the first-century historian Dionysius of Halicarnassus, *Roman Antiquities* 1.29.3) points to the Italian city of Cortona, with the Tyrrhenians being more easily identified with the Etruscans—the focus is thus shifted to the expansion of Grecophone populations in Italy, and to the problematic identification (upheld by several sources) between the Pelasgians and the Etruscans.

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English Translation

Herodotus, *Histories* 1.57–58, adapted from Herodotus, *The Persian Wars*, vol. 1, *Books I and II*, trans. A.D. Godley, Loeb Classical Library 117 (London, 1920), 65, round parentheses in original.

What language the Pelasgians spoke I cannot say exactly.[4] But if one may judge by those that still remain of the Pelasgians who live above the Tyrrheni in the city of Kreston[5]—who were once neighbors of the people now called Dorians, and at that time inhabited the country which now is called Thessaliotis[6]—and of the Pelasgians who inhabited Plakia and Skylake on the Hellespont,[7] who came to live among the Athenians, and by other towns too which were once Pelasgian and afterwards took a different name—if (I say) one may judge by these, the Pelasgians spoke a barbarian language. If, then, all the Pelasgian stock spoke so, then the Attic nation, being Pelasgian, must have changed its language, too, at the time when it became part of the Hellenes. For the people of Kreston and Plakia have a language of their own in common, which is not the language of their neighbors; and it is plain that they still preserve the manner of speech[8] which they brought with them in their migration into the places where they live.

But the Hellenic stock,[9] as to me seems clear, has always used the same language since its beginning; yet being, when separated from the Pelasgians,[10] few in number, they have grown from a small beginning to comprise a multitude of nations, chiefly because [the Pelasgians and] many other barbarian peoples united themselves with them.[11] Before that, as I think, the Pelasgic stock nowhere increased greatly in number while it was barbarian.[12]

6 This is Thessaly, the region west of Olympus and Ossa, often called "Pelasgiotis."

7 Plakie and Skylake are two cities on the eastern shore of the Propontis (now Marmara sea), east of Cyzicus.

8 More exactly, the "character," i.e., the shape, the original matrix, the "coinage" of the language.

9 The early Dorians, who spoke Greek from the start, and the Hellenized barbarians.

10 The nature of this separation—whether local or ethnic—is unclear: what emerges, however, is that Herodotus regards both Dorians and Pelasgians as fundamentally close, albeit distinct from each other.

11 The transmitted text (πολλῶν) does not mention the Pelasgians, but Sauppe's conjecture (Πελασγῶν) restores the name in the sentence, and looks plausible under other syntactical aspects too.

12 *Barbaros* (here translated as "barbarian") means in fact "of foreign speech."

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