

Ippokratis Kantzios - December 1st, 1996

## Herodotus and the Ends of the World

Herodotus, born ca. 490 BC in

principle of symmetry, Herodotus relies on maps with an equator passing through the Pillars of Heracles (Gibraltar), Delphi, and the Taurus mountains, dividing the world symmetrically into two halves, such that new information can be inferred from that already known by the process of analogy. Since the Ister River rises in the region of the Celts and passes eastward through Europe, so the Nile must have its sources in the western parts of Libya and cross North Africa eastwards.

Herodotus' accuracy of information is in inverse proportion to geographical distance from the center: the more remote a country, the more need to rely on hearsay, and the higher the risk of receiving distorted facts, causing disagreements among scholars about the precise geographical locations of the numerous Herodotean references. Still, roughly the boundaries of his world are India in the East, the Iberian Peninsula, the western parts of Africa, and perhaps England in the West, central Europe to perhaps Afghanistan in the North; and Arabia, Ethiopia, and perhaps Lake Chad and the River Niger (central West Africa) in the South.

India, the most distant nation known in the East, appears for the first time in the Histories in a way which underlines its "otherness." When king Darius of Persia asks the Greeks what would persuade them to eat their dead parents, they say there is no ~~paid~~ ~~in the world~~ for which they would do it. The Indians, however, summoned afterwards, who by custom devour their ~~(eat) (parent)~~, ~~and~~ ~~even~~ ~~the~~ ~~dead~~ ~~ones~~. ~~Herodotus~~ ~~is~~ ~~clearly~~ ~~not~~ ~~aware~~ ~~that~~ ~~the~~ ~~idea~~ ~~of~~ ~~the~~ ~~Indians~~ ~~is~~ ~~not~~ ~~unlike~~ ~~the~~ ~~idea~~ ~~of~~ ~~the~~ ~~ancient~~ ~~Greeks~~ ~~and~~ ~~the~~ ~~idea~~ ~~of~~ ~~the~~ ~~ancient~~ ~~Romans~~ ~~and~~ ~~the~~ ~~idea~~ ~~of~~ ~~the~~ ~~ancient~~ ~~Egyptians~~ ~~and~~ ~~the~~ ~~idea~~ ~~of~~ ~~the~~ ~~ancient~~ ~~Greeks~~ ~~and~~ ~~the~~ ~~idea~~ ~~of~~ ~~the~~ ~~ancient~~ ~~Romans~~ ~~and~~ ~~the~~ ~~idea~~ ~~of~~ ~~the~~ ~~ancient~~ ~~Egyptians~~ ~~and~~ ~~the~~ ~~idea~~ ~~of~~ ~~the~~ ~~ancient~~ ~~Greeks~~ ~~and~~ ~~the~~ ~~idea~~ ~~of~~ ~~the~~ ~~ancient~~ ~~Romans~~ ~~and~~ ~~the~~ ~~idea~~ ~~of~~ ~~the~~ ~~ancient~~ ~~Egyptians~~ ~~and~~ ~~the~~ ~~idea~~ ~~of~~ ~~the~~ ~~ancient~~ ~~Greeks~~ ~~and~~ ~~the~~ ~~idea~~ ~~of~~ ~~the~~ ~~ancient~~ ~~Romans~~ ~~and~~ ~~the~~ ~~idea~~ ~~of~~ ~~the~~ 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which the historian and his audience perceive and understand the world. A Greek can accept this co-existence of two opposites only as a very rare exception.

Arabian stories probably reach the historian through the Phoenicians, with some influences perhaps from Egypt. Remember that the Phoenicians were merchants, and that an exaggeration of the dangers involved in procuring their products would increase their value. This may help us understand the persistence of certain themes and images like snakes, winged guardians, unknown places, and the like.

Of Ethiopia, west of Arabia, Herodotus gives a compact description: "this country produces great quantities of gold, has an abundance of elephants and all the woodland trees, and ebony; and its men are the tallest, the most handsome, and the longest lived." Homer, in the beginning of the *Odyssey*, had mentioned Zeus' feasting with the "blameless" Ethiopians, a poetic tradition which may have encouraged Herodotus to place in their

Herodotus' mentions the peoples who live successively north and west of known peoples, until he reaches

the sailors decide to rob him and do away with him. Arion pleads for his life unsuccessfully, but he