



# The Landmark Herodotus: The Histories

By Robert B. Strassler, Herodotus

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## **Editorial Review**

### About the Author

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### Chapter 1

Herodotus of Halicarnassusa here presents his research so that human events do not fade with time. May the great and wonderful deeds—some brought forth by the Hellenes, others by the barbarians—not go unsung; as well as the causes that led them to make war on each other.

Persian authorities of the past claim that the Phoenicians were responsible for the dispute. This is because, after they had come to and settled the land which they still inhabit from what is now called the Erythraean Sea, they at once undertook long sea voyages and brought back cargo from Egypt, Assyria, and elsewhere, but more to the point, they came to Argos.

At this time in the land we now call Hellas, Argos surpassed other places in all things, and when the Phoenicians reached Argos they set out their cargo for sale. On the fifth or sixth day after their arrival, when they had sold almost everything, many women came down to the sea, in particular, the king's daughter. Her name, according to what the Hellenes also say, was Io daughter of Inachos. The women were standing by the stern of the ship intent upon their purchases when the Phoenicians, inciting each other, rushed upon them. The greater part made their escape, but some were seized and carried off. Io herself was among the captives. The Phoenicians put the women on board their vessel and set sail for Egypt.

This is how Io came to Egypt according to the Persians (though the Hellenes disagree), and this was the very beginning of grievances.

They say that following these events, certain Hellenes whose names they cannot specify came to the port of Tyre, in Phoenicia, and abducted the king's daughter Europa. These Hellenes would be Cretans. And now the score was even.

But after this, the Hellenes were responsible for a second crime. For they sailed in a warship to Aia in the territory of Colchis and on to the River Phasis. And when they had finished the business that brought them there, they abducted the king's daughter Medea. So the Colchian king sent a messenger to Hellas to demand

satisfaction for the abduction and the return of his daughter. The reply was that, since they had received no satisfaction for the abduction of Io of Argos, neither would they pay anything to them.

They say that in the generation following these events Alexandros son of Priama heard the stories and wanted to abduct a wife from Hellas for himself, quite confident that he would pay no penalty since the other side had not paid either. And so he abducted Helen. The Hellenes decided that the first thing to do was to send messengers demanding the return of Helen and satisfaction for the abduction. When they made these proposals they were charged with the abduction of Medea, and besides, they said, how could they expect satisfaction from others when they themselves had neither paid nor surrendered her upon request?

Up to this point, there had been abductions only from each other, but after this the Hellenes were largely responsible for offenses. For they began to make war on Asia before their enemies made war on Europe. Now the Persians think that the abduction of women is certainly an act only unjust men would perform, and yet once they have been abducted, it is senseless to make a fuss over seeking vengeance. It is the way of sensible people to have no concern for abducted women; it is quite obvious that the women would not have been abducted if they had not been compliant. The Persians claim that while they themselves, Asiatics, thought nothing of the women being abducted, the Hellenes of Sparta, for the sake of a woman, mustered a huge expedition, went to Asia, and destroyed the power of Priam. From that time on they have considered the Hellenes to be their enemies. For the Persians assume Asia and the barbarian tribes living there as their own, and anything Hellenic is separate and divergent from themselves.

The Persians claim that this is how it happened, and they find in the sack of Troya the origin of their hostility toward the Hellenes. But the Phoenicians disagree with the Persians about Io. They say that it was not by abduction that they brought her to Egypt, but rather that she had intercourse with the captain of the ship in Argos, and when she realized she was pregnant, she was ashamed to face her parents and she voluntarily sailed away with the Phoenicians so that she would not be found out.

These are the stories told by the Persians and Phoenicians. I myself have no intention of affirming that these events occurred thus or otherwise. But I do know who was the first man to begin unjust acts against the Hellenes. I shall describe him and then proceed with the rest of my story recounting cities both lesser and greater, since many of those that were great long ago have become inferior, and some that are great in my own time were inferior before. And so, resting on my knowledge that human prosperity never remains constant, I shall make mention of both without discrimination.

Croesus was of Lydiana ancestry, the son of Alyattes, and the ruler of the peoples this side of the River Halys (which flows from the south between the Syrians and Paphlagonians, then goes toward the north and empties into the sea called the Euxine). Now Croesus was the first barbarian known to us who subjugated and demanded tribute from some Hellenes, although he made friends with others. He subjugated the Ionians, the Aeolians, and the Asian Dorians, and made friends with the Spartans. Before the reign of Croesus, all Hellenes had been free. There had been an invasion by Cimmerians into Ionia prior to Croesus, but this was not for the subjugation of cities, but rather a raid for plunder.

The rule passed from the Heraklids to the family of Croesus, called the Mermnads, in the following way. There was a man named Kandaules, known to Hellenes as Myrsilos; he was the monarcha of Sardis and the descendant of Alkaios son of Herakles. The first of the Heraklids to become king of Sardis was Agron son of Ninos, who was the son of Belos, who was the son of Alkaios. Kandaules son of Myrsos was the last. The kings who ruled this land before Agron were descendants of Lydus son of Atys, from whom the whole Lydian people derives its name; earlier they had been called Meionian. From these Lydians, the Heraklids were entrusted with the rule, obtaining it through the sanction of an oracle.

The Heraklids were descendants of a slave-woman of Iardanos and Herakles. They governed for twenty-two generations, 505 years, handing down the rule from father to son until it reached Kandaules son of Myrsos.

Now this Kandaules fell in love with his own wife and, being in love, thought he had the most beautiful of all women. Therefore, he used to tell his favorite among his bodyguards, Gyges son of Daskylos, not only about serious matters but [especially] about the beauty of his wife, and with extravagant praise.

It was fated that things would turn out badly for Kandaules, and so this had not gone on long when he said to Gyges, "Since I don't think you believe me, Gyges, when I tell you about my wife's beauty (and it just so happens that people believe their ears less than their eyes), I am asking you to do something to make sure you see her naked." Gyges responded with a sharp cry and said, "My Lord, what are you saying? Insanity! You order me to see your mistress naked? When a woman's dress is removed, so is her dignity. People long ago recognized what principles are noble and good, and we should learn from them. Among them is this one: 'Look only at what belongs to you.' I do believe that she is the most beautiful of all women, and I beg you not to ask for what is against all decency."

Gyges said such things to thwart the king's desire, dreading the thought of how badly things could turn out for him because of this. Then Kandaules replied, "Don't worry, Gyges, and don't be afraid of me or my wife; I didn't tell you this to test you, and no harm will come to you from her. I have a plan and will make sure she has no idea you're watching her. I will position you in the bedroom behind the open door. After I come in, my wife, too, will be there to go to bed. Next to the doorway is a chair. She will set each of her garments on it one by one as she takes them off, and you may watch unobserved. But when she walks from the chair to the bed and her back is turned, be careful she doesn't see you and then you can go out through the door."

Since Gyges could not escape, he was won over. And when Kandaules thought it was bedtime, he led Gyges to the room, where before long the queen entered.

While she came in and set down her garments, Gyges watched. And when she went toward the bed with her back turned, he slipped out from behind the door and went out. But the woman spied him as he left and, realizing that this was her husband's doing, she neither cried out, even though she felt shamed, nor let on that she knew, since she intended to get even with Kandaules. For among the Lydians, as well as nearly all other barbarians, it is a great disgrace for even a male to be seen naked.

Thus she revealed nothing and remained silent for the time being.

But as soon as day dawned, she prepared her most faithful servants for what she intended and had Gyges summoned. He came at her request, assuming she knew nothing of what went on, just as he had always come to the queen whenever she had summoned him before. When he arrived, she said, "Now, Gyges, there are two roads before you, and I shall let you choose which you want to take. Either kill Kandaules and have me and the kingdom of the Lydians,<sup>a</sup> or you yourself must die at once so that in the future you will never see things you should not see in your complete obedience to Kandaules. At any rate, either he should die, since he planned the deed, or you should, since you saw me naked, which violated all decency."

At first Gyges was dumbstruck by what he heard; then he begged her not to force him to make such a choice. Nevertheless, he could not persuade her, and when he saw that he really was confronted with the necessity to kill his master or to be killed by others, he decided that he would survive. He asked her, "Since you are compelling me to slay my master, please tell me how we're going to assault him." "The attack will be made from the very place he revealed me naked," she replied, "and the assault will be made upon him in his sleep."<sup>a</sup>

Together they worked out the plan, and when night fell—for Gyges was not getting out of this; there was no escape—either he or Kandaules had to die—Gyges followed the woman to the bedroom. She gave him a dagger and hid him behind the same door. Then, when Kandaules was sleeping, Gyges crept up, slew him, and obtained the woman and the kingdom. It is this Gyges that the poet Archilochus of Paros, a who lived at the same time, mentions in his verses.

Gyges was supported in obtaining the kingdom by an oracle from Delphi. For the Lydians thought that what had happened to Kandaules was dreadful and were up in arms. However, the partisans of Gyges and the rest of the Lydians came to an agreement: if the oracle declared him king, he would be king; if not, he would return the rule to the Heraklids. The oracle did in fact declare for him, and thus Gyges became king. But the Pythia added this: retribution would come from the Heraklids to the fourth descendant of Gyges. The Lydians and their kings disregarded this part of the oracle until it actually came to pass.

Thus the Mermnads obtained the kingship by taking it from the Heraklids. When Gyges became king, he sent quite a few dedications off to Delphi, and of all the silver dedications in Delphi, most are his. Besides silver, he dedicated an unbelievable amount of gold. Most worthy of mention among them are the bowls; six golden bowls are his offerings; they weigh thirty talents and stand in the treasury of the Corinthians, although the truth is that it is not the treasury of all the Corinthians, but of Kypselos son of Eetion. Of all barbarians known to us, it was Gyges who first dedicated offerings to Delphi, after Midas son of Gordias, the king of Phrygia. Midas in fact dedicated a royal throne worth seeing, on which he sat when he gave judgments. This throne sits in the same place as Gyges' bowls. The gold and silver dedicated by Gyges is called "Gygian" by the Delphians, named after its dedicator.

After Gyges had gained control of the government, he led his army in an invasion of Miletus and Smyrna, and he took Colophon. But since no other great deed was done by him during his kingship of thirty-eight years, we shall bypass it, having mentioned so much already.

But I will mention Ardys son of Gyges, who became king after him. It was this man who took Prienea and invaded Miletus. While he was ruling in Sardis, the Cimmerians, expelled from their homeland by Scythian nomads, came into Asiae and took all of Sardis with the exception of the acropolis.

When Ardys had been king for forty-nine years, Sadyattes son of Ardys succeeded him and ruled as king for twelve years, followed by Alyattes son of Sadyattes. This king made war on Cyaxares, the descendant of Deiokes, and on his army of Medes. He drove the Cimmerians out of Asia, took Smyrna (a colony founded from Colophon), and invaded Klazomenai. From the latter he did not come away as he wished but suffered a great defeat.

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