
Tolstoy and Herodotus

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Michael Ondaatje's novel *The English Patient* makes frequent reference to the *Histories* of Herodotus and occasional reference to Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*. The novel is permeated with the *Histories*, with which it shares in large part the locale of Libya and Egypt, and its later chapters refer to Tolstoy's novel as a "story of deceit and romance" (237), which it emulates. But Ondaatje probably did not realise that shortly before Tolstoy wrote *Anna Karenina* he had been enthusiastically reading Herodotus in the original Greek.

Tolstoy's enthusiasm for ancient Greek and for Herodotus in particular is the chief evidence adduced by Al'tman in a series of articles in which he argues that Tolstoy's moralistic story 'How Much Land does a Man Need?' [Много ли человеку земли нужно (XXV: 67-78; 1886)] is inspired by a couple of lines in Herodotus (IV: 7). In December 1870 Tolstoy had suddenly begun to learn Greek and to read some of the classical works in the original. He refers especially to Homer (noting in January 1871 [LXI: 248] that existing translations are much inferior to the originals), to Plato, Xenophon, and Aesop. To Fet he wrote that "Without the knowledge of Greek there is no education" [без знания греческого нет образования (LXI: 248)]; to Urusov that "I am not doing anything and am not interested in doing anything beyond reading Greek" [я ничего не делаю кроме греческого чтения, и ничего не хочется делать (LXI: 253)]; to Alexandrine Tolstaia he wrote that a prerequisite for the composition of his *Azbuka* was "a knowledge of Greek ... literature" [для нее нужно знание греческой литературы (LXI: 283)]. It is reported that when, thirteen years later, he was discussing the publication of popular editions of works of "eternal world-wide significance" that "ought to be read by everyone," the first name that he mentioned was

that of Herodotus (XXV: 876). But however much he enjoyed learning Greek and reading these ancient texts, his wife feared that his studies were impairing his health. He wrote that he "had never been so groggy as this winter" [Я никогда так не хворал, как эту зиму (LXI: 252)], and it was for the sake of his health that he travelled in June 1871 to Bashkiria to drink *kumys*, checking out his Greek with Professor Leont'ev in Moscow on the way. He arrived in Bashkiria with, at least metaphorically speaking, Herodotus's account of Scythia (IV) in his hand, and he found there a teacher of Greek from a seminary to aid and encourage his reading. Almost immediately he wrote home to his wife of "the Bashkirs, from whom there is a smell of Herodotus" [Башкиры, от которых Геродотом пахнет (LXXXIII: 182)]; and a month later he wrote to Fet that he was "reading Herodotus, who describes in detail and with great accuracy the same milk-eating Scythians among whom I am living" [Читаю и Геродота, который с подробностью и большой верностью описывает тех самых галакто-фагов-скифов, среди которых я живу (LXI: 256)]. Incidentally, he uses here a Greek word, found in Homer, for "milk-eaters" (γαλακτοφάγοι), while Herodotus seems to have coined a new word when writing of "milk-drinking" (γαλακτοπόται) nomads in Scythia (I: 216) and, interestingly, also in Libya (IV: 186; see Powell viii). Tolstoy was doubtless thinking of the extraction and preparation of mares' milk described at the beginning of Herodotus's account of the Scythians (IV: 2), but not mentioning the fact that Herodotus somehow connects the *kumys* with the practice of blinding slaves.

Just a couple of pages later in Herodotus we find the sentence to which Al'tman traces the origin of Tolstoy's story "How Much Land does a Man Need?": "Whoever has charge of the sacred gold during the feast and falls asleep in the open air, this man is said by the Scythians to have less than a year to live; and for this he is given as much land as he can ride around on a horse in one day" (IV: 7). There are a number of oddities about this passage, beginning with the questionable concept of private ownership of land among a nomadic people, that make it probable that the whole story has at some stage become seriously distorted. Indeed its context at the beginning of Book IV of

Herodotus is more legendary than historical. There are also major differences between what we have in Tolstoy and what Herodotus gives us, beginning with the idea that a story of a dozen or so pages has been constructed out of just two lines and continuing with the fact that Tolstoy has changed the *объезд* on horseback into an *обход* on foot. Al'tman in fact weakens his argument not only by pointing out differences but also by reporting that similar legends can be found elsewhere, e.g., in Ukraine. Indeed, just about the time that Tolstoy was writing his story, a distant relative, Ivan Ivanovich Tolstoy, was reporting in his *Russkie drevnosti* a similar custom as legendary among the Turks and current among the Kalmyks.¹ Al'tman has therefore to rely on Tolstoy's earlier enthusiasm for Herodotus and his special interest in the summer of 1871 in Herodotus's account of Scythia in order to make the claim, which seems to me distinctly dubious, that Herodotus's garbled legend provides the germ for Tolstoy's well known story of "How Much Land does a Man Need?," which is set among the Bashkirs and refers to their drinking of *kumys* (XXV: 72).

We are on much safer ground when we come to consider the two excerpts from Herodotus that Tolstoy included in his elementary textbooks, *Azbuka* (1872) and *Russkie knigi dlia chteniia* (1875). These are the stories of 'Cambyses and Psammenitus' [Камбиз и Псаменит (XXI: 184-85, XXII: 247-49; based on Herodotus III: 14-15)] and 'Polycrates of Samos' [Поликрат Самосский (XXI: 255-56, XXII: 419-21; based on Herodotus III: 40-42 and 122-25)]. We note that they are both taken from Book III of Herodotus, where, according to Myres, "the story of Polycrates of Samos . . . is told in 'alternate chapters' with that of Cambyses . . ." (79). The stories are in fact historically related to one another: that of Cambyses and Psammenitus comes historically between the two separate episodes that Tolstoy presents from the life of Polycrates. Polycrates, as tyrant of the island of Samos, had a successful career largely through his piratical navy. But he was threatened by the growing power of Persia and therefore allied with others who were similarly threatened, including Amasis of Egypt. Tolstoy

follows Herodotus in opening his first episode with a letter from Amasis to his friend Polycrates warning of the dangers of excessive good fortune, although Tolstoy typically omits any reference to the notion that the gods' envy would bring an inevitable nemesis. Polycrates takes the warning, attempts to lose a ring that he considers to be his most precious possession by throwing it into the sea, only to have it returned to him a few days later inside a magnificent fish. This causes Amasis, in fear of what the consequences might be in terms of nemesis, to break off his friendship with Polycrates. Or so it was according to Herodotus and Tolstoy. In historical fact it was Polycrates who broke off the alliance and himself supported the Persian invasion of Egypt that occurred soon after the death of Amasis in 525 BCE. The Persians were led by Cambyses II, the son of Cyrus the Great, whose treatment of Amasis's son and successor provides Tolstoy's other story taken from Herodotus. The defeated Psammenitus expresses his grief not when his daughter is treated as a slave, nor when his son is led off to execution, but when he sees the destitution of a formerly rich friend. Such behaviour impresses both Cambyses and Tolstoy. In this story, although not mentioned, Polycrates of Samos, being now allied with Persia against Egypt, was historically on the winning side. But three years later he was short of cash and so fell the more easily into the trap that is central to Tolstoy's second instalment from his life. Oroites, satrap of Sardis, writes to Polycrates, offering to share his own wealth in return for an alliance with Polycrates (an alliance that, in Herodotus, is explicitly against Cambyses). Polycrates sends an envoy who is shown what look like piles of gold but are in fact piles of stones covered with a layer of gold. The envoy is taken in by this and Polycrates, in spite of his daughter's premonitory dream, goes to Oroites with the aim of cementing their alliance, but in fact to meet his death. While Tolstoy was clearly attracted to this episode by its warning against the deceptive allure of gold, it is also typical that he should simplify but not exclude the premonitory dream. Another such dream occurs, for instance, in a draft for "How Much Land does a Man Need?" (XXV: 584).

Premonitory dreams—yes; envy of the gods—no. Tolstoy clearly exercises some discretion about how much of Herodotus's original to include. As Tolstoy's preface to his *Krug chteniia* (XLI: 8) shows, he did not normally aim at exact translation; and, particularly at the beginning and end of these stories, he naturally resorts to simplification, summary, and paraphrase in order to abstract them from their full context. However, Tolstoy himself perhaps wrote and at least approved a note that he "altered the fables of Aesop and the translation of Herodotus least of all" [Менее всех изменены басни Эзопа и перевод Геродота (XXI: 598)]. While he was proud of his progress with Greek and made his own versions of both Aesop and Herodotus, he at least consulted other versions of Aesop and tried, in March 1871, to get hold of a translation of Herodotus (LXI: 252), probably, in view of an odd pencilled jotting, a translation into French (XLVIII: 166), although Herodotus had been rendered into Russian at least twice.² The central parts of Tolstoy's versions are in fact close enough to the originals to enable us to identify a few points where Tolstoy seems not to have understood Herodotus's Greek. Tolstoy, for instance, for no particular reason locates the scene of 'Cambyses and Psammenitus' on a square [площадь], while Herodotus has it in a suburb [προάστειον]. More importantly, the friend whose fate is bewailed by Psammenitus is described by Herodotus as an "elderly man" [ἄνδρα ἀπηλικέ-στερον]; whereas Tolstoy calls him a relative [родственника], in spite of the fact that only a few lines lower down he is said to be "not at all related" [вовсе не родного]. That Tolstoy has misunderstood the epithet is corroborated by his omission of a cognate noun earlier in the story. Similarly, there are a few places in the story of Polycrates where Herodotus's version makes better sense than does Tolstoy's, i.e., Tolstoy's apparent alterations have no good reason. He makes a plurality of islands [острова], for instance, out of Herodotus's singular [τῆς νῆσου] when the reference is obviously to the island of Samos; and he has the fisherman, after he has presented the fish and has been thanked by Polycrates, going "to the king" [к царю] instead of going home [ἐς τὰ οἰκία], as

Herodotus more reasonably has it. Most egregiously, Oroites's stones covered with a layer of gold are piled up, according to Tolstoy, in "many boats" [много лодок] rather than in "eight boxes/coffers" [λάβρακακας ὀκτώ], where Herodotus has them. At that point it is difficult to imagine what Tolstoy was thinking about.³

While it is possible to pick a few holes in Tolstoy's translations, his mistakes are neither many nor of great significance. He obviously understood what was going on and was reading Greek authors partly out of sheer delight at mastering another language; he also took a rather perverse delight in criticising the work of experts in this, as in any other, field. Tolstoy seems to have progressed to Herodotus after reading Xenophon, who is relatively easy to read, and Homer, who is not at all easy but is, of course, the kingpin of classical Greek literature. He was probably attracted to Herodotus by a number of factors: as I have written before (Turner 105), he seems to have been temperamentally attracted by the pictures of a relatively primitive, basically rural and still heroic or at least aristocratic society; military exploits continued to hold some attraction for him; and, to judge by his other reading and his various anthologies, he took a lively interest in history, folklore, folk wisdom, legend, and, in general, in what we would call cultural anthropology. All this was to be found in Herodotus, together with a certain simplicity, even naiveté, of narration. Tolstoy's choice of excerpts from Herodotus, like his selection of other pieces for his *Azbuka*, indicates that the two criteria that he later elaborated for art in his treatise on *What is Art?* (XXX: 27-203; 1898) were already operative: universal art is based on the simple and clear expression that infects with simple and clear feelings; Christian art is based on the moral quality of those feelings. Tolstoy is above all interested in portraying how men behave, how they should or should not behave, when faced with moral crises. Psammenitus reacts with simple and clear feeling when he sees a friend who had been rich but is now a beggar; and Polycrates, who is described by Herodotus as "very fond of money," is shown first as placing excessive value on a jewelled ring and then as lured to his death by his

greed for gold. Anyone familiar with Morson's view of *War and Peace* must be reminded of Tolstoy by how Herodotus is described by the English Patient, who sees him as "consuming everything without suspicion, piecing together a mirage . . . What you find in him are cul-de-sacs within the sweep of history—how people betray each other for the sake of nations, how people fall in love. . ." (Ondaatje 118-19).

Gusev wrote that Tolstoy's "two stories taken from Herodotus, 'Cambyses and Psammenitus' and 'Polycrates of Samos,' were meant not so much to acquaint children with historical events as to express definite moral ideas" (72). Similarly, How and Wells wrote of the story of "Croesus and Solon" recorded by Herodotus that "It is best to look upon the tale as a piece of popular philosophy, in which Croesus and Solon are introduced as illustrations, on ethical and not historical grounds" (I: 67). It is therefore surprising that Tolstoy did not himself use it for his *Azbuka*. He refers to it at least twice, both times in February 1890 (LI: 20 and LXXXVII: 10); and it was also the title-story of a collection (Царь Крез и учитель Солон) put out by *Posrednik* in 1886 that contained three of Tolstoy's own stories (XXV: 677, 680, 690). It is a famous story according to which the wise Solon visits Croesus, who tries to impress him with his immense wealth and asks who is the happiest person he has known. Solon names more than one but fails to name Croesus himself; for he refuses to recognize happiness in wealth and advises Croesus not to call anyone happy until he has seen the conclusion to that life. What Solon says here (σκοπέειν δὲ χρὴ τὴν τελευτήν, ["one has to consider/look to the end"]) may, indeed, be the ultimate source of the aphorism "Respice finem" [look to the end] that occurs in its Latin form in "The Death of Ivan Il'ich" (XXVI: 70); although I have also seen it suggested that Solon was quoting his younger contemporary, Chilon (of Sparta), who, like Solon, was reckoned among the Seven Sages of Greece.⁴ It is a good, moralistic story of the kind that one would expect to appeal to Tolstoy; and its note of warning contains an echo of the story of Polycrates that has been described as "not accidental" (Regenbogen 392). It is therefore

a pity that, although it seems to have arisen in the sixth century BC, it has to be a fiction on the basis of simple chronology, as Plutarch recognized before re-telling the story himself. My point, however, is that although, like all good stories, this one recurs (e.g., in Plutarch and Diogenes Laertius), it is also given at length by Herodotus (I: 30-32), which may well be where Tolstoy first read it. It is, of course, possible that Tolstoy missed it because he did not read the whole of Herodotus: the two stories that he translated came from Book III and he is likely to have read Book IV for its local interest; but we cannot be sure how much more he read.

But perhaps "Croesus and Solon" would have been too obviously moralizing a story. For Tolstoy also claims that there was no moralizing to be found in his *Azbuka*, since he even omitted, with regret, the explicit morals to Aesop's fables (XXI: 410). That is what he wrote in a draft reply to critics which he did not publish, perhaps because he was aware that morals, if not always moralizing, were desperately important to him in the *Azbuka* as in everything else. The same draft response refers to the suggestion that it would make more sense to include excerpts from Reshetnikov or Marko Vovchok than excerpts from Herodotus (XXI: 411). Tolstoy treats this suggestion with the contempt it deserves, but makes no specific response. Modern literature, he implies, contains few examples of the simplicity and clarity that he was looking for. Nor were simplicity and clarity always—or even often—achieved by Tolstoy himself. The composition of his elementary readers, in which Tolstoy says that he worked hard to make everything "beautiful, brief, simple and, most importantly, clear" [красиво, коротко, просто и главное—ясно (LXI: 283)], overlapped chronologically with the composition of *Anna Karenina*, which is not always clear and is far from simple from the stylistic, psychological, philosophical, sociological, or any other point of view. In other words, Winkelmann's "noble simplicity" (*eine edle Einfalt*), that had become a cliché about classical Greek art, was in Tolstoy dependent on genre. Modern life is complicated, and Tolstoy, however much he envied the simplicities of child-

hood or the folk wisdom of parts of ancient Greek literature (he seems largely to have avoided, on the other hand, the tragedians), could not, either in his philosophico-religious works or in his novels, avoid its complexity. Tolstoy's Golden Age, unlike Dostoevsky's, is located irrevocably in the past—either his own past or that of civilization. The editor of this journal has reminded us of what he wrote in 1862: "Our ideal is behind, not ahead of us" [Идеал наш сзади, а не впереди (VIII 323; Orwin 81)].

Notes

1. Tolstoy and Kondakov fasc. 2: 30-31. Cf. its French translation: Kondakov, Tolstoï and Reinach 160.
2. By A. Nartov (St. Petersburg, 1763) and I. I. Martynov (St. Petersburg, 1826-27). Cf. Wes. At a Tolstoy Conference (Iasnaia Poliana, 1998) I was kindly given a print-out of the Herodotus entries from the forthcoming catalogue of foreign books preserved in Tolstoy's library. This confirms that no translation of Herodotus is preserved there.
3. If Tolstoy did obtain a French translation of Herodotus, it is likely to have been that of Larcher, which duly translates this phrase with "huit grands coffres." The Greek word *λάρναξ* means much the same as the Russian word *ларь*, but an etymological connection between them is not likely.
4. A short piece under the title of "The Seven Sages of Greece" was drafted but not used by Tolstoy for his *Azbuka* (Spiridonov 505).

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