

A terracotta bust of a bearded man, likely a Greek deity or philosopher, wearing a laurel wreath. The bust is shown from the chest up, with a prominent, curly beard and hair. The background is a dark, textured wall.

PHILIP S. PEEK
Ancient Greek I
A 21st Century Approach



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Cover image: Athenian Fragmentary votive sculpture of Dionysus (?) Greek Ashmolean Museum. Photograph by Mary Harrsch, CC BY-SA. Cover design by Anna Gatti.

Guest Feature 2

Tom Holland on the Art of Translating Herodotos

Tom Holland, an award-winning historian, author and broadcaster, tells us about his lifelong fascination with Herodotos. For more information, visit his website:

Tom Holland.¹

Herodotus is my favourite historian. I first read him when I was twelve, and since then I have repeatedly returned to him. Every time I do so I find new things to notice, to admire, to enjoy. Only when I sat down to translate him, however, did I feel that I was truly coming to know him. The chance to live with Herodotus from the beginning of what he had written to the very end felt like entering a kind of marriage. It took me time to become easy with his ways. He was full of complexities that caused me trouble and difficulty. Only with familiarity did I come to appreciate just how various his moods might be. Never once, though, did I regret it. Translation can make or break a relationship. Translating Herodotus, I was confirmed for good in my love.

His great work is many things—the first example of non-fiction, the beginning point of history, the most important source of information we have for a stirring episode in human affairs—but it is above all a treasure-trove of wonders. There is very little that Herodotus does not find fascinating. He is forever moving from theme to theme. The Greek word, **ιστορία**, at the time when he used it to describe what he was attempting, meant not a study of the past, but simply ‘enquiry’—and though there is certainly no lack of history in his great work, there is also plenty of geography, ethnography and zoology. There are laugh-out-loud anecdotes and chilling tales of revenge,

1 <https://www.tom-holland.org/>.

accounts of mummification and disquisitions on giant ants, stirring narratives of battles and tales of bedroom duplicity. This means that there is never one single style. The fun of translating Herodotus lies not just in tracking the range and variety of his Greek, but in finding ways of conveying some sense of it in English. The many different accents and tones with which Herodotus speaks are the surest key to Herodotus himself.

Centuries after his death, a critic in the Roman Empire described him as being “very like Homer”. By this he meant that Herodotus was to prose what the author of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* was to epic: the supreme, the original fountainhead. To read his ‘enquiry’ is to engage with something both primal and heroic: an attempt to push back the frontiers of knowledge on almost every conceivable front. The premium that Herodotus set on providing sources for his material is so taken for granted now by historians that it is possible not to recognize just how revolutionary it originally was. In his account of the build-up to the battle of Plataea, for instance, he describes what he has been told by a man called Thersander of Orchomenus, who in turn is reporting what he was told at a banquet by a Persian fellow-guest. It is a moment to send a shiver down the spine. Men dead for two-and-a-half-thousand years are being given voice. We are witness to the birth-pangs of historical method. History is doubly being made. Thrilling though it is to read such a passage in English, it is even more so to read it in Greek. Few experiences in literature can rival it.

Herodotus’ ambition, he declares in the opening sentence of the first work of history ever written, was to ensure that “human achievement may be spared the ravages of time”. Literally, he spoke of not allowing them to become *ἐξίτηλα*, a word that could be used in a technical sense to signify the fading of paint from inscriptions or works of art. Today, the colours applied by Herodotus to his portrait of the long-gone world in which he lived remain as fresh and exuberant as ever. The surest and most moving way to inspect them, however, is by mastering the language in which he wrote. Herodotus is a joy in any language; but to read him in Greek is a rare and precious privilege. I rank the chance I was given to translate him as one of the great experiences of my life.

To watch an interview with Tom by Viral History, follow this link:

Viral History’s Interview with Tom Holland.²

2 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cyQUu_1XlhA.