

The History  
Herodotus



TRANSLATED BY

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To Wendy

several occasions; and, of course, there came also Solon of Athens. At the bidding of the Athenians he had made laws for them, and then he went abroad for ten years, saying, indeed, that he traveled for sight-seeing but really that he might not be forced to abrogate any of the laws he had laid down; of themselves, the Athenians could not do so, since they had bound themselves by great oaths that for ten years they would live under whatever laws Solon would enact.<sup>16</sup>

30. This, then, was the reason—though of course there was also the sight-seeing—that brought Solon to Egypt to the court of Prince Amasis and eventually to Sardis to Croesus. When he came there, he was entertained by Croesus in his palace, and on the third or fourth day after his arrival the servants, on Croesus' orders, took Solon round the stores of treasures and showed them to him in all their greatness and richness. When he had seen them all and considered them, Croesus, as the opportunity came, put this question to Solon: "My friend from Athens, great talk of you has come to my ears, of your wisdom and your traveling; they say you have traveled over much of the world, for the sake of what you can see in it, in your pursuit of knowledge. So now, a longing overcomes me to ask you whether, of all men, there is one you have seen as the most blessed of all." He put this question never doubting but that he himself was the most blessed. But Solon flattered not a whit but in his answer followed the very truth. He said, "Sir, Tellus the Athenian." Croesus was bewildered at this but pursued his question with insistence. "And in virtue of what is it that you judge Tellus to be most blessed?" Solon said: "In the first place, Tellus' city was in good state when he had sons—good and beautiful they were—and he saw children in turn born to all of them, and all surviving. Secondly, when he himself had come prosperously to a moment of his life—that is, prosperously as it counts with us—he had, besides, an ending for it that was most glorious: in a battle between the Athenians and their neighbors in Eleusis he made a sally, routed the enemy, and died splendidly, and the Athenians gave him a public funeral where he fell and so honored him greatly."

31. Solon led on Croesus by what he said of Tellus when he

29. To Sardis, then, all the teachers of learning<sup>15</sup> who lived at that time came from all over Greece; they came to Sardis on their

15. The Greek word here, *sophistai*, was later to win a derogatory sense, when a "sophist" was one who taught for hire and was given to fallacious argument. Here it has only its earlier meaning, "one who seeks for *sophia* [wisdom]"—a kind of self-chosen seeker, from whom one might perhaps, as a favor, learn some of the fruits of that wisdom.

16. Solon's reforms date from his archonship at Athens in 594-593.

spoke of his many blessings, so Croesus went further in his questioning and wanted to know whom Solon had seen as second most blessed after the first, for he certainly thought that he himself would win the second prize at least. But Solon answered him and said: "Cleobis and Biton. They were men of Argive race and had a sufficiency of livelihood and, besides, a strength of body such as I shall show; they were both of them prize-winning athletes, and the following story is told of them as well. There was a feast of Hera at hand for the Argives, and their mother needs must ride to the temple; but the oxen did not come from the fields at the right moment. The young men, being pressed by lack of time, harnessed themselves beneath the yoke and pulled the wagon with their mother riding on it; forty-five stades they completed on their journey and arrived at the temple. When they had done that and had been seen by all the assembly, there came upon them the best end of a life, and in them the god showed thoroughly how much better it is for a man to be dead than to be alive.<sup>17</sup> For the Argive men came and stood around the young men, congratulating them on their strength, and the women congratulated the mother on the fine sons she had; and the mother, in her great joy at what was said and done, stood right in front of the statue and there prayed for Cleobis and Biton, her own sons, who had honored her so signally, that the goddess should give them whatsoever is best for a man to win. After that prayer the young men sacrificed and banqueted and laid them down to sleep in the temple where they were; they never rose more, but that was the end in which they were held. The Argives made statues of them and dedicated them at Delphi, as of two men who were the best of all."

32. So Solon assigned his second prize in happiness to these men; but Croesus was sharply provoked and said: "My Athenian

17. I have translated the two verbs (perfect and present infinitives) as I have (and not as "it is better to die than to live") because for Herodotus death is not a condition. A Christian might say that our condition after death is better than in this life, but what Solon is after is that, if you are dead, at least the risks of trouble are over. Hence to have the last settlement when you are lavishly winning, with all the assets of youth, beauty, and strength in the moment of triumph on your side, is the supreme gift, while to go on living is to go on being continually at risk.

friend, is the happiness that is mine so entirely set at naught by you that you do not make me the equal of even private men?" Solon answered: "Croesus, you asked me, who know that the Divine is altogether jealous and prone to trouble us, and you asked me about human matters. In the whole length of time there is much to see that one would rather not see—and much to suffer likewise. I put the boundary of human life at seventy years. These seventy years have twenty-five thousand two hundred days, not counting the intercalary month;<sup>18</sup> but if every other year be lengthened by a month so that the seasons come out right, these intercalary months in seventy years will be thirty-five, and the days for these months ten hundred and fifty. So that all the days of a man's life are twenty-six thousand two hundred and fifty; of all those days not one brings to him anything exactly the same as another. So, Croesus, man is entirely what befalls him. To me it is clear that you are very rich, and clear that you are the king of many men; but the thing that you asked me I cannot say of you yet, until I hear that you have brought your life to an end well. For he that is greatly rich is not more blessed than he that has enough for the day unless fortune so attend upon him that he ends his life well, having all those fine things still with him. Moreover, many very rich men are unblessed, and many who have a moderate competence are fortunate. Now he that is greatly rich but is unblessed has an advantage over the lucky man in two respects only; but the latter has an advantage over the rich and unblessed in many. The rich and unblessed man is better able to accomplish his every desire and to support such great visitation of evil as shall befall him. But the moderately rich and lucky man wins over the other in these ways: true, he is not equally able to support both the visitation of evil and his own desire, but his good fortune turns these aside from him; he is uncrippled and healthy, without evils to afflict him, and with good children and good looks. If, in addition to all this, he shall end his life well, he is the man you seek, the one who is worthy to be called blessed; but wait till he is dead to call him so, and till then call him not blessed but lucky.<sup>19</sup>

18. The intercalary month was the Greek substitute for our leap year.

19. For the subtle nuances of meaning that Herodotus brings to this discussion of "blessedness" or "happiness" (nuances embedded in the Greek terms he employs), see the end note to this passage.

"Of course, it is impossible for one who is human to have all the good things together, just as there is no one country that is sufficient of itself to provide all good things for itself; but it has one thing and not another, and the country that has the most is best. So no single person is self-sufficient; he has one thing and lacks another. But whoso possesses most of them, continuously, and then ends his life gracefully, he, my lord, may justly win this name you seek—at least in my judgment. But one must look always at the end of every thing—how it will come out finally. For to many the god has shown a glimpse of blessedness only to extirpate them in the end."

33. That was what Solon said, and he did not please Croesus at all; so the prince sent him away, making no further account of him, thinking him assuredly a stupid man who would let by present goods and bid him look to the end of every matter.

Of your son as he speaks. Nay, for you, far better it were to go wanting;  
For the first day he speaks it shall be a day of luckless destruction.

Now, when the fortress was being taken, there came upon Croesus, to kill him, one of the Persians who did not know him. Croesus saw the man coming at him, but in his misfortune he was past caring; it was all one to him that he should be stricken and die. But the son who was dumb, when he saw the Persian approaching, his voice broke from him through his fear and the disaster, and he called out, "Sir, it is Croesus; do not kill him." This is the first time the boy spoke, and directly after that he spoke all the rest of his life.

86. So the Persians held Sardis and made Croesus their prisoner. Fourteen years he had reigned<sup>36</sup> and fourteen days been besieged, and he had indeed fulfilled the oracle, in that he had destroyed a mighty empire—his own. The Persians took him and brought him to Cyrus. Cyrus heaped a huge pyre and set Croesus on the top of it, fettered in chains, with fourteen of the children of the Lydians along with him. He had in his mind either to offer these firstfruits to some god or other, or perhaps he wished to fulfill some vow he had made, or perhaps even, since he had heard that Croesus was a god-fearing man, he set him on the pyre to know whether some one of Those-that-are-Divine<sup>37</sup> would rescue him from being burned alive. This, anyway, they say, is what he did. Now as Croesus stood upon the pyre, there came into his head, for all that he was in such calamity, that word of Solon: "No one of them that are living is blessed." How that word had been uttered with god to back it! As this came to him, he heaved a great sigh and broke into lamentation. He had till then held his peace a great while, but now three times he called out the name "Solon!" Cyrus heard him and told his interpreters to ask

36. 560-546 B.C.

37. The Greek word *daimōn* is Herodotus' most general term for divine power. It covers therefore both the single god (*theos*) and the impersonal force of fate. The latter sense is usually expressed by the neuter plural of the adjective *daimonios*, meaning "those things that are out of man's control." In Homer *daimōn* is often used by a speaker to refer to some divine presence that he cannot identify more certainly. Thus Herodotus in this chapter is saying that Cyrus wanted to see whether one of the divine beings (who knew which one!) would rescue Croesus.

85. But as for Croesus himself, this is what happened. He had a son, of whom I have spoken before, who was in other respects a handsome lad but was dumb. In the days of his former well-being, Croesus had taken all measures on the boy's behalf and, besides his other care for him, he had sent to consult the oracle at Delphi concerning him. The Pythia answered as follows:

Lydian by breed, king of many, still are you a great fool,

Croesus:

Wish not to hear, in your halls, the voice so much prayed for, the voice

Croesus whom it was he called on. They approached Croesus and asked. For a while Croesus was silent, but they forced him to answer, and he said, "One whom I would have every ruler meet; more than a fortune I would have it so." His answer was so obscure that they asked him again what it was he said. And, as they were instant and bore hard on him, he told the story: of how at the beginning there had come to him this Solon, the Athenian, and how he had surveyed all the blessings that he, Croesus, had and had made little of them all ("Thus and thus it was," he said), and how it had all befallen himself as the man had said. "But it concerns me," said Croesus, "no more than every man in the world, and especially those who are in their own eyes blessed." So Croesus told his story, and, as he did so, the fire had been lit and the edges of it were burning. Cyrus listened to the interpreters telling him what Croesus said, and his mind was changed; he recognized that he too was a man and that it was another man, no whit less in great fortune than himself, whom he was giving alive to the fire; besides, he was afraid of what he must pay in retribution and thought again how nothing of all that is in the world of men could be secure. He bade them quench the fire, even as it burned, with all the speed they could, and bring Croesus down and those that were with him. The men tried to do so but could gain no mastery of the fire.

87. Then, as the Lydians tell the story, Croesus became aware of Cyrus' change of heart, and when he saw every man striving to quench the fire and no longer able to do so, he called in a loud voice to Apollo, bidding him, if ever he had received any gift of his that was pleasing, to come to his rescue and deliver him out of his present evil. With tears he called upon the god, and suddenly, out of a clear sky, with no wind in it, there gathered clouds, and a storm burst and a violent rain with it; and the fire was quenched. So Cyrus knew for certain that Croesus was loved of god and a good man, and he had him down from the pyre and asked him, "Croesus, who of all mankind persuaded you to make war upon my land and to be my enemy rather than my friend?" The other answered, "My lord, I myself did—to your good fortune and to my ill fortune; but the cause of it was the god of the Greeks, who incited me to fight. For no one is, of himself, so foolish as to prefer war to peace; in the one, children bury their fathers; in the other, fathers their children. I suppose, however, it was the will of the gods that this should have happened so."