Referred to both as "the father of lies" and as the founder of the discipline of history, Herodotus (5th cent. B.C.E.) stands at the threshold of historical and ethnographic discourse in the West. Through its primary topic, the wars between Greece and Persia, Herodotus' Histories examines the distinctive social, political, and religious characters of the major cultures of the ancient mediterranean world. In this class, our reading of the Histories will include a consideration of the following questions: how does the perspective of the Histories contribute to, and complicate, contemporary notions of exoticism and "otherness"; what is the relation of the Histories (with its recognition of cultural pluralism) to the themes and structure of Athenian tragedy? How does Herodotus construct a history out of travel, hearsay, participant-observation? What can we learn from Herodotus about historical method? Our readings will include (in addition to the primary text) selections from: Michel De Certeau, The Writing of History; Carlo Ginzburg, Clues, Myths and Historical Method; Leslie Kurke, Coins, Bodies, Games, and Gold: The Politics of Meaning in Archaic Greece.

**Week 1.** 1/25. Problems and perspectives in reading Herodotus. Background to the Histories. Inquiry; sources; evidence, structuring principles.

**Week 2.** 2/1. Happiness and wisdom: the logos of Book 1. **Reading:** Histories, Book 1; Dewald’s Introduction to the Histories (ix-xli). N.B. Timeline on xlvii-li; notes to the reading and maps at the end of the text.


**Week 4.** 2/15. Customs and kings. **Reading:** Book 2.chs. 1-91, 99, 102-105,111-


Week 6. 2/29. The Histories and tragedy. Reading: Book 6 (selections)
Book 7, chs. 1-61, 99-106, 118-120, 133-145, 204-239. First written assignment due (see below).

Recommended reading again: “Common Sense as a Cultural System” in Geertz, C., Local Knowledge: Further Essays in Interpretive Anthropology (NY: 1983)


Final written assignment due March 19 (see below).

The text for this course is Herodotus: The Histories tr. R. Waterfield, introduction by C. Dewald, (Oxford: 1998), available at the NYU Bookstore. Other readings are posted on Blackboard. Recommended readings are optional.

Suggestions for further reading (on reserve in Bobst):
Course requirements: 1) class attendance (more than 1 absence -- except for emergencies -- will automatically lower your final grade) and participation; 2) required readings; 3) two written assignments.

Grading will be based on class participation 20%; first paper 30%; final paper 50%. All your written work must be your own; “borrowed” work will be severely sanctioned in accordance with school policies. If you have any questions about what constitutes plagiarism, please ask me.

**First written assignment:**

By the time of this assignment, we will have read extensive excerpts from Herodotus; we will have reflected on his narrative method, and his combination of historical inquiry and ethnographic detail; we will have considered Herodotus as a narrative artist, the “father of history,” and indeed, a founder of comparative “cultural studies” in antiquity. We will have considered his *Histories* as a carefully constructed text of cultural comparison and historical narrative, drawing on oral report, experience, hearsay, written document, custom, law.

For this first assignment, you are to write your own mini-Herodotean text: a 2-3 page study of one or more “cultures” you have experience of, either directly or through report (written, oral, internet-mediated, etc.): you could also write a wholly fictional Herodotean “history” – the point is to adapt the Herodotean project to your own contemporary ends.

You could for example offer a comparative study of neighborhoods, of musical subcultures, city blocks, political groups, work environments, student organizations, teenage cliques, zines, fan clubs, or larger social units such as cities (Chicago vs. New York, e.g.), demographic zones (Red States v. Blue States), geographic regions (the seacoast vs. the plains): your text should reflect the historical impulse behind Herodotus’ project, the cultural curiosity everywhere evident, and familiarity with the narrative devices he uses (modes of transition, ways of presenting evidence, returning themes and preoccupations). You must in other words present yourself as a convincing Herodotean narrator, with an imagined audience and well-considered narrative project.

This paper will be a test-run for your final Herodotean project
Final written assignment:

HERODOTEAN WRITING or MIXED MEDIA PROJECT and CRITIQUE

PART I: You will continue and expand the assignment above, either extending and enriching your first paper, or generating a wholly new Herodotean text, if you choose to go at the assignment differently. This component of the assignment should be 5-6 pages. As an alternative, you could choose to create this Herodotean “project” in mixed-media, combining poetry and prose and photography, say, or developing a preliminary web-site, or using cut-outs or music samples or video with voice-over. A self-conscious engagement with the Herodotean project is required.

PART II. In addition to your Herodotean narrative above, you will submit a 2-3 page analytic mini-essay about your aims, how you are and are not in dialogue with Herodotus, what it means to re-imagine his project in the 21st century U.S. This brief reflective critique of your own text should draw on the theoretical, critical, and historical materials assigned or recommended for class (e.g. Levi-Strauss, DeCerteau). How might your essay/project (for example) be considered in light of M. De Certeau’s notion of “the work of returning,” or “the historiographic operation”? What kinds of narrative shaping did you find yourself drawing upon, and what kinds of evidence did you deploy or invent in your historical and cultural investigation, and why?