Narratives of Ancient Persian History: A Comparative Reading of al-Ṭabarī's *History* and Herodotus' *Histories*

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Abstract
This article offers a comparative reading of the historical approaches adopted by two major historians, al-Ṭabarī and Herodotus, in their treatment of the history of ancient Persia. It focuses on the fundamental differences between the sources on which each historian relied, the purposes informing their respective works, and the chronological periods to which each devoted particular attention. The study seeks to demonstrate how these divergences in sources, aims, and temporal frameworks directly shaped the nature of the historical narrative constructed by each historian, producing distinct visions of Persian history. Despite these differences, the article also examines a significant point of convergence between al-Ṭabarī and Herodotus: the incorporation of myth into historical narration. It argues, however, that the manner in which each historian negotiated the relationship between myth and history differed considerably, reflecting the broader cultural and intellectual contexts from which their works emerged.
Keywords: Ancient Persian history; al-Ṭabarī; Herodotus; historiography; myth and history; Achaemenid Empire.

1. Introduction:
Herodotus is indisputably regarded as the "Father of History" in the Western tradition. He was not merely a compiler of tales, but the first to attempt, in a systematic manner, to gather information, verify it, as far as the tools of his age allowed, and offer a causal interpretation of events, especially the Greco-Persian Wars. His works laid the foundation for the writing of history as a discipline, or as an art with its own rules, in the Greco-Roman world and beyond.

His counterpart in the Islamic world is Abū Jaʿfar al-Ṭabarī, who bears the title "Shaykh of Historians" or "Imam of Historians". His book *History of the Prophets and Kings* is considered the largest and most important comprehensive historical work written in the early Islamic centuries. His method was distinguished by the collection of multiple reports together with their chains of transmission, a method inspired by the science of ḥadīth, and by his concern to document the reports that reached him from highly diverse sources, including ancient Persian traditions that would not have come down to us were it not for his efforts.

Both historians, Herodotus and al-Ṭabarī, were also connected to Persia through their homelands. Herodotus was born in Halicarnassus, the Greek colony that was under Persian influence in Asia Minor, and it appears that his travels were undertaken mainly between the ages of twenty and thirty-seven (464–447 BCE). It is likely that in his early youth, as a Persian subject, he visited Susa and Babylon, benefiting

from the Persian postal system that he describes in his fifth book.[1] Al-Ṭabarī, meanwhile, came from the city of Āmul in the province of Ṭabaristān in northern Iran.

What is striking in comparing them is that the history of ancient Persia constitutes a unique point of convergence between them.

One of the similarities between them is their explicit reference to their critical method in the introductions to their two works. Whereas Herodotus explains that he records everything he hears without committing himself to believing everything he writes,[2] al-Ṭabarī clearly states that any report the reader may find strange does not originate from him, but from the transmitters who conveyed the information to him, affirming that he faithfully transmitted what had reached him.[3] This shared approach highlights their awareness of the importance of fidelity in historical transmission, while leaving the responsibility of final verification to the reader.

Herodotus approached this history from the outside, from a Greek perspective, focusing on the conflict between the Persians and the Greeks and describing the customs of the peoples ruled by, or interacting with, the Persian Empire.

Al-Ṭabarī, by contrast, approached the same history from the inside, from an Arab-Islamic perspective, relying on local Persian traditions, which reached him through translation and which often differed from Greek accounts. He also integrated this history into a universal narrative beginning with creation and passing through the stories of the prophets.

Each historian represents the culmination of the historiographical method within his own civilisation. A comparison between them reveals not only points of similarity, such as the blending of myth with reality and reliance on oral reports, but also, in particular, the profound methodological differences that reflect the philosophical and cultural visions of each civilisation. Whereas Herodotus sought the "causes" of events, al-Ṭabarī collected "reports" and "accounts" and paid careful attention to their chains of transmission.

On the basis of the foregoing, comparing Herodotus and al-Ṭabarī in their treatment of the history of ancient Persia is not merely a comparison between two historians. It is, rather, a comparison between two great historiographical schools, and between the ways in which they dealt with the same historical material from two divergent perspectives, thereby offering us a rich and complex picture of how history was written and understood in antiquity and the Middle Ages.

A. The Research Problematic:

The research problem lies in the fact that these sources do not always agree; rather, they often contradict one another in matters of detail, in the interpretation of events, or even in the portrayal of major figures. What is regarded as historical fact in one source may be deemed myth or exaggeration in another. This divergence makes the very process of "historiography" an integral part of understanding history, since the researcher must analyse not only the events themselves, but also the manner in which these events are narrated and interpreted.

[1] Herodotus, *The History of Herodotus*, trans. ʿAbd al-Ilāh al-Mallāḥ (United Arab Emirates: Cultural Foundation, 2001), 619.
[2] Herodotus, *The History of Herodotus*, 547.
[3] Al-Ṭabarī, *Taʾrīkh al-rusul wa-l-mulūk*, ed. Muḥammad Abū al-Faḍl Ibrāhīm (Cairo: Dār al-Maʿārif, n.d.), 1:8.

Why, then, is the reading of historians from different backgrounds, Greek and Arab-Persian, necessary for a deeper understanding?

B. The Aim of the Article:

To compare and analyse the "narratives" of al-Ṭabarī and Herodotus concerning the history of Persia.

To shed light on the similarities and differences in their methods, sources, and temporal and thematic emphases.

To explore how myths and oral traditions influenced each narrative.

2. Herodotus' Method and Sources:

A. His Focus on "Evidence" and "Inquiry":

Herodotus' *Histories* is, in essence, a set of "inquiries" that he conducted into the Greco-Persian Wars, their origins, and their geographical and cultural contexts. These "inquiries" were so pioneering that they laid the foundation for what we know today as "history" as a field of study. Thus, the term carries both meanings; however, the original and deeper meaning in Herodotus' time was "inquiry" or "investigation". The word *Histories,* which Herodotus used in the title of his work, in ancient Greek Ἱστορίαι, pronounced *Historíai,* is derived from the Greek word *historia* (ἱστορία).

In Herodotus' time, the fifth century BCE, the word did not yet fully possess the modern meaning of "history" as we understand it today, namely the chronological narration and analysis of past events. Instead, its original meaning was closer to:

"Inquiry": this is the closest and most accurate meaning of the word in the context of Herodotus. It refers to the process of research, investigation, and the gathering of information through questioning, observation, and oral narration. Herodotus was presenting the results of his research and investigation into the causes of the Greco-Persian Wars, and into the peoples and cultures he encountered during his travels.

The meaning later developed into what we understand today as "history", that is, the systematic and organised study of the past. For this reason, Herodotus is called the "Father of History".

Inquiries are the dynamic and active process of gathering information, asking questions, searching for facts, and investigating causes and effects, whereas history is the final product of the process of inquiry, namely the written and organised narrative of past events.

B. His Temporal and Thematic Focus:

1. The central period: Herodotus' interest is concentrated almost entirely on the period of the Achaemenid Persian Empire, from its emergence under Cyrus the Great, through the reigns of Cambyses and Darius, to the height of the conflict with Greece under Xerxes.
2. The main subject: the book seeks to explain the reasons for the outbreak of the conflict between the Persians and the Greeks. Herodotus' aim was not so much the history of the Persians as the history of the origins and course of the wars between the Greeks and the barbarians. Nevertheless, the absence of Persian historical writing gives the *Histories* a distinguished place in contemporary Achaemenid studies. At times, Herodotus can be compared with authentic Achaemenid documents, and such comparison is not always to his disadvantage. In many areas of political and

social institutions, modern studies tend to demonstrate that it is mistaken to underestimate the value of some of the Persian information provided by Herodotus.[4]

C. Features of His Narrative:

The conflict between the Greeks and the barbarians: Herodotus often depicts the conflict between the Persians and the Greeks as a conflict between the "barbarians" (the Persians, as a symbol of despotism and arrogance) and the "Greeks" (as a symbol of freedom and democracy), although he was relatively impartial in certain respects and provides positive details about some Persians.

Hubris and divine retribution (*Nemesis*): Herodotus alludes to the idea that the excessive hubris of Persian kings, such as Xerxes, who lashes the sea, was, in his view, the cause of his defeat. Herodotus considers his attempt to punish the sea as revealing his belief in his absolute power, which challenges nature itself. Herodotus uses this dramatic scene to show that such hubris would be a prelude to divine punishment (*Nemesis*) and to Xerxes' subsequent downfall in his conflict with the Greeks, while highlighting the contrast between Persian tyranny and Greek freedom.[5]

Cultural and geographical diversity: Herodotus provides precise details about the customs, traditions, and geography of the various peoples within the Persian Empire or on its frontiers, including the Egyptians, Scythians, Libyans, Indians, and others. He is therefore considered a pioneer in applying the ethnographic method to the treatment of historical events and the writing of history.

A tendency to justify the conflict from a Greek perspective: in his *Histories*, Herodotus does indeed present an integrated narrative of the history of the Achaemenid Empire, but it comes from a purely Greek perspective, which at times gives it a degree of bias. Thus, he describes the Persians as "barbarians" or "tyrants": although Herodotus shows some admiration for Persian power and organisation, he often portrays them as "barbarians", a Greek word meaning "non-Greeks", a term that often carried a connotation of savagery or lack of civilisation.

He also mentions the Persian kings in stories and describes them as marked by arrogance, madness, and arbitrariness. These stories serve the idea that absolute power leads to tyranny and hubris, a trait that stands in contrast to the Greek idea of freedom and democracy.

Herodotus also tends to justify the Greek victory over the Persians, especially in decisive battles such as Marathon,[6] Salamis,[7] and Plataea.[8] He does not attribute victory to military power alone, but alludes to moral factors, or even to divine intervention, which punishes Persian hubris and rewards the courage of the Greeks and their defence of their freedom.

The presence of mythical elements or folk tales within the historical narrative, such as the mythical birth of Cyrus.

Character construction: Herodotus does not confine himself to mentioning the names of kings, but attempts to delineate their characters and motives. For example, he portrays Darius I as an ambitious, organised king and an expander of the empire. His ambition was not merely a desire for power, but was driven by a clear vision of expanding the Persian Empire and securing its borders. He presents Cambyses,

[4] *The Greek Accounts of Eastern History* (Cambridge, MA, 1973), 41–96.
[5] See Herodotus, *Histories*, 7.35–36.
[6] Herodotus, *The History of Herodotus*, 429.
[7] Herodotus, *The History of Herodotus*, 596.
[8] Herodotus, *The History of Herodotus*, 645.

the son and successor of Cyrus, as a psychologically unstable figure, overcome by bouts of anger and madness, especially after his conquest of Egypt. Xerxes, the son of Darius, is regarded as the figure who embodies absolute arrogance (*hubris*) in Herodotus' narrative, which led to his tragic end and defeat in Greece, thereby making the narrative more vivid.

He therefore presents a comprehensive narrative of the history of the Achaemenid Empire, but it is not entirely neutral. It is a narrative that seeks to explain, from a Greek perspective, how Greek civilisation confronted the threat of the vast Persian Empire and how it defeated it, thereby contributing significantly to the formation of Greek historical and national consciousness.

3. Al-Ṭabarī and the "Persian/Islamic Vision" of Persian History

Imam Abū Jaʿfar Muḥammad ibn Jarīr al-Ṭabarī (d. 923 CE / 310 AH) is considered one of the most prominent historians, jurists, and Qurʾanic exegetes in the history of Islam. His book *History of Nations and Kings*, widely known as *The History of al-Ṭabarī,* is a vast and comprehensive work that aims to narrate the history of the world from the beginning of creation to his own time. With regard to the history of the Persians before Islam, al-Ṭabarī presents a unique vision that reflects the sources and traditions that prevailed in his Islamic and Persian milieu. In his book, al-Ṭabarī recorded the history of the Persians and excelled in mentioning many facts not found elsewhere. As a result, al-Ṭabarī's book also became a reference for the history of the Persians during the Sasanian period and for understanding their relationship with the Arabs; for this reason, scholars hastened to translate it into Persian. Nöldeke also relied on it in writing the history of the Persians and the Arabs in the Sasanian period.[9]

A. Al-Ṭabarī's Method and Sources:

Multiplicity of accounts of the same event: al-Ṭabarī does not confine himself to mentioning a single account; rather, he presents several successive accounts, each of which may differ in its details, motives, or even outcomes. For example, when discussing the end of Dārā the Younger, who corresponds to Darius III in the account of Alexander, al-Ṭabarī mentions more than one version. In one account, he states that men from Dārā's guard killed him out of a desire to ingratiate themselves with Alexander. In another account, he may provide different details concerning the betrayal or the circumstances surrounding the killing. He even mentions a controversial account concerning Alexander's origin, namely that he was Dārā the Younger's paternal brother,[10] an account that completely contradicts the generally accepted historical narrative. He does not say, "This is the sole truth"; rather, he says: "It has been mentioned thus," "It has been said thus," and "So-and-so related to me from so-and-so thus."

In doing so, he places the raw material before the reader, leaving him free to compare, analyse, and even give preference to one account over another, on the basis of other evidence or the strength of the chain of transmission. In this regard, the English historian Trevelyan states: "His preservation of the different accounts is the greatest gift he offered to the modern researcher."[11]

[9] Jawād ʿAlī, *Mawārid al-Ṭabarī*, 2:135.
[10] Al-Ṭabarī, *Taʾrīkh al-rusul wa-l-mulūk*, 1:574.
[11] Yusrā ʿAbd al-Ghanī ʿAbd Allāh, *Muʿjam al-muʾarrikhīn al-muslimīn ḥattā al-qarn al-thānī ʿashar al-hijrī* (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyyah, 1991), 115.

This method demonstrates scholarly integrity in the collection of historical material, unlike those who select the account they consider closest to the truth, tend to present it as the principal version, or express their personal doubt.

Reliance on Persian traditions: in his account of pre-Islamic Persian history, al-Ṭabarī relied heavily on the oral and written Persian traditions that were current in his time.

He often sided with Persian historians because he was persuaded by their authority and trusted their preservation of their histories and genealogies. Hence his statement: "What Hishām has said is a statement with no basis, for King Hūshang is more famous among those knowledgeable about Persian genealogies than al-Ḥajjāj ibn Yūsuf is among the people of Islam. Every people is more knowledgeable than others about its fathers, genealogies, and glorious deeds; in every matter that becomes obscure, reference is made to its people."[12]

Al-Ṭabarī's reliance on Persian traditions in his narration of pre-Islamic Persian history is a central feature of the *History of Nations and Kings*. While he sought to present a comprehensive universal history, his sources for that period differed radically from his sources for Islamic history, or even for late Roman and Greek history.

1. The Nature of the Persian Sources Available to al-Ṭabarī

1.1 Among the most important sources on which al-Ṭabarī relied in the history of Persia were the following:

Khwadāy-nāmag:[13] in Persian Pahlavi, *Shāhnāmeh*. It is a book on the biographies of the kings of Iran from the time of Gayōmart to Yazdegerd III (632-652). It was translated into Arabic in several versions, including the translation of Ibn al-Muqaffaʿ, and Zoroastrian scholars added to it material connected with the end of the history of the Sasanian state. Nöldeke adds that al-Ṭabarī benefited from this book in what he reported about pre-Islamic Iran.[14]

Āyīn-nāmeh: that is, "The Book of Customs". It is a large work, and it is scarcely found complete except among the mowbeds and others holding positions of leadership. Ibn al-Muqaffaʿ translated it from Pahlavi into Arabic.[15]

Gāh-nāmah, or *Gāh-nāmag*: "The Catalogue of Men". It is part of the *Āyīn*, and contains the ranks of the great men of Persia, which number six hundred ranks.[16]

Kārnāmag: al-Masʿūdī mentioned it. It contains reports about Ardashīr, his wars, and his campaigns across the land. Nöldeke adds that, from the information al-Ṭabarī provided about Ardashīr ibn Bābak, it appears that he benefited from this book.[17]

Tāj-nāmeh, or *The Book of the Crown*: it is devoted to the sayings of the kings of Iran, their teachings, ceremonies, and similar matters. Ibn al-Nadīm's *Fihrist* referred to it.[18]

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[12] Al-Ṭabarī, *Taʾrīkh al-rusul wa-l-mulūk*, 1:154.
[13] Abū al-Faraj Muḥammad ibn Isḥāq al-Nadīm, *Al-Fihrist*, 2nd ed. (London: Al-Furqan Islamic Heritage Foundation, Centre for the Study of Islamic Manuscripts, 2014), 2:325.
[14] Samīrah ʿAbd al-Salām ʿĀshūr, *Tārīkh al-Furs al-usṭūrī ʿinda al-Ṭabarī wa-l-Firdawsī*, 10.
[15] Ibn al-Nadīm, *Al-Fihrist*, 342; *Īrān fī ʿahd al-Sāsāniyyīn*, 46.
[16] Al-Masʿūdī, *Al-Tanbīh wa-l-ishrāf*, 104.
[17] *Ḥamāsah-yi millī-yi Īrān*, 10.
[18] Ibn al-Nadīm, *Al-Fihrist*, 1:368.

Yādgār-i Zarērān (*The Memorial of Zarēr*), or *Sīrat Zarērān*: it is the oldest of the Iranian heroic poems, and its subject is the war between Gushtāsp and Arjāsp the Tūrānian in defence of the Zoroastrian religion.[19] Nöldeke mentioned it among the references from which al-Ṭabarī benefited in his history.

Mazdak-nāmag: a book that discusses the social reformer Mazdak and his relationship with King Qubādh.[20] Ibn al-Muqaffaʿ Arabised this book in prose, and al-Lāḥiqī translated it into verse, as Ibn al-Nadīm mentions. Christensen also listed it among the references on which al-Ṭabarī relied.

1.2 Examples of the Influence of These Sources on al-Ṭabarī's Narrative

Al-Ṭabarī's reliance on these sources appears clearly in many aspects of his narrative:

The legendary royal lineages, "the Pishdadians and the Kayanians": al-Ṭabarī begins the history of the Persians with the lineages of the Pishdadian kings, such as Jamshīd, to whom major civilisational achievements are attributed, and the Kayanians, such as Kay Kāwūs and Kay Khusraw. These figures have no existence in documented historical records outside the legendary Persian tradition.

For example: the story of Kay Kāwūs, who built a vast city with the help of subjugated demons, and his attempt to ascend to heaven.[21] These supernatural details are clear features of the Persian myths that appeared in the *Khwadāy-nāmag* and later emerged in greater detail in the *Shāhnāmeh*.

The naming of the Achaemenid kings: instead of using the common Greek names of the Achaemenid kings, such as Cyrus, Darius, and Xerxes, al-Ṭabarī relies on traditional Persian names or their adaptations.

For example: Cyrus the Great is referred to indirectly in al-Ṭabarī's *History* through the figure of "Bahman ibn Isfandiyār"[22] from the later Kayanians. Historical actions performed by Cyrus, such as the return of the Children of Israel to Jerusalem, are attributed to Bahman. This shows how Persian traditions "absorbed" the historical figure within their sequential mythical framework.

Likewise, kings such as Darius I, Xerxes, and Darius III appear in al-Ṭabarī under names such as Dārā the Elder and Dārā the Younger. Al-Ṭabarī may also merge the deeds of several Achaemenid kings into a single figure, such as "Dārā the Younger", who confronts Alexander. This reflects the Persian understanding of that period, and not necessarily an accurate historical sequence according to modern standards.

Epic events rather than historical details: whereas Herodotus focuses on the details of the Greco-Persian Wars, al-Ṭabarī does not attach the same importance to those events. He generally mentions the existence of conflicts or powerful kings, but Persian epic details occupy the foreground in his narrative.

In short, al-Ṭabarī did not have the luxury of access to the direct archaeological or documentary sources known today concerning ancient Persia. He therefore had to rely on what was circulating and preserved in Persian memory and traditions, especially the *Khwadāy-nāmag*, which gave his narrative of Persian history a distinctive epic and mythical character, different from the Western narratives derived from Greek sources.

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[19] *Al-Mawsūʿah al-ʿArabiyyah al-ʿĀlamiyyah*, 2nd ed. (Riyadh: Muʾassasat Aʿmāl al-Mawsūʿiyyah li-l-Nashr wa-l-Tawzīʿ, 1416 AH), 17:186.

[20] Mufīd Rāʾif, *Maʿālim tārīkh al-dawlah al-Sāsāniyyah*, 1st ed. (Damascus: Dār al-Fikr, 1999), 31.

[21] See al-Ṭabarī, *Taʾrīkh al-rusul wa-l-mulūk*, 1:507.

[22] Al-Ṭabarī, *Taʾrīkh al-rusul wa-l-mulūk*, 1:571.

The integration of Arab and Islamic accounts into Persian history: Imam al-Ṭabarī was not merely a transmitter of Persian traditions when he wrote about pre-Islamic Persian history in his encyclopaedic *History of Nations and Kings*. He displayed a distinctive synthetic method, integrating three principal types of sources in order to form his comprehensive narrative: authentic Persian traditions, the accounts of Arab historians and genealogists, and the rich Islamic heritage of prophetic stories and religious interpretations. This combination gave his work a distinctive character, while also making it multifaceted and, at times, contradictory in its details.

Temporal and thematic focus:

The main themes: al-Ṭabarī begins his narrative of Persian history from the earliest mythical ages, which he calls the "Gayōmartian" or "Pishdadian" period,[23] passing through the Kayanian dynasty, then the Achaemenids, whom he calls "the Kisrās", "the later Kayanians", or "the kings who came after the early Kayanians", then the Parthians, the Ashkanians, down to the Sasanians and then the Islamic conquest. This is a very broad chronological span, unlike Herodotus, who focused on a specific period, namely the Achaemenid Empire.

Royal succession and genealogies: al-Ṭabarī presents a detailed succession of kings, even when their reigns are mythically long.

Epics and heroic myths: al-Ṭabarī incorporates many mythical stories associated with the early kings, such as the subjugation of demons to Kay Kāwūs and the adventures of Rustam. These stories reflect the epic spirit and Persian folklore.

The relationship of the Persians with the prophets: al-Ṭabarī is concerned with linking Persian history to the stories of the prophets mentioned in Islamic tradition, such as Solomon, peace be upon him, Nebuchadnezzar, Daniel, and the relationship of certain Kayanian kings with the Jews. This gives Persian history a religious dimension consistent with his Islamic vision.

Construction and urban development: al-Ṭabarī mentions the achievements of kings in building cities and fortresses, yet political and religious history predominates. Hence, al-Ṭabarī did not attempt to highlight or analyse the economic, social, and intellectual aspects, despite their appearance over many pages of his work and despite the important role he assigned to them in accelerating the disintegration of the community. This means that he showed little interest in cultural history, unlike his contemporary al-Yaʿqūbī in his *History*, and later al-Masʿūdī in his *Meadows of Gold* and *The Book of Admonition and Revision*. This may be because he did not wish to enter into the questions raised by the penetration of Greek philosophy and foreign heritage in general into the Islamic world, and by the political and intellectual problems that resulted from this, which conflicted with al-Ṭabarī's fundamental aim, mentioned above, namely the unity of the community.

B. Features of His Narrative:

The clear integration of myth and history without sharp separation: al-Ṭabarī does not sharply separate mythical material from historical material. He presents the narrative as he found it in his sources, giving the mythical kings the same sequence as the historical kings. This reflects the nature of the "national history" of that period.

[23] Al-Ṭabarī, *Taʾrīkh al-rusul wa-l-mulūk*, 1:172.

Emphasis on sequence and narration: the importance lies in preserving the continuity of the story and the chain of rule, even if this required the integration of historical events, such as Cyrus, into a mythical framework, such as Bahman.

The moral and religious dimension: the moral dimension appears in the stories of kings, justice, and injustice, while the religious dimension appears through the connection of certain kings with prophets or religious events.

In general, al-Ṭabarī presents a rich and complex image of Persian history, reflecting how Persian-Islamic culture viewed its glorious past, combining the heroism of myth and the facts of history in a single fabric.

The use of traditional Persian names for kings, such as Dārā the Elder and Dārā the Younger.

Details concerning mythical kings, such as the subjugation of demons to Kay Kāwūs and long lifespans.

In his treatment of Persian history, he did not follow what we are accustomed to in his work, namely the mention of the chain of transmission and adherence to it. This naturally indicates that he transmitted this history directly from books.[24]

4. A Comparative Reading: Fundamental Similarities and Differences

Similarities:

Both Herodotus and al-Ṭabarī show considerable interest in presenting a historical narrative centred on kings and genealogies, reflecting a common perspective in ancient and medieval historiography.

1. Interest in historical and royal narrative: both historians place royal figures at the heart of their historical accounts. In their works, history is often narrated through the lives and achievements, or failures, of ruling kings.

In Herodotus, most of the major events in Persian history revolve around figures such as Cyrus, Darius, and Xerxes. The actions and decisions of these kings drive events forward and shape Greco-Persian relations.

As for al-Ṭabarī, he devotes a vast part of the *History of the Prophets and Kings* to narrating royal lineages, beginning with the mythical kings, such as the Pishdadians and Kayanians, and continuing down to the Sasanians. Royal succession and genealogies constitute the basic structure that organises his narrative of Persian history.

This shared focus reflects the belief that kings are the principal agents of history, and that the fate of nations is closely linked to the fate of their rulers. It also highlights the central importance of the royal institution in the ancient understanding of authority and social organisation.

2. Reliance on oral accounts and traditions, but from different sources:

Despite the vast chronological and cultural differences between them, Herodotus and al-Ṭabarī are similar in their fundamental reliance on oral accounts and transmitted traditions as a principal source of their historical information. Each collected stories and reports from the mouths of narrators and from the peoples whom he encountered or about whom he heard.

[24] Jawād ʿAlī, *Mawārid al-Ṭabarī*, 181.

In the case of Herodotus, it is generally agreed that he gathered most of his information from oral accounts.[25] Even those who question this acknowledge that he sought to present his sources as oral, whether he invented them or described them as oral when they were in fact written. Throughout the *Histories*, Herodotus adheres to the claim that his work is an oral account, even in passages where we know, or may infer, that it is based on written sources.[26] These were, for the most part, free oral traditions, not bound by fixed formulae.

As for al-Ṭabarī, he inherited a well-established Islamic tradition based on oral transmission authenticated by the chain of transmission, a method derived from the science of ḥadīth. He collected a vast number of reports from transmitters and traditionists, giving the chain of transmitters for each report: "So-and-so related to me from so-and-so from so-and-so . . . ." Although some of these reports may have reached him in written form as books, their origin was oral. He also relied on oral Persian traditions that were translated and recorded in later periods, such as the *Khwadāy-nāmag*.

The fundamental point of difference here lies in the "sources" of these oral accounts and traditions:

Herodotus derived them mostly from Greeks and non-Greeks, or "barbarians", whom he met directly, and they reflected their perspectives and cultures.

Al-Ṭabarī derived them chiefly from the ancient Persian heritage, through translation, and from the Arab-Islamic traditions that were narrated and authenticated by chains of transmission.

Nevertheless, the mere reliance on the oral, on transmitted traditions, and on the inclusion of stories not necessarily based on firm documents constitutes a major common denominator between them, revealing the nature of historiography in antiquity and the Middle Ages.

3. The integration of myth and history, but in different proportions and ways:

The integration of myth and quasi-mythical elements within historical narrative is a shared and fundamental feature of the methods of Herodotus and al-Ṭabarī, although the extent and manner of this integration differ considerably between them.

Herodotus: Herodotus does not hesitate to include mythical and popular tales in his text, especially when discussing the origins of kings or strange events. The story of the birth and mythical upbringing of Cyrus is one example. At the beginning of his *Histories*, he also discusses the mythical origins of the conflict between the Greeks and the Persians, beginning with the abduction of women, such as Io, Europa, Medea, and Helen,[27] stories that belong more to the realm of myth than to documented history. He presents these accounts as ancient "causes" of the conflict, even if he does not fully believe them.

His narration of the story of the Lydian king Croesus, who was defeated by Cyrus the Great,[28] is a clear example of his blending of historical elements with tales of a mythical or didactic character, such as Croesus' encounter with Solon, the dramatic changes in his fortune, and prophetic warnings.

Al-Ṭabarī: by contrast, al-Ṭabarī goes further in integrating myth and history. In his narrative of pre-Islamic Persian history, al-Ṭabarī does not clearly distinguish between mythical kings, such as the

[25] Detlev Fehling, *Herodotus and His "Sources": Citation, Invention, and Narrative Art* (Leeds, 1989); H. R. Immerwahr, *Form and Thought in Herodotus* (Cleveland, 1966).

[26] Oswyn Murray, "Herodotus and Oral History," in *Achaemenid History, Volume II: The Greek Sources*, ed. H. Sancisi-Weerdenburg and A. Kuhrt (Leiden, 1987), 93–115.

[27] Herodotus, *Histories*, 1.1–5.

[28] Herodotus, *Histories*, 1.6–94.

Pishdadians and the Kayanians, and historical kings, such as the Achaemenids and the Sasanians. Rather, he includes them within a single continuous line of rulers, attributing to them extraordinarily long lifespans and describing mythical events and powers associated with them, such as the subjugation of demons to Kay Kāwūs. This complete integration reflects the nature of the ancient Persian sources on which al-Ṭabarī relied, such as the *Khwadāy-nāmag*, which regarded the mythical kings as an authentic part of the history of the nation. Myth here is not merely a set of tales to be narrated; rather, it is a fabric fully interwoven with what is considered history and is presented as a legitimising cultural foundation for Persian existence.

The conclusion regarding this point of similarity: both historians include myth in their historical narratives because they recognise that myth is an integral part of peoples' understanding of their past and identity. The difference, however, lies in the manner of treatment and the degree of integration. Herodotus tends to refer to myth as "reports I have heard", whereas al-Ṭabarī integrates it as part of the chronological and royal sequence, reflecting a difference in the concept of "history" between the two cultures.

5. Conclusion: Significance and Findings

This comparative reading of al-Ṭabarī's and Herodotus' narratives of ancient Persian history has revealed the richness and complexity of historiographical methodologies in different civilisations. History was not merely a narration of events, but a form of knowledge shaped by the available sources, cultural aims, and intellectual backgrounds of the historian.

The most important findings drawn from this comparison are as follows:

The multiplicity of narratives and the necessity of integration: the study has shown that understanding ancient Persian history goes far beyond reliance on a single source. Both Herodotus and al-Ṭabarī presented their own "truth", which, although at times apparently contradictory, together form a more complete picture when analysed integratively.

The external perspective versus the internal perspective: Herodotus, as a Greek historian, presented an external view focused on the clash of civilisations and the motives of events from a Greek perspective, with a notable incorporation of the ethnographic dimension. By contrast, al-Ṭabarī, as a Muslim historian of Persian origin, reflected an internal perspective based on local Persian traditions and Islamic accounts, framing history within a religious cosmic narrative, with considerable attention to chains of transmission and the multiplicity of reports.

The influence of sources on the nature of the narrative: the sources on which each historian relied had a decisive influence on the formation of his narrative. Whereas Herodotus derived his information from oral accounts and his own observations, which may have been marked by Greek biases, al-Ṭabarī relied heavily on the *Khwadāy-nāmag* and translated Persian traditions, in addition to Arab and Islamic reports, which gave his narrative an epic and mythical character in its early sections.

The integration of myth and history as a shared feature, with differences in treatment: although both historians integrated myth and popular tales into their historical narratives, their treatment of them differed. Herodotus sometimes used myth to explain the moral causes of events or to add drama, whereas

al-Ṭabarī integrated it into a more comprehensive narrative framework that linked worldly history to religious revelation, with an emphasis on moral lessons and the fate of nations.

The didactic and moral dimension as an essential element: the study has shown that neither historian aimed merely to record events; rather, both sought to offer lessons and admonitions. This is evident in Herodotus' focus on the concept of hubris and its divine punishment, and in al-Ṭabarī's method, which views history as a field in which God's laws concerning justice and injustice are manifested, using the stories of righteous kings, such as Khosrow Anūshirwān, and corrupt kings to establish these values.

The continuing value of both works: despite their methodological and source-based differences, both Herodotus' *Histories* and al-Ṭabarī's *History of the Prophets and Kings* are invaluable repositories of knowledge. Herodotus' writings, even with their biases or mythical elements, remain an essential reference for the study of the Achaemenid Empire from an external perspective, one that is sometimes supported by modern archaeological discoveries. Al-Ṭabarī's work, meanwhile, offers a unique window onto ancient Persian memory and constitutes an indispensable source for understanding how these narratives were incorporated into the larger Islamic narrative.

In conclusion, this study confirms that understanding the true history of a nation such as Persia requires a critical and integrative reading of multiple sources and different perspectives, in which each narrative complements the other and reveals deeper layers of historical and cultural truth.

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