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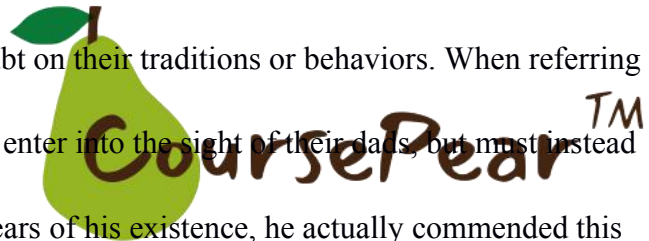
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Working with Evidence: Perceptions of Outsiders in the Ancient World

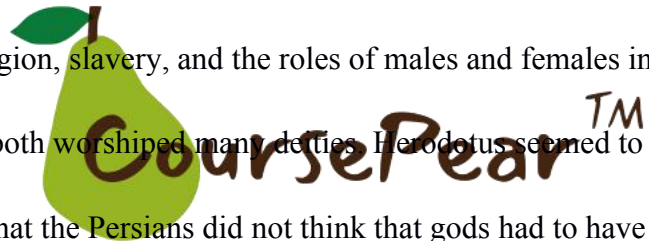
When documenting historical events, inadvertent bias may distort the real facts or even lead certain information to be omitted or glossed over entirely, resulting in the presentation of a false history or incomplete image. Knowing the author's identity and a bit about their background enables us to see the narrative through their eyes and contributes to (or detracts from) the narrative's believability. It is critical to identify when an incomplete history is given or when the author's personal prejudice is shown. We are all aware that there are always two (or more) sides to every tale, yet we often accept one author's perspective as gospel.

Herodotus, a rich Greek, chronicled the battles between the Greeks and the Persians in a section of his *The Histories*. He based his observations not only on what he observed but also on others' tales, myths, and oral memories. Herodotus seemed to virtually extol the Persians and Egyptians, seldom condemning or casting doubt on their traditions or behaviors. When referring to how a Persian male kid "is not permitted to enter into the sight of their dads, but must instead spend time with the ladies" for the first five years of his existence, he actually commended this tradition. He used harsh words to describe the Egyptians and their civilization. He used the adjectives "wonderful" and "many buildings and monuments that "defy" description." He



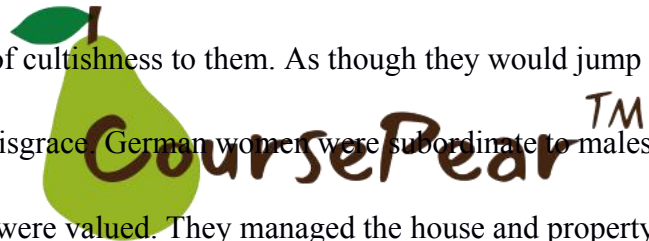
continued for almost two pages without making any comparisons between the Persian or Egyptian civilizations and his own. He made no disparaging remarks about either culture. Tacitus, a Roman official and renowned historian gathered all of his knowledge on the Germans from secondary sources. He never visited the regions personally but relied on previously recorded records and conversations with merchants and soldiers who traveled and resided in the area. On the other side, he had relatively few kind remarks for the Germans. While he never mentioned Rome by name, he implied a comparison between Germany and his own culture when he used the phrase "our way" in reference to slave treatment and "we have now taught them to accept" in reference to presents from other tribes. Though he never explicitly expressed his disdain for the Germans, his animosity against them is evident. He used derogatory terms such as "physical peculiarities," "armies already on the verge of capitulating have been rallied by women who...bare their bosoms," "on certain days they believe it is appropriate to sacrifice," and "they employ timber for all purposes, crude masses devoid of ornament or attractiveness..." Even in his rare compliment on their stringent marriage law, he slipped in an attack by referring to them as barbarians.

Both Herodotus and Tacitus wrote on religion, slavery, and the roles of males and females in all three cultures. The Persians and Germans both worshiped many deities. Herodotus seemed to be disparaging his own culture when he said that the Persians did not think that gods had to have the same nature as humans, as the Greeks assume, which is why they lacked statues, temples, and altars and regarded them to be stupid. The Persians and Germans both had slaves and treated



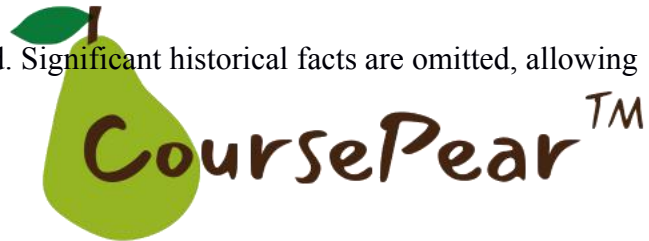
them well; however, there is no mention of the Egyptians or slavery, despite the fact that we know from other sources (the narrative of Moses in the Bible) that they did have slaves and that they were not always treated well. The Germans even treated slaves more like tenants, requiring them to pay a part of their property (food, livestock, and clothes) to their owners as their only means of subjugation. Additionally, he observed that slaves were not required to cook or clean for their owners, making it seem as if they had a pretty comfortable lot in life.

Male and female roles in society varied significantly, according to these two historians. Along with fathering kids, the Persians judged a man's manliness by his deeds on the battlefield. There is no commentary on women's treatment other than to state that they were responsible for preventing dads from seeing their kids until they reached the age of five. The child was then taught to ride a horse, fire an arrow, and always speak the truth by his fathers. What he learned from his mum is not stated. This clearly indicates a division between male and female duties. Germans stressed manliness in combat by exhibiting bravery and abstaining from dishonorable behavior. They battled not just for their chief's triumph but also for his protection and appearance, even if it meant lying. Surviving was deemed "a disgrace and a dishonor for life" by the chief. This portrayal of their customs lends an aura of cultishness to them. As though they would jump over a cliff with their leader rather than face disgrace. German women were subordinate to males but were treated as equals, and their opinions were valued. They managed the house and property on their own and did not rely on slaves for help. Egyptians, on the other hand, had a totally distinct culture. Herodotus makes no mention of the Egyptians fighting, despite possessing slaves,



indicating that they made conduct war. Males remained and cared for the house, while females dealt with business and engaged in marketplaces and commerce.

Clearly, the lens through which you were raised has an effect on how you see and experience the world. Tacitus, himself a warrior, viewed all of Germany through the eyes of a member of martial culture. The Romans held their troops in high regard; they were a symbol of manhood. A man may exercise full control over his household, even murdering his wife, kid, or slave without repercussions. For Tacitus, the Germans lacked a number of the characteristics he valued. This way of living prompted Tacitus to write a very unfavorable exposé about the Germans. Herodotus traveled to Persia and Egypt and observed firsthand the cultures. This intimate interaction with the populace may have contributed to his very positive report in some manner. Herodotus centered his account about the Egyptians on the people's eccentricities. He seemed to make a point of highlighting their differences from the rest of society. From shaving their heads and allowing hair to grow only in the morning, to kneading bread with their feet while mixing clay and cleaning up dung with their hands, to how men wove and women conducted business; these are fascinating facts, but quite different from the way he reported on Persian culture. Each of the three tales seems to be incomplete and skewed. Significant historical facts are omitted, allowing the reader to fill in the blanks.



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