

Though it is widely assumed that Herodotus espoused a three-continent scheme of world geography, his text actually presents us with confusing and contradictory solutions to the continental question; and this confusion has important implications for Herodotus’ thinking about the geopolitical issues underlying the Persian wars.

The passage of the Histories cited by most commentators as decisive for the continental question is 2.16-17, in which Herodotus ridicules “the Ionians” for supposing that Asia is divided from Libya by the Nile; according to this scheme, he says, the Nile delta would form a fourth continent. He argues for preserving the unity of Egypt by assigning the entire nation, on both sides of the Nile, to a single continent – but, remarkably, neglects to say which one it attaches to. Scholars have taken the omission to be mere carelessness and have supposed that Herodotus meant to put Egypt in Libya (How and Wells, A Commentary on Herodotus, notes *ad loc.* and Appendix 13.5), but this ignores evidence elsewhere in the text that Herodotus was uncertain as to whether Libya was a continent separate from Asia. At 4.41, in a careful exegesis of world geography, he twice calls Libya an *akte* of Asia, the same term applied to Arabia and other “promontories.” He also indicates his unease over all schemes of continental division, saying at 4.45.2 that “the earth is one land” and that he cannot tell how it became divided into three, and reveals that geographers of his time were unclear about the boundary between Europe and Asia, with some placing it along the east-west axis of the River Phasis, others along the north-south axis of the Tanais. His unwillingness to take a position on this crucial question bespeaks his uncertainties about global structure generally and in particular about the two-continent Hecataean world map, which he mocks at 4.36 for showing too much symmetry between Europe and Asia but without mentioning the more glaring issue of the non-separation of Libya.

Herodotus then was aware of competing ideas about global division which gave the earth either two, three, or four continents, while he himself thought it might have none at all. In Books 2 and 4 we see him zealously seeking solutions to problems involving continental structure but failing to find them, or at least, in the case of Egypt’s continental identity, framing his conclusions incompletely as though unsure about the validity of his premises.

Herodotus’ lack of clarity over continental divisions leads us to question larger assumptions about his understanding of the Greek victory over Persia. At 8.109 for example Herodotus quotes Themistocles explaining Salamis as the result of divine anger over Xerxes’ attempt to rule more than one continent, and this passage has been widely cited by commentators as evidence of the historian’s own beliefs. But Herodotus goes on to say that Themistocles was lying in this speech to his sailors, seeking to manipulate them for the sake of personal gain. The idea that continental boundaries were imposed and defended by the gods is in fact out of line with his own views elsewhere in the text, which suggest instead that political borders supersede natural ones and that therefore the expansion of the Persian empire had no divinely-sanctioned limits.