



## **Activity 1 – Greek sources and the Persian Empire**

When historians begin to examine a new society, the starting point is usually a contemporary (or near-contemporary), written, narrative source. By a 'contemporary, written, narrative source' I mean a piece of literature that describes the events of a particular period in the order that they happened, and which was produced close to the events described. Such sources are usually considered reliable because they were produced at a time when memory of the events were available and facts could not be distorted easily; such material is important because it helps historians to contextualise major events and develop a basic understanding of the period in question.

Unfortunately, no such sources were written by Persians during the Achaemenid period – Persia was predominantly an oral culture and, so although events were remembered and stories told, information was passed down by word of mouth from generation to generation and not written down. Consequently, all of the narrative, written history that has come down to us about the Persians was written not by the Persians themselves, but by Greeks. Although there are some plus points to this (the Greeks were not, for instance, likely to exaggerate Persian achievements), in general, this is not a particularly positive scenario. Most importantly, Greeks were concerned with all things Persian only when Persia came into direct contact with Greeks – most often, this occurred in the context of war, and Greek sources for such conflicts inevitably contain a degree of anti-Persian bias. Equally, Greece was located on the North-Western border of the Persian Empire – far from the Imperial centre – and Greek sources focus only on those events which took place relatively close to the Greek mainland. Consequently, the written sources cover only a very small part of the empire, and there are huge swathes of territory, especially in the east of the empire, about which we know very little.

This activity is all about one of those Greek writers – Herodotus – sometimes called the 'Father of History', since his work was the first piece of writing that resembles a history book. In the first task, you will learn a little about the strengths and weaknesses of Herodotus as a source; then, in the second task, you will examine, and analyse, a passage of Herodotus which concerns the Persian Empire.

### **Task 1**

Read these three articles about Herodotus:

<http://www.livius.org/he-hg/herodotus/herodotus01.htm>

<http://www.ancient.eu/herodotus/>

<http://www.theguardian.com/culture/2009/jan/03/herodotus-charlotte-higgins>

What are the strengths and weaknesses of Herodotus' *Histories* as a source for the ancient world?

### **Task 2**

Read the following passage from Herodotus, which concerns the respect bestowed by the Persians upon the peoples of their empire.



“They honour most of all those who live nearest them, next those who are next nearest, and so going ever onwards they assign honour by this rule: those who dwell farthest off they hold least honourable of all; for they think that they are themselves in all regards by far the best of all men, that the rest have only a proportionate claim to merit, until those who live farthest away have least merit of all.”

Herodotus, *The Histories* 1.134, trans. A.D. Godley (1920).

Now create a visual representation of Herodotus’ words, which clearly shows the decreasing status of the subjects as we move further from Persia. (Visual representations were hugely important in the ancient world, where literacy levels were much lower than they are today. In Activity 2, you will compare what you produce here to a piece of art produced by the Persian king, which deals with the same subject.)

### **Bonus Task**

Herodotus’ history deals with the causes of the so-called Persian Wars, a conflict between the Persians and the city-states of Greece, which took place early in the 5<sup>th</sup> Century BC. The two major events of the war, were Persian invasions of Greece, the first between 492 and 490, the second, and more significant, lasting from 480-479 BC. This latter invasion was a hugely significant moment in western history – the Greek states united to defeat the Persian king, Xerxes, and, in the wake of the Greek victory, Greek culture (including democracy in Athens, literature, and philosophy) flourished as never before.

It was during this second invasion that the 300 Spartans found immortality in death at the Battle of Thermopylae. People have been fascinated by the 300 ever since – they have featured in novels, artwork, and, most recently, in the Hollywood film *300*, based on a graphic novel by Frank Miller. Like any movie, the film is a hugely exaggerated version of events, but, in many respects, the film does a brilliant job of capturing the ancient Greek worldview. The clip below shows the Spartan King, Leonidas, receive a messenger from Persia.

Clip: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QkWS9PiXekE>

Question: How does Leonidas characterise the Persian Empire and the people who live in it?

Hint: Think about the connotations of words such as ‘slavery’ (‘you threaten my people with slavery and death’). You may wish to update your image from Task 2 to reflect the ideas expressed in the clip.