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THE FUNCTION OF RECIPROCITY IN
THE HISTORIES OF HERODOTUS

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A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy in Ancient History,
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ABSTRACT

This thesis is an inquiry into the function of reciprocity in the Histories of Herodotus of Halicarnassus. It examines the complex ways in which the historian weaves reciprocity into his stories of kings and tyrants, citizens and slaves, city-states and empires, men and gods. It investigates the way he records relationships of personal, political and religious reciprocity, positive, negative and retaliatory reciprocity to illustrate his themes, explain the cause of events and characterise individuals and city-states. And it explores how he uses language to emphasise the significance of the obligation of reciprocity in his Histories.

Herodotus explains the cause of events in terms of the personal obligation of reciprocity. He moves his narrative forward through interlinking chains of reciprocal action and reaction to show that the obligation to take revenge and repay favours is a catalyst for historical action. Herodotus uses reciprocity for the purpose of characterisation. He characterises individuals through his stories of their observance or transgression of the obligation of reciprocity, he contrasts good men with bad by recording their actions of reciprocity, and he characterises city-states through his accounts of the reciprocal actions of their people. Through this use of reciprocity, Herodotus imposes upon his audience a picture, either positive or negative, of the men, women, and city-states whose stories he tells in his Histories.

This thesis is an examination of reciprocity in literature. It is a study of reciprocity as it is presented by a master story-teller whose literary representation of reciprocity is more complex and more interesting than reciprocity as it is presented in the writings of behavioural scientists. It is an investigation into the way reciprocity functions in the work of a man whose stories have entertained and charmed his readers for centuries.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I offer my gratitude to my supervisor, Professor Vivienne Gray for her invaluable assistance, guidance and encouragement, the generous gift of her time, and her ability to regenerate enthusiasm when the spirit wilts. Her enthusiasm for my topic and her remarkable knowledge, understanding and love of all things Herodotean have been an inspiration. Without her encouragement and understanding this thesis would not have been completed.

To my co-supervisor, Dr W.R. Barnes, and to the academic staff of the Department of Classics and Ancient History, I offer my thanks for their help and encouragement. I also thank Pauline Brill, the Departmental Administrator, for her practical assistance and support.

Finally, I wish to record my gratitude to my husband and family without whose support and encouragement this thesis would never have been written.
PREFACE

In this thesis I intend to examine the ways in which Herodotus uses reciprocity in his *Histories*. I focus primarily on the text of Herodotus — what he wrote and why he wrote it. I do not analyse the historical accuracy of his work, nor do I intend to recreate history.

In order to demonstrate Herodotus' use of language, I include the Greek of words of reciprocity in the text or footnotes of the thesis. I also use the Greek of words which illustrate a theme or motif, and of words which Herodotus repeats for oral effect in order to emphasise his message.

I use Ionic dialect when quoting from Herodotus' text, but Attic dialect in the sections of the thesis in which I analyse the text.

In phrases such as the νόμος of reciprocity and the νόμος of ἱκετεία, I use νόμος in its meaning of "custom/usage" rather than "law".

Translations from the Greek in the text of this thesis are my own. Translations from ancient authors in footnotes are from the Loeb Classical Library, unless otherwise stated. For translators see Primary Bibliography.

In footnotes I follow the convention of using "see" or "see also" for references from both primary and secondary sources which support my opinion, confirm a statement, or add to the discussion. I use "cp." for references from secondary sources which are of a contrary opinion, and "cf." for references from primary sources which tell a similar story or deliver the same message. Citations of primary and secondary sources in footnotes are recorded in order of their usefulness to the reader.

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INTRODUCTION

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Measure well what you receive from your neighbour, and repay him well with equal measure or more, if you can, so that later, when you are in need, you will find you can depend on him (Hes. Op. 349-51).

Reciprocity is a fundamental element in human relationships. It is a universal norm which is found in all value systems and moral codes.¹ The nature of reciprocity in tribal societies has been studied by anthropologists from a scientific point of view.² Sociologists, also, have added their voices to the debate on the nature of reciprocity.

Reciprocity in Anthropological and Sociological Theory

Anthropologists and sociologists define reciprocity, in its simplest form, as the exchange of goods and services, gifts and favours. Reciprocity imposes three obligations — the obligation to give, the obligation to receive, and the obligation to repay.³ In relationships of reciprocity, gifts and favours are given voluntarily as if they are free, but they must be repaid.⁴ The gift creates a debt which places the beneficiary in a position of inferiority until it is repaid,⁵ but it is the nature of reciprocity that repayment will be

² Societies studied by anthropologists include the Nuer in southern Sudan, the people of the Andaman Islands in the Bay of Bengal, the Indians of North-West America, and Melanesian and Polynesian societies including the New Zealand Maori, the Trobriand Islanders, and the people of New Guinea, the Solomon Islands and Samoa.
⁴ Mauss (1954) 1, Pitt-Rivers (1973) 99, Firth (1972) 316 and Campbell (1977) 153. The initial gift or benefit is what Gouldner (1960) 176 calls a "starting mechanism" which, if accepted, initiates social interaction and begins a reciprocal relationship of exchange intended to benefit both parties. See also Blau (1964) 107.
delayed in the interests of fostering relationships of reciprocity. The period between giving and repaying is governed by the rule that a beneficiary must give gratitude and aid to his benefactor and refrain from injuring him. Thus, during this time, men are morally constrained to maintain friendly relationships with their benefactors and hence continuity of the relationship is maintained.\(^6\) When repayment is made, the beneficiary, if he is in a position to do so, gives a counter-gift which is of greater value than the initial gift. This places the original benefactor in debt to the original beneficiary until, after a suitable period of time, he repays his debt with a gift of greater value than he received. If he is unable to fully repay his debt, he remains in debt to his benefactor. Thus, at any given time, one partner is in debt to the other, and the chain of reciprocity continues as first one, and then the other, is under an obligation to maintain friendly relations with his partner.\(^7\)

As important as the obligation to give and repay, is the obligation to receive. The rejection of a gift implies mistrust and insults the giver. It indicates an unwillingness to participate in a relationship of reciprocity, and in some circumstances, it is the equivalent of a declaration of war. In relationships of unequal power, the refusal to accept a gift can be an assertion of victory by the strong over the weak, and it can signal that a man of power does not consider the giver a worthy partner in a relationship of gift-exchange.\(^8\)

The alternating “in debt/out of debt” nature of the reciprocal relationship acts as an insurance against one party dissolving the relationship, first because reciprocity imposes an obligation on people to help, and not harm, those who have helped them and, second because, in Gouldner’s words, “it is morally improper, under the norm of reciprocity, to

break off relations or to launch hostilities against those to whom you are still indebted."  

Thus the obligation of reciprocity fosters functional, peaceful relationships.

**Reciprocity between Ruler and Ruled**

Mutually beneficial exchange generally takes place in partnerships between equals in which first one partner and then the other is in a position of superiority. There is another type of reciprocal relationship which is particularly relevant to my examination of reciprocity in the *Histories* — the relationship of unequal reciprocity between a ruler and his people. This relationship has been examined by anthropologists in their study of the tribal chief or “big-man”. It is a relationship in which both chief and people have rights and obligations. The chief accepts his people’s gifts of goods and services in the spirit of reciprocity and, in return, he provides important benefits to the community. His people present him with counter-gifts as repayment for their continuous indebtedness to him, and so the chain of reciprocity continues. This relationship of giving and counter-giving between ruler and ruled is the ideal, but the reality can be different. The chief, as the superior partner in the relationship, has greater rights and, therefore, greater obligations, but once he has established himself as a powerful leader of his community, he can disregard his obligations to his people and compel them to benefit him with little or no reciprocity.  

**Categories of Reciprocity**

Sahlins, in his chapter “On the Sociology of Primitive Exchange”, divides reciprocity into three categories beginning with what he calls the “solidary extreme” and ending with the “unsociable extreme”. The first of these categories is “generalized

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9 Gouldner (1960) 175.
10 For the reciprocal relationship between ruler and ruled see Sahlins (1972) 205, Sahlins (1968) 86-7, Firth (1972) 133, 297-8, Malinowski (1921) 10, Malinowski (1922) 180 and Blau (1964) 110, 113.
reciprocity” to which Sahlins assigns transactions that are putatively altruistic, but which do, in fact, attract a return. The second category is “balanced reciprocity” which Sahlins defines as direct exchange in which the reciprocation is the customary equivalent of the thing received. And the third is “negative reciprocity” which is the attempt to get something for nothing with impunity and includes actions such as theft and trickery.11

Reciprocity in ancient Greece was more complex than reciprocity in tribal societies. This is apparent in Sahlins’ classification of reciprocities. One of the principal elements of reciprocity in the Greek world was the obligation to “do good to your friends and harm to your enemies”. The fulfilment of this duty was a mark of a man’s virtue.12 Doing good to one’s friends can be classified as generalised or balanced reciprocity. Categorising harming one’s enemies in terms of Sahlins’ spectrum of reciprocities is more complicated. Gouldner writes that “historically, the most important expression of homeomorphic reciprocity is found in the negative norms of reciprocity, that is, in sentiments of retaliation where the emphasis is placed not on the return of benefits but on the return of injuries, and is best exemplified by lex talionis.”13 It seems to me that retaliation cannot be accommodated in Sahlins’ category of negative reciprocity. In the world of “do good to your friends and harm to your enemies”, retaliation is not negative reciprocity because, unlike negative reciprocity, retaliation creates a continuing reciprocal relationship of animosity in which the participants repay harm with harm in a balanced relationship of hostility. van Wees writes that harming enemies “has no place at the end of a spectrum ranging from altruistic to egotistic attitudes towards exchange. It is in fact a wholly

12 Xen. Mem. 2.6.35 says: “.... a man’s virtue consists in outdoing his friends in kindness and his enemies in mischief.” See also Lys. 9.20; Theog. 337-40; 869-72, Pind. Pyth. 2.83-5; Sol. 13.5-6; Soph. Ant. 643-4; Ar. Av. 491-20; Xen. An. 1.3.6; Cyr. 1.4.25; 8.7.28; Hier. 2.2; Mem. 2.3.14; 4.5.10; Pl. Men. 71c; Isoc. 1.26. For comment on this topic see Blundell (1989) 26-38, 50-59, Hester (1977) 22-41, Dover (1974) 180-4, Mitchell (1997) 14-15, Easterling (1989) 12 and Fisher (1976a) 19.
13 Gouldner (1960) 172.
different category of exchange.” Gouldner raises the question of whether a norm of retaliation is the polar side of the norm of reciprocity or is a distinctive norm which may vary independently of the reciprocity norm. I suggest that retaliation does not belong in a different category of exchange from those defined by Sahlins, but can be incorporated within Sahlins’ categories. The problem of where to place retaliation in Sahlins’ classification of reciprocity can be solved by adding a fourth category of reciprocity between his “balanced” and “negative” reciprocities. This fourth category is that of “retaliatory reciprocity.” Retaliatory reciprocity is a form of balanced reciprocity in which harm is repaid with harm. It is the polar side of returning good with good. It cannot be categorised as negative reciprocity in Sahlins’ terms.

With the addition of retaliatory reciprocity as a fourth category, Sahlins’ classification can be divided into two sections — “positive reciprocity” which includes generalised and balanced reciprocity, and “negative reciprocity” which includes retaliatory and negative reciprocity. In this thesis, I will use the term “negative reciprocity” for actions which are, in van Wees’ words, “negatively valued” and “positive reciprocity” for actions which are “positively valued”. Thus balanced reciprocity can be both positive and negative — positive when it involves the return of good for good, and negative when it involves the return of harm for harm.

An illustration of the complex nature of reciprocity in Greece can be found in Aristotle’s division into three forms, not of reciprocity itself, but of one small component of reciprocity — friendship. Aristotle divides φιλία into three categories. He says that there are three forms of friendship (τρία δή τὰ τῆς φιλίας εἶδη) — friendship based on utility (χρήσιμον), friendship based on pleasure (ἡδονή), and perfect friendship (τελεία

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15 Gouldner (1960) 172.
φιλία) which is based on virtue (ἀρετή) (*Eth. Nic.* 1156a-1157b). Perfect friendship resembles generalised reciprocity in that the primary concern of each partner is the good of the other. This form of relationship, says Aristotle, is permanent because within it are found all the qualities that friends should possess. Relationships of pleasure resemble balanced reciprocity in that both partners benefit mutually from the relationship, and thus it lasts as long as both partner obtains pleasure from their association. Relationships of utility resemble Sahlins’ category of negative reciprocity to the extent that the relationship is based on what one partner can get from the other. And, like Sahlins’ negative reciprocity, friendships based on utility do not last long, but as soon as there is no advantage to be gained from the relationship it comes to an end because each partner is interested only in what he can get from the other.\(^\text{18}\) Aristotle’s principal interest in categorising the forms of friendship was not only the nature of the relationship itself, but also the nature of the men who participate in relationships of φιλία — inferior men participate in relationships of pleasure and utility, whereas it is the good and virtuous who participate in relationships of perfect friendship. This analysis of one small element of reciprocity is an indication that reciprocity in Aristotle’s world, was more complicated than reciprocity in the world of tribal societies.\(^\text{19}\)

**Reciprocity in the Greek World**

Reciprocity was a fundamental reality in the Greek world. In Seaford’s words, “it is to be found in various kinds of Greek practice and discourse. ....... It is to be found as an ethical value, as a factor in interpersonal relations, as an element of political cohesion, as economically significant, as a way of structuring human relations with deity, as shaping the

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\(^\text{19}\) Donlan (1982) 137-175 undertook a study of the relevance of Sahlins’ categories of reciprocity in the Homeric poems. He concludes that the strategy of playing-off Sahlins’ typology of the spectrum of reciprocities against the text of the poems has resulted in a high degree of congruence with balanced exchange predominating.
pattern of epic and historical narrative, as a central theme of drama.”

How do scholars of Greek history and literature define reciprocity as it functioned in the Greek world? I present three definitions. van Wees, having surveyed reciprocity in anthropological theory, concludes that the most satisfactory definition of reciprocity is “exchange conceptualized as the performance and requital of gratuitous actions.” And Braund defines reciprocity as “the exchange of goods and services in any and every sense.” Seaford includes both the voluntary nature of reciprocity and the concept of retaliation in his definition of reciprocity as “a system of exchange in which the return of benefit or harm is compelled neither by law nor by force.” I prefer Seaford’s definition of reciprocity. His inclusion of the repayment of harm for harm is particularly relevant to reciprocity as it operated in the world of the ancient Greeks.

The Reciprocity of Ζευνά

Personal relationships in Greece form a spectrum which begins with relationships of φιλία such as those analysed by Aristotle. At the outer limit of personal relationships is the reciprocal institution of ἔντιμο. Ζευνά was of fundamental importance in the Greek world. It was a sacred institution the rules of which were governed by the gods. Like reciprocity itself, Ζευνά was universal. Ζευνά relationships could exist between members of different Greek cities, between Greeks and non-Greeks, and between non-Greeks. The relationship of Ζευνά was initiated by a ritual exchange of gifts. Once a relationship had been established, Ζευνά participated in a partnership of mutual aid sustained by the

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22 van Baal (1975) 11 includes retaliation in his definition of reciprocity as “doing or rendering something in return for a good received, an act committed, or an evil inflicted.”
24 Ζευνά is a complex institution. I restrict my comments here to those aspects of Ζευνά which are relevant to my study of reciprocity in the Histories.
25 Herman (1987) 12. Herman adds that in all these cases, Ζευνά seems to have followed an identical pattern and the non-Greek partners seem to have shown as profound an understanding of this pattern as the Greek. See also Cartledge (1993) 47-8.
expectations of reciprocity and the giving, receiving, and returning of hospitality, favours and gifts. One of the more important features of \( \xi \varepsilon \nu \iota \alpha \) was the assumption of perpetuity. The privileges and obligations of the relationship did not end with the death of the partners but were passed on from father to son.\(^{26}\) This characteristic of \( \xi \varepsilon \nu \iota \alpha \) is illustrated in Homer’s story of Diomedes and Glaucus who, when they met in combat at Troy, realised that their grandfathers had been \( \xi \varepsilon \nu \iota \alpha \) and, acknowledging their \( \xi \varepsilon \nu \iota \alpha \) relationship with each other, they exchanged armour on the battlefield (II. 6.212-236).\(^{27}\) The harming of a \( \xi \nu \beta \omega \) was an offence, not only against one’s \( \xi \nu \beta \omega \), but also against the gods. Hesiod places the harming of a \( \xi \nu \beta \omega \) in the same category as having sexual intercourse with one’s brother’s wife, offending against orphans, and abusing one’s elderly father. These actions, says Hesiod, anger Zeus and he will take harsh revenge upon the transgressor for his evil deeds (Op. 320-34).\(^{28}\) We know little about the breaking of \( \xi \varepsilon \nu \iota \alpha \) relationships in the Greek world, but since in other ritualised relationships, the severance of the sacred bond entails disgrace,\(^{29}\) we can assume that this was also the case in the breaking of relationships of \( \xi \varepsilon \nu \iota \alpha \).\(^{30}\)

**Reciprocity in the Histories**

Herodotus’ *Histories*, like Homer’s poems, reveal a world which functioned through the obligation of reciprocity. Braund suggests that the *Histories* are about reciprocity and asks why Herodotus should be so interested in the phenomenon of reciprocity.\(^{31}\) I contend that the *Histories* are not about reciprocity, nor was Herodotus

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\(^{28}\) See also Pl. *Leg.* 729e; Diod. *Sic.* 20.70.3-4; Theog. 143-4.

\(^{29}\) Herman (1987) 71-2. See also Gouldner (1960) 175 and Hammell (1968) 79.


\(^{31}\) Braund (1998) 165, 179.
interested in reciprocity as a phenomenon. To Herodotus and his contemporaries reciprocity was a fundamental reality. The obligation to repay good with good and harm with harm was something Herodotus and his audience took for granted. From his stories of the stealing and counter-stealing of women across the boundaries between east and west until his final historical story of the punishment of Artaïctes at the Hellespont, Herodotus uses the obligation of reciprocity to move his narrative forward through chains and circles of reciprocal action and reaction. His work is structured through reciprocity. It is not about reciprocity.

The question of the problematics of reciprocity in the Histories has been raised by Braund. Reciprocity, by its very nature, can be problematic. Herodotus recognises this. He uses this characteristic of reciprocity to great effect in patterned stories which depend on problematic reciprocity for their climax — stories such as the fatal gift. He manipulates problematic reciprocity in order to record some of the great and marvellous deeds of men — the unforeseen happening, the reversal of the expected, or the amazing paradox.

Gould writes that "connection in Herodotus' narrative is everywhere made by personal relationships, through the interconnections of individuals or communities, by kinship ties and also by ties of reciprocal obligation whether of repaying good by good or of revenge for hurt, and by the complementary relationships of aggressor and victim (or intended victim) or of donor and recipient of gifts. ....... The obligations of gratitude and revenge are the fundamental human motives for Herodotus. ....... The most pervasive strand of explanation in Herodotus' narrative ....... is the sense that historical experience is the result of reciprocal action, the fulfilling of debts of gratitude and the taking of revenge." 34

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In my examination of reciprocity in Herodotus' *Histories*, I intend to confirm Gould’s assertion that connection in Herodotus’ narrative is made by the personal obligations of friendship and enmity, and that he uses reciprocity to explain the cause of events in terms of reciprocal action and reaction. I will also examine Herodotus’ use of the obligation of reciprocity for a purpose that appears to have been neglected by modern historians — the characterisation of individuals in terms of their observance, manipulation or transgression of the νόμος of reciprocity, and the characterisation of πόλεις in terms of the reciprocal behaviour of their citizens.

In addition to demonstrating Herodotus’ use of reciprocity as cause and characterisation, I will explore the complex, sophisticated ways in which Herodotus shows reciprocity at work. Whereas the anthropologist studies reciprocity as a behavioural science, Herodotus recreates reality in literature. He arranges reciprocity into literary patterns which are central to his presentation of events. He peoples his *Histories* with a wide range of characters who are involved in a wide variety of reciprocal relationships, both positive and negative. He arranges his work into fascinating, complex patterns so that his literary recreation of reality is more interesting than scientific studies of reciprocity as it operates in real life.