FACT, FICTION AND THE GENRE OF ACTS[*]

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This paper explores the boundaries between fact and fiction in ancient literature. The historians effectively created the concept of 'fiction' in Greek literature by defining what could be incontrovertibly established as 'fact' by accepted rationalistic criteria. Anything beyond these limits (tales involving distant places, or the distant past, or divine intervention) was widely perceived as belonging to the realm of 'fiction'. To readers from this background, Acts would fall uncomfortably on the boundary: much of the narrative would sound like fiction, but there is a disturbing undercurrent which suggests that it might after all be intended as fact.

In current scholarship, the debate about 'reading Acts as history' is readily taken as a debate about literary genre: does Acts fall into the genre 'history'? But for many less academic readers the question is about reliability: the underlying question is, is Acts true? This is a perfectly right and proper question to ask of any narrative, but it is not, strictly speaking, a question about the text at all: 'truth' is not a literary quality inhering in the text, but a function of the relationship between the text and the external world it purports to describe. And the most obvious way to answer the question also involves looking outside the text for corroboration, by checking its story against external data (parallel narratives, documentary evidence, archaeological background). This has been and remains a major concern of Acts scholarship during the twentieth century: but it is not my prime concern in this paper.

There is however another dimension to the question of historicity. Checking a narrative against external data is not the only way readers assess its reliability: other facts within the text itself may be brought into play. These may be broadly divided into two categories, drawing on two different kinds of reader experience. The first rests on a philosophical judgement about the intrinsic probability (plausibility) of what is related, what we might call the

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'factlikeness' or realism of the narrative. This kind of judgement draws on the reader's wider experience of the world: human behaviour, geographical information, scientific or sociological theory may all be brought into play. This question typically arises for the reader of Acts in relation to the narrative's treatment of the miraculous and the supernatural: 'Such things do not happen, therefore the narrative is fiction (or fantasy, or wish-fulfilment).'

The second kind of assessment draws on the reader's experience of other texts, an experience which identifies certain literary phenomena as indicators of reliability: 'Is this the kind of literature to which we would normally give credence?' This kind of judgement forms a part of our reading equipment for a whole range of texts, and is widely exploited, as in the use of black-and-white film to give an impression of authentic newsreel or documentary, or in the use of the scientist (white coat, laboratory equipment) to lend credence to an advertisement for soap powder or toothpaste. In practice, these two kinds of experience – experience of the world, and experience of other texts – are often played off against one another to telling effect. Thus fantasy can use the 'documentary' technique to frame a narrative of the frankly unbelievable, like the use of the paraphernalia of the authentic travel narrative in *Gulliver's Travels*. There, it is the improbability of the content which warns the reader to distrust the signals emitted by the genre. Conversely, the realistic film or novel, which has no such tell-tale improbability, was dogged for many years by the need to carry a conventional disclaimer warning the reader that 'no representation of any actual persons alive or dead is intended'.

Both these kinds of assessment, in their different ways, open up the possibility of exploring the textual factors which predispose a reader to accept or reject a narrative as 'true': and this brings us back to the question of genre. For many people, I suspect, this is the real (if undisclosed) justification for the lengthy debate over genre which has preoccupied Acts scholarship for much of this century. Ever since Ramsay set out to give his 'reasons for placing the author of Acts among historians of the first rank',[1] scholars who have a high estimate of the accuracy of Acts have tended to align it with the literary practice of contemporary Greek or Roman historiography. Conversely, it is often assumed that detaching Acts from the generic label 'historiography' inevitably means impugning its reliability as a record of past events. But all these inferences

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[1] W. M. Ramsay, *St Paul the Traveller and the Roman Citizen* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1895) 4.

rest on the too-easy assumption that 'accurate reporting of past events' is co-extensive with the ancient literary genre 'history', as if each entails the other: which is not necessarily the case. The literary identification of Acts as 'historiography' may actually militate against a high estimate of the text's accuracy:[2] conversely, as Bowersock reminds us, classifying a text as 'fiction' does not rob it of historical value.[3]

What I want to do here is simply to explore some of the textual features, generic and otherwise, which informed the ancient reader's expectations of a text's reliability. What were the literary techniques which disposed ancient readers to accept a narrative as 'true'? Does Acts use any of these? Or does Acts use literary conventions which effectively align it with other types of narrative: fiction, paradoxography, fantasy? What is the effect on the reader of the substantial supernatural element of the narrative? This approach has the advantage at least of highlighting issues which often operate as hidden assumptions in the debate about the genre of Acts; and it will allow us to locate our discussion of Acts within the broader debate on the nature and definition of fiction in the ancient world.

HISTORY AS FACT

The claim to factuality is bound up with the very origins of Greek historiography, indeed with the very origins of Greek prose. The oldest and most venerable genres in Greek literature are poetic: epic, lyric, drama; even the wisdom-literature of the Greeks uses didactic verse as its primary medium of expression. When the first historians chose to write in the more utilitarian medium of prose, they were already implicitly making the point that the work of the historian was different from that of the poet.[4] The distinction is made explicitly and polemically in the prefaces of Herodotus and Thucydides.[5] But the historians' concern to distance themselves

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[2] Cf. W. L. Knox, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Cambridge: CUP, 1948) 4; C. K. Barrett, *Luke the Historian in Recent Study* (London: Epworth, 1961) 9–12; M. Dibelius, *Studies in the Acts of the Apostles* (tr. M. Ling & P. Schubert; London: SCM, 1956 = *Aufsätze zur Apostelgeschichte* [ed. H. Greeven; Göttingen, 1951]).

[3] G. W. Bowersock, *Fiction as History, Nero to Julian* (Sather Classical Lectures 58; Berkeley: University of California, 1994).

[4] B. E. Perry, *The Ancient Romances* (Sather Classical Lectures 37; Berkeley: University of California, 1967) 55.

[5] E.g. Herod. 7.20.2–21.1; Thuc. 1.10.3.

from the poets – despite their manifest similarities in subject-matter and purpose – goes far deeper than the occasional disparaging allusion. The pattern is established from the very first sentence of Herodotus' history:

> Quite unhomeric, however, is the proud obtrusion of the historian's identity in the first two words – a pattern already set by Hecataeus and followed by Thucydides and many later historians. The effect is double: the naming suggests that Herodotus himself will be an important figure in his *History* (as indeed he is); the use of the third person suggests objectivity and detachment.[6]

The construction of this authorial *persona* is a crucial step in the development of Greek historiography. It allows Herodotus to maintain a sense of 'objectivity and detachment' throughout by introducing himself as observer and commentator on his own narrative. Sometimes this takes the form of first-person authentication for geographical sights he himself has seen, for example on the sources of the Nile (2.29.1). More distant phenomena can also be authenticated at one remove: not 'I saw' but 'I heard from an informant' (2.32.1, 33.1). The use of the first person here implicitly provides a reassuring link in a chain of autopsy. The incredible data related have actually been 'seen', if not by the author himself, then by somebody he has met: the anonymous 'they say' becomes a series of real (if unnamed) informants.

But the authorial persona can also be used to create an (equally reassuring) buffer zone of scepticism between 'what is reported' and the reader. It speaks the language of reason, of conjecture and probability and calculation (e.g. 2.31). It proposes rationalistic, physical explanations for the marvellous phenomena of legend and travellers' tales (e.g. 2.24–8). Probability – 'what usually happens' – plays an important part in these explanations (e.g. 2.27). It is frank about the limits of autopsy: 'I have not seen a phoenix myself', Herodotus reassures his readers, 'except in paintings, for it is very rare and only visits the country (so at least they say in Heliopolis) at intervals of 500 years, on the death of the parent-bird'.[7] The implication is that the equally incredible descriptions of the crocodile and the hippopotamus (2.68–71), which carry no such limitation, are trustworthy reports of real animals. Reassurance also lies in the way the historian-as-observer is careful to distinguish between observable and verifiable facts (paintings, places,

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[6] J. L. Moles, 'Truth and Untruth in Herodotus and Thucydides', in *Lies and Fiction in the Ancient World* (ed. C. Gill and T. P. Wiseman; Exeter: University of Exeter, 1993) 96 (hereafter *Lies and Fiction*).

[7] 2.72; cf. 3.115.1; 4.16.1.

animal bones, religious customs) and the stories told to explain them (e.g. 2.75). Having heard and relayed the most amazing variety of tales passed on by the scribes, priests, travellers and native inhabitants who cluster at the boundaries of autopsy, the authorial voice presents itself as one which can afford to select and discriminate on rational, common-sense principles: two witnesses are better than one, for example, though rival traditions which do not agree may discredit one another. And in the last analysis, the historian reserves the right to an absolute scepticism: 'I give the story as it was told me', he says of the phoenix, 'but I don't believe it' (2.72, cf. 2.28).

This self-deprecatory, faintly ironical authorial voice is the final assurance of reliability: a narrator who is so ready to confess the limitations of his knowledge must surely be trustworthy. It is the reader's companion throughout Herodotus' many geographical excurses, on a journey of investigation (*historia* in the Ionian sense) which ranges from the merely curious to the frankly fantastic. But there is no deceit, no compulsion to believe what is simply recorded as τὰ λεγόμενα, the things people say. The same voice provides an insidious running commentary on the events of the *Histories*, especially where they stray into the realm of the marvellous or the supernatural:

> There is a story that the Athenians had called upon Boreas – the north-east wind – to help them, in consequence of another oracle . . . I cannot say if this was really the reason why the fleet was caught at anchor by the north-easter, but the Athenians are quite positive about it: Boreas, they maintain, had helped them before, and it was Boreas who was responsible for what occurred on this occasion too. On their return they built him a shrine by the river Ilissus.[8]

A similar technique is used to telling effect on the archaeological material in the preface, where Herodotus relays a selection of the stories told by different nations to explain the origins of the conflict between the Greeks and the Persians. Here the problem is not distance in space but distance in time: only myth and legend reach so far back into antiquity. Herodotus' solution is not to ignore this legendary material but to pass it on, framed in such a way that the historian is protected from the charge of gullibility by foregrounding his own impartiality (refusing to mediate between rival versions of the story) and scepticism:

> So much for what the Persians and Phoenicians say; and I have no intention of passing judgement on its truth or falsity. I prefer to rely on my own

[8] 7.189 (tr. A. de Selincourt; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1954).

knowledge, and to point out who it was in actual fact that first injured the Greeks; then I will proceed with my history. (1.4–5, tr. de Selincourt)

Herodotus thus bequeathed to Greek historical tradition a barrage of techniques for distinguishing fact from fiction – or from unconfirmed report – within their narratives. And by displaying their ability to use these techniques in their opening chapters, Herodotus and his successors could convince their readers that everything that followed had been subjected to the same careful, sifting process by a critical, analytical mind. The narrative itself tends to proceed with a minimum of authorial intervention: the ancient historians do not cite sources in the modern fashion, but leave the story to tell its own tale. But the use of the authorial voice in the preface, and the sensitivity to critical issues displayed there, has the effect of 'framing' the whole story as the perception of a particular, rational – but not omniscient – narrator. And this effect is maintained within the narrative by bracketing particular items as 'stories' – *logoi* – reported by others: we might compare the dissociative effect of *Private Eye*'s 'allegedly', or the quotation marks of the tabloid newspapers. Certain kinds of 'things said' seem to attract especial suspicion and thus a particular need for distancing: reports from distant places, tales of the distant past, and anything to do with religion. Here the Greek historians, like a modern anthropologist, tend to take the outsider's role: whatever their private religious viewpoint, they observe and record religious rite and monument as 'fact' but reserve judgement on the theological explanations offered by insiders. This careful distancing of the recording self from religious belief remains characteristic of Greek and Roman historiography and biography.[9]

HISTORICAL AND GEOGRAPHICAL FICTION

The surprising and even paradoxical result of all this is that the critical historical enterprise, in the very process of defining and delimiting an area which we would call 'fact' (i.e. that which can be verified by rational means), simultaneously delimits an area of 'fiction' (or, more properly, 'non-fact'), i.e. that which cannot be verified by rational means. History-as-fact, in other words, itself creates the possibility of fiction. This is a situation of which Greek and Roman writers in the first and second centuries are keenly

[9] John S. Lown, 'The Miraculous in the Greco-Roman Historians', *Foundations and Facets Forum* 2 (1986) 36–42.

aware. There is an extensive literature, both ancient and modern, on the potential for fiction both within ancient historiography and in the literature which clusters around its edges.

The Greek and Roman historians are frequently attacked as 'liars':

> For Seneca, in the first century A.D., it was axiomatic that historians are liars. There is a passage in his *Quaestiones Naturales* (7.16.1f.) where, discussing comets, he brushes aside the theory offered by Ephorus with a damning remark: 'It takes no great effort to refute him – he's a historian'. . . . Seneca justifies his paradox with a sardonic little digression on the practice of history as mere entertainment: 'Some historians win approval by telling incredible tales; an everyday narrative would make the reader go and do something else, so they excite him with marvels. Some of them are credulous, and lies take them unawares; others are careless, and lies are what they like; the former don't avoid them, the latter seek them out. What the whole tribe have in common is this: they think their work can only achieve approval and popularity if they sprinkle it with lies.'[10]

Even Lucian, that doughty champion of a proper Thucydidean devotion to 'fact', suggests on closer examination that this was a minority interest among the historians of his day. *How to write history* makes it clear that the normal way to achieve success with the 'common rabble' was to provide eulogy, exaggeration, and 'complete fiction'.[11] This cynical view is matched by a widespread perception among modern scholars that by the first century CE history as a genre was as much concerned with fiction as with fact – or, more damaging still, that historians and their readers had lost the ability to distinguish between the two.[12] The thrust of this debate is not to question how successful historians were in practice at achieving the ideal of objective, factual reporting of the past (or even the related but not identical ideal of objective, critical examination of reports about the past). Rather – and this is where it impinges on the debate about the genre of Acts – it suggests that historical writing in the first centuries of our era suffered from a fundamental failure to distinguish 'fact' from 'fiction'. Despite a

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[10] T. P. Wiseman, 'Lying Historians: Seven Types of Mendacity', in *Lies and Fiction*, 122. For the ancient (and modern) debate on Herodotus, cf. W. K. Pritchett, *The Liar School of Herodotos* (Amsterdam: Gieben, 1993).

A similar complaint is made in Jos. *C.Ap.* 1.12–14: but note how Thackeray's translation of *pseudomenon* here equivocates between 'lying' ('mendacity') and 'mistaken'.

[11] Τὸ κομιδῇ μυθῶδες: *How to write history* §10, Loeb tr.

[12] Cf. Bowersock, *Fiction as History*, ch. 1; Emilio Gabba, 'True History and False History in Classical Antiquity', *JRS* 71 (1981) 50–62; M. J. Wheeldon, 'True Stories: the Reception of Historiography in Antiquity', in *History as Text: The Writing of Ancient History* (ed. A. Cameron; London: Duckworth, 1989) 33–63; T. P. Wiseman, *Clio's Cosmetics* (Leicester: Leicester University, 1979) 41ff., 149ff.; A. J. Woodman, *Rhetoric in Classical Historiography* (London/Sydney: Croom Helm, 1988) esp. chs. 1–2, Epilogue.

continuing devotion to 'truth' as a historiographical ideal, the genre of history in the hellenistic and Roman periods laboured under a set of operating assumptions which effectively blurred the distinction between 'fact' and 'fiction'.

One reason for this, I would suggest, is an ambivalence which lies at the heart of the Herodotean critical methodology itself.[13] Herodotus made the distinctly post-modern discovery that beliefs and traditions are 'facts' in their own right, even if the things they report are not. The critical historian may doubt that X exists or Y happened, but it remains a fact that A believes – or that the story (*logos*) exists – that X exists or Y happened. The historian is therefore free to include any number of fanciful or marvellous reports of monsters and miracles, provided that they are bracketed with the ubiquitous 'so they say . . .'. The training of the rhetorical schools ensured that Greek writers learnt early to be proficient in turning stories into *oratio obliqua*,[14] a *tour de force* in itself but also an insistent reminder that the narrator is refusing to take full responsibility for the content of what is related. This is, of course, a wonderful method of 'having your cake and eating it', of enjoying all the pleasures of fiction without abandoning the respectability of fact. Herodotus exploits this duality to the full, and it is abundantly clear that later readers found this one of the most rewarding and exciting aspects of historiography. But the recounting of marvels need not conflict in principle with a commitment to the pursuit of 'truth'. As Lucian cynically puts it:

> Again, if a myth comes along you must tell it but not believe it entirely; no, make it known for your audience to make of it what they will – you run no risk and lean to neither side (*How to write history*, §60, Loeb tr.)

Dionysius of Halicarnassus displays a similar ambivalence. On the one hand, Thucydides is to be commended because 'he did not insert anything of the mythical into his history, and he refused to divert his history to practise deception and magic upon the masses, as all the historians before him had done, telling . . . about demigods, the offspring of mortals and gods, and many other stories that seem incredible and very foolish to our times'.[15] On the other hand, Dionysius himself was a collector of 'the fictions of myths' and openly used them in his *Antiquities* (*Ant.* 1.8.1). The solution is

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[13] There are of course other important factors, especially the role of rhetoric: cf. previous note.

[14] Ἀποφαντικὸν ἐγκεκλιμένον: Hermogenes *Prog.* 2/18.

[15] Dionysius of Halicarnassus *De Thuc.* 6, tr. W. K. Pritchett, *Dionysius of Halicarnassus: On Thucydides* (Berkeley: University of California, 1975).

to issue a specific disclaimer: historians of 'local and national history' are compelled by their informants to reproduce traditions in the form in which they are passed on from parents to children (*de Thuc.* §7).[16]

History is not the only Greek prose genre to exemplify this kind of blurring of the boundaries between fact and fiction. Plutarch sees the same processes at work in geography and in biography – not surprisingly, since both are closely related to history:

> As geographers, Sosius, crowd into the edges of their maps parts of the world they know nothing about, adding notes in the margin to the effect, that beyond this lies nothing but the sandy deserts full of wild beasts, unapproachable bogs, Scythian ice, or a frozen sea, so in this work of mine, in which I have compared the lives of the greatest men with one another, after passing through those periods which probable reasoning can reach to and real history find a footing in, I might very well say of those that are farther off: 'Beyond this there is nothing but prodigies and fictions, the only inhabitants are the poets and inventors of fables: there is no credit, or certainty any farther.'[17]

As Plutarch suggests, there was a widespread perception that the marvels which filled the blank spaces at the edge of the geographers' maps were simply fictions, poetic fantasies which did not call for serious belief: and it seems clear that writers who wanted to create geographical fiction could do so by exploiting these spaces at the limits of *autopsia*.[18] Lucian parodies these 'incredible' (*apista*) travel-narratives in his *True History*, which contains, so he tells his readers, only one true statement:

> I think I can escape the censure of the world by my own admission that I am not telling a word of truth. Be it understood then that I am writing about things which I have neither seen nor had to do with nor learned from others – which, in fact, do not exist at all and, in the nature of things, cannot exist. Therefore my readers should on no account believe in them. (Lucian, *A True Story*, 1.4–5, Loeb tr.)

Lucian takes Herodotus' 'framing' technique to its logical extreme here, by bracketing his whole narrative as a lie: but this was an unusual expedient. Most writers of geographical fiction were careful to maintain the 'credibility ethic'[19] by retaining the framework of traveller's report, bracketing their incredible tales in multiple

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[16] This kind of 'agnosticism' is evident throughout Dionysius' treatment of the mythical origins of Roman history: E. Gabba, *Dionysius and the History of Archaic Rome* (Sather Classical Lectures 56; Berkeley: University of California, 1991) 118–25.

[17] Plutarch *Life of Theseus* 1, tr. A. H. Clough, *Plutarch's Lives* 1 (London: J. M. Dent [Everyman], 1910) 1.

[18] James S. Romm, *The Edges of the Earth in Ancient Thought* (Princeton: Princeton University, 1992) ch. 5.

[19] 'Credibility ethic': cf. Romm, *Edges*, 174.

layers of quotation marks. This emerges clearly from Photius' account of *The Wonders Beyond Thule*:

> And so Dinias begins the narration of these things to an Arcadian named Cymbas, whom the Arcadian League sent to Tyre to ask that Dinias return to them and his homeland. . . . He is represented as recounting what he himself had seen during his wandering or what eyewitness accounts he had heard from others; and what he had learned from Dercyllis' account while on Thule, that is, her already reported journey . . . and what she previously heard from Astraeus, that is, his account of Pythagoras and Mnesarchus – which Astraeus himself heard from Philotis . . .[20]

Diogenes, whom Photius calls 'the father of fictional stories of that time' (112a, Reardon 782), also takes care to give his story an air of antiquarian learning by citing earlier writers 'so that the incredible events would not seem to lack authority' (111a, Reardon 781); and the whole thing is placed in a pseudo-historical framework by the story of the discovery of Dercyllis' story written on cypress tablets in a vault opened in the presence of Alexander (111b, Reardon 782).

All of this means that the generic markers of factuality are no longer sufficient in themselves to help the reader distinguish between fact and fiction. The *autopsia*-convention, which is designed in the first place to provide reassurance about the factuality of a geographical narrative,[21] can just as easily be subverted to encourage the reader to collude in the creation of fiction. And a similar fuzziness pervades the whole area of antiquarian history or 'archaeology'. Beyond the reach of 'probable reasoning' and 'real history', as Plutarch puts it, are 'nothing but prodigies and fictions, the only inhabitants are the poets and inventors of fables; there is no credit, or certainty any farther'. Plutarch does indeed go on to express the hope that 'the purifying processes of reason' may be able to reduce this legendary material to something like 'exact history': but even if it cannot, Plutarch sees no reason not to use such excellent material:

> Let us hope that Fable may, in what shall follow, so submit to the purifying processes of reason as to take the character of exact history. In any case, however, where it shall be found contumaciously slighting credibility and refusing to be reduced to anything like probable fact, we shall beg that we

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[20] Antonius Diogenes, *The Wonders Beyond Thule* (Photius *Bibl.* 166.109b), tr. Sandy; cited from *Collected Ancient Greek Novels* (ed. B. P. Reardon; Berkeley: California University, 1989) 778.

[21] On the geographical associations of *autopsia*, cf. L. C. A. Alexander, *The Preface to Luke's Gospel* (SNTSMS 78; Cambridge: CUP, 1993) 34–41.

may meet with candid readers, and such as will receive with indulgence the stories of antiquity. (*Life of Theseus* §1, tr. Clough)

The readers, in other words, are being asked to accept the story of Theseus as largely fiction – but fiction sanctioned by being classified as a 'story of antiquity'.

Such 'stories of antiquity' were hugely popular in the first centuries of our era, and the period saw an explosion of more or less learned compilations of 'marvels' (*paradoxa*, *apista*), both ancient and contemporary, in a genre which modern scholarship has labelled 'paradoxography': Gabba calls this 'one of the central concerns of middlebrow culture in the Hellenistic and Roman periods'.[22] This kind of compilation has been aptly compared to the bizarre 'news' stories which appear regularly in popular tabloid newspapers: talking heads, sex-changes, and two-headed babies figure among the 'Marvels' listed by Phlegon of Tralles in a collection published at the beginning of the second century CE.[23] But I would contest Gabba's statement that 'the problem of the truth or credibility of the phenomena or facts . . . was simply not raised, since the question of truth was not present in the minds of readers'.[24] Certainly there is no attempt at making a critical assessment of the credibility of the data recorded: but these writers place themselves firmly in the tradition of antiquarian erudition going back ultimately to Herodotus, and their stories are regularly bracketed as 'reports' or attributed to earlier sources ('as Isigonos says in the second book of his *Incredible Matters*'; 'Hieron of Alexandria or of Ephesos relates that a ghost also appeared in Aitolia').[25] Many of Phlegon's marvels are given precise dates in the not-so-distant past: ch. 9, for example, relates a sex-change which happened 'when Makrinos was archon at Athens, and Lucius Lamia Aelianus and Sextus Carminius Veterus were consuls in Rome' – i.e. 116 CE. This last phenomenon is further authenticated as an eyewitness report: 'I myself have seen this person', Phlegon states. Similarly in the case of the hippocentaur sent to Rome: 'anyone who is sceptical can examine it for himself, since as I said above it has been embalmed and is kept in the emperor's storehouse' (§35, Hansen 49). Like Herodotus, Phlegon has an eye to the possibility of disbelief and is prepared to disarm it by describing strictly observable phenomena (e.g. §15.1, Hansen 44). Fiction, in

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[22] Gabba, 'True History', 53.
[23] *Phlegon of Tralles, Book of Marvels* (ed. & tr. William Hansen; Exeter: University of Exeter, 1996).
[24] Gabba, 'True History', 53; cf. Hansen, *Phlegon*, 9.
[25] Hansen, *Phlegon*, 7, 29.

other words, still prefers to wrap itself in the generic trappings of fact.

But it must also be remembered that not all of this material can be dismissed as fiction. Many of Phlegon's 'marvels' are physical freaks and abnormalities which do, in fact, occur and can be documented.[26] The point is not that all such tales are false, simply that it is hard to know which are true. Where personal experience gives out, the scientific observer can only fall back on a rational judgement of what is 'possible' within the limits of the physical world. But that plausibility-judgement is itself necessarily constrained by the limitations of the observer's own experience: and ancient geography contains a number of classic examples of travellers' tales which Mediterranean antiquity found implausible but which have been vindicated by a wider geographical knowledge. Herodotus tells the story (4.42) of the circumnavigation of Africa around 600 BCE by a Phoenician expedition sent out by Pharaoh Neco. The explorers reported that on the return leg the sun was on their right, a fact which Herodotus finds incredible. To the modern geographer, this apparently implausible detail is confirmation that the expedition had indeed gone beyond the equator.[27] Around 320 BCE, Pytheas of Massilia sailed out of the Pillars of Hercules and made a voyage north towards the 'Tin Islands'. His *Periplus* (which is now lost) was treated with varying degrees of scepticism by the scientific geographers of subsequent centuries. Among the 'implausible' details which Pytheas related about the British Isles are: the use of barns for threshing grain 'because they have so little sunshine that an open threshing-place would be of little use in that land of clouds and rain'; North Sea tides which could swamp low-lying country in minutes; and a mysterious fog-like substance which assails the sailor in these northern seas:

> In these regions obtained neither earth as such, nor sea, nor air, but a kind of mixture of these, similar to the sea-lung, in which . . . earth, sea, and everything else is held in suspension; this substance is like a fusion of them all, and can neither be trod upon nor sailed upon.[28]

Romm, who cites the above, professes himself unsure 'what pelagic phenomena (if any) lie behind this strange description', but to a native of these islands, it is not too difficult to recognise a description of a good East Coast sea-fret or 'haar'.

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[26] Cf. Hansen's notes *ad loc*.
[27] O. A. W. Dilke, *Greek and Roman Maps* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1985) 25.
[28] Pytheas frg. 7b (Polyb. 34.5.3–4; Strabo 2.4.1), cited from Romm, *Edges*, 22.

THE GREEK NOVEL

The privileging of 'fiction' implied by the modern library category 'non-fiction' is a very modern phenomenon. For the public librarian of the ancient world, if we can posit such an anachronism, the categories would more appropriately be called 'fact' and 'non-fact', with the latter embracing a huge and undefined area of statements whose factuality must be doubted simply because it cannot be guaranteed. Nobody is quite sure what to call this dangerous territory, or where its limits are: the warning posts which mark the danger area bear a variety of names ('myth', 'lies', 'poetic tales', 'invention', *plasma*, *apista*). But ancient readers attuned to the debate – and its key features are remarkably constant over the centuries – were well aware of the kind of terrain where fiction was likely to be found: distant times, distant places, ancient traditions, especially of non-Greek peoples, tales of the traveller and the shipwrecked mariner, tales of the marvellous and the supernatural. All these were topics which the reading public enjoyed for their entertainment value, but which the responsible historian would take care to encircle with a ring-fence of authorial scepticism: 'This is what I was told, but I don't necessarily believe it. You have been warned.'

This is precisely the territory occupied by the literary genre now identified most clearly as 'Greek fiction', that is, the Greek novels (though it is important to remember that this group of texts was never identified with a single generic title in antiquity). Many of the early novels exploit the credibility-gap at the beginning of historical time, picking as heroes great figures from the mists of national legend, like Ninus and Semiramis.[29] These tend also to be figures from non-Greek legend, and are thus doubly protected from critical investigation. Chariton, whose story belongs very definitely to historical time, exploits a different kind of gap in the Thucydidean concept of history. His heroine's father is Hermocrates, the famous Sicilian general who was instrumental in the defeat of the Athenian expedition in Thucydides Bk. 7. But Thucydides' general has no family life – indeed, women are conspicuous by their absence in Thucydides. So by attaching his romance to Hermocrates' daughter, Chariton is fitting it neatly into 'real history' while

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[29] Martin Braun, *History and Romance in Graeco-Oriental Literature* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1938).

opening up a whole new area of private experience – especially women's experience – which history preferred to ignore.[30]

The novels also exploit the spaces at the edge of the geographical map. The romantic novelists show little or no interest in the physical marvels which concerned the geographers, but they all make use, one way or another, of exotic settings and extensive travel as a background to their heroes' adventures. Many of the novels bear ethnographic titles: *Ethiopika*, *Phoinikika*. Achilles Tatius presents himself as a Herodotean ethnographer, relating the story behind a striking picture discovered in the 'Phoenician' city of Sidon, beside the 'Assyrian sea': both epithets highlight Sidon's foreignness, as well as imparting an archaic air to the narrative.[31] Longus, too, though his travels take him no further than Lesbos, presents his story as the 'interpretation' of a picture spotted on a hunting trip – and his story (which manages to include the obligatory shipwreck) opens with a description of Mitylene romanticized as an exotic location.[32] Chariton and Xenophon, the two earliest of the extant novels, share a common pattern of voyaging which begins and ends in the familiar (Syracuse, Ephesus), but removes its protagonists for most of the plot to a series of exotic locations: Egypt, Syria, Babylon. The 'exotic' here is largely a narrative construction. For Xenophon's readers (and his story carries no indication that it is dated anywhere but their present, i.e. the first or second century CE), Egypt and Syria were populous and prosperous Roman provinces; but in the narrative world of the novel, they are empty, desolate landscapes devoid of inhabitants apart from bandits and shepherds. Chariton reconfigures his own homeland of Roman Caria as a Persian satrapy worked by chaingangs, and his Babylon is a fantasy city drawing on long-standing Greek constructions of the Orient, from Ctesias downward.[33]

The novels also make an intriguing and unexpected use of the more disturbing and contested space created by religious discourse – or rather, by the historians' refusal to give it direct credence. The aetiological framework used by many of the novelists might well have been an invitation to elaborate on the tales of the 'marvellous'

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[30] *Joseph and Aseneth*, of course, does the same thing with biblical history.
[31] Achilles Tatius 1.1ff., Reardon, 175: cf. Winkler's note ad loc.
[32] *Daphnis and Chloe*, 1.1. Reardon, 289: cf. Gill ad loc.
[33] On the role of travel in the novels of Chariton and Xenophon, see further L. C. A. Alexander, '"In journeyings often": Voyaging in the Acts of the Apostles and in Greek Romance' in *Luke's Literary Achievement: Collected Essays* (ed. C. M. Tuckett; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1995) 17–49; and *eadem*, 'Narrative Maps: Reflections on the Toponymy of Acts', in *The Bible in Human Society: Essays in Honour of John Rogerson* (JSOTSS 200; ed. M. Daniel Carroll R., D. J. A. Clines, P. R. Davies; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1995) 17–57.

such as were told at every Greek local shrine. The novels are certainly full of 'marvels', and their narratives are studded with expressions of religious awe and wonder – standard reactions to miraculous events – on the part of the bystanders.[34] But there is something self-mocking and deprecatory about all this. There are no real miracles here, only good stage-management: all the novelists' 'marvels' (including a series of 'resurrections' verging on the grotesque[35]) turn out to have a rational explanation. Perhaps there is also something obscurely comforting in the way these narratives effectively screen out the supernatural from real life. Despite their religious trappings, the novels' plane of action remains resolutely human. The gods have their place, but it is a familiar and acceptable one: divine oracles, or Fortune, may be invoked on occasion to move the plot forward; people who offend against Love are punished; a troubled heroine prays to Isis or Aphrodite for protection. The only real 'miracle' is the management of the plot, which turns far too often for modern tastes on un-foreseen coincidence. But these coincidences are not themselves occasions for 'marvelling', either by the characters in the narrative, or by its readers: as Morgan points out, ancient readers do not seem to have been concerned about the plausibility of the overall plot provided each episode is 'plausible'.

THE BOOK OF ACTS: FACT OR FICTION?

Where does all this leave us as readers of Acts? First, it now seems abundantly clear that we shall never solve the question of Acts' historicity by solving the genre question. 'Fact' and 'fiction' are not generic categories at all, and in ancient literature it is evident that the conventional markers of factuality (in any genre) were easily – and regularly – subverted. But it also seems clear that the narra-tive of Acts inhabits many of the spaces allocated to 'fiction' on the Greco-Roman cultural map. It draws on the scriptures of an exotic race, alluding freely to a whole set of characters and stories from a distant, barbarian past inaccessible to the historians of the Greek world. Geographically, too, the story is located at the edges of the Mediterranean map. It begins in the 'exotic' regions of Syria-Palestine, with a whole series of barbarian place-names to add

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[34] J. R. Morgan, 'Make-Believe and Make Believe: The Fictionality of the Greek Novels', in *Lies and Fiction*, 175–229.
[35] Bowersock, *Fiction as History*, ch. V.

authentic local colour. Like the novels, it bursts the confines of the
Mediterranean map by alluding briefly to travellers from even
further afield – Parthians, Medes, Elamites, the treasurer of an
Ethiopian queen. Its characters become travellers in their own
right, with a series of dramatic encounters with Greek and bar-
barian, culminating in a fully-fledged shipwreck scene recounted in
technicolour detail.[36]

Not that everything in Acts can be paralleled in the novels.[37] The
central event which powers its plot is not a *pathos erotikon* but a
prophetic mission laid on the characters in the opening scene. *Eros*
does not figure anywhere in the book, even negatively: contrast the
role of celibacy in some of the later apocryphal acts.[38] But the
characters have their own deity, who communicates his purposes
through a variety of divine agents: and here, too, the book fails to
confine itself to the approved limits of rationalistic history.
Religion is not something that can be screened out of the narrative
of Acts, and the author makes no attempt to do so. There is a
glimpse of the detached authorial voice at the beginning of the
book (Acts 1.1), but this reassuring frame collapses almost imme-
diately into the relentlessly supernatural scene of the Ascension.
The authorial voice never returns: Acts contains no authorial
comment, no 'they say' or 'it is said' to bracket its many reports of
miraculous events and divine guidance. Whatever the function of
the first person in the we-passages, it is not used in the
Herodotean fashion to provide comment on the narrated from the
perspective of a detached observer. On the contrary, this author
projects himself as a participant in at least some of the action who
explicitly shares the religious perspectives of his characters: cf.
16.10, where the narrator identifies himself with the group which
shares both in the theological interpretation of Paul's vision and
in the commission which it implies. A narrative which so openly
espouses a particular religious ideology certainly risks being classi-
fied by the educated ancient reader as 'myth', though it may be
recognised as an edifying one.

All of this suggests that, from the perspective of at least one
group of ancient readers (readers, that is, attuned to this Greek

[36] For a detailed and persuasive reading of Acts as novel, cf. R. I. Pervo, *Profit with Delight*
(Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987).

[37] Both the similarities and the differences argued in this paper are set out more fully in
Alexander, 'Voyaging' and 'Narrative Maps'.

[38] Contrast also the treatment of *eros* in Philostratus' *Life of Apollonius*: E. L. Bowie,
'Philostratus: Writer of Fiction', in *Greek Fiction: The Greek Novel in Context* (ed. J. R.
Morgan and R. Stoneman; London: Routledge, 1994) 193.

literary debate), Acts might well be classed at first sight as 'fiction'. Nevertheless, there are disturbing features about the narrative which make it difficult to sustain this classification. The 'exotic' setting does not quite live up to the expectations of the novel-reader. Syria-Palestine turns out to be neither bandit-infested wilderness nor pastoral countryside, but a network of cities and streets which exhibit much the same humdrum features as the rest of the Mediterranean world.[39] Travel takes place not in the archaic fantasy landscape of Greek romance but in the real, contemporary world of the Roman empire, and it is described in intensely (even boringly) realistic terms: unlike the novelists, this narrator takes the trouble to find out about winds and harbours, cargoes and ports of call. The shipwreck (and there is only one, as against Paul's three: 2 Cor 11.25) is described in dramatic but realistic terms – and there is no divine intervention, only a private vision to reassure the hero that the ship's passengers will survive. The miracles which punctuate the narrative also have unusual features for the Greek reader. Unlike the 'marvels' of Greek fiction, they are presented as real events of supernatural origin, not coincidences or dramatic fakes. In this respect Luke is perhaps closer to the 'strange but true' world of Phlegon of Tralles – except that Phlegon's *paradoxa* have no significance beyond the creation of a momentary sense of wonder, whereas Luke's are part of a religiously-charged narrative in which every event is seen by the characters as part of a divine plan. This narrative determinism has some parallels in the Greek novels, where an apparently random sequence of adventures can be interpreted as part of a divine schema (cf. e.g. Chariton, *Callirhoe* 8.1). But, unlike the novels, Acts provides no final resolution for its characters' *pathe*. It has an open-ended character which dissipates any feel of romantic closure: suffering and conflict are part of the agenda for the foreseeable future (Acts 20.29–30, 14.22), and Paul's trial narrative has no happy ending.

The more ethnographic aspects of Acts exhibit a similar ambivalence. The Greek reader of Acts might well seek some reassurance about the genuine antiquity of the 'writings' which are so often cited by the book's characters. We, of course, know that they are genuine – the Hebrew Scriptures are not fictitious inventions on Luke's part but real ancient documents (even if they are not as old as Luke thought they were). But, without prior knowledge of the Jewish community and its scriptures, how was the Greek reader to recognise this? Luke's contemporary Josephus is acutely

[39] Paul apparently feared bandits (2 Cor 11.26), but there are none in Acts.

aware that the mere assertion that Jewish history is based on ancient texts in a foreign language is not a sufficient defence against the imputation that it is fiction – especially not in Rome, at the end of a century which had seen a remarkable flurry of historical forgeries and fictions.[40] Josephus is forced to attack the presuppositions of the historical-critical enterprise (scepticism about ancient traditions, comparison of divergent stories, 'plausible' conjecture on rational grounds) precisely because it is this enterprise which pushes his own national history into the dubious border region of 'fiction'.[41] Unlike Josephus, however, Luke shows little if any awareness of the historiographical debate. Even in the preface, where Josephus ducks and weaves expertly to avoid flying shrapnel, Luke seems scarcely to be aware that he has strayed into a battle-zone.

Nevertheless, there is the preface, where Luke does assume (however briefly) the authorial persona which is largely lacking in biblical narrative. The opening sentence of the Gospel breathes a measured air of moderate rationalism which the ancient reader must have found deeply reassuring. Historians used words like *akribeia* and *autopsia*, it is true – but all of Luke's buzzwords can be paralleled across a much wider spectrum of Greek writing on technical subjects which values fidelity and accuracy in the transmission of ancient tradition as much as first-hand experience.[42] The language of the preface is business-like rather than academic: *pragmata* and *asphaleian* are paralleled most closely in official letters and reports, and even *autoptes* is found in a soldier's letter of the first century CE, where it seems to mean little more than 'an experienced traveller'.[43] This pragmatic tone may in the end contribute as much to the reassurance of the reader as any amount of historiographical protestation.[44]

So what, in the end, can we conclude about the status of Luke's work in the eyes of ancient readers? Would it be taken as fact, or as fiction? 'Ancient readers', of course, are not a homogenous group: and readers who shared Josephus' background knowledge of the Hebrew scriptures would probably have no difficulty in recognising Acts as a historical narrative in scriptural style. But for readers educated in the Greek classics, much of the narrative

[40] Bowersock, *Fiction as History*, ch. I.
[41] *Antiquities* 1.5, 10–12, 15–17; *Contra Apionem* 1.15–27, 45–56.
[42] Alexander, *Preface*, chs. 4–5.
[43] Alexander, *Preface*, 122, 138.
[44] Contrast Philostratus' use of his Damis source, which Bowie sees as consciously novelistic Bowie, 'Philostratus', 195.

content of Acts would place it in the danger-area of 'fiction' –
though with a disturbing undercurrent which suggests that it
might after all be fact. It deals with many of the topics which were
pushed into the convenient 'no-go areas' at the edges of the map of
verifiable 'fact' by Greek historians – distant places, non-Greek
traditions, private beliefs, supernatural events. Against this are
the realistic contemporary setting in a thoroughly Roman world,
the lack of a fantasy happy ending, and the sober, business-like
tone of the preface. But ultimately I suspect that the ancient
reader knew too much to rely solely on literary signals to assess
whether a narrative was 'fact' or 'fiction'. Generic signals of factu-
ality could too easily be mimicked or subverted, and writers of the
first and second centuries CE were exploring ever more ingenious
ways of 'playing with the ontological status of a narrative'.[45] Like
ourselves, ancient readers had to fall back on something outside
the text to assess the veracity of what they read.

   They might, like the readers of Philostratus, be able to draw on
sufficient prior knowledge of the book's main characters to
establish a shared presumption of the story's historical core.[46] They
might further, following the venerable tradition of Herodotus and
Thucydides, attempt to subject the stories they heard to the
common-sense critique of 'probable reasoning', which essentially
means assessing the plausibility of the new by reference to a world
already known. Rationalism, of course, has its limitations: proceed-
ing from the known to the unknown is a sound enough principle,
but it can create a scholasticism which makes it impossible to
accommodate any new data (as in the case of the circumnavigation
of Africa). The habitual scepticism of the historical-critical *persona*
created particular difficulties (then as now) for any narrative
of religious phenomena, a difficulty to which both Plutarch and
Josephus, in different ways, bear testimony. And the sophisticated
awareness of the possibility of fiction mimicking fact could lead to
a quite unwarranted scepticism about *all* claims to factuality.

   Alternatively – and this is perhaps the most likely scenario –
readers could rely on the social context in which a narrative was
first encountered to help them assess its factuality: 'only on a
written or printed page, torn of its context', as Bowie points out,
'does its reader have to resort to its content to establish its real

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[45] Bowie, 'Philostratus', 195.
[46] Bowie, 'Philostratus', 193. E. P. Sanders makes a similar point about Paul: E. P. Sanders,
Paul (Oxford: OUP, 1991) 15.

status'.[47] Luke's prefaces effectively collapse the distinction be-
tween outsider (observer) and insider (believer) which was so
important in the construction of the historian's critical *persona*.
This author is not only the receiver and arranger of traditions, but
one of the group (*hemin*) which has witnessed the 'accomplishment'
of the momentous 'business' he describes (Lk 1.1) – and, as he
makes clear in the second half of Acts, he has no scruple in
aligning himself with the insider-viewpoint of his main character.
His inscribed reader, Theophilus, is one who has already had some
instruction in the book's subject-matter, and must therefore
himself count in some sense as an 'insider'.[48] Within the epistemo-
logical space created by Luke's preface, in other words, there is
no real room for doubt as to the broadly factual status of his
narrative. This is 'committed' narrative of a type unusual in Greek
prose literature. Whether or not Luke was aware of the more
sophisticated historiographical debates in which Josephus partici-
pates (and I rather doubt that he was), he chose a different vehicle
for expressing something which to him was evidently a new and
significant viewpoint on the world. Acts is a narrative which both
implies and creates the presumption of a shared religious experi-
ence: and that is something difficult to accommodate within the
standard fact/fiction grid of Greek literature.

[47] E. L. Bowie, 'Lies, Fiction and Slander in Early Greek Poetry', in *Lies and Fiction*, 1–37,
on p. 6.
[48] Alexander, *Preface*, 139–42, 191–2.