The Political Science Reviewer • Volume 50, Number 2 • 2026

Political Freedom and Freedom of the Will in Herodotus' *History*: Against Compulsory Self-Interest and Divine Fatalism

Matthew K. Reising
University of Texas at Austin

In 510 BC Cleomenes I of Sparta led a unified force of Peloponnesians and Athenians against Hippias, the tyrant of Athens. Shortly after laying siege to Athens, a group of Peloponnesian soldiers happened to capture the family of Hippias. With his newfound political leverage, Cleomenes I gave Hippias an ultimatum: Either you abandon your tyranny and accept exile from Athens or your whole family will be executed. Hippias decided to flee to Ionia (and eventually Persia) to save his children and relatives. The Athenians, having finally shaken off tyranny thanks to Spartan support, then established a democracy committed to freedom and equality.[1] But more than that, as Naomi Campa argues, the Athenians created a regime that enshrined a particular kind of freedom, understood as "the ability to do 'whatever one wishes,'" or "to act on one's volition" in both a private and a public capacity.[2]

Several Herodotus scholars have argued that freedom—most especially Greek or Athenian freedom—is of central importance in the *History*.[3] One of Herodotus' chief goals, these scholars argue, is to delineate the various kinds of freedom possible in political life, including the external freedom of a city "from foreign subjugation," the internal freedom of a people "from tyranny or despotism,"[4] and even the individual or "positive" freedom of democratic citizens to do whatever they wish.[5] Others, however, have suggested that Herodotus is not so much concerned with freedom as its absence.

In contrast to this first group of scholars who view freedom as of ultimate importance to Herodotus, several scholars have argued that the *History* actually teaches that all political action is governed by some form of determinism, be it the irresistibly compelling force of perceived interest[6] or the notion of "divine foreordainment,"[7] where "all of human agency is thought to be determined from the outside."[8] Whichever of these two deterministic views is argued for, the conclusion of both groups of scholars is the same: Freedom, at least in the volitional sense spoken of by the Athenians, is impossible.

Scholars who maintain that Herodotus is committed to a politics of freedom tend to raise one of three possible defenses to the deterministic thesis. First, some scholars have argued that determinism and freedom are compatible. Ronald Osborne, for example, argues that the "localized political 'freedom' [examined by Herodotus] need not imply a release from the overarching metaphysical fact of fate, nor need courageous action in defense of such freedom be based on the belief that humans can actually alter or control their own destinies in any ultimate sense."[9] In offering this view, Osborne (contra Campa) maintains that freedom for Herodotus is a wholly collective or political phenomenon: Because freedom is primarily attributed to cities, and only incidentally to citizens, a city can still be said to be free even if all politics is determined by fate insofar as the freedom of a city means that the citizens therein are neither conquered nor ruled by a tyrant. Second, other scholars such as Ann Ward have argued that the relationship between human agency and divine intervention is best understood as a complex economy of knowledge and action rather than an immovable wheel of fortune. In Ward's view, Herodotus presents a world in which the gods are agents just like human beings, albeit more powerful ones. Insofar as humans can gain knowledge of themselves and the gods' character, plans, and mode of speech, they can respond accordingly and can even potentially alter the future (or, at least, the future as pronounced by an oracle).[10] Third and finally, Matthew Landauer has argued that the deterministic reading of the *History* creates contradictions between the theory

and practice of Herodotus' own thought. Landauer states, for example, that "it would not be worth considering the ways in which the politics of the Persian regime might have served as an obstacle to taking good counsel if Herodotus, in recounting such scenes, merely wished to show that the invasion of Greece was fated to fail."[11] In short, Landauer wonders whether a majority of the historian's political inquiries are rationally justified or even useful if he was a committed determinist.

This article offers a new defense of the centrality of freedom in Herodotus' political and historical thought, rejecting Osborne's attempted synthesis of political freedom and determinism on the grounds that recent scholarship has persuasively shown that Herodotus is just as interested in individual freedom as he is collective freedom.[12] Since Herodotus not only examines but also praises individual freedom,[13] and since individual freedom requires individual agency and volition, neither psychological nor divine determinism can be compatible with the fullness of Herodotus' political thought on freedom. What's more, attempts such as Osborne's to reconcile fatalism and freedom obscure the real views Herodotus has about the relationship between the human and the divine. For Herodotus, the existence and character of the traditional gods of the ancient world as elaborated by the various cities and poets is not rationally justified. In this regard, the account of the divine presented here partially breaks from that of Ward's. Unlike Ward, who argues that accurate knowledge of divine speech can help us to better interpret oracular pronouncements on fate, I argue that for Herodotus, examining the common opinions about the gods actually reveals how little humans know about the divine, a realization that subtly cuts against all dogmatic claims about divine fatalism on epistemological grounds.

Ultimately, this article builds on Landauer's contention that fatalistic interpretations of the *History* introduce a contradiction between the theory and the practice of Herodotus' work. And though Landauer's defense is fundamentally correct, his explication of the issue is at best provisional and in need of expansion. What follows argues that a didactic work such as Herodotus'

History, which makes recommendations for how to promote freedom and avoid tyranny, is coherent only if the reader of that history can learn and subsequently enact political changes. Otherwise, the only lesson of the rather prolix *History* is that knowledge of history is itself pointless and not worth pursuing, since all historical events are predetermined.[14]

To prove as much, the first section of this article examines the thesis of compulsory self-interest and argues that various passages of the *History* point to the real possibility of human altruism. The second and third sections then turn to a refutation of divine fatalism. The second section offers what I see as the strongest case for divine fatalism in Herodotus' *History*. It also clarifies the exact kind of fatalism spoken of in the *History* by comparing Herodotus' work with the poetry of Bacchylides. The third section then reconsiders the evidence in favor of divine fatalism from the perspective of the historian's own methodology. There, the various claims that Herodotus makes throughout the *History*, once seen in light of one another, are shown to actually call into question the very possibility of fatalism, or at least our knowledge of it. In short, this article argues that Herodotus intentionally presents an extreme view of divine fatalism within the *History* while simultaneously lacing his account with various contradictions that reveal a complex rejection of divine fatalism.[15] Indeed, the manner in which Herodotus undermines arguments about determinism actually points to what Herodotus perceives to be, in the words of Susan McWilliams, "the most important human unity—the ability to choose."[16]

Free Choice, Necessity, and the Compulsion of Perceived Interest

Throughout his account of the rise of the Persian Empire, Herodotus seems to regularly portray the Persian nobility as committed to what might be called psychological egoism, or the thesis that all action ultimately and necessarily stems from the perceived self-interest of the agent. This compulsory view of political life is typified by two Herodotean stories: Cyrus' initial founding of the Persian Empire and Darius' rise to power during the Persian

coup d'état of the Magian usurpers. Regarding the first, Herodotus presents the Persians at the outset of the *History* as conquered and enslaved to their northern neighbors in Media. To convince the Persians to revolt from the Median king Astyages, Cyrus ordered the Persians to toil for a whole day, then on the very next day he threw them a feast. When asked which of the two days they preferred, the Persians said they much preferred to feast than to toil. Having received this answer, Cyrus proclaimed, "Be willing to obey me and you will have both [feasts] and countless other good things without either work or slavery. . . . Now obey me and become free [ἐλεύθεροι]!"[17] Lindsay Rathnam notes of this passage that "the founding moment of the Persian empire makes plain that the Persians view the end of politics as the pursuit of collective self-interest, and that they take goodness of this end for granted."[18] That Cyrus does not appeal to the choiceworthiness of freedom for its own sake to convince the Persians to revolt, but rather the pleasures of a feast, suggests that they collectively view politics as driven by self-interested gain.

Second, and later on in the *History*, Herodotus presents Darius as seemingly transforming Cyrus' appeal to self-interest into a universal principle of human action. After joining a conspiracy to overthrow the Magi who had usurped the Persian throne, Darius presented the conspirators with an ultimatum. He explained that if they did not begin the coup d'état immediately, then "someone will give information to the Magian, investing [περιβαλλόμενος] himself for the sake of personal gain."[19] Because Darius was unwilling to be betrayed by another conspirator, he asserted that he would be the first to betray the group if they did not act with all haste. Darius then followed his threat with advice by encouraging the conspirators to ignore Persian custom, which prohibited lying, and instead deceive anyone who opposed them, since "liars" and "truth-tellers" both act for the sake of their own "gain [κέρδος]."[20] Between these two statements, Darius not only seems to suggest that all human action ultimately stems from considerations of interest but also encourages his fellow conspirators to openly profess as much. From Darius' speech, Stanley Rosen even goes so far as to

conclude that "the establishment of order depends upon self-interest, not the gods. . . . Gain is the link between chaotic origins and surface piety. *Gain replaces the gods*," since "the core of nobility is self-interest."[21]

While Herodotus would by no means deny that human beings often act from self-interest, other stories from the *History* emphasize the real ability human beings have to pursue the noble—that is, to genuinely engage in altruism, selflessness, or noble self-sacrifice. Herodotus provides the first example in the very midst of the conspiracy against the Magi, a placement that indicates its narrative function as a rebuke or complication of Darius' claim. Herodotus explains that a Persian named Prexaspes knew of the Magian takeover but had remained silent out of fear. Believing that Prexaspes was guided by self-interest, the Magi asked him to deliver a speech to the Persians that would confirm the legitimacy of their rule. Upon mounting the pulpit at the top of a tower, however, Prexaspes "forgot of his own free will [ἑκὼν ἐπελήθετο]" everything that the Magi had told him to say and instead told the Persians the whole truth—that the Magi had stolen the throne and that he had been complicit in their takeover.[22] Prexaspes concluded his speech by exhorting the Persians to win back the throne, then threw himself from the top of the tower.

Here, Prexaspes is presented by Herodotus as sacrificing his own life for the good of his country. Rather than pursue his own perceived interest, as the Magi expected him to do, he instead acted selflessly so that the Persians would come to know that their monarchy had been stolen. The Prexaspes story thereby complicates scholarly interpretations that see Darius' speech as proving the compulsory nature of self-interest, insofar as Prexaspes provides an example of noble sacrifice. What's more, this juxtaposition of the Prexaspes story with Darius' speech on gain invites a closer inspection of Darius' words. A more careful analysis reveals that though Darius is presenting an exaggerated (and potentially hyperbolic) appeal to self-interest, he is not necessarily denying the freedom of the will. After all, Darius

refers to the "free will [ἑκὼν]" of the Persian guards a few lines later in his speech, guards he believes will let the conspirators into the palace unchallenged.[23] But even were it admitted that Darius was a proponent of psychological egoism, his speech is not presented by Herodotus as persuasive to the other Persian conspirators. After Darius finished his speech, Herodotus explains, Gobryas spoke and argued that the conspirators would not have "a nobler [κάλλιον] opportunity to either recover the rule [τὴν ἀρχήν] or, if we cannot retake it, to die trying," after which Herodotus notes that the other Persians "all approved what *he* [meaning Gobryas] said."[24] As has been recently noted (though not as a refutation of psychological egoism), "Gobryas casts his vote for Darius's plan but makes clear that he disagrees with Darius's reasoning: the 'personal advantage [κέρδος]' (3.72.4) that was central to Darius's appeal is replaced by the pursuit of noble action," meaning that "[n]obility, not private gain, wins out for the majority of the conspirators."[25]

Other examples throughout the *History* reinforce this pro-altruism interpretation. As Ward notes, Herodotus offers two key examples that defy any "universal claim about the selfishness and enmity" of all human beings:

> For instance, at Thermopylae, three hundred Spartan hoplites under the command of Leonidas, together with a small group of Thespians, well aware of the end that awaited them, marched out against the Persians of their own free will, and died together in battle (VII.219–223). . . . [And, similarly,] the Athenian refusal to give earth and water to Darius and their decision to fight at Marathon, (VI.103–16, VII.133), showing their willingness to confront the power of Persia, indicates that the Athenian *demos* is dedicated to something higher than merely physical security and pleasure, namely freedom.[26]

To these two examples that Ward provides, it is worth adding a third that more decisively proves the point. At the beginning of

Book IX, Herodotus recounts a speech given by Athenian messengers before the Spartan assembly. The Athenians explained that Xerxes had offered to make an alliance with them but that they refused. They explained their actions in this way:

> Out of shame [αἰδεσθέντες] before the God of the Greeks, and thinking it terrible to betray Greece, we did not consent [οὐ καταινέσαμεν], but refused, though we are being unjustly treated by the Greeks and left in the lurch, and though we know [ἐπιστάμενοί] full well that it would be more to our profit [κερδαλεώτερον] to come to an agreement with the Persian than to make war. But we will not come to an agreement of our own free will [ἑκόντες]. For our part, we will act in all honesty towards the Greeks.[27]

This passage is remarkable, not only because the Athenians claim that they voluntarily act out of a sense of duty but also because they expressly state that their actions were contrary to their perceived interest. The Athenians thereby articulate in speech what both they (and the Persian Prexaspes) performed in deed: an altruistic action that thereby undermines any claim to the compulsion of perceived self-interest.

> Thus, while Herodotus does offer an implicit analysis of the notion that all political action is motivated by perceived self-interest, it is not the view he ultimately adopts. In short, Herodotus lets the historical deeds speak for themselves, interlacing examples of noble self-sacrifice within his narratives where something like the compulsion of self-interest is put forward by his characters. This is, of course, not to deny that various figures in the *History* are motivated by self-interest, such as Xerxes' open proclamation of self-interest in invading Greece.[28] Rather, the suggestion is that if anyone is found to be pursuing self-interest, it is because they freely choose to do so.

The Fates, Destiny, and the Intervention of the Gods

Regarding the fatalistic view, three stories in the *History* provide the strongest evidence that Herodotus is himself a proponent of divine fatalism. First is Xerxes' seemingly divine dream on the eve of the invasion of Greece. Second are the oracular pronouncements that led to the Spartan conquest of Tegea. Third and perhaps most important is the life of Croesus and his exchange with the Delphic oracle before Cyrus the Great conquered his country. While several other stories within the *History* deal with oracles—such as the pronouncement of Cambyses' death in Ecbatana[29] or the debate over whether the Athenians should abandon their city and flee to their ships[30]—these three stories in particular span the three major civilizations Herodotus considers (Persia, Sparta, and Athens) and represent typical examples of his treatment of fate. After using these stories to establish here the strongest argument in favor of divine fatalism, in the next section I draw out what I see as Herodotus' criticism of fatalism.

Three Herodotean Stories on Fate

Regarding the first story, Herodotus suggests in Book VII that the second Persian invasion of Greece was destined by the gods. Herodotus explains that shortly after Xerxes ascended to the throne, the Athenian diviner Onomacritus brought him a prophecy that stated that "the Hellespont had to be [χρεὸν] bridged by a man of Persia" during a great expedition against Greece.[31] Shortly after receiving this oracle, however, Xerxes discussed the matter with his counsel and decided, per the recommendation of Artabanus, not to march against Greece. The next two nights, however, Xerxes dreamed that a large and beautiful man appeared to him and threatened his destruction if he did not invade Greece.[32] Xerxes right away summoned Artabanus and explained his dream, stating, "I want [ἐόντα] to do what you have advised, but I am not able [οὔκων δυνατός] to do what I want [βουλόμενος]. For ever since changing my mind, a vision keeps coming in my dreams and will not allow me to do as you advise—just now it threatened me and disappeared."[33] To decipher whether the

dream was really from the gods or not, Xerxes asked Artabanus to put on the kingly robes and sleep in the royal bed, thinking that if such a dream were from the gods, then it would surely show up to Artabanus. At first Artabanus was hesitant to go along with the plan. He told Xerxes that dreams are nothing but "the anxieties dealt with during the day [τις ἡμέρης φροντίζει], and in the days before this dream we have had the expedition very much in our hands."[34] In the end, however, he relented. After Artabanus fell asleep in the king's bed, the same vision appeared to him and threatened his life. The next day Artabanus advised the king to invade Greece, claiming that the expedition was now "compelled by a god [θεήλατος]."[35]

Later on in the *History*, a Persian nobleman offers an approximate restatement of this story as proof that the decree of the gods cannot be changed. Herodotus explains that a banquet was held by the Theban Attaginus before the battle of Platea, to which several Persian noblemen were invited. A Persian, who happened to be dining next to the Boeotian Thersander, began to talk about the outcome of the coming battle. According to Herodotus, who claims that he was told as much by Thersander himself, the Persian said this during the dinner:

> "I wish to leave behind a statement of my thoughts, so that you may be forewarned and deliberate profitably for your own safety. . . . Of all these Persians, in a short time you will see but a few of them remain." As the Persian said these things, he wept bitterly. In wonder at these words, Thersander replied, "Should you not tell this to Mardonius and these other notable Persians around us?" But in reply the Persian said, "Sir, that which is necessitated [δεῖ] to happen by a god is impossible to prevent, for even what is credibly stated, nobody would be willing to be persuaded. And many of the Persians know this, but we follow bound by necessity [ἀναγκαίῃ]. The most hated pain for a person is this: to have prudence [φρονέοντα] without holding any sway [over affairs]."[36]

For this Persian nobleman—and for many of the Persians—the will of the gods (rather than human choice) seems to be held as the ultimate determiner of political events. For this reason, Jonas Grethlein argues that the Persian nobleman's view is Herodotus' own: "[I]n the end, as the dreams of Xerxes reveal, human beings are at the mercy of the gods. Even with history as *magistra vitae*, the future remains unpredictable."[37]

Regarding the second story, Herodotus recounts the tale of Lichas and Orestes' bones in Book I of the *History*. After Lycurgus had instituted his reforms and died, the Spartans came to desire war with Arcadia and so went to the Delphic oracle to ask Apollo what they ought to do to win. The oracle responded, "You ask for Arcadia, but [I] do not grant it. . . . I give you Tegea to beat with your feet in dancing, and with a rope to measure her beautiful plains to your fill."[38] So the Spartans marched on Tegea instead, trusting in the oracle. But, as Herodotus reports, the Spartans were defeated in war and many of them were enslaved. The oracle was fulfilled, however, since the captured Spartans were then forced to beat with their feet and measure with rope the fields of Tegea, not as conquerors, but as workers. Having failed to conquer Tegea, the Spartans return to Delphi to ask what god they should propitiate to defeat Tegea. When the oracle responded that they should search out and recover the bones of Orestes, they inquired again where those bones might be found. The priestess then explained that the bones were at the intersection of two "winds" driven by compulsion, where "blow and reverberates counter-blow, and woe lies upon woe."[39] The Spartans were unable to decipher the oracle for some time until finally the Spartan Lichas "furnished the answer through a combination of luck and wisdom [καὶ συντυχίῃ χρησάμενος καὶ σοφίῃ]."[40] By luck, Lichas came upon a smithy in Tegea and, after speaking with its owner about a coffin he had found, came to realize that the bellows were the compelled winds, the anvil and the hammer the blow reverberating counter-blow, and the iron being welded the woe laid on woe, since iron in war leads to the misery of man. After deciphering the oracle's true meaning by recognizing its metaphorical nature, Lichas purchased the smithy

and brought the bones to Sparta, securing the city's rise to prominence and conquest of Tegea—all as the oracle had foretold.[41]

The third and final story—the life of Croesus and his exchange with the oracle at Delphi—is perhaps the most important Herodotean *logos* on fate insofar as it is the most cited by scholars. The story goes something like this: When Croesus the king of Lydia saw that Cyrus the Great had overthrown the Median Empire, he inquired of the Delphic oracle whether he should go to war with Cyrus. According to Herodotus, the Delphic oracle responded that if he waged war on Persia, then "he would destroy a great empire" and that Croesus would continue reign so long as the Medes did not have a "mule" as their king.[42] Trusting in this response, Croesus marched against Persia and to his doom. Croesus was defeated in the ensuing war and the Lydian Empire (the empire the oracle was deceptively referring to) was destroyed.[43] But according to Herodotus' narrative, the Lydian Empire had been fated for destruction long before Croesus even took the throne and consulted the oracle of Delphi, since five generations earlier Gyges had usurped the throne of Lydia from Candaules, the rightful king. After this usurpation, the oracle of Delphi proclaimed that the family of Gyges would reign for five generations, or until the time of Croesus, and then they would face destruction.[44] Between these two oracles, Herodotus seems to present the life of Croesus as anything but freely lived.

Fate was not, however, a monolithic concept in the ancient world: Competing notions of fate and the divine can be found in different ancient texts. To avoid simply attributing the most extreme position to Herodotus and then refuting it, which would amount to a strawman, we need to compare the way fate is discussed in the *History* with other ancient sources. It is especially helpful to contrast Herodotus' presentation of the conversation between Croesus and the oracle to the alternative version found in Bacchylides' *Third Epinician Ode*. While both stories follow a similar pattern (the capture of Sardis, a reconsideration of the Delphic oracle, and the learning of some lesson), some crucial details differ and thereby point to alternative understandings of the relationship

between the world and the divine, thus providing greater clarity on Herodotus' view.

A Comparative Account of the Fate of Croesus

In his *Third Epinician Ode*, which is addressed to Hiero the tyrant of Syracuse, Bacchylides recounts the story of Croesus and points to his pious generosity as an example for Hiero to emulate. Bacchylides' version of the Croesus story goes as follows:

> Let god—god!—be adorned, for that is the best [kind of] bliss [ὄλβων]. For indeed at the time of the ruler of horse-taming Lydia, after Zeus had fulfilled the fated [πεπρωμέναν] judgement and Sardis was ravaged by an army of Persians, Croesus was protected by Apollo of the golden lyre. And on that unexpected day, Croesus . . . had a pyre built in front of his bronze-walled courtyard, and climbed it . . . [and then] he shouted: "mighty [ὑπέρβιε] spirit, where is the grace of the gods? Where is lord Apollo, son of Leto? The palace of Alyattes is destroyed. . . . What was once hated is loved. Now, to die is the sweetest thing." . . . [But then] Zeus sent a dark cloud and put out the yellowed flame. For nothing is incredulous [ἄπιστον] that the god brings about with care. Then Delos-born Apollo bore the old man to the Hyperboreans and settled him there because of his piety . . . since he had sent to the holiest Pytho the greatest gifts of any mortal.[45]

This account of Cyrus' conquest of Lydia is dominated by the theme of divine intervention: Sardis is fated by Zeus to be destroyed, the death of Croesus is averted by means of Apollo's divine intervention, and the ultimate lesson of the story that Hiero is meant to learn is that true bliss is found in adorning not oneself but the gods. On this point, Emmet Robbins insightfully comments that "the translation of Croesus to the land of the Hyperboreans by Apollo at the end of the story suggests the requital of piety and continued life for the great ruler. . . . The reward for virtue is made

explicit in Apollo's saving of Croesus from death . . . [and, as Pindar, suggests] a doctrine of a happy life after death for the righteous."[46] For Bacchylides the world is governed by the fates, which are to some extent malleable by a system of divine favors or quid pro quo. Bacchylides thereby suggests that the only refuge available to humankind is personal salvation as found in the pious life: Because the gods rule over everything, both big and small, piety becomes the most important virtue. Hence, while Croesus could have done nothing to avert the fate of Lydia, Apollo was able to save Croesus as a reward for his ardent devotion.

Herodotus' telling of the Croesus story diverges from Bacchylides' in significant ways. For example, according to Herodotus it is Cyrus who places the Lydian king on a pyre, and it is not Zeus but Apollo who puts out the flame.[47] What's more, while both Bacchylides and Herodotus present Croesus as doubting the gratitude of the divine, the two stories diverge sharply from there. Unlike in Bacchylides, Herodotus' Croesus is not miraculously whisked away from the fire to a peaceful life among the Hyperborean. Instead, he is enslaved to Cyrus.[48] In this regard, Herodotus appears to be even more fatalistic than Bacchylides—or, at least, Herodotus presents a far more extreme form of fatalism. The implication is that a life spent in devotion to the gods cannot bring salvation or that there is no divine economy of quid pro quo. At best, piety and sacrifice can provide a few extra years as a slave. In the *History*, the seeming futility of divine propitiation and the lack of miraculous salvation spurs Croesus to resent Apollo and blame the god for deceiving him into invading Persia.[49]

But the most striking difference between Herodotus and Bacchylides is that in the *History* Croesus is permitted by Cyrus to travel to Delphi to litigate his complaint against Apollo. The exchange between Croesus and Delphi is entirely unique to Herodotus and begins with Croesus sending messengers to lay his chains before Delphi's priestess and to ask if Apollo was not ashamed for inciting him to march against the Persians. The priestess gave the following two-part response:

> It is impossible for someone—even for a god—to alter the decree of fate. Croesus paid the penalty for the misdeed of his ancestor of five generations prior, who, despite being a bodyguard of the Heraclidea, abided the treachery of a wily woman, slew his master, and took his honor, which was not befitting for him. And Loxias [(Apollo)] was eager that the destruction of Sardis should happen during the time of Croesus' children and not during Croesus' own, but he was unable to alter the course of the fates. Yet what they did allow him, he both willingly gave and accomplished [good for Croesus]; for he delayed the capture of Sardis by three years. . . . And second, he prevented the burning of Croesus [on the pyre].[50]

At first glance, the statement of the Pythoness seems to endorse the Bacchylidean view of political life. In truth, however, Herodotus' Pythia again seems to go even further than Bacchylides' Pythia in her pronouncement about the fixity of fate. For Bacchylides and other ancient poets such as Homer and Pindar, fate was something fulfilled by the gods. In fact, the poets often suggested that Zeus could alter fate entirely, even though he would never do so.[51] In contrast to this view, however, Herodotus has his Delphi pronounce (without qualification) that not even a god can change the dictates of fate. This claim is seemingly proved by the idea that Apollo was capable only of "delaying" the capture of Sardis by a few years (even though the original oracle given to Gyges specified only the generation of his family's downfall and never foretold the exact year of Lydia's destruction). In short, the narrative of Herodotus goes out of its way to highlight that Apollo's delay did not alter the dictates of fate in any meaningful way: Candaules' family (the Heraclidea) still received their revenge against Gyges through the downfall of his fifth-generation descendants.

Yet at the same time that Herodotus' account seems to place extreme restrictions on the freedom of action of both the gods and human beings, it also seems to expand the possibilities for human freedom of choice beyond those limits set by Bacchylides.

Immediately after the Pythoness gave this answer, Herodotus introduces a second part to her response:

> [The Priestess continued:] "But regarding the [specific] oracle that was given [to him], Croesus is not correct to find fault with it. For Loxias had foretold this: 'If Croesus waged war against the Persians, he would destroy a great empire.' Now respecting this proclamation, if he intended [μέλλοντα] to be well advised, he should have sent to ask which of the two empires was spoken of, his own empire or Cyrus's. But he did not understand what was spoken or ask again, and so let him blame himself."[52]

This second portion of the Pythia's response differs sharply from Bacchylides' telling of the story. According to these comments, Croesus' punishment came about, not because of fate, but because he failed to understand the oracle's pronouncements. The suggestion seems to be that Croesus was conquered because despite being in possession of an oracle that prophesied the truth, he was blinded to its true meaning by his overly simplistic mode of interpreting divine speech. The oracle seems to confirm as much by ending its rebuke in this way:

> "And even when Croesus asked that last question of the oracle and Loxias gave him the answer regarding the mule, even this Croesus did not understand. For that mule was indeed Cyrus, who was from two parents of dissimilar classes, of whom the mother was better and the father inferior. . . ." And when Croesus heard this, he agreed that the fault was his own and not the god's.[53]

The Pythia's advice suggests—indeed, the very presence of such advice within the story suggests—that Croesus could have and in fact would have altered his fate had he merely cultivated wisdom or understanding.[54] In this regard, the contrast between Herodotus and Bacchylides is especially helpful because it draws out a

seeming confusion within Herodotus' story. Because Herodotus has the oracle of Delphi present such an extreme view of fate, the subsequent suggestion from the very same oracle that Croesus could have changed his fate is all the more shocking and incongruous.

In *Herodotus and the Philosophy of Empire*, Ward takes the tensions between the first and second halves of the Pythia's response as an indication that Croesus' simplistic approach to speech is the true cause of his downfall. As she argues, "The problem with Croesus is that he did not step back and reflect upon the various meaning that the word 'empire'" or "'mule'" could refer to, and so he failed to grasp that speech "is not only complex but sometimes metaphorical."[55] If Herodotus' Croesus had simply understood that he needed to ask the oracle for clarification—if he had simply known himself and the nature of the oracle better—then he would not have destroyed his own empire. But this would mean that Croesus had a means within his power to secure his own safety that was far more accessible than the system of divine favors that Bacchylides put forward. Croesus did not have to spend his life dedicating his wealth to Delphi to receive divine favor. Instead, he needed only to attend to the latent and varied complexities in interpreting speech. On this reading, the central lesson of Herodotus' version of the Croesus story is, not that all historical events are dependent on the whim of the gods, but that humans can (at least minimally) shape events so long as they are willing to approach political circumstances from the standpoint of critical inquiry, a process that entails complex acts of deliberation and conscious self-reflection.

Ward's account of the importance of interpreting speech sheds much light on Herodotus' project in the *History* and undoubtedly helps to defend the centrality of freedom against those who see Herodotus as a committed fatalist. It also helps to illuminate various other passages in the *History* where the meaning of an oracle is hotly debated.[56] However, her argument does not perfectly refute every possible objection that a fatalist might raise. After all, there are *logoi* in the *History* where a portent or oracle seems to be

correctly interpreted and where an attempt is made to alter the future, though the outcome remains the same. This is exactly what happens, for example, in the story of Amasis, Polycrates, and the signet ring.[57]

The following section adopts Ward's contention about the importance of interpreting complex speech but applies the argument retroactively to the words of Herodotus in the *History* to gain a better understanding of his view of the divine.[58] Having shown in this section that Herodotus' *History* presents a rather extreme view of fatalism, this article shows in the next section the various ways that Herodotus undercuts the likelihood of this extreme view.

Herodotus' Profound Questioning of Public Theology

Before meaningfully assessing Herodotus' views about the possibility of divine fatalism, we must first attend to his express statements about the limits of human knowledge regarding the gods.

Herodotus' Limited Divine Epistemology

According to Herodotus, all men have "equal knowledge [ἴσον . . . ἐπίστασθαι]" about the gods, and so, out of seeming piety, he relates divine matters only insofar as his narrative account "forces [ἐξαναγκαζόμενος]" him to do so.[59] In fact, Herodotus not only says that he "omits [ἐπιλήθομαι]" of his own "free will [ἑκὼν]" certain details about the gods from his *History*,[60] he also states—and in one of his very few chapters on methodology—that he finds few of the religious or mythological stories he recounts in his *History* to be credible.[61] Herodotus thereby casts doubt on and questions the veracity of public theology. Herodotus accuses the Egyptian priests, for example, of being liars who "falsify [παρατρέπουσι]" historical records,[62] something that is especially shocking, since the Egyptians believed, per their historical records, that the gods once ruled over Egypt.[63] More important, however, is that Herodotus also regularly states throughout Book II that he considers several aspects of Egyptian religion to be impious and ignoble, and it is for this reason he will not relate what they believe.[64]

Despite his epistemological claim that all men have equal knowledge about the gods, Herodotus' subtle criticisms of Egypt's public theology suggest that notable differences exist between the theology of the Egyptians (the supposed originators of religion[65]) and the theology of other civilizations. Thus whereas the Greeks considered Heracles to be a man who became a god, the Egyptians denied any possibility of apotheosis.[66] The Egyptians believed that the gods took the form of animals, whereas the Persians believed that the gods were elemental and never incorporeal.[67] The Greeks believed that the gods want the dead to be burned, whereas other nations believed the dead should be buried,[68] embalmed,[69] or even eaten.[70] These differences, intentionally juxtaposed by Herodotus, call into question the veracity of many of the theological stories recounted in the *History*; as Rathnam points out, Herodotus often places "the conventional or traditional alongside narrative strands that challenge it," thereby forcing the reader "to grapple with the complexity of the world as it is."[71] That is to say that when all these conflicting statements are viewed together, it is clear that when Herodotus claims "all men know equally about the gods," he means that they know equally *as little* about the gods, not equally as much.[72]

This is not to say that Herodotus was an atheist, nor that he denied that human beings could have any knowledge of the gods. In Book II, after all, Herodotus seems to suggest (without criticism) that the Pelasgians held something like a natural religion: They worshipped nameless "gods [θεοὺς]" on the mere belief that something "set all things in order [κόσμῳ θέντες τὰ πάντα πρήγματα]" and "arranged [νομὰς]" everything.[73] My argument, rather, is that Herodotus was deeply skeptical of the mythological stories presented by the various civilizations he examined, and hence he believed that human beings were rather limited in their divine knowledge. Hs goal in the *History* is not to simply present what he believes but, as he himself states, to presents what he has heard: "I must tell what is said, but I am not at all required to believe it, and this rule holds true for the whole of my account."[74] In short, by calling into question many of these mythical or

religious stories throughout the *History*, Herodotus thereby teaches his reader how to approach divine matters in their own analyses.[75]

After all, several nations attribute to divine intervention various events that Herodotus himself explains according to natural processes.[76] He notes, for example, that a storm hit the Persian fleet near Magnesia, which the Magi abated by sacrificing to Thetis and the Nereids. After stating as much, however, Herodotus immediately undercuts this claim by musing, "[O]r perhaps it simply stopped on its own [ἢ ἄλλως κως αὐτὸς ἐθέλων ἐκόπασε]."[77] He makes a similar comment in his examination of Thessaly. According to the Thessalians, Poseidon created the valley they live in by splitting a mountain in half. Herodotus, by contrast, states that "this split between the mountain, it seems to me [ἐμοὶ φαίνεται εἶναι], is clearly the work of an earthquake [σεισμοῦ]."[78] Elsewhere, Herodotus even goes so far as to say (in his own name, "I say [ἐγὼ λέγω] . . .") that Homer and Hesiod "created [ποιήσαντες]" Greek theology, "gave [δόντες]" the gods their names, "divided [διελόντες]" the gods from one another, and "described [σημήναντες]" their forms.[79] Much like the Egyptian priests who falsified historical records for their own benefit, Herodotus notes, Homer changed the stories he presented to make for better poetry.[80] As K. Scarlett Kingsley observes, Herodotus thereby presents "a new critical view of truth claims alongside the demotion of traditional poetry's authority."[81]

Three Vignettes of Fate, Revisited

Having clarified Herodotus' skepticism of public theology, this article puts us in a better position to analyze Herodotus' treatment of fate in the three stories outlined in the previous section: first, the prophecy that Xerxes was fated to invade Greece; second, the Spartan dependence on oracles to conquer Tegea; and third, the confrontation Croesus has with the oracle at Delphi. Herodotus purposefully complicates the presentation of fate in each of these stories in the same way that he questions the veracity of various public theologies: by (1) questioning the honesty of historians or his informants,

(2) providing alternative natural explanations, or (3) pointing out tensions or confusions within the accounts of the divine.

First, when Herodotus' account of Xerxes' fatalistic invasion of Greece is read against the backdrop of his critique of public theology, different elements stand out. Notably, Herodotus prefaces his consideration of Xerxes' invasion by recounting Onomacritus's prophecy that the Hellespont had to be bridged by a man of Persia. In the very same paragraph, however, Herodotus undercuts the credibility of Onomacritus in the same way that he undercuts the credibility of the Egyptian priests and Homer. Onomacritus, Herodotus explains, had been banished from Athens for falsifying oracles and prophecies and had been brought to Persia (and paid) by the Pisistratidae to persuade Xerxes to invade Greece.[82] And just as Herodotus casts doubt on the veracity of Onomacritus' prophecy, so too he questions the veracity of Xerxes' dream. There, Herodotus had stated the following: "[I]n the night Xerxes *allegedly* [κου] saw, as the Persians say [ὡς λέγεται ὑπὸ Περσέων], this vision: it *seemed* [ἐδόκεε] to Xerxes" that a large and beautiful man was threatening him.[83] Here, the inclusion of the Ionic Greek word κου (equivalent to που in the Attic dialect) is important because it serves as an expression of doubt regarding the possibility of such a dream. Herodotus thereby distances himself from the dream story and instead attributes it to the Persians, presumably the Persian noblemen or chroniclers whom he met during his travels. And in doubting the veracity of this claim, Herodotus thereby sets himself against the fatalistic view expressed by the Persian nobleman at the symposium with Thersander.[84]

Herodotus likewise includes textual clues in the story of Orestes' bones and Sparta's conquest of Tegea that put distance between his own view and the fatalistic story being told. Just as Herodotus explains other seemingly divine events by means of natural causes, such as the natural movements of the weather or earthquakes, so too at the very end of his narrative Herodotus offers an alternative account of Sparta's conquest of Tegea. Herodotus concludes the story of Orestes' bones in this way: "[A]nd by the time of the conquest of Tegea, the Spartans had already conquered

most of the Peloponnese [ἤδη δέ σφι καὶ ἡ πολλὴ τῆς Πελοποννήσου ἦν κατεστραμμένη]."[85] Here, Herodotus does not just point to the possibility that the Spartans conquered Tegea because they had achieved military superiority (rather than divine support)—he leaves this possibility as his final word on the matter. In short, Herodotus suggests that the conquest of Tegea was the natural result of a stronger power attacking a weaker power, a conquest that happened to coincide with the fulfillment of an oracle.

Third, Herodotus' presentation of the conversation Croesus has with the Delphic oracle should be read in light of the historian's later examination of the oracle's origins at Dodona. Herodotus provides two diverging accounts of the Greek oracle's origins. According to the Egyptians, the oracle was founded by an Egyptian priestess who had been kidnapped by Phoenicians and sold as a slave to the Greeks at Dodona.[86] According to the priestesses and the servants at the temple of Dodona themselves, however, the oracle was founded by a black dove that landed on an oak tree and began to prophesy.[87] "I myself think," Herodotus then concludes, that an Egyptian priestess was enslaved and sold to the Greeks, and "being so enslaved, she set up a shrine in honor of Zeus under an oak that grew there," after which "she learned the Greek language and established a place of prophecy."[88] Herodotus then removes the contradiction between the two tales in this way:

> I think that the women were called by the Dodonaeans "doves" because they were barbarians, and so they seemed to the people of Dodona to sound like birds. After a time, as soon as the woman talked intelligibly, they said that "the bird spoke with a human voice." As long as she talked her own barbarian language, she seemed to them to speak like a bird. How, after all, could a dove speak with a human voice? That they said that the dove was black indicates that the woman was an Egyptian.[89]

It is remarkable that Herodotus simply denies the possibility of any miraculous or magical event in order to remove the contradiction

between the two stories. In reconciling the two stories through rational inquiry, however, Herodotus thereby implies that the oracle at Dodona is ignorant about its true origins. In doing so, Herodotus calls into question—much as he did with the Egyptian priests—the certainty of the knowledge held by those who run the oracles and temples across Greece.

What Herodotus makes explicit in his examination of the origins of the Oracle of Dodona in Book II, however, he leaves implicit in his consideration of the conversation Croesus has with the oracle at Delphi. Just as the oracle at Dodona is confused about its own origins (despite that it purports to have access to divine knowledge), so too the oracle at Delphi is confused about its own proclamations on fate. Or, more accurately, Herodotus suggests that the human beings who run the oracle are themselves confused about the nature of the gods they claim to represent. This is why Croesus is presented as both bound by fate and not bound by fate, both blamed for losing his empire by misinterpreting the oracle and exculpated from losing it by the knowledge of his ancestor's sins, and so on.[90] Herodotus' presentation raises questions that retroactively impinge on the authority of the oracle and call into question its accuracy in presenting the divine. In place of both, Herodotus points to a natural explanation: for the one, that birds cannot speak as humans do; and for the other, that humans are naturally ignorant about the gods (and, hence, naturally ignorant of divine fatalism).

While the foregoing interpretation is in some sense radical insofar as it calls into question the credibility of oracles—even if it doesn't call into question the very existence of divine beings—it also comports with other comments made by Herodotus throughout the *History*. For instance, Croesus himself is presented as testing various oracles before deciding on his devotion to Delphi. And, according to Herodotus, of all the oracles Croesus tested, he found only two to be credible: Delphi and Amphiarans.[91] (Herodotus' unstated implication is that the other oracles were *not* credible.) Elsewhere Herodotus notes that the oracles are often bribed to falsify their pronouncements,[92] and he even describes them as

having ulterior political motives.[93] Herodotus thereby warns his readers not to blindly accept the commands or pronouncements of oracles and prophesiers, or, in his own words, not to "foolishly [εὐηθέστατον]" and uncritically accept those who claim to be supported by the divine.[94] But in arguing as much, Herodotus also subtly warns his readers against blindly accepting oracular pronouncements about destiny and fate.

Conclusion

Throughout, this article has built on the work of Landauer and Ward to show that deterministic interpretations of Herodotus create a dissonance between the professed goal of the *History* and his own understanding of political life. As argued here, Herodotus' rejection of a determinism becomes especially clear when close attention is given to how he writes, or how his careful juxtaposition of seemingly contradicting stories or comments tends to undermine fatalistic readings of the *History*. Herodotus does makes regular reference to fate (χρή) and necessity (ἄνάγκη) at various places throughout the *History*,[95] but as shown, these uses are complicated by other passages in which he speaks of the limits of human knowledge or free will (ἐκών).[96] In short, prioritizing Herodotus' manner of writing—or reading the historical examples he provides in light of his methodology—offers us clearer insights into what the author of the *History* himself thought. In this regard, my analysis has not necessarily refuted determinism as a viable philosophical system. Rather, this article shows only that Herodotus rejects determinism, be it in the form of psychological egoism or divine fatalism. But insofar as my reading of Herodotus neither denies the existence of the divine nor considers common ancient opinions about the gods to be held by Herodotus as certain or authoritative, it opens the door for a far more nuanced reading of the *History*.

Notes

1. All citations to Herodotus' *History* are from the Oxford Classical Texts *Herodoti Historiae*, *editio tertia, tomus prior et posterior*, trans. Carolus Hude (Oxonii e Typographeo Clarendoniano, 1927), and all translations

are my own; see 5.78. See also Emily Baragwanath, "A Noble Alliance: Herodotus, Thucydides, and Xenophon's Procles," in *Herodotus and Thucydides*, ed. Edith Foster and Donald Lateiner (Oxford University Press, 2012), 316–44, at 324.

2. Naomi T. Campa, *Freedom and Power in Classical Athens* (Cambridge University Press, 2024), 19.
3. Donald Lateiner, *The Historical Method of Herodotus* (University of Toronto Press, 1989), 15; Seth Benardete, *Herodotean Inquiries* (St. Augustine's Press, 2009), 211; Norma Thompson, *Herodotus and the Origins of the Political Community* (Yale University Press, 1996), 110–11; and Hans-Peter Stahl, "Herodotus and Thucydides on Blind Decisions Preceding Military Action," in *Herodotus and Thucydides*, ed. Edith Foster and Donald Lateiner (Oxford University Press, 2012), 125–53, at 137.
4. Matthew K. Reising, "The King's House or the Tyrant's Palace? Rethinking Persia in Herodotus' History," *Polis* 41, no. 2 (2024): 203–26, at 206.
5. Campa, *Freedom and Power*, 29.
6. Most readers will be familiar with Thucydides' treatment of this problem in the *History of the Peloponnesian War* (see 1.75.3–4). For a few helpful analyses of Thucydides, consider Nichols, *Thucydides and the Pursuit of Freedom*; Clifford Orwin, *The Humanity of Thucydides* (Princeton University Press, 1994); Timothy Burns, "The Problematic Character of Periclean Athens," in *On Civic Republicanism: Ancient Lessons for Global Politics*, ed. Geoffrey Kellow and Neven Brady Leddy (University of Toronto Press, 2016), 15–40; and Timothy Burns, "The Virtue of Thucydides' Brasidas," *Journal of Politics* 73, no. 2 (2011): 508–23. For Herodotus, consider the claim of Philip A. Stadter that "Thucydides learned from Herodotus how the ironic clash of high ideals and self-interest works itself out in historical events," in "Thucydides as 'Reader' of Herodotus," in *Thucydides and Herodotus*, ed. Edith Foster and Donald Lateiner (Oxford University Press, 2012), 39–66, at 52. Consider also Robert D. Kaplan, "Fated to Lead," *National Interest* 135 (2015): 58–69, at 58–59, where Kaplan states that Herodotus "best captures" the complexity of fate by skillfully conveying "how self-interest is often calculated within a disfiguring whirlwind of passion, so that the most epic events emerge from the oddest of incidents and personal dramas."
7. Tobias Joho, *Style and Necessity in Thucydides* (Oxford University Press, 2022), 228.

8. Jon Stewart, *The Emergence of Subjectivity in the Ancient and Medieval World: An Interpretation of Western Civilization* (Oxford University Press, 2020), 122. Consider and compare with Thomas Harrison, "Herodotus and the Certainty of Divine Retribution," in *What Is a God? Studies in the Nature of Greek Divinity*, ed. Alan B. Lloyd (Classical Press of Wales, 2009), 101–22; Roger Travis, "The Spectation of Gyges in P. Oxy. 2382 and Herodotus Book 1," *Classical Antiquity* 19, no. 2 (2000): 330–59, at 354; and Irene de Jong, "De Ring Van Polycrates (Herodotus, Historiën 3.39–43): een narratologische close reading," *Lampas* 52, no. 1 (2019): 3–15.
9. Ronald E. Osborn, "The Overdetermined Universe: The Paradox of Freedom in Herodotus' History," *Modern Age* 57, no. 1 (2015): 37–47, at 44.
10. Ann Ward, *Herodotus and the Philosophy of Empire* (Baylor University Press, 2008), 15–17.
11. Matthew Landauer, *Dangerous Counsel: Accountability and Advice in Ancient Greece* (University of Chicago Press, 2019), 85.
12. Aside from Campa, *Freedom and Power*, 8, 88, and 101–6, see Paul Cartledge and Matt Edge, "'Rights,' Individuals, and Communities in Ancient Greece," in *A Companion to Greek and Roman Political Thought*, ed. Ryan K. Balot (Blackwell, 2009), 149–63, at 159.
13. Herodotus, *History*, 5.78.
14. See Susan Shapiro, "Herodotus and Solon," *Classical Antiquity* 15, no. 2 (1996): 348–64; Mark Munn, *The Mother of the Gods, Athens, and the Tyranny of Asia* (University of California Press, 2006), 294–98; Henry Immerwahr, *Form and Thought in Herodotus* (Press of Western Reserve University, 1966), 312.
15. This methodological approach intentionally builds on the work of Elizabeth Irwin "Ethnography and Empire: Homer and the Hippocratics in Herodotus' Ethiopian Logos, 3.17–26," *Histos* 8 (2014): 25–75.
16. Susan McWilliams, "Hybridity in Herodotus," *Political Research Quarterly* 66, no. 4 (2013): 745–55, at 752.
17. Herodotus, *History*, 1.126.5–6.
18. Lindsay Rathnam, "The Madness of Cambyses: Herodotus and the Problem of Inquiry," *Polis* 35, no. 1 (2018): 61–82, at 67. Rathnam does not argue that self-interest is compulsory, only that the Persians equate it with the common good.
19. Herodotus, *History*, 3.71.4.
20. Herodotus, *History*, 3.72.4.
21. Stanley Rosen, *The Quarrel Between Philosophy and Poetry* (Routledge, 1988), 41.

22. Herodotus, *History*, 3.75.
23. Herodotus, *History*, 3.72.
24. Herodotus, *History*, 3.73 (emphasis my own).
25. Reising, "The King's House," 215–16; cf. Herodotus, *History*, 8.26.
26. Ward, *Herodotus and the Philosophy of Empire*, 97.
27. Herodotus, *History*, 9.7.
28. Herodotus, *History*, 7.8.
29. Herodotus, *History*, 3.64–65.
30. Herodotus, *History*, 7.140–43.
31. Herodotus, *History*, 7.6.4.
32. Herodotus, *History*, 7.15.
33 Herodotus, *History*, 7.14–15.
34. Herodotus, *History*, 7.16.
35. Herodotus, *History*, 7.18.
36. Herodotus, *History*, 9.16.2–5. Many other examples of prophetic narratives can be found in Herodotus, though those offered here suffice to draw out the complexities of his view. For other examples, consider the twelve years of King Mycerinus (2.133), Polycrates and the ring (3.40–43), the death of Hipparchus (5.55), the tale of Socles (5.92), and the oracle about Miletus (6.19).
37. Jonas Grethlein, "How Not to Do History: Xerxes in Herodotus' *Histories*," *American Journal of Philology* 130, no. 2 (2009): 195–218, at 204–5. For additional proponents of this view, see John Lewis, "The Intellectual Context of Solon's *Dike*," *Polis* 18, no. 1–2 (2001): 3–26, at 7; Charles Chiasson, "Herodotus' Use of Attic Tragedy in the Lydian Logos," *Classical Antiquity* 22, no. 1 (2003): 5–36, at 25; Mabel Lang, *Herodotean Narrative and Discourse* (Harvard University Press, 1984), 64–66; Joseph Russo and Bennett Simon, "Gambling with Demeter, Winning, Losing, and Successful Outcome in Herodotus' Histories," *Arion* 25, no. 1 (2017): 131–60, at 132; Michael Flower, "Herodotus and Persia," in *The Cambridge Companion to Herodotus*, ed. Carolyn Dewald and John Marincola (Cambridge University Press, 2006), 274–89, at 276; and Hans-Peter Stahl, "Learning Through Suffering? Croesus' Conversations in the History of Herodotus," in *Studies in the Greek Historians*, ed. Donald Kagan (Cambridge University Press, 1975), 1–36. But compare these with Emily Baragwanath, *Motivation and Narrative in Herodotus* (Oxford University Press, 2008), 178–79; and Stewart Flory, "Laughter, Tears and Wisdom in Herodotus," *American Journal of Philology* 99 (1978): 145–53.
38. Herodotus, *History*, 1.66.2.

39. Herodotus, *History*, 1.67.4
40. Herodotus, *History*, 1.68.1.
41. Herodotus, *History*, 1.68.4.
42. Herodotus, *History*, 1.53–55.
43. After the Gyges narrative, but before the conquest of Lydia by Persia, Herodotus recounts an exchange between Solon and Croesus in which the Lydian king receives another warning about fate. Solon states, "Croesus, you ask me—who knows that the divine is entirely jealous and troublesome to us—about human affairs. In a long period of time there is much to see that you would not wish to see, and also much to suffer. . . . In this way, Croesus, man is entirely chance. . . . Now it is impossible for one who is human to gather all the good things together . . . [for] no single person is self-sufficient. . . . So one ought [χρὴ] to see how every affair is brought to an end, or in what way they turn out, for truly the god promises [ὑποδέξας] bliss [ὄλβον] [to many] and then utterly ruins them" (Herodotus, *History*, 1.32.2–9). Here, it is important to contrast Solon's ὑποδείκνυμι with Herodotus' own ἀποδέχομαι in 1.1; Solon's warning is especially interesting because it suggests that we both can and cannot have certain knowledge about how the gods will treat us in the future.
44. Herodotus, *History*, 1.13.2; cf. 1.91 with 6.53–54 and 7.150 for the familial nature of this act. See also Lynette Mitchell, *Panhellenism and the Barbarian in Archaic and Classical Greece* (Classical Press of Wales, 2007), 188 and the sources offered in note 79.
45. Bacchylides, *Five Epinician Odes*, ed. and trans. D. L. Cairns and J. G. Howie (Francis Cairns, 2010), 152–57, lines 20–70; translation my own, made in comparison with Bacchylides, "Third Ode for Hiero of Syracuse Chariot Race, Olympic Games," in *Greek Lyric IV: Bacchylides, Corinna, and Others*, ed. and trans. David A. Campbell (Harvard University Press, 1992), 126–35. For the two other extant accounts of Croesus' capture, see Photius's gloss of Ctesias in *Ctesias' "History of Persia": Tales of the Orient*, ed. Lloyd Llewellyn-Jones and James Robson (Routledge, 2010), 170–72, and Polyaenus in the same volume, 174–75.
46. Emmet Robbins, "Public Poetry," in *A Companion to the Greek Lyric Poets*, ed. Douglas Gerber (Brill, 1997), 223–87, at 285. Cf. Theodora A. Hadjimichael, "Sports-Writing: Bacchylides' Athletic Descriptions," *Mnemosyne* 68, no. 3 (2015): 363–92, at 368; as well as Isabella Demarchi, "Esplendor e soberania: a celebração de Hierão no 'Epinício 5' de Baquílides," *Codex* 7, no. 2 (2019): 56–68, at 65–66.
47. Herodotus, *History*, 1.87.1–2.

48. Bacchylides, *Five Epinician Odes*, ed. and trans. D. L. Cairns and J. G. Howie (Francis Cairns, 2010), 205. Cf. Herodotus, *History*, and the tale of the twelve years of King Mycerinus (2.133) for how even intense piety cannot abate the fates.
49. In Herodotus' telling, Croesus, after he was removed from the pyre, explained to Cyrus that a "god of the Greeks" had "roused [him] to wage a war" against the Persians "for [Cyrus'] happiness and for [his] own misfortune," see Herodotus, *History*, 1.87.3–4.
50. Herodotus, *History*, 1.91.1–3.
51. See Bacchylides, *Third Epinician Ode*, lines 25–30; Homer, *Illiad*, ed. and trans A. T. Murray (Harvard University Press, 1976), Hera at 16.440–44, and Athena at 22.175–85; Pindar, "Paean VI," in *The Odes of Pindar, Including the Principal Fragments*, ed. and trans. John Sandys (Harvard University Press, 1968), 532–43, lines 90–100.
52. Herodotus, *History*, 1.91.4.
53. Herodotus, *History*, 1.91.5–6.
54. Robert Fowler, "Gods in Early Greek Historiography," in *The Gods of Ancient Greece*, ed. Jan Bremmer and Andrew Erskine (Edinburgh University Press, 2010), 318–34, at 323.
55. Ward, *Herodotus and the Philosophy of Empire*, 15–16.
56. Ann Ward, "Equality of Speech: Athenian Democracy in the Histories of Herodotus," in *Democracy and the History of Political Thought*, ed. Patrick Cain, Stephen Sims, Stephen Block (Lexington Books, 2021), 39–55, at 40. Cf Joel Schlosser, *Herodotus in the Anthropocene* (University of Chicago Press, 2020), 123.
57. Herodotus, *History*, 3.39–43.
58. Ward, "Equality of Speech," 41. Cf. Benardete, *Herodotean Inquiries*, 9.
59. Herodotus, *History*, 2.3.
60. Herodotus, *History*, 4.43.
61. Herodotus, *History*, 1.182, 2.45, 2.123.
62. Herodotus, *History*, 3.2.2.
63. Herodotus, *History*, 2.144.
64. Herodotus, *History*, 2.46, 2.61, 2.86, 2.132, 2.170–71.
65. Herodotus, *History*, 2.2.
66. Herodotus, *History*, 2.43–45.
67. Herodotus, *History*, 3.27–29.
68. Herodotus, *History*, 1.198.
69. Herodotus, *History*, 2.85–90.
70. Herodotus, *History*, 1.216, 3.38.
71. Rathnam, "The Madness of Cambyses," 77.

72. Herodotus, *History*, 2.3. Worse yet, Herodotus notes that the same theologies that speak of divine fatalism also make distinctions between voluntary and involuntary actions. In Egypt, for example, anyone who "willingly [ἑκών]" kills a sacred animal must be killed, whereas someone who "accidentally [ἀέκων]" does so has his punishment determined by a priest. See Herodotus, *History*, 2.65, 2.139; cf. 1.89 and 2.179.
73. Herodotus, *History*, 2.52.
74. Herodotus, *History*, 7.152.
75. Ward, *Herodotus and the Philosophy of Empire*, 17; Christopher Pelling, "Speech and Narrative in the Histories," in *The Cambridge Companion to Herodotus*, ed. Carolyn Dewald and John Marincola (Cambridge University Press, 2006), 103–21.
76. Herodotus, *History*, e.g., 2.24–26, 2.57, 2.93, 2.131.
77. Herodotus, *History*, 7.191.
78. Herodotus, *History*, 7.129.
79. Herodotus, *History*, 2.53.
80. Herodotus, *History*, 2.116.
81. K. Scarlett Kingsley, *Herodotus and the Presocratics: Inquiry and Intellectual Culture in the Fifth Century BCE* (Cambridge University Press, 2024), 169. See also ibid., 26.
82. Herodotus, *History*, 7.6.
83. Herodotus, *History*, 7.12 (emphasis my own).
84. It is also noteworthy that Herodotus has the Persian banqueter offer advice to Thersander. The Persian nobleman urges Thersander to act in such a way as to ensure his own safety, since the Persian army would soon be destroyed, a gesture that assumes Thersander's freedom to act on that advice.
85. Herodotus, *History*, 1.68. I would like to thank Lee Ward for bringing this passage to my attention.
86. Herodotus, *History*, 2.54.
87. Herodotus, *History*, 2.55.
88. Herodotus, *History*, 2.56.
89. Herodotus, *History*, 2.57. Here it might be objected that the priestesses at Dodona may have been speaking metaphorically or that they did not literally believe the priestesses were doves. However, Herodotus is clearly explaining the origin of the confusion; He is repairing the damage caused by the "fading [ἐξίτηλα]" of memory induced over time (Herodotus, *History*, 1.1). Hence, it is not the present Dodonaeans who refer to the Egyptian slaves as "doves" because of their speech, but rather those Dodonaeans contemporary with the founding of the

oracle. The metaphorical speech was then transmitted through time but misunderstood. Regardless, Herodotus' account is clearly remarkable for its denial of miraculous or magical events.

90. It is notable that Herodotus' story of the Egyptian king Mycerinus parallels that of Croesus (see *History*, 2.133). In the Egyptian story, however, Mycerinus is not blamed for his actions. The contrast between the two stories highlights the confusion latent in the Croesus narrative.
91. Herodotus, *History*, 1.46–49. Herodotus also suggests at 2.83 that the oracles in Egypt are not all held to be equally credible.
92. Herodotus, *History*, 5.63, 6.66.
93. Herodotus, *History*, 8.136 in comparison with 1.159.3–4. While this latter story could be dismissed as nothing but a moral test put before the city of Cyme, it must be remembered that in the *History*, divinely ordained disaster is not always a well-deserved punishment befalling only the impious or those who freely committed some immoral action, but even those who are said to be the "most just" (2.129.1) and who act especially "piously" (2.133.2), such as Mycerinus, the king of Egypt, who was punished for reopening the Egyptian temples and allowing his citizens to tend to their sacrifices in the temple. Likewise, the gods fated the tyrant Polycrates to die (3.142.3), not because he had done something wrong, but because he was too fortunate in his affairs (3.40–43). When Polycrates did die, Herodotus proclaimed his death to be unworthy of his high-mindedness and magnificence (3.125.1). The gods do not simply cause evil for those who deserve punishment but are themselves, as Solon states, "entirely envious and troublesome to humans" (1.32.1).
94. Herodotus. *History*, 1.60.
95. Herodotus, *History*, 1.8, 1.91, 5.33, 5.92.
96. Herodotus, *History*, 2.65, 3.72, 4.43, 4.164, 9.7.