DIVINE VENGEANCE IN HERODOTUS' *HISTORIES*

Nathan Israel Smolin

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Approved by:

Emily Baragwanath

Fred Naiden

James Rives

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ABSTRACT

Nathan Israel Smolin: Divine Vengeance in Herodotus' *Histories*
(Under the direction of Emily Baragwanath)

This essay argues that the motifs of divine vengeance present in the *Histories* represent a conscious, considered theory of divine action in the world. This theory is the result of Herodotus' empirical methodology, and is defined by an admitted lack of access to poetic revelation or other actual insight into the motivation and nature of divinity. Instead, Herodotus' theory is based on his own analysis of historical events on a large scale. Divinity possesses a basically regulatory role in the cosmos, ensuring that history follows certain consistent patterns. One such pattern is vengeance, by which a large-scale balance of reciprocity is maintained in human events through acts of repayment carried out with the support of divinity. This theory underlies Herodotus' historical project, reinforcing his general skepticism about human knowledge and power and making possible his universalizing approach to historical narrative.

To Randy Todd,
A man of many λόγοι

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τλήθι λέων ἄτλητα παθὼν τετληότι θυμῷ·
οὐδεὶς ἀνθρώπων ἀδικῶν τίσιν οὐκ ἀποτίσει.

Suffering with a courageous spirit, O Lion, bear the unbearable:
No man who has acted unjustly fails to pay the price of vengeance.¹

I. Introduction

Herodotus' use of divine action and motivation in his *Histories* has long drawn the attention of scholars. No consensus has emerged, however, as to how this divinity should be understood, how it operates, and especially how much credence Herodotus places in the stories of divine action found throughout his work. In this essay, I will examine in detail one specific—and, I believe, extremely telling—instance of Herodotus' treatment of the gods and the divinity, namely that of divine vengeance, or punishment for wrongdoing. I will then use this to lay the groundwork for a more general theory of Herodotus' treatment of the divine, as well as its impact on his methodology and identity as a historian and thinker. As we shall see, this idea of divine vengeance provides us with a crucial means to understand Herodotus' conceptions of divinity, history, and ultimately the world itself.

Vengeance, human and divine, plays a major role in Herodotus' *Histories*. This fact, quite naturally, has not escaped the attention of modern scholars.² As Jacqueline de Romilly points out

¹Herodotus of Halicarnassus, *Histories*, 5.56.1.

²For additional bibliography, see Thomas Harrison, *Divinity and History: the Religion of Herodotus* (Oxford:

in her seminal 1971 essay on the subject, even a bare textual study shows the prominence of this theme in Herodotus: throughout the *Histories*, Herodotus makes use of the terms τίνω (“to pay back”) or its cognate τίσις (“payback, vengeance”) 53 times, and the word τιμωρέω (“to avenge”) or its cognate τιμωρία (“vengeance”) a full 60 times.³ In other words, even on a purely linguistic level, there is a lot of payback in the *Histories*. Much of this vengeance, as we will see, is closely tied to divinity in some way; and this fact, too, has drawn its share of attention. In recent decades, in fact, there has been an increase in interest in the specifically *religious* dimension of Herodotus' work; this has gone along, naturally, with an interest in Herodotus' use of vengeance as an organizing principle in his work. Among these are Walter Burkert's important articles on the subject,⁴ as well as influential works by John Gould,⁵ Thomas Harrison,⁶ Jon Mikalson,⁷ and Donald Lateiner.⁸ These works will all be dealt with in some way in this essay; and their contributions to my own thinking are substantial.

Most important of all for my analysis, however, is the recent scholarly work done by John

Oxford University Press, 2002), Chap 1, as well as Scott Scullion, "Herodotus and Greek Religion" in *The Cambridge Companion to Herodotus* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), esp. the "Further Reading" section.

³Jacqueline de Romilly, "La vengeance comme explication historique dans l'œuvre d'Hérodote," *Revue des Études Grecques* 84 (1971): 315.

⁴Walter Burkert, "Herodot als Historiker fremder Religionen" in *Herodote et les peuples non grecs*. (Geneva: Fondation Hardt, 1990), and "Herodotus on the Names of the Gods: Polytheism as a Historical Problem" in *Herodotus: Volume Two*, Ed. Rosario Munson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

⁵John Gould, "Give and Take in Herodotus," in *Myth Ritual Memory and Exchange* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

⁶Harrison, *Divinity and History*.

⁷Jon D Mikalson, *Herodotus and religion in the Persian wars* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003).

⁸Donald Lateiner, *The Historical Method of Herodotus* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1989).

Gould and Thomas Harrison on the subject of Herodotus' use of divine vengeance. Between them, these two scholars lay out, in skillful fashion, two fundamental ways of approaching Herodotus' use of divine vengeance. Although I differ from them quite strongly on certain topics, it is only just to acknowledge the contribution they have made to my own work. Throughout this essay, I will be frequently making use of and engaging with their theses in detail. Hence, it is important for us to understand, at the outset, just what these basic theses are.

Gould's theory approaches Herodotus from a basically *anthropological* perspective. His theory, while sophisticated, in its essence ascribes Herodotus' use of vengeance to (1) an overall idea of reciprocity both positive and negative as a primary explanatory factor, and (2) the influence of narrative tropes and impulses in shaping Herodotus' portrayal of events. As he puts it, "The most pervasive strand of explanation in Herodotus' narrative, so pervasive that it constitutes the essence of his perception of events, is the sense that historical experience is the result of reciprocal action, the fulfilling of debts of gratitude and the taking of revenge."⁹ Gould links this to a larger pattern of gift-giving, obligation, and reciprocity present in Herodotus' thinking and Greek culture as a whole, a pattern that in Herodotus' hands is extended to become a general explanation of events: "why did these things happen?": they happened because they were 'owed'."¹⁰ Thus, for Gould, the Greek cultural model of gift-giving and obligation are the keys to understanding Herodotus' concept of vengeance as an historical explanation. This cultural model primarily affects the narrative by way of the actions and motivations of individual human beings. Characters act and interact, and their actions serve both to exploit and to reinforce the complex web of obligation they participate in. As Gould argues, this emphasis on personal

⁹John Gould, *Herodotus* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1989), 82.

¹⁰Gould, "Give and Take," 298.

motivation is by no means an indication of a lack of sophistication on Herodotus' part; rather, “the likelihood is that Herodotus is giving us the true feel of what men said, of how contemporaries perceived and accounted for the major happenings of their experience [...] in a world dominated by ruling families and elites, and by despotic kings surrounded by a closed circle of kinsmen and subordinate officials.”¹¹ Merely because we might be more comfortable with, say, a large-scale economic analysis in discussing the cause of a particular war is no reason to discount Herodotus' real insight into the influence of powerful individuals on historical events, as well as their characteristic motivations. Herodotus' use of human vengeance, then, does give us real insight into history, albeit colored by Greek cultural assumptions and Herodotus' own commitments.

In addition, I will also make use of the general contention laid out in Thomas Harrison's *Divinity and History*: namely, that Herodotus does in fact possess real ideas, both conscious and unconscious, about the nature of the divine and its relationship with history, and that it is possible to reconstruct, to at least some degree, these ideas.¹² Harrison, for his part, sees Herodotus' use of vengeance from a basically *religious* perspective; Herodotus has “beliefs”¹³ about the world and the gods, and these naturally manifest themselves in the things he writes. Among these ideas, for Harrison, is the gods' supernatural role in enforcing the punishment of the guilty across time and space. Thus, broadly speaking, while for Gould vengeance emerges primarily from within, from the cultural motivations of the characters, for Harrison it is primarily something imposed from

¹¹Gould, *Herodotus*, 67.

¹²Harrison, *Divinity and History*, esp. Chapter 1.

¹³For the question of how appropriate this word is applied to Herodotus, see my own discussion below, in section 3. For my own part, I have consistently avoided the use of the terms 'belief' or 'religious belief' in this essay.

without, a work of the gods to which Herodotus himself bears witness.

For us to understand just what Herodotus' ideas about the gods *were*, however, and see just how this cultural idea of reciprocity manifests itself in his work, we will have to undertake a thorough analysis of our own.

With this basic framework in place, we can begin our analysis of the text itself.

II. Textual Analysis

The quote with which we began this essay comes almost as a parentheses within the text of the *Histories*. Coming in the middle of Herodotus' discussion of the career of Aristagoras of Miletus, this brief passage gives the fate of Hipparchus, a tyrant of Athens, who, Herodotus tells us, had seen “a very clear vision of his suffering in a dream” (5.55).¹⁴ Herodotus then proceeds to give us the dream Hipparchus experienced, employing only a few lines before moving on to other matters. Yet the dream itself is worthy of note, for its content more than its placement. The figure who delivers the prophesy is an ἄνδρα μέγαν καὶ εὐειδέα (5.56.1),¹⁵ and what he delivers is two lines of prophetic foretelling, in dactylic hexameter: “Suffering with a courageous spirit, O Lion, bear the unbearable: No man who has acted unjustly fails to pay the price of vengeance” (5.56.1). This is in many ways an extremely strange passage. For one thing, it is not at all clear, given the private nature of the vision, what Herodotus' source is for this incident; for another, the dream's statement is given not only in direct quotation by Herodotus, but also in a couplet of verse in dactylic hexameter. This is a format usually reserved in the *Histories* for the oracles of Apollo at Delphi; this makes this λόγος in many ways akin to an oracle story, especially since the vision foretells the future and predicts the demise of its recipient. Unlike most oracle stories in the *Histories*, however, there is seemingly no possibility of avoiding the predicted fate, and no

¹⁴All in-text citations here and elsewhere refer to the text of Herodotus' *Histories*, as found in N.G. Wilson, ed., *Herodoti Historiae* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

¹⁵With which compare the divine figure who delivers Xerxes' dream vision in 7.12.

correct course of action to take in reaction to it; when Hipparchus awakes the next day, it is simply to die. What the dream offers is not counsel or warning, but rather comfort and assurance for Hipparchus in bearing his unavoidable fate. The comfort offered comes in the second line of couplet, and should immediately draw our interest; for it seems to give, in a way not at all common in Herodotus' text, a universal statement of historical interpretation: "No man who has acted unjustly fails to pay the price of vengeance" (5.56.1).

This statement might appear, at first glance, to be fairly straightforward; yet it involves concepts that are in fact extremely complex, as well as culturally foreign to most contemporary scholars. Vengeance within Herodotus' text is frequently a personal, idiosyncratic affair, carried out with passion and hatred and often taken to extremes; yet for Herodotus and for the ancient Greeks as a whole, vengeance would also be connected naturally with ideas of justice, punishment, and retribution—ideas at the core of the *πόλις* and Greek communal life. For modern Westerners, in general, vengeance has an almost wholly negative connotation—it is, in fact, frequently often seen as the *opposite* of justice. For the ancient Greeks, however, vengeance was a more complex affair, an outgrowth of justice that could be either in or out of accord with it. The reciprocal web of obligation, gift-giving, and vengeance that Gould describes was not viewed by the ancient Greeks as a pernicious web of injustice. Rather, the opposite is true: it was this complex web of obligation that determined what was just or unjust. For, to the Greeks, justice was to give someone what he is owed. In examining further Herodotus' presentations of divine vengeance, it will be instructive to keep these things in mind. For the task we are set is to decide what, precisely, it means for Herodotus to ascribe vengeance to divinity. As we begin, then, we must keep in mind that there is more than one way in which it is possible to understand vengeance; and that we ought not to be driven by modern constructions in determining

Herodotus' ideas.

This passage also highlights a more difficult question of interpretation: namely, to what degree the statements and opinions contained in Herodotus' text ought to be attributed to Herodotus himself. This is an immensely complex question, and not one I am able to fully address in this essay. For the purposes of my analysis, I will be employing the system laid out by Rosario Munson in her excellent monograph *Telling Wonders*. As Munson lays it out, Herodotus' work is defined by a complex relationship between *narrative* and *meta-narrative*. While the narrative is defined largely by a basic, albeit limited, commitment to the reality of what is reported, “[w]ith the meta-narrative [...] the author of the narrative emerges from the text.”¹⁶ It is on the meta-narrative level, then, that we primarily find Herodotus' expressed thoughts and ideas on the nature of the stories he tells, their reality, and their narrative purpose. In her exhaustive catalog of Herodotus' meta-narrative strategies and modes of speaking, Munson highlights two forms of meta-narrative that are especially important for our analysis: “Glosses of evidence, knowledge, and ignorance,”¹⁷ by which Herodotus evaluates his sources and their accuracy, and “Glosses of opinion,” by which Herodotus lets us know “the result of Herodotus' mental activity—estimate, reasoning, conjecture, judgment, and so on.”¹⁸ It is especially the latter that “constitute the most forceful markers of Herodotus' own ideological and philosophical position.”¹⁹ In examining Herodotus' text, then, we should be attentive to the varieties of meta-

¹⁶Rosario Munson, *Telling wonders: ethnographic and political discourse in the work of Herodotus* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2002), 16.

¹⁷*Ibid.*, 35-6.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, 36.

¹⁹*Ibid.*, 36.

narrative markers we encounter; and in analyzing the stories he tells, we should pay attention above all to the relationship between the *narrative* of what is expressed, and the *meta-narrative* of how Herodotus himself explains and glosses the events he bears witness to. We should be attentive where possible not only to the events, but also to the interpretation given to these events, not only by characters within the story, or by Herodotus' sometimes unnamed sources, but also and above all by Herodotus himself.

It will be instructive, then, to examine first a case in which Herodotus, in meta-narrative mode, explicitly appeals to divine vengeance to explain events in his narrative: Herodotus' unorthodox presentation of the most canonical of all Greek narratives, the story of the Trojan War. In retelling this story, so foundational to Greek ideas and identity, Herodotus gives a very different spin to the affair than that provided by Homer: Helen, Herodotus tells us, was actually detained in Egypt after her kidnapping, and was not at Troy at all during the war.²⁰ Despite the protestations to this effect by the Trojans, the Greeks disbelieved them and destroyed Troy, finding out only after the fact their mistake. To this tragic tale of crime and misunderstanding, Herodotus adds an explanatory note of his own:

ὥς μὲν ἐγὼ γνώμην ἀποφαίνομαι, τοῦ δαιμονίου παρασκευάζοντος, ὅπως πανωλεθρίη ἀπολόμενοι καταφανὲς τοῦτο τοῖσι ἀνθρώποισι ποιήσωσι, ὥς τῶν μεγάλων ἀδικημάτων μεγάλαι εἰσὶ καὶ αἱ τιμωρίαι παρὰ τῶν θεῶν. καὶ ταῦτα μὲν τῇ ἐμοὶ δοκέει εἶρηται.
(2.120.5)—

I declare my own opinion, that [these things happened] because the divinity was causing

²⁰Herodotus, though, certainly did not originate the idea of Helen's absence from the Trojan War. See Alan B. Lloyd, *Herodotus Book II: Commentary 99-182* (Leiden: Brill, 1988), 46-47 for a plausible discussion of the origin of this λόγος—though unlike Lloyd, I find it more likely that it was Herodotus himself who eliminated references to the εἶδωλον from his account. It is also worth noting that the basic λόγος (of Helen's absence from Troy), and Herodotus' conclusions from it (that this was the result of divine vengeance), are clearly distinguished in the text.

it, so that having been utterly destroyed [the Trojans] might make this fact completely clear to all mankind, that for the greatest injustices there are from the gods the greatest retributions. And I declare these things as it seems to me.

I quote this passage at length because of its importance to any discussion of the topic of divine vengeance in Herodotus. For this is an unusual passage in a number of ways—and above all because Herodotus the narrator steps from behind the curtain, as it were, and emphatically reveals his own interpretation of events. The language of this passage is marked by Herodotus' desire for emphasis, with the author drawing out his clauses to give maximum emphasis to their content. Among these emphatic features are the use of the personal pronoun ἐγώ, the redundancy and epic qualities of πανωλεθρίη ἀπολόμενοι,²¹ and the construction καταφανές... τοῦτο ποιήσωσι ὥς. Most emphatic of all, though, are the double statements bracketing this passage, both repeating that this is, in fact, Herodotus' own judgment (γνώμην) on the subject. Yet, as Herodotus states it, this judgment is not merely his own; rather, it is a divine message sent to humanity by the gods, who wished to “make this fact completely clear to all mankind.” The “fact,” as Herodotus states it, is simply this: “for the greatest injustices there are from the gods the greatest retributions.” The statement that Herodotus wishes to make in such an emphatic fashion, and that he wishes to buttress not only with divine authority, but also with his own human authority as narrator, turns out to be a statement about divine vengeance and historical causation. In Herodotus' view, the Trojan war turned out as it did “because the divinity was causing it.” Here, we have not only an ascription of events to divine *causality*, but also one of divine motivation; Herodotus believes the god caused this war, and destroyed Troy, *in order to*

²¹Cf. Thucydides' use of the term in his description of the Sicilian expedition in *History of the Peloponnesian War* 7.53.

exact vengeance for the crime of Paris' rape of Helen, the great crime of the violation of *xenia*, and in doing so to reveal to mankind the gods' involvement in history, and the priorities of their action. In Herodotus' hands, then, the Trojan War, the greatest incident of Greek culture and mythology, becomes, in fact, a kind of divine revelation; and what it reveals is the presence and power of divine vengeance within history.

The details of this scenario as Herodotus tells it are quite instructive as well. To begin with, though Herodotus ascribes the sack of Troy to divine causation, there is nothing obviously “miraculous” about the story as he tells it. Unlike in Homer, there are no gods actively involved in the conflict; and though Herodotus clearly thinks divine vengeance is at work, it is emphatically human beings who fight, argue, and finally raze Troy to the ground. Likewise, it is entirely the human folly of the Greeks that causes them to not to listen to the Trojans—there is no phantom Helen in Troy, as in other versions of the myth,²² and no mysterious madness on the part of either Greeks or Trojans. In fact, Herodotus' construction of events is entirely premised on his own rationalistic understanding of human motivation and action as basically the same across time and space. After all, he operates with the assumption that the ancient Trojans would have behaved in a basically rational way, and hence had *not* been struck with the *ἄτη* or divine madness²³ that, in myth or tragedy, might lead them to act irrationally and refuse to reveal Helen's absence to the Greeks (2.120). Whatever role the divine is playing in this story, then, there is clearly not, for Herodotus, any competition between it and ordinary human motivation

²²e.g. that found in Euripides' *Ἑλένη*, cf. Lloyd, *Commentary*, 46-47.

²³Cf. Richard E. Doyle, *Atē, Its Use and Meaning: A Study in the Greek Poetic Tradition From Homer to Euripides* (New York : Fordham University Press, 1984), especially 7-22 for Doyle's discussion of the usage of the term in Homer, where it refers to human blindness, folly, or infatuation brought on by a divine cause. It is also worth pointing out that the word *ἄτη* appears only twice in Herodotus, both in 1.32, within Solon's speech to Croesus, and seemingly with a more general sense of “disaster” or “ruin,” without explicit divine connotations.

and action. In this story, human and divine causation are both emphatically involved— but not in the same way. Human beings act in their own characteristic ways, according to their own motivations—and the result is divine vengeance.

This profound connection between divine and human vengeance can be seen elsewhere in the *Histories* as well. A useful example is the curious story of Hermotimus the eunuch and his vengeance on Panionius, the man who had, when Hermotimus was a young man, forcibly castrated him and then sold him into slavery.²⁴ Due to his status as a eunuch, Hermotimus was able to rise through the ranks of the Persian court to become an important and powerful man: an adviser to Xerxes, the leader of the Persian Empire. Once in this powerful position, however, Herodotus informs us that τῷ μεγίστῃ τίσις ἤδη ἀδικηθέντι ἐγένετο πάντων τῶν ἡμεῖς ἴδμεν (8.105.1)—“to this man, who had been treated unjustly, there happened the greatest vengeance of anyone we know of.” Again, we see that in Herodotus' mind, τίσις (vengeance) and ἀδικίη (injustice) are closely related concepts—in the most basic sense, vengeance is a response, either human or divine, to an act of injustice. When Panionius comes by chance into the power of Hermotimus, then, the wronged man takes extreme vengeance against him, forcing him to castrate his sons and then be castrated by them in turn. Before doing so, however, Hermotimus delivers a speech explaining his actions and the reasons behind them. First, he censures Panionius for the manifest injustice of his conduct, since the merchant had harmed him even though no injustice had been committed by Hermotimus' family against his—another manifestation, on the human level, of Gould's network of obligations at work. With the injustice of Panionius' deed firmly established, Hermotimus goes on to explain how and why Panionius

²⁴For an examination of this story as a cultural myth, see Simon Hornblower, “Panonios of Chios and Hermotimos of Pedesa” in *Herodotus and His World*, ed. Peter Derow and Robert Parker (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

has since come into his power: ἐδόκεές τε θεοὺς λήσειν οἷα ἐμηχανῶ τότε· οἷ σε ποιήσαντα ἄνόσια, νόμῳ δίκαιῳ χρεώμενοι, ὑπήγαγον ἐς χεῖρας τὰς ἐμάς (8.106.3)—“You were thinking that the things you contrived then were hidden from the gods; but they, employing a just law, led you, since you had done profane things, into my hands.” Here we see again a direct connection drawn between a human act of vengeance and the divine vengeance of the gods—with the latter supporting, as it were, the former. The coincidence by which Hermotimus both *happened* to become a powerful man and then *happened* upon his tormentor after many years is taken, by Hermotimus at least, as clear evidence of divine involvement. Yet while Hermotimus' motives are, naturally, strongly colored by emotion and trauma, he imagines the gods as acting from more objective motives, “employing a just law” in leading Panionius to τὴν ἅπ' ἐμέο τοι ἐσομένην δίκην (8.106.3)—“the justice coming upon you from me.” It is the presence of the gods, and their alleged assistance in his actions, that provides for Hermotimus the moral validation for his own actions. Like his protest that his family had done no wrong against Panionius', Hermotimus' claim of the gods' involvement is a way of appealing to a larger moral standard, based around reciprocity and obligation, as justification for his action. Far from being in competition with human moral values and obligations, then, the presence and concurrence of the divine is seen as in fact validating and enforcing it. It is the human actor who takes vengeance—but this act of vengeance would have been impossible without the gods' involvement.

Of course, all this is coming from the mouth of one of Herodotus' characters, not Herodotus himself. Yet the comments with which Herodotus buttresses the account seem to lend some degree of credence to Hermotimus' views. As we have already noted, Herodotus says that this story represents “the greatest vengeance of anyone we know of”—one of a number of passages where Herodotus claims for an incident or person the status of “first” or “greatest”—

always, of course, with the caveat “that we know of” added. As elsewhere, this is a way for Herodotus to draw special attention to this incident, and highlight his own evaluative role as author.²⁵ Likewise, Herodotus indicates that this vengeance “happened” to Hermotimus—a presaging of the strong role coincidence will play in the events of the story. Elsewhere in the *Histories*, the presence of extreme chance and coincidence is taken by Herodotus as a strong sign of divine involvement.²⁶ Likewise, after giving his full account, Herodotus summarizes it with a short statement in his own words: Πανιώνιον μὲν νυν οὕτω περιῆλθε ἢ τε τίσις καὶ Ἑρμότιμος (8.106.4)—“In this way, then, vengeance, and also Hermotimus, overtook Panionius.” The impersonal principle and the human agent are here placed side by side, as equal actors. Taken along with Herodotus' emphatic comments, in the context of the Trojan war, about great vengeance from the gods falling upon great injustices, there is solid reason to believe that the presentation of divine action here is at least broadly accordance with Herodotus' own views.

In these two incidents, then, divine and human action are seen as complimentary and supporting causes, together making up an explanatory whole. Based on this picture, though, it could well be argued that the divine causes are somewhat superfluous from an explanatory point of view—after all, in both stories, it is human action, and human ideas of justice, that play the operative role in determining the shape of events. Hermotimus may believe he is acting in accord with the gods' wishes, but it is he who carries them out, based on motives that are eminently personal and emotional—and while the gods may wish to use the Trojan war to teach humanity a lesson, it is Helen's aggrieved husband and his allies who take Troy and burn it to the ground.²⁷ It

²⁵cf. Munson, *Telling Wonders*, 35-6, where this is discussed as a “gloss of knowledge.”

²⁶i.e. in the account of Cyrus' birth and rise to power in 1.107-130.

²⁷Cf. the Persian λόγος in the proem, where a different perspective is taken on the destruction of Troy, ascribing it

could be argued, then, that Herodotus treats divine action and divine vengeance as essentially superfluous from a causative perspective, as nothing more than moralizing glosses on purely human actions.

This hypothesis, however, cannot stand up to the full weight of evidence from the *Histories*. There are, in fact, a number of incidents in Herodotus' text where actions of divine vengeance occur without a concurring human motivation to explain them, and hence where divine action plays the main causal role. To begin with, there is the example of the mad Persian king Cambyses, who accidentally stabs himself in the leg at precisely the same place where he had earlier stabbed the divine bull Apis (3.64). Here, seeming coincidence (the sheath of Cambyses' sword breaking at the wrong moment) is discreetly indicated to be the result of divine vengeance, with no human actor concurring in the incident. In a similar vein is the death of Cleomenes, the Spartan king, who is afflicted with madness and then stabs himself to death while in the stocks (6.75). Here, too, Herodotus makes his belief in divine causation quite explicit. After describing Cleomenes' death, he engages in a brief discussion of the possible reasons for the mad king's fate. The Spartans, he says, believe that ἐκ δαιμονίου μὲν οὐδενὸς μανῆναι Κλεομένεα (6.84.1)—“Cleomenes went mad from no divine cause”—but simply because he was given to drinking Scythian wine. Here, however, Herodotus takes the extraordinary step of directly disagreeing with his source: οὕτω δὲ Σπαρτιῆται τὰ περὶ Κλεομένεα λέγουσι: ἐμοὶ δὲ δοκεῖ τίσιν ταύτην ὁ Κλεομένης Δημαρήτω ἐκτεῖσαι (6.84.3)—“So the Spartans tell the things about Cleomenes in this way—but to me Cleomenes seems to have paid this price of vengeance for Demaratus.” Notable here is the emphatic nature of the ἐμοὶ δὲ, by which Herodotus directly contrasts the view of his source with his own opinion. While the

entirely to (excessive) human emotion (1.4.1-3).

Spartans wish to ascribe the matter to chance, Herodotus is insistent that this seemingly random event was, in fact, an act of divine vengeance, a punishment for Cleomenes' earlier actions. For Herodotus, then, in both of these incidents, divine motivation is not a mere gloss for human action and motivation—it is rather a determinative factor of its own, capable of accomplishing its goal even in the absence of human action.

If, however, divine vengeance is neither in competition with human causation, nor a mere addition to it, then how should the relationship between them be understood? One possibility is that divine vengeance is a sort of mirror image of human vengeance, by which individual gods respond to slights against them by taking personal vengeance on wrongdoers. This model would, of course, be well in keeping with the generally anthropomorphic depictions of divinities in Greek culture as a whole, as well as in such classic works of Greek culture as the epics of Homer.²⁸ There are indeed a number of incidents in the *Histories* that can be understood in this fashion. For instance, there is the θῶμα that Herodotus recounts in telling of the Persian defeat at Plataea: that, despite there being fighting all around the temple of Demeter, no Persians seem to have entered the temple or died there. In explaining this report, Herodotus hypothesizes that perhaps ἡ θεὸς αὐτὴ σφεας οὐκ ἐδέκετο ἐμπρήσαντας {τὸ ἱρὸν} τὸ ἐν Ἐλευσῖνι ἀνάκτορον (9.65.2)—“the goddess herself did not receive them, because they had burnt her temple at Eleusis.” Here, an individual deity seems to be acting out of very personal motives: wanting to protect her dwelling place and avenge a wrong done to her, in a manner that would not be out of place in Homer. In a similar fashion, when at an earlier time the Spartans had killed heralds sent to them by Xerxes, the result was that τοῖσι δὲ ὦν Λακεδαιμονίοισι μῆνις κατέσκηψε Ταλθυβίου τοῦ Ἀγαμέμνονος κήρυκος (7.134.1)—“The wrath of Talthybius the herald of Agamemnon

²⁸E.g. the vengeance taken by Apollo for the Achaean's insults toward his priest in *Iliad* 1.34-67.

struck the Spartans.” Here, Herodotus' presentation is doubly Homeric in the fact that the aggrieved deity in question is a hero of the *Iliad*, as well as in his use of the first word of the *Iliad*, μῆνις, to describe the hero's anger.²⁹ The reason why this particular deity becomes angry at the Spartans seems to be twofold: not only the hero's patronage of heraldry, but also the presence of his shrine in the city of Sparta itself. These very personal motives, it would seem, lead to a very personal anger—an anger that is temporarily alleviated by the Spartans' offer to let Xerxes kill some of their own heralds as compensation, but eventually returns all the same, to continue wreaking havoc.

However, many of these incidents are more complex than they would appear at first glance. For instance, after recounting the story of the heralds ὡς λέγουσι Λακεδαιμόνιοι—“as the Spartans say”—Herodotus goes on, in his own voice, to make a number of perplexing comments on the issue:

τοῦτό μοι ἐν τοῖσι θειότατον φαίνεται γενέσθαι. ὅτι μὲν γὰρ κατέσκηψε ἐς ἀγγέλους ἡ Ταλθυβίου μῆνις οὐδὲ ἐπαύσατο πρὶν ἢ ἐξῆλθε, τὸ δίκαιον οὕτω ἔφερε· τὸ δὲ συμπεσεῖν ἐς τοὺς παῖδας τῶν ἀνδρῶν τούτων [...] δῆλον ὦν μοι ὅτι θεῖον ἐγένετο τὸ πρῆγμα ἐκ τῆς μῆνιος (7.137.1-2).

In these events, what happened seems to me to be most divine. For inasmuch as the wrath of Talthybius fell upon the messengers and did not cease until it was satisfied, in this way it turned out justly: but because it fell upon the children of these men [...] it is clear to me that the outcome of this anger was divine.

This is an extremely odd passage, for a number of reasons. First of all, Herodotus'

²⁹Cf. Jonas Grethlein, "The Manifold Uses of the Epic Past: The Embassy Scene in Herodotus 7.153-63," *The American Journal of Philology* 127, no. 4 (2006), where Herodotus' subtle, critical approach to Homeric allusion is examined.

indication that he thinks that something “divine” is going on here seems at first glance somewhat superfluous, considering he has already told us that the events came about due to the anger of a specific hero. Herodotus seems, in fact, to be to some degree contrasting, or at least distinguishing, the actions and anger of this individual deity from divinity as such. This can be seen most clearly in the distinction he makes between two results of this anger, in contrasting *μὲν* and *δὲ* clauses; the fact that Talthybius' anger was kindled against the messengers themselves as long as they lived, Herodotus says, was merely *δίκαιον*; it is only the fact that it also pursued their children to the grave that is actually *θεῖον*. It seems, then, to be possible to distinguish between events ascribed to the anger of a particular god, and events that are “divine.” The personal anger of this particular hero is, in fact, related to a larger pattern of divine vengeance in a similar way as the human acts of vengeance we have seen earlier; the personal drive for vengeance works itself out according to its own lights, but it is how this happens, and its effects, that show divinity at work in it—in this case, precisely the remarkable, perhaps even excessive, nature of the vengeance taken. A hero might, perhaps, be expected to take just vengeance on those who wronged him—but only the divine could take *such* a vengeance. Some of this is perhaps ascribable to the “heroic,” and so minor status of Talthybius as a deity—but it is no less strange for that.

Likewise, even in giving his opinion about Demeter's defense of her shrine, Herodotus shows his reluctance to attribute motives to particular gods: *δοκέω δέ, εἴ τι περὶ τῶν θεῶν πρηγμάτων δοκέειν δεῖ* (9.65.2)—“But I think, if it is necessary to think something about the deeds of divinities...” In general, Herodotus seems far more comfortable describing how divinity acts, and in what ways, than in asking why. In a famous passage from Book 2, Herodotus makes this aversion to describing the motives of the divine explicit:

τὰ μὲν νυν θεῖα τῶν ἀπηγημάτων οἷα ἤκουον, οὐκ εἰμὶ πρόθυμος ἐξηγέσθαι, ἔξω ἢ τὰ οὐνόματα αὐτῶν μοῦνον, νομίζων πάντας ἀνθρώπους ἴσον περὶ αὐτῶν ἐπίστασθαι· τὰ δ' ἂν ἐπιμνησθῆω αὐτῶν, ὑπὸ τοῦ λόγου ἐξαναγκαζόμενος ἐπιμνησθήσομαι (2.3.2).

Now of the things which I heard, I am not eager to talk about the divinities, except for their names, since I think that all people understand equally about them. But what I do mention about them, I will mention when I am compelled by the story.

As we have seen, this reticence in discussing the divine does not prevent Herodotus from making generalized divine interpretations of historical events; on the other hand, it does emphatically seem to apply when it comes to ascribing events to the personal actions and motivations of particular deities. Actions can be deduced to be divine, it appears, with some certainty; but to ascribe a personal, anthropomorphic motivation to a particular deity seems, for Herodotus, to be a much more difficult matter. For a historian who specializes, on the human level, in detailing personal motivations, this is a notable lacuna.

In fact, as scholars have noted, Herodotus' expressed judgments on divinity show a strong resistance to the typical Homeric and Hesiodic model of personalized, anthropomorphic deities. Most notably, in Book 2, Herodotus pauses in his account of Egypt to tell us the cultural origins of the Greek pantheon as it was known in his day. This leads into an extended passage of what we could perhaps call historical philosophy—explaining, in historical and cultural terms, how the idea of numerous differentiated divinities came into being in the first place. As Walter Burkert points out, “in this passage the 'I' of the author comes to the fore in a striking way,” as Herodotus lays out “a systematic line of proof” on this topic.³⁰ This is, in fact, the principal place in the *Histories* where Herodotus lays out his own thoughts on divinity as such. In the earliest times,

³⁰Burkert, “Herodotus on the Names of the Gods,” 198.

Herodotus tells us, people ἔθουν [...] θεοῖσι ἐπευχόμενοι [...] ἐπωνυμίην δὲ οὐδ' οὐνομα ἐποιεῦντο οὐδενὶ αὐτῶν (2.52.1)—“sacrificed by calling on 'the gods,' and made for none of them either an epithet or a name.” Prior to contact with the Egyptians, the Greeks worshiped divinity in an undifferentiated way, without any particular divine personalities or attributes. In striking fashion, Herodotus uses etymology to explain his own understanding of these original θεῖοι and their nature: θεοὺς δὲ προσωνόμασάν σφεας ἀπὸ τοῦ τοιούτου ὅτι κόσμῳ θέντες τὰ πάντα πρήγματα καὶ πάσας νομὰς εἶχον (2.52.1)—“they named them θεῖοι from a reason of this sort, that they were the ones setting (θέντες) all events and all customs in order.” The gods and their nature, then, were understood, not mythologically, but empirically, based on the characteristic modes of action of divinity as a whole, operating in the world. It was only later, Herodotus argues, that the Greeks came to adopt ὀνόματα of the gods from the Egyptians. The question of how to understand the term ὀνόματα here has been extremely controversial in scholarship. Some scholars, such as Richmond Lattimore, have held that by ὀνόματα Herodotus can only mean the literal, spoken names of the gods—hence, although Herodotus elsewhere gives Egyptian equivalencies for Greek gods (e.g. “Amon” for “Zeus”), he must somehow believe that all the Greek names of gods are actually in origin Egyptian words.³¹ I do not find this theory at all convincing, for the simple reason that it makes Herodotus out to be far stupider than he elsewhere shows himself to be. In contrast, Walter Burkert's argument on the question—that Herodotus is employing “the incipient theories of language that arose between the Eleatics and Sophists,” by which language is essentially a matter of “fix[ing] and mark[ing] differences” by way of “ὀνόματα,” and “is 'correct' in so far as its differentiation corresponds to the

³¹Lattimore, Richmond, “Herodotus and the Names of the Egyptian Gods.”

differences within reality”³²— is far more in accord with Herodotus as we have examined him. As I have argued, the emphasis for Herodotus is on the differentiation of divinity into individual personalities, as opposed to a more general, and far less detailed, acknowledgement of “gods” governing and regulating the world as a whole. With this in mind, Burkert argues that “what the Pelasgians learned from [the Egyptians] was [to] διουρίσαι τὰ οὐνόματα ('distinguish the names') as against an older, indistinct unity.”³³ As for the particular personalities and spheres of influence of the Greek gods, in Herodotus' judgment (“δοκέω”), it was in fact Homer and Hesiod, only 400 years before, who were responsible for “making” (“ποιήσαντες”) all of their genealogies, epithets, appearances, and zones of control (2.53.2). As with the story of the Fall of Troy, though, Herodotus seems, to say the least, quite doubtful about the accuracy of their information. As Burkert summarizes it, the overall effect of this argument is to make clear that, for Herodotus, “there is no cultural advancement in the development from an undifferentiated plurality of θεοί towards a system of names in mutual contradistinction.”³⁴ Herodotus' general use of divinity, in fact, corresponds far more closely to the generalized “setters-in-order” of ancient times than it does to the contemporary Greek pantheon: a category of entities responsible for setting πράγματα (“matters,” “events”) in order generally, and known only in general terms, rather than a detailed set of divinities known through poetic inspiration. This is not to say that Herodotus rejects out of hand all use and reality of the traditional Greek divinities and Greek religion in general—after all, to take only one example, he certainly makes use of and shows respect for Greek oracles

³²Burkert, “Herodotus on the Names of the Gods,” 207.

³³Ibid., 208.

³⁴Ibid., 209.

such as Delphi, however understood³⁵—it is merely to say that this is not the primary sense of divinity for him. His divinity is at once vaguer and more rationalized than the ordinary gods of cult and myth.³⁶

Still, even if this divinity is vague, its vengeance is no less terrible. After all, in the case of Talthybius' vengeance, it is precisely the remarkable, extreme extent of its consequences that makes Herodotus take it as divine. From this, it is possible to conclude that divine vengeance for Herodotus is a rather frightening thing, as extreme and capricious as the worst excesses of human spleen, which it always both assists and approves. The true picture is more complex, however; for it must be noted that there are several important incidents in the *Histories* where the divine in fact acts to check and to even punish the human drive for vengeance. One important example we have already seen: the death of the Spartan king Cleomenes, who stabs himself to death while mad, and whose death Herodotus ascribes to divine punishment. The interest of this passage, however, does not lie only in the way in which divine vengeance operates, but also in the injustice it is punishing; for Cleomenes is being punished for excesses committed in the act of taking vengeance. Earlier, Demaratus, the other king of Sparta, had on multiple occasions slandered Cleomenes, as Herodotus puts it, ὥς φθόνῳ καὶ ἄγῃ χρεώμενος (6.61.1)—“because of envy and malice.” It was only because of this obvious injustice done to him that Cleomenes ὀρμηθεὶς [...] ἀποτίνυσθαι (6.65.1)—“set himself to exact vengeance.” Out of this motive—one shared by many characters in the *Histories*, and not at all illegitimate from a Greek point of view—Cleomenes set out to have Demaratus removed from the kingship under the allegation of

³⁵Cf. the Croesus λόγος in Hdt. Bk. 1.

³⁶In this, I would broadly agree with Scott Scullion's conclusion that “Herodotus' theological stance is very much that of Protagoras and his predecessors” such as Xenophanes (Scullion, “Herodotus and Greek Religion,” 36). I will examine other connections between Herodotus and contemporary philosophers later in this essay.

illegitimate birth. In pursuing this vengeance, however, Cleomenes had taken several extreme steps, including secretly entering into a pact with a member of Demaratus' family to make the charge in his stead, and, most notably, successfully suborning the Pythia at Delphi into declaring on divine authority that Demaratus was not his father's son (6.65, 66). Due to these actions, Demaratus was indeed removed from office, and Cleomenes' vengeance achieved; however, in Herodotus' view, as we have already seen, Cleomenes would later fall prey to madness and suicide precisely in order to “[pay the] price of vengeance for Demaratus” (6.84.3). Cleomenes, then, is being punished by the divine precisely for his human act of vengeance. Unlike many of the figures we have seen, Cleomenes does not openly appeal to any standard of justice in taking vengeance on the one who has wronged him—rather, he acts from behind the scenes, bringing about the downfall of his enemy by bribery and lies. In doing so, he does not even attempt to claim the sanction of the gods—rather, by suborning the Oracle at Delphi, he fabricates such a sanction where none exists. Although his desire for vengeance may be just, his actions in carrying it out are clearly extreme, and result in an obvious injustice being done to Demaratus. They also result, of course, in an obvious offense to Apollo, the god of Delphi—yet in explaining Cleomenes' death, Herodotus appeals, not to the personal anger of the god wronged in his shrine, but rather to a more generalized divine vengeance for the injustice committed against the man Demaratus. Indeed, in explaining this event, Herodotus directly contrasts his own view on the matter with those of three other groups who ascribe Demaratus' punishment to offenses against the shrines of particular deities, including Apollo and Argus (6.76). For Herodotus, however, it is Cleomenes' offense against justice, and not any particular act of sacrilege, that is responsible for his death.

A similar account is given by Herodotus of the death of Pheretime, the queen of Cyrene.

After being banished from her city along with her son, Pheretime plots to return herself and her son to the city. When her son does return, however, he disobeys the Oracle at Delphi and exacts cruel vengeance on those who had banished him, an action that leads to his murder by the citizens of the town of Barce. In this way, ἐξέπλησε μοῖραν τὴν ἐωυτοῦ (4.164.4)—“he fulfilled his own fate.” Incensed by her son's death, Pheretime plots her revenge on the guilty city, a city where, as our narrator puts it, πᾶν [...] ἦν τὸ πλῆθος μεταίτιον (4.200.1)—“the whole people was responsible” for the murder of Pheretime's son. We may well question this ascription, especially as it occurs in the narrative itself, rather than in an explicitly meta-narrative comment; still, within the narrative itself, when questioned by Persian heralds, the people themselves seem to admit their universal guilt for the deed. In wishing to take vengeance on the city, then, Pheretime is not necessarily acting unjustly—she is merely responding as we might expect a character in Herodotus to respond when seriously wronged. Returning with a Persian army, however, Pheretime besieges the city and takes it; and then, she exacts her vengeance on its populace. Taking the αἰτιωτάτους (“most responsible”) of the Barceans, she impales them on the city wall along with the severed breasts of their wives; the rest of the Barceans, except for a few of the royal house, she enslaves and gives over to the Persians for deportation. In payment for the death of her son, in other words, Pheretime depopulates an entire city, making a bloody spectacle of many of its citizens and their family members. Even for the world of the *Histories*, this is by no means a typical act of vengeance.

However, as Herodotus tells the story, all does not end well for Pheretime; ὥς γὰρ δὴ τάχιστα ἐκ τῆς Λιβύης τισαμένη τοὺς Βαρκαίους ἀπενόστησε ἐς τὴν Αἴγυπτον, ἀπέθανε κακῶς (4.205)—“for as soon as she had taken vengeance on the Barceans and sailed from Libya into Egypt, she died badly.” Indeed, Pheretime dies in an especially gruesome and inauspicious

fashion, with maggots breeding in her living flesh. Herodotus himself offers the moral of this bloody tale: ὥς ἄρα ἀνθρώποισι αἱ λίην ἰσχυραὶ τιμωρίαι πρὸς θεῶν ἐπίφθονοι γίνονται (4.205)—“since indeed excessively great acts of vengeance by human beings become liable to envy from the gods.” Here, again, far from simply concurring with Pheretime’s act of vengeance, the gods in fact punish her for it; and they do so, notably, not by means of any human actor, but in a far more direct and dramatic fashion. Although Pheretime had every reason to want revenge, and although the people of the city admitted their guilt, yet the divine ultimately acts not to support and sanction her personal sense of justice, but rather to correct it, and to take vengeance upon her for her method of carrying it out. This stands in strong contrast to many of the cases of divine vengeance we have seen so far. Yet, as with Cleomenes, it is not the motive of vengeance itself, but the way in which it is carried out that invites divine punishment. In explaining this story, Herodotus appeals to the excessive (λίην) nature of Pheretime’s actions as the reason for her punishment; and in doing so, he makes a statement about divine vengeance that goes far beyond this particular story.

In the accounts we have just examined, it is precisely the *excessive* nature of the vengeance taken that triggers a response. In a similar fashion, elsewhere in our narrative, Herodotus shows us a pattern of divine action that seems to respond punitively, not just to excess in vengeance, but to all expressions of excess in mortal life: the operation of divinity in order to destroy the proud and the excessively great. This is the picture presented in two of the most famous passages of the *Histories*: Solon's speech in Book I (1.32), and the speech of Artabanus in Book VII (7.10). In the former case, we are told—not by Herodotus himself, but rather by a stock “wise adviser” character within the narrative—that τὸ θεῖον πᾶν ἐὸν φθονερόν τε καὶ παραχῶδες (1.32.1)—“the divinity is entirely envious and troublesome.” Likewise, another wise

adviser, Artabanus, tells us that οὐ γὰρ ἔᾤ φρονέειν μέγα ὁ θεὸς ἄλλον ἢ ἑαυτὸν (7.10e)—“the god does not allow anyone other than him to think great things,” and so is brought to destroy those who do so. This pattern, of great men and kingdoms subject to destruction as the result of divine φθόνος, reoccurs frequently throughout the *Histories*³⁷—the downfall of Xerxes and the Persian expedition, which structures the work as a whole, can be considered the principal instance of this pattern. At first glance, though, this might seem to describe a divine system entirely at variance with that already described—an anthropomorphic, personal envy of divinity for the large and great, rather than the reciprocal system of punishing wrongdoing we have discussed. A deeper examination, though, reveals a state of affairs fully compatible with our argument. To begin with, we should note that in both cases, this “envy” of divinity is described in highly metaphorical language, and is based, not on a perceived “poetic” insight into divinity, but rather on at least broadly empirical reasoning. Artabanus' position, for instance, is based on the action of lightning in striking the largest trees rather than smaller ones, as well as his own experience of disastrous expeditions and surprising reversals in the past; it is from these observed states of affairs that he concludes that φιλέει γὰρ ὁ θεὸς τὰ ὑπερέχοντα πάντα κολούειν (7.10e)—“the god loves to humble the excessively great.” Likewise, it is instructive to compare these λόγοι with Otanes' discussion of autocracy (3.80) elsewhere in the narrative (by which kings are marked by an unjust φθόνος towards their inferiors). In both Artabanus's and Solon's speeches, we have adviser figures addressing, and attempting to persuade, absolute monarchs; and both men consequently describe divinity using the terms and characteristics of autocracy. Divinity, in other words, is presented metaphorically as a tyrant; but this rhetorical conceit need not be taken as a literal description of the actual nature and motivations of the divine. The basic historical

³⁷i.e. the story of Polycrates in 3.39-44 & 3.120-125.

pattern this is based on is earlier given by Herodotus in more neutral language, in his statement that small and large cities constantly change fortune and place (1.1.5). Since this pattern is, for Herodotus, clearly operative in history, it is natural for Herodotus to ascribe it ultimately to the guaranteeing and regulating force of divinity—yet it is this (rhetorical) ascription of motives to the divinity that is based on the empirical reality described by Herodotus, and not vice versa.

Likewise, while at first glance it might seem that the divine's punishment of the proud and great merely for their greatness is unjust, or inconsistent with the punishment of actual wrongdoing seen elsewhere, this does not at all follow from Herodotus' cultural context. After all, as Julia Kindt points out, Greek thinking was generally based on a clear division between the divine and human realms; any breach of these boundaries could naturally be taken as an injustice in itself, liable to punishment.³⁸ At the heart of this division lay the differing perspectives, and forms of knowledge, that characterized divine and human existence; while the gods see things as a whole, across large stretches of space and time, human beings are confined to a more limited perspective. There are, to be sure, ways for human beings to access this perspective in a limited way—most notably the various dreams, seers, and oracles that proliferate in Herodotus' narrative. Still, even these, in Kindt's reading, are marked, from a human perspective, precisely by their obscurity, the great difficulty human beings have in understanding and interpreting them. As she argues, “the obscure language of the oracle represents and maintains the restricted nature of human knowledge and the resulting human ignorance of the future,” thus preventing any significant breach in the boundary between human and divine realms.³⁹ It is this, she argues, that

³⁸Julia Kindt, “Delphic Oracle Stories and the Beginning of Historiography: Herodotus' Croesus *Logos*” in *Revisiting Delphi: Religion and Storytelling in Ancient Greece* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 46-48.

³⁹*Ibid.*, 37.

ultimately undoes Croesus, as he fails to appreciate the essential difference between divine and human knowledge and perspectives, and so tries to treat the divine speech as a simple and easily grasped prediction of the future, subject to his own intelligence and foresight.⁴⁰ It is precisely this arrogance, this failure to appreciate the division between divine and human, that habitually afflicts tyrants within Herodotus' narrative.

It is natural to connect this with the characteristic Greek idea of ὕβρις—“wanton violence” characterized by arrogance and lack of regard for boundaries— and its negative consequences, ideas highlighted especially in contemporary Greek tragedy.⁴¹ Indeed, as N.R.E. Fisher points out, the term itself appears in Herodotus 38 times, where it “congregate[s] in the political arena, and concern[s] insulting offenses committed by, or against, rulers of various hues, and aggressive acts committed by states against each other.”⁴² For Herodotus, then, ὕβρις is connected not so much with mythical heroes as with great political power and its consequences. Indeed, according to Otanes in the Persian constitutional debate, such ὕβρις is a natural feature of autocracy itself. Monarchs always stand, we are told, ἐκτὸς τῶν ἐωθότων νοημάτων (3.80.3)—“outside of their accustomed thoughts”—and so commit many and unnatural crimes, including the rape of women and the violation of ancestral νομοί.⁴³ In other words, as Van der Veen puts it,

⁴⁰Ibid., 37-44.

⁴¹Cf. esp. Euripides' *Bacchae*, where the theme of divine-human conflict brought on by ὕβρις is central (cf. lns. 375, 555, et al), as well as N.R.E. Fisher, *Hybris: A Study in the Values of Honour and Shame in Ancient Greece* (Warminster: Aris & Phillips, 1992) for an thorough examination of the concept of ὕβρις in Greek history and literature.

⁴²Fisher, *Hybris*, 343.

⁴³Still, it is worth noting, as does Fisher, that the reply of the advocate of oligarchy goes on to accuse democracy of *also* naturally leading to acts of ὕβρις (3.81). Given Herodotus' ideas as we have constructed them elsewhere, however, and his posited concerns about the Athenian “tyrant city,” this should not surprise us. After all, great power is great power, whether held by a single man or by a whole people.

“great success breeds disaster by its impact on the human mind.”⁴⁴ or as Fisher argues, “the tendency to commit crimes of ὕβρις is generated by great wealth and power, and anyone who is 'corrupted' by a major surplus of these things is led to commit the major hybriistic crimes characteristic of the greatest tyrants and despots.”⁴⁵ Excessive power, then, habitually produces a kind of madness in those who hold it—the pursuit of pleasure and success, and the “delusion of vulnerability it generates,”⁴⁶ leads to a failure to appreciate the natural boundaries and limitations that make up the world, and define one's place in it. The most notable of these boundaries is, of course, that which separates divine and human perspectives and prerogatives.⁴⁷ Because of this confusion between divine and human, tyrants frequently find themselves unable to correctly interpret divine speech,⁴⁸ and are often brought to commit sacrileges or other crimes against divinity, νόμος, and other mortals. Cambyses, the mad king of Egypt who murders the bull of Apis, is perhaps the most notable example of this category of rulers (3.27-29).

Still, direct crimes of this sort are only one outgrowth of a more fundamental reality: namely, that great men and empires habitually fail to give to others and to themselves what is their due. Indeed, I would argue that this is, in a sense, a natural feature of tyranny and Empire—for the *excessive* nature of such power consists precisely in its arrogation to itself of more than is its due, and the consequent *taking away* from others that makes this possible. Tyrants take, and

⁴⁴J.E. Van der Veen, *The Significant and the Insignificant: Five Studies in Herodotus' View of History*. (Amsterdam: Gieben, 1996), 22.

⁴⁵Fisher, *Hybris*, 348.

⁴⁶Van der Veen, *The Significant and the Insignificant*, 22.

⁴⁷Cf. Xerxes' description of his own empire as coterminous with that of Zeus in 7.8c.1; with which compare Euripides' *Bacchae* ll. 395-401, *et al.*

⁴⁸Cf. Kindt, “Oracle Stories,” 37-44.

do not pay back what they owe. Great power, then, represents by its very nature a breach in the regulated network of distribution and exchange that characterizes the world governed by the gods⁴⁹—and so, a breach in justice as Herodotus understands it. It is fundamentally, I would argue, this violation of reciprocity that triggers divine vengeance, and calls down the wrath of the gods upon the great and powerful. This vengeance can be carried out by human or even divine actors; but it is practically always initiated, and made possible, by the human folly of the punished.

The only ways to avoid such ruin, Van der Veen argues, are either to “remain within the limits of the small,”⁵⁰ avoiding the arrogance and confusion typical of excessive power, or else to lay down one's power voluntarily, before it has brought about ruin.⁵¹ The latter path is taken, notably, by the Egyptian King Sabacos, who, upon being sent a divine dream commanding him to commit a sacrilegious crime, concludes that the time of his rule is up, and so voluntarily lays down his power and returns to Ethiopia (2.139). In this instance, by realizing that his power is both limited and temporary, subject to chance and divine governance, and that the divine perspective is fundamentally other than his own, Sabacos correctly interprets the obscure divine speech given to him, and so saves himself from ruin. Many other tyrants do not fare so well; most notably, when a dream commands Xerxes to carry out the expedition against Greece, he fails to recognize that this is only a deceptive way for the gods' to set up his rule and his empire for defeat (7.12-18). Like other tyrants, Xerxes fails to appreciate the difference between the

⁴⁹cf. Herodotus' discussion of divine providence in the animal world in 3.108.2-3.

⁵⁰Van der Veen, *The Significant and the Insignificant*, 122.

⁵¹Cf. Van der Veen's analysis of the story of Polycrates (Hdt. 3.39-44 and 3.120-125) in *The Significant and the Insignificant*, 5-22.

divine and the human realms and perspectives; and it is this which leads to disaster, for him and his kingdom.

Taking all of this into account, how, then, should we understand the role of divine vengeance in the events of the *Histories*? To begin with, it is eminently clear that divine vengeance is not in competition with human agency and action; indeed, as we have seen, the idea of divine vengeance in Herodotus is most commonly employed in intimate connection with, rather than in competition with, human deeds of vengeance. Herodotus' use of the divine in these cases is not intended to detract from the motivations of the human characters in his story; rather, divine causation operates alongside human motivation in bringing about vengeance, supporting, as it were, the human principle of reciprocity and δίκη by ensuring its successful operation. In the stories themselves, as we have seen, divine presence is detected either by the presence of extraordinary coincidence (as with Hermotimus' chance discovery of his tormentor after gaining power in the Persian state), or else by the extraordinary nature of the vengeance taken (as with Talthybius and the destruction of Troy). In the first place, divinity ensures that vengeance will actually take place; in the second place, it regulates its operation.

However, as we have also seen, while divine vengeance frequently operates in tandem with human motivations, it does not always do so; rather, there are cases where divine vengeance constitutes the sole explanatory factor offered by Herodotus for the cause of an event. Sometimes, this is the result of a slight committed against a particular god or goddess; though as we have seen, these cases are generally downplayed by Herodotus in favor of a more vague and impersonal model of the divine. Most intriguingly, sometimes this is the result of excessive action taken in the gaining of vengeance itself, which is then punished by divine action. In all these cases, divinity acts with impunity in both bringing about and regulating vengeance for

injustices done by human beings.

In my judgment, the role of divine vengeance in Herodotus' *Histories* should be seen as primarily regulatory— that is, as ensuring that human events, by and large, take on a certain shape, and exhibit certain characteristic patterns. That is to say, for Herodotus, to fully account for the patterns operative in historical events, including the basic pattern of reciprocity and vengeance that we have seen, a concurring divine cause is necessary alongside human ones. Herodotus is noteworthy for his sophisticated understanding of human motivation and action, including the profound role that human ignorance, chance, and other factors play in influencing what people do or do not do, and how successful people are in achieving their aims. It is this “other side of things” that is for Herodotus the purview of the divine. Human beings are motivated by desires for vengeance and by a sense of δίκη and reciprocity, and they are deeply influenced by their personal character, as well as the character and νομοί of their ἔθνος; yet, ultimately, the achievement of vengeance, and the maintaining of reciprocity on a large scale, depends on many factors entirely outside of their control. In the exacting of vengeance, then, human and divine action and motivation form two halves of a single causative whole.⁵²

Hermotimus may *want* to take vengeance on the man who castrated him; but the only reason he is actually able to do so is because the gods contrive to put Panionius and his children into his power. Likewise, even in the act of taking vengeance, human beings act on the basis of an idea of δίκη that has, ultimately, a divine basis and justification. Through the events of the Trojan War,

⁵²This idea of “double causation,” with humans and gods acting in tandem to cause a single event or action, has parallels in other Greek works, including Homer. For the complex, confusing relationship between human and divine causes in Homer, see especially Albin Lesky, “Göttliche und menschliche Motivation im homerischen Epos”, *Sitzungsberichte der Heidelberger Akademie der Wissenschaften* 4, 1961, as well as Douglas Cairns’ commentary on the issue, focusing on Lesky’s article and the scholarly debate following from it, in Douglas Cairns, ed, *Oxford Readings In Homer’s Iliad* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 12-24, which also includes an abridged English translation of Lesky’s article by Leofranc Holford-Stevens. Although the Homeric picture is quite different from Herodotus’ own, it still forms an essential background to Herodotus’ ideas.

and elsewhere, the gods have revealed to mankind the presence of a network of reciprocity, crime and punishment, within history. This reciprocity can and does function even in the absence of human action; but human beings may if they wish cooperate with the divine in taking vengeance on those who have wronged them, secure in the knowledge that, so long as they are in the right, the gods themselves will be on their side. At the same time, though, the divine does not only act so as to facilitate and support acts of vengeance; it also regulates how and in what terms it is taken. A human being taking vengeance is acting in close conjunction with the divine; thus, excessive action in this realm is especially offensive, and liable to especially grievous punishment. For as Artabanus and Solon make clear, the transgressing of human boundaries, or the arrogation to oneself of divine attributes or perspectives, is a very dangerous offense, one especially liable to be punished by the gods. This the proud and the great again and again do—and suffer the consequences.

III. Theory and Application

So far, we have laid out a broad and schematic view of the nature of divine vengeance as it appears in the *Histories*. Still, the question of how this model should be understood theoretically, and its consequences for our understanding of Herodotus as a historian and as a thinker, remain. For this topic has enormous implications for our understanding of the *Histories* as a whole, and cuts to the heart of Herodotus' purported status as the “father of history.”

Herodotus' theory of divine vengeance differs strongly from our own reflexive ideas on the nature of history and historical causation. It might also appear to conflict rather strongly with our conventional idea of the skeptical, empirical, and “scientific” nature of Herodotus's work as a historian. It is, then, extremely tempting for modern scholars to try to construe this aspect of Herodotus' work as narrowly as possible, confining it within a narrower “religious” or “poetic” sphere cut off from Herodotus' main project. Donald Lateiner, for instance, sees a struggle in Herodotus' work between “Herodotus the enlightened Skeptic” who as a matter of course “shows little sympathy for belief in supernatural interference in earthly affairs” and “Herodotus the patient recorder of belief, practice, and memory,”⁵³ who is consequently forced to include the supernatural beliefs and stories of his subjects. It is the latter, Lateiner argues, who is responsible for much of what passes for supernatural intervention in the *Histories*. Although Herodotus does see “a set of delicate and easily disturbed balances in the world, violations of which entail a

⁵³Donald Lateiner, “Deceptions and Delusions in Herodotus,” *Classical Antiquity* 9, no. 2 (1990): 236.

cosmic restoration of balance or revenge by τίσις,”⁵⁴ this is primarily “considered agreement with folk wisdom”⁵⁵ rather than a developed theory of Herodotus' own. While “the workings of providence are not disallowed,” then, “they are distanced from the choices that men are forced to make.”⁵⁶

Yet, as we have seen, it is Herodotus himself, as narrator and interpreter, who frequently reads divine vengeance *into* stories that otherwise lack it. Herodotus, in fact, is not merely accepting the accounts and wisdom of others; he is plainly engaged in drawing conclusions of his own. He is, to be sure, plainly skeptical of a whole class of stories involving individual gods and their interactions with mortals—and more broadly, of the whole Homeric mythos⁵⁷ and the colorful, differentiated Greek pantheon that accompanies it⁵⁸—but this skepticism does not extend, seemingly, to the operation of divinity as director and guarantor of divine vengeance within history. This combination of “skepticism” and “belief” may well strike us as rather odd.

Another possible route of interpretation is that taken by Thomas Harrison in his *Divinity and History: The Religion of Herodotus*. This is to engage with Herodotus' use of divinity through the primary rubric of “belief”—that is, non-empirical, essentially non-rational ideas about the world, a set of conscious and unconscious assumptions, mediated by culture, which are

⁵⁴Donald Lateiner, *The Historical Method of Herodotus*, 141.

⁵⁵*Ibid.*, 143.

⁵⁶*Ibid.*, 143.

⁵⁷Herodotus' reading of Homer, however, is not entirely skeptical. As Lawrence Kim argues, “Herodotus has it both ways – Homer is wrong, but still serves as a witness for Herodotus' competing narrative.” Lawrence Kim, *Homer between History and Fiction in Imperial Greek Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 37.

⁵⁸Cf. Burkert, “Herodotus on the Names of the Gods,” as well as sec. 2 above.

by nature not subject to rational analysis or consistency.⁵⁹ Based on this idea, Harrison argues that the pattern of divine vengeance and reciprocity we have discerned should not be understood as a serious, conscious theory, but rather as “an engrained habit of understanding the world, an attitude of mind that has both shaped and been shaped by the events that Herodotus records.”⁶⁰ In picking between various, partly inconsistent sets of divine interpretations of events, Herodotus is being “subliminally” affected by only “the most intangible, indirect form of ‘intellectual influence,’”⁶¹ in the application of which “Herodotus is not entirely conscious”⁶² of what he is doing. Herodotus' use of the motif of divine vengeance, then, is in its essence a contradictory and inconsistent set of “religious beliefs,” protected from easy falsification by “let-out clauses”⁶³ that allow the semblance of rationalism to be maintained. In similar fashion, John Gould argues that Herodotus' uses of the divine to explain history do not amount to any kind of generalized “‘theory’ of human historical experience,”⁶⁴ but rather are to be related to the popular Greek tradition of gnomic utterances, designed to “relate what happens to the general fund of human wisdom” and to “reassure,”⁶⁵ without true causative or inferential force. As Gould sees it, Herodotus' concept of divine vengeance is fundamentally inconsistent with the general pattern of

⁵⁹Harrison's description of 'religious belief' in general is, in fact, a remarkable tour de force of modern assumptions on the inherent irrationality of 'religion': “no ‘system’ of religious beliefs is entirely consistent” (14), with even the more rational “riven with contradictions and inconsistencies” (22), so that “inconsistencies in belief are not just an inevitable flaw of all religions, but actually a means whereby belief is maintained” (14).

⁶⁰Harrison, *Divinity and History*, 116.

⁶¹*Ibid.*, 116.

⁶²*Ibid.*, 114.

⁶³*Ibid.*, 110.

⁶⁴Gould, *Herodotus*, 82.

⁶⁵*Ibid.*, 82.

reciprocity and vengeance that he has detected in the *Histories*,⁶⁶ and this in turn leads Gould to deny almost any causative role to divine vengeance in the *Histories*, maintaining, for instance, that “human disasters are brought about by human short-comings, not by supernatural causes such as 'divine envy,'”⁶⁷ and that all uses of divine vengeance within the text are merely small-scale, *ad hoc* explanations for particular cases, with little or no import for the causative structure of the *Histories* as a whole. In fact, as we have seen, Gould's argument is based on a faulty premise. The presence of the principle of vengeance and reciprocity on the divine level in no way vitiates its explanatory force on the level of human motivation and action; rather, it serves both to regulate and ultimately to guarantee its causative power as a principle of historical interpretation.

Still, this basic stance—by which Herodotus' ideas of the divine are to be considered as the result primarily of his religious environment, and not the conscious judgments of Herodotus himself—can also be found in any number of other scholarly discussions.⁶⁸ This should not surprise us—from the point of view of modern scholarship, constructed on the basis of the post-secular division between “religion” and “science,” this represents an obvious hermeneutic with which to read Herodotus' text. Nor is this at all a fruitless approach—for clearly, Herodotus *is* in fact influenced by the cultural ideas of his time, and, equally clearly, his ideas about divinity are not without what we would think of as “religious” significance.

At the same time, however, this way of viewing divinity in Herodotus is, in my judgment,

⁶⁶Ibid., 82.

⁶⁷Ibid., 80.

⁶⁸E.g. Mikalson, *Herodotus and Religion in the Persian Wars*: “Herodotus' views of the origins of Greek religion are a theory to be tried, tested, and improved; his ideas about the existence and power of the gods are more what we would, I think, call religious belief” (139-40), although Mikalson also maintains that “reason and common sense were major components in Greek religious belief” (138-9). Still, for him, these ideas are primarily the result of Herodotus' Greek cultural background rather than his own thought.

fundamentally flawed. Gould's approach, especially, strikes me as a problematically simplistic way to approach figures far less sophisticated than Herodotus—as if there were no intellectual space available between post-modern academic theory and “a stitch in time saves nine.” Gould is surely right that Herodotus' presentation of events is often influenced by Greek models of generalized knowledge and gnomic wisdom—but to argue that therefore Herodotus is incapable of possessing any distinctive ideas of his own on these topics, or of giving them causative force in his narrative, is simply to mistake medium for message. It is plausible only if we fail to pay due attention to the ideas presented. But even Harrison's more general reduction of Herodotus' ideas on divinity and vengeance to the realm of irrational “religious belief” rests on a number of assumptions that are seriously misleading when applied to Herodotus. Most fundamentally, it relies on an anachronistic understanding of “religion” and “belief.” The fundamental division of thought into mutually-exclusive realms of “reason” on the one hand, and “belief” on the other reflects a division between what I would call “approved” and “unapproved” discourse—with the former authoritative, public, and based on reason, while the latter is assumed to be essentially private, internal, and not subject to rational or empirical analysis.⁶⁹ For modern thinkers, the division between these two areas is often assumed to be coincident with the realms of the “natural” and “supernatural”—so that every discourse that involves the divine (however construed and however tangentially) must necessarily be a matter of private, assumed, or otherwise non-rational belief. But neither this division of discourse into “approved” or “unapproved” spheres, nor the simple equation of these with “natural” and “supernatural”

⁶⁹This conception is historically the result of the Early Modern Christian religious doctrine of fideism, as well as the bitter and often violent conflicts over the status of religion in public life in 18th and 19th-century Europe and America. It is, in other words, historically and culturally contingent, and would not have been accepted without argument in most other times and societies.

realms, are at all reflective of ancient Greek thinking—certainly not at the time of Herodotus, when pre-Socratic philosophy (much of which dealt, as a matter of course, with the divine and supernatural) was in the process of being formulated.⁷⁰ If we wish to understand Herodotus' treatment of divine matters, then, we should strive to understand Herodotus' thinking in as a holistic a mode as possible, without imposing divisions on it based on contemporary ideas.⁷¹ Once we have understood Herodotus on his own terms, we will be able to more fruitfully relate his understanding to modern categories.

As a number of scholars have deduced, the way Herodotus divides the divine from human realms is not at all based on this essentially modern schema. Herodotus is certainly deeply influenced by Greek cultural and religious ideas about the divine; yet, as we have seen, Herodotus' use of these ideas is by no means unexamined, but takes place within the context of an overall critique of Greek religious ideas as handed down by Homer and Hesiod. When taken on his own terms, Herodotus' stated judgments on divinity and history can, in fact, be brought together to form not only a true “philosophy of history”⁷² (to use Charles Fornara's phrase), but even a “theology” in the sense suggested by Julia Kindt—that is, a “theology of the story”⁷³ which, although closely related to and frequently expressed in narrative, should not be for this

⁷⁰For one perspective in the debate over how to date Herodotus precisely, see Charles Fornara, “Evidence for the Date of Herodotus' Publication,” *The Journal of Hellenic Studies* 91 (1971).

⁷¹As the result of these considerations and others, I have consistently avoided using the terms “belief” and “religious belief” in this essay.

⁷²Charles W. Fornara, “Human History and the Constraint of Fate in Herodotus,” in *Conflict, Antithesis, and the Ancient Historian*, ed. June W. Allison (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1990), 27.

⁷³Julia Kindt, “The Story of Theology and the Theology of the Story,” in *Theologies of Ancient Greek Religion*, ed. Esther Eidinow et al. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 13.

reason taken as irrational or illegitimate.⁷⁴ Unlike much of ancient religion, however, Herodotus' theology is fundamentally skeptical and rationalist in orientation, in a similar fashion to most ancient theistic philosophy; but it nevertheless constitutes a consistent set of ideas about the divine, its nature, and its relationship to the world, and so has legitimate *religious* import, and a close, albeit critical, relationship, with other manifestations of Greek religiosity. It is my fundamental contention, then, that Herodotus' ideas on divine causation within history are neither simply assumed, nor merely cultural—that they constitute, in fact, the broadest and most intellectually developed stratum of the *Histories* as a whole, relating directly to his methodology and the essential terms of his project.

It remains only to examine in greater depth just what this theology consists of. Although I share Charles Fornara's opinion that Herodotus can be termed “a theological historian,” for whom divinity “is an immanent force guiding events in accord with his will,” Fornara's treatment of this divine “fate” as “a necessity imposed from without that constrains individuals and states to act, according to its own laws and plan”⁷⁵ is too simplistic to take in the broad sweep of divine vengeance as we have seen it. Divinity or fate is not merely an imminent character in Herodotus' narrative, driving events inevitably as it wishes; rather, divinity has a *meta-narrative* character, helping to tie together and explain the events and broad historical patterns present in the *Histories*. As Burkert puts it, the sphere of divinity is primarily “das Hintergrund allen Geschehens”⁷⁶—that sphere, in other words, where the welter of stories and ethnographies that make up the *Histories* are integrated to form a single, consistent narrative and picture of the

⁷⁴Ibid.

⁷⁵Fornara, “Human History and the Constraint of Fate,” 45.

⁷⁶Burkert, “Herodot als Historiker fremder Religionen,” 28.

world. Robert Fowler puts the matter even more baldly: “Herodotus' procedure is to construct a master narrative and equate that with the gods.”⁷⁷ If in the *Histories* there are certain consistent patterns, by which the guilty are punished or blame assigned, then responsibility for these patterns can be assigned to the gods. The most notable instance of this is, of course, that of the Persian Wars, where, as Jon Mikalson argues, the gods play a pivotal role in punishing the Persians and ensuring a positive outcome for the war.⁷⁸ If, as Herodotus suggests in his proem, one of the principal narratives connecting his work together is the causes and results of the Persian War, then the gods, inasmuch as they are responsible for ensuring this war's existence and outcome,⁷⁹ hold a pivotal position in tying together the work as a whole. Divinity, then, is not merely present in small stories of dubious value; it is present on the highest narrative level of the *Histories*, ensuring the work's cohesion as a whole.

For what reason, though, does Herodotus employ divinity in this way? From a modern perspective, this might seem an odd choice indeed—after all, contemporary historians often feel quite comfortable writing grand histories with grand narratives, without thereby suggesting that God himself is responsible for these narratives. Here, though, it is important to recognize Herodotus' cultural and intellectual context, and the general ideas of divinity and humanity that underlie them. In her discussion of Herodotus' use of oracles, Julia Kindt points out the strong conceptual divide between the divine and human realms, which centers specifically around *time*:

⁷⁷Robert Fowler, “Gods in early Greek Historiography” in *The Gods of Ancient Greece*, ed. Jan Bremmer and Andrew Erskine (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010), 332.

⁷⁸Mikalson, “Herodotus and Religion,” throughout, esp. 15-110.

⁷⁹Cf. Herodotus, throughout, for instance, at 8.13 (ἐποιετό τε πᾶν ὑπὸ τοῦ θεοῦ ὅκως ἂν ἐξισωθεῖν τῷ Ἑλληνικῷ τὸ Περσικὸν μηδὲ πολλῷ πλέον εἴη), as well as Mikalson, cited above. For the part played by the divine in the initial decision to invade, see also Emily Baragwanath, *Motivation and Narrative in Herodotus* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 249-253.

the gods are timeless, and humans are not. While the “gods could survey past, present, and future and therefore gain an overall view of human destiny [...] the human perspective (and with it human knowledge) was believed to be more limited.”⁸⁰ Mortal human knowledge is by definition confined to the present, to what they themselves can see and hear directly, and does not extend broadly over great swathes of time and space. As James Lesher argues, this pessimism when it comes to human knowledge was rooted for the Greeks in Homer and other early Greek poets, who generally “disparaged the intellectual capacities of mortal beings”⁸¹ in contrast to the knowledge possessed by the immortal gods. As Lesher points out, the “one particular body of knowledge that is consistently regarded as the special prerogative of the gods and the select few mortals with whom they choose to share it is knowledge of events or conditions in distant places and times.”⁸² In setting out to write a history encompassing hundreds of years in both East and West, Herodotus, then, is almost by definition taking a god-like position and perspective, one analogous in many ways to the various other human mediators to the divine realm that proliferate in his narrative: “The authoritative voice of oracles, seers, and omens in many ways corresponds to the authoritative voice of the historian in his role as the researcher and narrator of the history he tells.”⁸³ It is natural, then, for Herodotus, inasmuch as his narrative “negotiates between the different dimensions of time,”⁸⁴ to associate this perspective and narrative with the timeless gods.

⁸⁰Kindt, “Oracle Stories,” 37.

⁸¹James Lesher, “The Humanizing of Knowledge in Pre-Socratic Thought,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Presocratic Philosophy*, ed. Patricia Curd and Daniel Graham (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 458.

⁸²*Ibid.*, 452.

⁸³Kindt, “Oracle Stories,” 35.

⁸⁴*Ibid.*, 43.

Still, if we remain here, we are apt to remember the “lying Herodotus” of scholarly yore—one perhaps guilty, as Kindt puts it, of “the exploitation of divine language for his own purposes.”⁸⁵ Is Herodotus’ use of divinity and divine vengeance, perhaps, little more than a narrative con game, a way of concealing his own literary preoccupations, and disguising his own lack of real knowledge? This is not, in my judgment, an accurate or fair assessment of Herodotus as a historian or as a thinker. In fact, as we will see, what sets Herodotus apart from past writers is precisely his profound awareness of the limits of human knowledge, including his own lack of access to the divine realm and its perspective.

Homeric and Hesiodic poetry was entirely premised upon the supposed inspiration of the poet by the Muses.⁸⁶ As James Leshar argues, the Greek poetic world generally took for granted a profound pessimism about human knowledge, “[t]he only exceptions” to which “were seers, prophets, and the poets themselves, who claimed a share in divine wisdom.”⁸⁷ As Homer himself puts it in his second invocation of the Muses, ὑμεῖς γὰρ θεαί ἐστε πάρεστε τε ἴστε τε πάντα, ἡμεῖς δὲ κλέος οἶον ἀκούομεν οὐδὲ τι ἴδμεν⁸⁸—“You are goddesses and are present everywhere, and know everything—but we hear only a rumor, and know nothing.” It is only based on his privileged relationship with the gods that the poet is permitted secure knowledge of human events both near and far, as well as a look “behind the scenes,” as it were, at the characters and actions of the gods. Whether or not this inspiration is always truthful, it at least allowed narratives to be constructed in which divine and human action both proliferated, interacting in

⁸⁵Ibid., 49.

⁸⁶Cf. Leshar, “The Humanizing of Knowledge,” 458.

⁸⁷Ibid., 458.

⁸⁸*Iliad* 2.485-6.

complex ways to achieve an overall narrative end, conceptualized (in Homer) as “fate” or “the will of Zeus.”⁸⁹ It cannot be emphasized enough, however, that Herodotus claims no such divine inspiration for himself. Rather than a presentation of what the Muses have shown him, his *Histories* are a ἱστορίης ἀπόδεξις (1.1.1), a “presentation of inquiry.” Not only this, but Herodotus, throughout his work, shows significant skepticism about even the possibility of poetic inspiration as Homer and Hesiod claimed it; according to Herodotus, Homer and Hesiod almost certainly just invented whatever they claimed to have known about the gods and divinity.⁹⁰ His own presentation of Homer, as Benjamin Sammons argues, consistently casts doubt on Homer's poetic inspiration while presenting him more as an “inquirer” and analogue to Herodotus himself.⁹¹ If Herodotus is really a con man claiming divine inspiration where none exists, then he is certainly doing a bad job of it.

In fact, as I will argue, Herodotus possesses a very complex and sophisticated understanding of his own role as “inquirer” or “historian,” and its necessary relation to the nature of the world and divinity. As Vivienne Gray describes it, this project is based, not on supposed divine inspiration, but on “ἄκοή (what he heard), ὄψις (what he saw), and γνώμη (his judgment).”⁹² As inquirer, Herodotus reports the stories he hears, confirms or disproves them with the things he sees, and then judges and unifies them by the use of his own judgment. In this, he frequently evinces significant skepticism, especially (it may be added) in matters involving

⁸⁹Cf. *Iliad* 1.5, et al.

⁹⁰Cf. Hdt. 2.53.2, as well as Kim, “Homer Between History and Fiction,” 22-46.

⁹¹Benjamin Sammons, “History and *Huponoia*: Herodotus and Early Literary Criticism,” *Histos* 6 (2012).

⁹²Vivienne Gray, “Herodotus' literary and historical method: Arion's Story (1.23-24),” *American Journal of Philology* 122, no. 1 (2001): 11, cf. Hdt. 2.99.1.

the direct intervention of gods and heroes in the human realm, as well as the nature of divinity in general. These are matters, Herodotus believes, where in fact *no one* has the kind of access that Homer and Hesiod pretended to have.⁹³ There are, to be sure, oracles, seers, dreams, and other forms of divine speech that Herodotus often seems to accept as valid communications from the divine⁹⁴—but as Jonas Grethlein argues, “[t]he language of the gods is often obscure and the majority of the oracles in the *Histories* are misunderstood or ignored by the receivers.”⁹⁵ Likewise, as Julia Kindt makes clear, this obscurity is not an accidental or inconsequential feature of divine communication, but has to do with the basic nature of the divine in its division from humankind.⁹⁶ There is, then, for Herodotus, no possibility of the kind of clear, unambiguous divine knowledge that Homer and Hesiod make use of. Nor does Herodotus claim for himself even the limited divine access granted to seers and oracles in his narrative. Yet for all this, Herodotus still, as we have seen, still makes important use of divinity, not only in the narratives he reports, but also in the highest level of his own judgments and explanations of events. How, and why does he do this?

We must emphasize here how novel, and how seemingly impossible, the task Herodotus is setting himself in the *Histories* is. In setting out to construct a super-temporal and super-ethnic narrative solely on the basis of his own hearing, seeing, and opinion, Herodotus is setting himself

⁹³Cf. Hdt. 2.3.

⁹⁴This need not, however, be in itself taken as a blot against Herodotus' “rationality.” As Michael Flower argues, “The various rites of divination, taken together, constituted a rational and coherent, as well as a socially useful, system of knowledge and belief for the Greeks” (105), which was “authoritative [...] not only for the uneducated masses, but also for the elite” (104-5), including most notably the rationalist philosopher Socrates and his successors. Michael A Flower, *The Seer in Ancient Greece* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008).

⁹⁵Jonas Grethlein. *Experience and Teleology in Ancient Historiography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 203.

⁹⁶Kindt, “Oracle Stories,” 36-7.

a task that, in the terms of the Greek poetic tradition, would be seen as by definition impossible.⁹⁷ As Robert Fowler makes clear, it was also a task that was almost entirely novel. While local histories of various sorts existed before, no one prior to Herodotus that we know of ever tried to do what Herodotus did—to write a single, collective history based on innumerable sources, using critical methods to evaluate and compare and combine sources drawn from across great swathes of space and time.⁹⁸ This is how Herodotus' originality was viewed by the ancients, as well.⁹⁹ It is thus a task—and this cannot be emphasized enough—whose very possibility is entirely dependent on the question of *just what precisely* the nature of the world, the cosmos, and divinity actually *is*. If divinity and the world, for instance, is as Homer made it out to be—numerous gods acting with impunity to enforce their desired will against one another within the limits of fate—then Herodotus' task would indeed be impossible. For in this case, judging an event would require knowing which particular god had performed it, for what reason, and with what consequence for the social world of the gods in general; and Herodotus has access to none of this information. In setting out on his task, then, Herodotus requires, in a sense, the world and the gods to both be on his side. In the first place this means, as Rosario Munson puts it, that Herodotus' ethnographies and master narratives alike rely on an “ideology of a unitarian world,”¹⁰⁰ a world where the nature of things, including people, are essentially consistent across time and space. Herodotus, indeed, is very aware of the bewildering complexity of the world, and the bizarre and determinative differences between various cultures—but, if his work is to

⁹⁷Cf. Leshner, “The Humanizing of Knowledge,” 462.

⁹⁸Robert Fowler, “Herodotus and His Contemporaries,” *The Journal of Hellenic Studies* 116 (1996): 62-80.

⁹⁹Cf. Dionysius of Halicarnassus *On the Character of Thucydides* 5.1.

¹⁰⁰Munson, *Telling Wonders*, 89.

have any meaning at all, this complexity and diversity must be grounded fundamentally in a level of sameness and consistency. One can only distinguish different νομοί if they, and human beings, have *something* in common. “The world can be explained [historically] because it is ‘same,’ with a limited number of possible shapes.”¹⁰¹ In a stable, ultimately consistent and united world, history is possible.

But this necessity of consistency and sameness applies not only to human culture or the natural world, but equally to the gods as well. Whatever our judgment of them, the stories Herodotus heard, and the things he saw, all attested to the presence and reality of some kind of divine realm. If this divine realm was as Homer saw it—divided, frequently at war with itself—then, again, history would be impossible. Only a stable, regulating divinity could ensure a stable, regulated world, a world in which critical inquiry was possible at all. Indeed, regulation, in this sense, is the main role Herodotus seems to assign to divinity writ large—seen, for instance, both in his etymology of the word θεοί from the Greek word θεῖναι, “to set in order” (2.52.1), and in his famous discussion of the role of divinity in ensuring order in the natural world (3.108.2-3). Under this view, discerning the nature of the divinity underlying and regulating the world is neither a matter for unexamined cultural νομοί (of the sort that Herodotus frequently explodes), nor is it a matter for supposed poetic inspiration (of the sort that Herodotus plainly does not believe in): it is, like his *Histories* itself, a matter for empirical inquiry and rational analysis. The primary difference, here, though, is that, unlike the world of mortals, the regulating divinity cannot be *directly* accessed at all: instead, it must be discerned *through* human events, by examining the patterns underlying them, and attempting to discern the purpose and nature of divine action and regulation in history. Herodotus' *assumption*, based on his own methodological

¹⁰¹Ibid., 89.

commitments and his general sense of the nature of the world, is that divinity operates in a rational and consistent fashion in its regulation of the world; his *conclusions*, though, are based on his own analysis of the events of history across space and time. Herodotus' discussion of the Sack of Troy is a good example of this mode of analysis—based on his own experience of events far and wide, as well as the information provided to him by Homer and the Greek tradition, Herodotus forms a judgment on the intention of divinity in regards to this event. This is in no sense merely an unexamined or reflexive understanding; it is the result of a specific mode of rational analysis, one that Herodotus employs in many other places as well. Herodotus' judgments on divinity, then, are the result of his own analysis of the events and patterns he has seen and heard and collected. Among these events and patterns, to be sure, are the accounts of oracles, dreams, and visions that proliferate in his narrative—but while these certainly aid Herodotus in his task of understanding historical patterns, as a means by which “a teleological structure is embedded” within events themselves,¹⁰² their obscurity means that it is often Herodotus himself who is forced to interpret them and assign what he considers to be their true meaning, significance, and place in the narrative.¹⁰³ While they are an important set of data for Herodotus, they by no means determine his conclusions. These are based on his own analysis and perception, and emerge at the highest narrative level of the *Histories*. They thus deserve to be called rational, empirical judgments or conclusions, and not merely “beliefs” in a private or unexamined sense.

Still, Herodotus' thoughts are by no means simplistically “rationalistic” in a modern

¹⁰²Grethlein, *Experience and Teleology*, 203.

¹⁰³Cf. Hdt. 1.13.2, 1.66.2, 8.96.2, as well as Kindt, “Oracle Stories,” 44-6.

sense. Both Gould¹⁰⁴ and Harrison,¹⁰⁵ for instance, see a profound inconsistency and even contradiction in Herodotus' presentation of the divine, especially in his use of motifs of chance and capriciousness along with ideas of justice and rational order. Divinity operates, broadly, in a rational manner; but also at times rather capriciously as well, forcing Xerxes to undertake the expedition to Greece, for instance (7.12-18), or trying to trick Sabacos into opening himself up for punishment (2.139). When Herodotus' views of the divine are seen properly, however, as conclusions rather than as “beliefs” or poetic insights into divine motivation, much of this inconsistency disappears. Divine action is at least broadly rational and consistent; but it need not be totally so. After all, Herodotus, unlike Homer, has no real access into the actual motivations and basic nature of divinity itself. All his conclusions are external and based on the stories and evidence available to him. At the same time, though, Herodotus' placing of the idea of chance (συμφορή) side by side with the action of divinity should not be taken as remotely inconsistent. Συμφορή, “what comes together,” is not an independent, comprehensive cause of its own;¹⁰⁶ rather, it is representative in human events of the whole range of causes whose action is both inscrutable to man and entirely outside his control. The most notable of these causes, as we have seen, is divinity. Divinity can, indeed, be assumed to be operating in a rational and consistent

¹⁰⁴“We [are dealing] with a set of metaphors of very different implications [...] generalizations which permit contradictions.” In Gould, *Herodotus*, 79-82.

¹⁰⁵“Other misfortunes are interpreted only as illustrations of the mixed and unpredictable nature of human fortune. [...] Such apparent inconsistency might be thought problematic. It is precisely this, however, the potential for two contradictory but parallel forms of explanation, that allows for the belief in the possibility of divine intervention to be maintained.” In Harrison, *Divinity and History*, 113, 115.

¹⁰⁶The idea that “chance” or “randomness” as such constitutes a real cause of its own, opposed to “necessity” or “determinism” is, in fact, a fairly modern idea, emerging largely out of Early Modern scientific debates. It should not be read back into the ancient world without significant consideration.

manner; nevertheless, it remains ultimately inscrutable to mortals, something to whose motivations Herodotus has no direct access.

Still, even if we accept Herodotus' position—on the presence of a broadly stable, rational divinity regulating events—as basically rational and consistent (whatever our thinking on its merits), we might well still wonder whence comes Herodotus' seemingly oversize emphasis on divine *vengeance* specifically. This, at least, might strike us as rather irrational. Nevertheless, this emphasis too has much to tell us about Herodotus' methodology and thought.

To begin with, Gould is clearly right in seeing in Herodotus' thinking on this matter a Greek cultural model of reciprocity, giving, and receiving—a model also present in many other ancient cultures. This surely underlies Herodotus' analysis of divinity and its intentions, just as it informs his understanding of the actions and intentions of human beings. At the same time, this emphasis on divine vengeance was surely present, to a great degree, in the stories Herodotus himself heard from his sources. As an empiricist reliant for his information upon the things he himself heard and saw, Herodotus would be something of a fool if he did not perceive, in the stories he collected, a clear pattern of what can only be described as divine vengeance. To entirely remove this pattern from his *Histories* would take a radical kind of skepticism quite foreign to Herodotus' methodologies—one that would likewise threaten to make his entire project impossible.

Still, as we have seen, Herodotus does not merely accept what he has heard in every instance. He seems, in fact, generally to underplay specific instances of what we would call “personal” divine vengeance of particular gods for wrongs against them and their shrines, in favor of a much more broad and ethically-grounded system of divine reciprocity and regulation,

“a divine participation that makes sense also in ethical terms.”¹⁰⁷ His “divine vengeance,” in fact, is not really vengeance in our sense we would think of it at all, but rather something approaching a “justice system,” defined not by private and personal grudges, but by a broad impartiality on behalf of the regulating divinity. Herodotus is not merely, then, a reporter of Greek cultural mores; he is something closer to a philosophical thinker, altering what his tradition has given him in favor of more rationalist and ethical stances.

At the same time, there is a close link between Herodotus' methodologies and the kind of divine causes he in fact uncovers. Put simply, Herodotus generally finds divine vengeance (as opposed, say, to divine benevolence)¹⁰⁸ because this is what he is looking for. As Munson again points out, the main use of the word ἵστωρία prior to Herodotus was, in fact, in cases of judicial arbitration;¹⁰⁹ and Herodotus' entire project has, quite openly and deliberately, broadly judicial overtones:

“Herodotus’ ἵστωρία is a ‘scientific’ undertaking, but it is also comparable to the process of inquiry in cases of judicial arbitration. In an inquiry of arbitration, the evidence collected serves as the basis for a judgment about who is right and who is wrong in a dispute and for the recommendation of a settlement on the part of the arbitrator or ἵστωρ.¹¹⁰ In a similar way, the information presented in the *Histories* counts as evidence

¹⁰⁷Munson, *Telling Wonders*, 185.

¹⁰⁸Though this is certainly present throughout the text; as, for instance, in the story of Arion and the dolphin in 1.23-4. It should also be emphasized that the regulatory role played by the divinity in human events, even in its infliction of punishment on the guilty, would be for Herodotus an instance of divine benevolence broadly conceived. After all, for the Greeks, vengeance and δίκη were seen generally as a *good thing*.

¹⁰⁹Munson, *Telling Wonders*, 7-8.

¹¹⁰Cf. Connor, W. R., “The *Histor* in History,” in *Nomodeiktes: Greek studies in honor of Martin Ostwald*, Ed. Ralph M. Rosen and Joseph Farrell (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994), where the social role of the ἵστωρ as arbitrator in Greek communities is discussed in greater detail.

in view of judgments and recommendations by the ἵστωρ Herodotus.”¹¹¹

Indeed, as Gregory Nagy points out,¹¹² Herodotus's proem frames his entire narrative as a judicial inquiry into the αἰτία, or “responsibility” for the Persian Wars as a whole (1.1.1); and this immediately leads into a long and somewhat irreverent discussion of the causes for the Trojan War, presenting contradictory, back-and-forth assignments of blame from the various parties to the conflict, culminating in Herodotus' ultimate dismissal of these biased accounts in favor of his own, more objective inquiry (1.1-5). As a historian, then, Herodotus is interested in the “causes” of events—but his construing of them has a strongly judicial bent. As Nagy argues, “the word for ‘inquiry,’ ἵστορία, as Herodotus uses it “is a juridical concept, semantically distinct from later uses of the word and from the current use of history.”¹¹³ Herodotus the ἵστωρ is inquiring, not just into “what happened,” but also “why it happened,” and “who was responsible.” Likewise, I would comment that if the contemporary scholarly position that Herodotus' narrative is broadly intended to speak to and warn contemporary Athens is correct, then this judicial inquiry and arbitration has, in fact, quite a specific audience¹¹⁴—one that makes perfect sense in terms of Herodotus' thinking as we have laid it out.

The connection between Herodotus' own work and the gods, then, is quite natural. In his judicial examination of causes and responsibility, Herodotus considers himself assisted, as it

¹¹¹Munson, *Telling Wonders*, 8.

¹¹²“The juridical aspect of Herodotean narrative--that it can establish who is αἰτιος ‘responsible’ for the ultimate struggle between Hellenes and Persians--is articulated already in the prooemium of the *Histories*, in that the purpose of the entire narrative is said to be an inquiry into the αἰτία ‘cause’ of that struggle,” in Gregory Nagy, *Pindar's Homer: the Lyric Possession of an Epic Past* (Baltimore: John Hopkins, 1990), 251.

¹¹³Nagy, *Pindar's Homer*, 251.

¹¹⁴Cf. for instance, J. Moles, “Herodotus warns the Athenians,” *Papers of the Leeds International Seminar* 9 (Leeds: Francis Cairns, 1996), as well as Robert Fowler, “Herodotus and Athens,” in *Herodotus and his World*, ed. Peter Derow and Robert Parker (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), *et al.*

were, by the essential nature and shape of the world, and of divinity itself. He is interested in human responsibility; and so are the gods. His project is made possible, as it were, by divinity and its role as the rational regulator of the world and history across space and time. This is not to say that divine vengeance is the *only* regulatory role the gods play in Herodotus' view; it is merely to say that this is the role that Herodotus himself is most sure of, and which most closely pertains to his own work and analysis.

At the same time, the impact of Herodotus' judgments on divinity are not merely the passive result of his methodological commitments; they have, in turn, a broad and pervasive impact on the way Herodotus goes about his task, and even how he understands history itself. As J.A.E. Van der Veen persuasively argues, Herodotus' pervasive skepticism is, in fact, largely driven by his judgments on the nature of divinity as a presence in history. The world is not *merely* a perfectly understandable set of interlocking causes defined by human intention and action. Above the human and natural worlds, there is another realm, the divine, that is *essentially* not subject to human understanding and confirmation; and it is this realm that defines and regulates the overall course of human events. The divine can, and does, certainly, act in consistent and rationally-understandable ways, which can be reasoned about fruitfully; but as Munson puts it, "Herodotus' evidence in the narrative does not support the notion that divine action can be intelligible to men in every case."¹¹⁵ Hence, even the possibility of divine intervention throws typical epistemologies radically into doubt. Great cities become small; small cities rise up and become great. Appearances are often deceiving; the insignificant and overlooked are often the true causes of the greatest and most destructive events. As Van der Veen

¹¹⁵Munson, *Telling Wonders*, 186.

argues, “the notion ‘anything can happen’ for Herodotus’ way of thinking and writing”¹¹⁶—a notion defined by the presence of the divine in human events— is directly responsible for his continual theme of “the irrelevance of what seemed important, and the importance of what seemed expendable.”¹¹⁷ As Solon says, only in retrospect can human events really be understood; the future is always uncertain (1.32); and as Grethlein argues, “Herodotus’ insight,” the basic insight that defines his methodology and his approach to human action, is precisely that “history can only be written retrospectively”¹¹⁸—“Only hindsight permits us to overcome the insecurity that weighs on our lives.”¹¹⁹ If the gods were not present, the world and human events might be simple and totally knowable, and the future easily predictable; because of them, though, many seemingly certain things are thrown into doubt. In the world of human events, people cannot be certain about the future; and even in retrospect, the discerning of causes is a complex and delicate process, requiring the use of many sources, points of view, and confirmations to establish the truth. Rather than Herodotus’ acceptance of a divine presence in history being an example of a breach in his general attitude of epistemological skepticism, I would argue that this divine presence is in fact the ultimate grounds *for* his skepticism. This may seem paradoxical; but even in its paradoxes it corresponds closely, I believe, to Herodotus’ methodologies and positions as we have uncovered them.

¹¹⁶Van der Veen, *The Significant and the Insignificant*, 89.

¹¹⁷*Ibid.*, 89.

¹¹⁸Grethlein, *Experience and Teleology*, 186.

¹¹⁹*Ibid.*, 199.

IV. Conclusion

It is my contention, then, that the presence and action of the divine in fact exist on the highest level of the *Histories*— the level of Herodotus’ analysis, not merely of individual stories, but of the larger patterns and causes that underlie history as a whole. Indeed, Herodotus’ interjections on divine matters play the role of relating individual stories to what Herodotus sees as larger patterns common to the broad sweep of history. Throughout the *Histories*, as we have seen, Herodotus is generally reluctant to ascribe human motivations and emotions to divinity, or indeed any motivations at all; this is because, unlike Homer, he has no access to the divine realm, and the emotions and thoughts of gods. In contrast, Herodotus’ view of divinity is essentially empirical, since it is based on accounts of divine action in the world of observed human events, and in a sense even philosophical, since it is based on a large-scale, rational analysis of these accounts. Indeed, as Daniel Graham argues, Herodotus not only shows familiarity with contemporary pre-Socratic philosophers,¹²⁰ but can also be seen as “a player in the same game”¹²¹ as these philosophers. In fact, his basic methodology, Graham argues, “is much like that of Aristotle a century later”¹²² in its focus on empirical verification and the refutation of alternate hypotheses. Indeed, in comparison with contemporary philosophers, Herodotus is

¹²⁰Cf. Hdt. 2.20-22.

¹²¹Daniel Graham, “Philosophy on the Nile: Herodotus and Ionian Research,” *Apeiron* 36, no. 4 (2003): 300-301.

¹²²*Ibid.*, 306.

noteworthy precisely for his emphasis on empiricism and verification; he is “an empirical researcher among abstract theorists.”¹²³ Still, even if his focus is on the empirical, it is the contention of this essay that Herodotus *does*, in fact, end up with what can only be called a theory of divinity and of history, one capable of being placed alongside those of contemporary pre-Socratic philosophers, such as Xenophanes.¹²⁴ By studying the characteristic ways divinity acts within history, Herodotus builds up a picture of the divine that has little to do with Homeric caprice. Instead, Herodotus' divinity acts in a broadly consistent and rational manner, enforcing and regulating, at least on the very highest level, a kind of cosmic reciprocity, a δίκη that helps to tie together the *Histories* as a whole.

It is my contention, then, that divine vengeance constitutes a true explanatory cause in the *Histories*, acting to guarantee and regulate an overall historical pattern of reciprocity and δίκη. This pattern, however, is based on an empirical judgment—ascribing extraordinary events, strange coincidences, and the overall pervasiveness of a given pattern within history to divine action—and not on a claimed insight into divine motivation. Herodotus' treatment of the divine and divine vengeance, then, is revealed as complex, sophisticated, and, ultimately, consistent with itself.

We can now return to the strange anecdote with which I began this essay. The story of Hipparchus—his life, his motivations, and the manner of his death—is barely a footnote in the text of the *Histories*; yet the dream of Hipparchus is a vivid incident that stands out even more in the midst of simple narration. What this dream offers to Hipparchus, soon doomed to die, is both judgment and comfort. He must endure the unendurable; but he is to be assured that “no one who

¹²³Ibid., 303.

¹²⁴Cf. Xenophanes frags. 23, 34, *et al.*

acts unjustly fails to pay the price of vengeance.” This statement, which to us perhaps would seem rather harsh, even distressing, is for Hipparchus a true consolation; for it is nothing less than an assurance of ultimate justice in human events. It is this divine guarantee—that the law of reciprocity does indeed have force, that obligations are fulfilled, that there is, in fact, a true order and meaning governing the tumultuous events of human life, even across the vast and unfathomable reaches of time, space, and culture—that stands at the heart of Herodotus’ view of the role of divinity, and divine vengeance, in the world of human history.

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