DELPHIC ORACLE STORIES AND THE BEGINNING OF HISTORIOGRAPHY: HERODOTUS' *CROESUS LOGOS*

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H ERODOTUS DISPLAYS A special interest in beginnings and endings. It is not only the beginnings and endings of his own narratives, his *logoi*, to which he gave special thought, and which he shaped carefully so that they form patterns of "ring composition."[1] Within the *Histories*, Herodotus shows a special interest in the beginnings and endings of cities and communities, of empires and states, and, above all, of the people in power.[2] Thus, although Herodotus' underlying theme is the growing antagonism between the barbaric East and the Greek West, erupting in the Persian Wars, his interest in the changing nature of things induces him to follow patterns of beginning and ending, of growth and decay, as a general principle in history.[3]

From Herodotus' perspective, King Croesus' reign over Lydia marked both a beginning and an end: "He was the first foreigner so far as we know to come into direct contact with the Greeks, both in the way of conquest and alliance, forcing tribute from Ionians, Aeolians, and Asiatic Dorians, and forming a pact of friendship with the Lacedaemonians. Before Croesus' time all the Greeks had been free."[4] At the same time, Croesus' fall ends the Mermnad monarchy over Lydia. Herodotus devotes a large part of the first book of his *Histories* to an account of Croesus' rise and fall.[5] What is the significance of the story of this "first man" beyond his appearance as the first king to subdue Greek cities?[6] What paradigmatic aspect of history did Herodotus see in the story of Croesus' rise and fall that induced him to dedicate an extended narrative to the king of Lydia at the beginning of his

1. See (among others) Immerwahr 1966, in particular 46–78 and 306–7; Beck 1971.

2. See Arieti 1995, 4–7, on the connection between personal responsibility and historical events in the Greek concept of αἰτίη in the *Histories*. On beginnings and endings in the *Histories* see Lateiner 1989, 35–50.

3. On the complex scholarly debate on the subject (or subjects) of Herodotus' *Histories* see in particular Lattimore 1958; Immerwahr 1966, 17–45; Cobet 1971.

4. Hdt. 1.6. All translations of Herodotus are by de Sélincourt in Marincola's revised edition from 1996. For a discussion of why Herodotus emphasized Croesus' place in the beginning of the Greek-barbarian antagonism see Arieti 1995, 13–14. See also Hellmann 1933, 23–26; White 1969; Shimron 1973; Lloyd 1984; Flower 1991, 59–60.

5. Hdt. 1.26.1–91.6.

6. Lateiner (1989, 122) argues that Herodotus wrote the *Croesus logos* at the end of his *Histories*.

work?[7] In this article I start from the observation that oracles, especially Delphic oracles,[8] appear with particular frequency in the beginning of Herodotus' *Histories*, in order to explore what Herodotus' reliance on accounts of oracle consultations can contribute to our understanding of the *Croesus logos*, and in fact, of the *Histories* as a whole.[9] Thus, while this article offers a focused analysis of a specific aspect of the *Histories*, it contributes to a more general understanding of Herodotean historiography.

ORACLES AND THE HISTORIAN

Why are oracles "good to think with" for Herodotus? Oracles, predictions, and omens are not only an important part of the world Herodotus described but also a helpful tool for the "father of history" to relate his interpretation of events to his audience. Herodotus uses oracles to establish the authority of his *Histories* as text written in a new genre.[10] However, understanding this historiographic dimension requires first an investigation of how oracles work within the narrative frame of the *Histories*.

For a start, oracles, predictions, and omens introduce another authoritative voice into the historian's 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. Both communicate with the reader and convey authority to certain statements they make. Both have their own peculiar way of presenting and withholding information according to the genres to which they belong. Moreover, like the historian, oracles, seers, and omens can see the past, present, and future of a protagonist's life. There is, however, one distinct difference: whereas Herodotus, as the narrator of the *Histories*, is bound to reflect and comment upon these dimensions in the voice of the omniscient narrator,[11] the oracle engages directly with the protagonist and communicates its knowledge to

7. Classical scholars have offered a variety of answers to these questions. See (among others) Defradas (1954, 208–28), who reads the entire *Croesus logos* as "une oeuvre d'apologétique delphique" (208). Klees (1965) argues that Croesus' consultations of the Delphic oracle display a typically non-Greek approach towards oracular divination (62–98). See Immerwahr 1966, 81–89, for a structuralist analysis of the *Croesus logos*. Romm (1998, 64) holds the view that "the entire story of Croesus' rise and fall . . . has been constructed by Herodotus virtually as a case study of Solon's ethical ideas." Kurke (1999, 130–71) reads the *logos*, in particular Croesus' communication with Delphi, in terms of different and conflicting economies.

8. In this article I use "oracle" as referring to both an oracular utterance and the institution to which such oracles are ascribed.

9. See Fontenrose 1978, 453–54, for a complete catalogue of Delphic oracles listed according to the book in which they appear in the *Histories*.

10. In Herodotus' case this cannot yet be the genre of historiography in its modern definition, because Herodotus stands at the very beginning of this tradition and combines elements of different genres such as epic and Greek tragedy. However, Herodotus obviously had certain ideas about what it implied to write a ἱστορίης ἀπόδεξις (an historical exposition). The *Histories* are "a unified work of art of considerable complexity, coinciding in many respects with the modern genre of history but not precisely classifiable in any modern genre" (Flory 1987, 16; see also 12). On Herodotus and genre see also Lateiner 1989, 13–51, and, in particular, Boedeker 2000. See Thomas 2000 for a contextualization of Herodotus in the intellectual climate of the late fifth century B.C.E. On genre and Greek and Roman historiography more generally see Fornara 1983, 1–46 and 169–93; Marincola 1999. On Herodotus' position in "the history of historiography" see Momigliano 1960, 29–44. See also Lateiner 1989, 211–27.

11. For an investigation of how statements Herodotus makes in his own authorial voice are related to the discourse of the characters within his narrative, see de Jong 1999, 254–58.

him. In the following, I investigate how these two authoritative voices, the voice of Herodotus and the voice of the Delphic oracle that he included in his historical narrative, relate to each other in the *Croesus logos*.

At the beginning of his communication with the Delphic oracle we find Croesus putting Apollo to the test. In order to find out which oracle was truthful, and thus could be trusted to give reliable advice regarding his impending war with the Persians, Croesus staged an elaborate "oracle quiz." He sent out envoys to great oracular institutions inside and outside the Greek world to ask what Croesus was doing on the hundredth day after their departure.[12] They were supposed to write down the answers they received from the individual oracular shrines and return them to Croesus.

Once the delegation to Delphi had entered the temple and had asked their question, the Pythia replied,

οἶδα δ᾽ ἐγὼ ψάμμου τ᾽ ἀριθμὸν καὶ μέτρα θαλάσσης,
καὶ κωφοῦ συνίημι καὶ οὐ φωνεῦντος ἀκούω.
ὀδμή μ᾽ ἐς φρένας ἦλθε κραταιρίνοιο χελώνης
ἑψομένης ἐν χαλκῷ ἅμ᾽ ἀρνείοισι κρέεσσιν,
ᾗ χαλκὸς μὲν ὑπέστρωται, χαλκὸν δ᾽ ἐπίεσται.[13]

I know the grains of sand on the beach and measure the sea;
I understand the speech of the dumb and hear the voiceless.
The smell has come to my sense of a hard-shelled tortoise
Boiling and bubbling with lamb's flesh in a bronze pot:
The cauldron underneath is of bronze, and of bronze is the lid.

When the delegates returned to Sardis with this answer, Croesus seemed to be delighted. Delphi had passed the test.

How can we make sense of this episode, which initiates Croesus' use of the Delphic oracle? What is the meaning of this strange prophecy and the equally strange circumstances of its delivery? I suggest that this episode provides the key to our understanding of the *Croesus logos*. However, before we can understand what is at stake behind Croesus' communication with Delphic Apollo we need to think about the significance of obscure oracular language more generally.

THE MEANING OF ORACULAR OBSCURITY

When protagonists of oracle stories consult the Delphic oracle, and when the priestess responds to their questions, the opposing spheres of the human and the divine communicate with each other. But the obscure language in which Apollo frequently chooses to address those consulting his oracle turns out to be a significant obstacle to a smooth conversation. Why does Apollo make use of obscure language to address those seeking his advice? In the following I explore, from a religio-philosophical point of view, the conceptual significance of the positioning of the obscure divine sign at the intersection

12. Crahay (1956, 195) notes that the oracles that Croesus tests (Delphi, Abae in Phocis, Dodona, the oracles of Amphiaraus and Trophonius) were important in Herodotus' time, not in Croesus'.
13. Hdt. 1.47.3.

between the divine and mortal spheres. Following Giovanni Manetti and Jean-Pierre Vernant, I argue that oracular obscurity represents the very dichotomy between the gods and mortal men.

Heraclitus states, ὁ ἄναξ, οὗ τὸ μαντεῖόν ἐστι τὸ ἐν Δελφοῖς, οὔτε λέγει οὔτε κρύπτει ἀλλὰ σημαίνει ("The Lord, whose oracle is in Delphi, neither reveals nor conceals but indicates through signs").[14] In *Theories of the Sign in Classical Antiquity*, Manetti investigates the intellectual concepts behind these words.[15] He argues that this statement was based on a Greek assumption about two different modes of knowledge and perspective.[16] The gods could survey past, present, and future and therefore gain an overall view of human destiny. In contrast, the human perspective (and with it human knowledge) was believed to be more limited: "Mortals . . . can see only the present, while the other dimensions of time remain inaccessible to them, except through the mediation of the gods."[17]

The gods do not reveal their knowledge of things hidden to men in human language, but instead use their own specific language. Divine speech (which Heraclitus labeled as σημαίνειν, to show by a sign, to indicate) is different from human language insofar as it is frequently not directly intelligible to mortals.[18] By emphasizing that "the Pythia's language was distinguished from ordinary discourse,"[19] obscure oracular language thus expresses the difference between a human and a divine form of knowledge: "The gods do not grant humanity a complete revelation but neither do they completely deny humanity knowledge, rather, by means of the oracular sign, the gods provide a base for inference on which humanity must work to reach a conclusion."[20] Therefore, the obscure language of the oracle represents and maintains the restricted nature of human knowledge and the resulting human ignorance of the future, and translates these into its own linguistic signs. The knowledge of the future, which men can gain only indirectly, via the gods, manifests itself indirectly, namely, in the form of oracular obscurity.

TESTING THE ORACLE

Returning to the *Croesus logos*, what strikes us first is how Herodotus, as he narrates the oracle test, playfully subverts the normal conventions of accounts of oracle consultations. Herodotus' depiction of the oracle test is a grotesque distortion of an ordinary request at Delphi. To test the oracles, Croesus turns the normal procedure of an oracle consultation upside down. This holds true in two respects: First, in this case, the protagonist already knows the (right)

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14. Heraclit. frag. 22 B93 DK.

15. Manetti 1993, 14–19.

16. I would like to thank Bruce Lincoln for pointing out to me that the concept of a difference between the "language of men" and an obscure "language of gods" can frequently be found in Indo-European literature; see Güntert 1921, Watkins 1970, and Toporov 1981.

17. Manetti 1993, 15.

18. See Manetti 1993, 14–19; and Gould 2001, 223–25. On σημαίνειν see also Nagy 1990, 215–49; Hartog 1999, 190–95.

19. Maurizio 1995, 86. Maurizio rightly points out that the ambiguous language of the Pythia "indicated that the Pythia's possession was real and that her utterances were Apollo's."

20. Manetti 1993, 18.

answer to the question that he asks the oracles. Second, it is not the protagonist who is challenged by an obscure divine answer, but the oracular institutions that are challenged by the protagonist's obscure doings.

Thus, the roles of consultant and oracle are reversed. Making use of obscurity (the hallmark of the language in which Apollo frequently addresses the consultant),[21] Croesus makes an attempt to communicate with Apollo in the god's own language and on the same terms.[22] In doing so, Croesus does not acknowledge the difference between the human and divine spheres. He implicitly denies the difference in perspective and knowledge represented in the obscure oracular language. Naturally, the Delphic oracle responds to this violation of the border between the human and divine spheres with a strong claim of authority: "I know the grains of sand on the beach and measure the sea; I understand the speech of the dumb and hear the voiceless."[23]

This self-statement of Delphi's capacities emphasizes the difference between human and divine perspectives. A strong case is made for the divine perspective's being different from that of mortal men. The god knows what no human being can possibly know—Apollo can grasp the number of the uncountable and the dimensions of the sea, something without limit and beyond human grasp. Moreover, Apollo hears what goes beyond human perception. Line 2 of the oracular answer also anticipates the Delphic response about Croesus' mute son.[24] It is meant to hint to Croesus that Apollo can see more than he, and that things can turn out to be different than they appear at first sight. Croesus, however, seems to turn a blind eye to such hints. He does not see the dense web of prediction and fulfillment in which he slowly gets caught, and which is spun in many small episodes of the *Croesus logos*.[25] Herodotus' audience, however, acknowledges such hints and thus reads the story of Croesus' fall in a larger framework of significance.

The second part of the response provides the appropriate answer to the test question.

ὀδμή μ' ἐς φρένας ἦλθε κραταιρίνοιο χελώνης
ἑψομένης ἐν χαλκῷ ἅμ' ἀρνείοισι κρέεσσιν,
ᾗ χαλκὸς μὲν ὑπέστρωται, χαλκὸν δ' ἐπίεσται.[26]

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21. See, for example, Hdt. 1.66.2, 1.67.4, 4.163.2–3, 5.79.1, 5.92b, 5.92b.2, 5.92.b3, 6.19.2, 6.77.2, 7.140.2–3, 7.141.3–4, 7.148.3, 9.33.2.

22. See Marg's points about "Selbstsicherheit" (self-confidence) and "Selbstbefangenheit" in Herodotus: "Kroisos fühlt sich freilich nicht als der Überlegene, aber doch als der Gleiche, wenn er mit dem Gott experimentiert" (Marg 1962, 293).

23. Hdt. 1.47.3.

24. See Sebeok and Brady 1979, 11. When Croesus sends his envoys to Delphi to ask about his dumb son, the Pythian Priestess replies: "O Lydian lord of many nations, foolish Croesus, wish not to hear the longed-for voice within your palace, that is, your son's voice: better for you were it otherwise; for his first word will he speak on a day of sorrow" (Hdt. 1.85.2). Later, after Sardis, Croesus' fortress, has been conquered, the Lydian king is approached by a Persian soldier who, unaware of his identity, wants to kill him. When Croesus' dumb son sees the hostile soldier approaching his father, he breaks the silence and cries, ὤνθρωπε, μὴ κτεῖνε Κροῖσον ("Do not kill Croesus, fellow!," Hdt. 1.85.4).

25. This theme is most prominently worked out in Herodotus' depiction of Solon's encounter with Croesus earlier in the narrative (Hdt. 1.29.1–33).

26. Hdt. 1.47.3.

> The smell has come to my senses of a hard-shelled tortoise
> Boiling and bubbling with lamb's flesh in a bronze pot:
> The cauldron underneath is of bronze, and of bronze the lid.

When Croesus learned of this response, he immediately believed the Delphic oracle to be the most truthful. For when the crucial day had come, Croesus had done something that he thought would be impossible to predict by chance. He had cut open a tortoise, slaughtered a lamb, and boiled both together in a bronze cauldron covered by a bronze lid.[27]

The oracle's response to the test question playfully depicts and juxtaposes clear and obscure language within one single oracular answer. What appears to be clear to Herodotus' readers remains obscure to Croesus and vice versa. For Herodotus' audience the first two lines of the oracular response are directly intelligible, although they heavily rely on metaphors to communicate the unlimited knowledge of the Pythia. The second part of the oracle, however, remains obscure to Herodotus' readership until he reveals the particulars of Croesus' oracle test a little later in his narrative. In contrast, Croesus seems to ascribe no significance to the first two lines of the oracle, but focuses entirely on part two of the answer, which satisfies him as the correct answer to his test question.

This, however, turns out to be a significant mistake on Croesus' part, for the more important message for him is actually included in the first part of the oracular answer: divine knowledge is special insofar as it encompasses what is beyond human grasp. This difference in perspective and knowledge is maintained in the oracle's obscure language and makes it necessary to subject oracular utterances to careful investigation and reflection. Only when the necessary precautions are taken can humans profit from the superior vantage point of the gods and gain further insight into their situation. The first two lines of the oracular response thus could have provided Croesus with invaluable information concerning the differences in perspective and knowledge that separate the human and divine spheres. Herodotus' narration of the oracle test not only demonstrates Croesus' wrong assumptions about his place in the world in relation to the gods, but also sharpens the attention of Herodotus' audience to problems of understanding and interpreting oracular language.

MISREADING DELPHIC RESPONSES

The approach to oracular responses that Croesus reveals when he tests the oracles for their truthfulness corresponds to the way in which he will later handle all Delphic advice. The oracle's answer to Croesus' riddle only confirms what Croesus already knows anyway. Similarly, whenever Croesus later receives responses from Delphi he (thinks he) already knows their meaning. Because Croesus, in his oracle test, transgressed the pattern of normal oracle consultations and turned the whole procedure upside down, he assumes in

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27. For a reading of the imagery of this oracle see Wormell 1963 and Dobson 1979.

all his later encounters with Delphi that Apollo speaks to him on the same level and in a common language.

Croesus misunderstands what it means for an oracle to be ἀψευδές, without lie and deceit.[28] From his experiences with the oracle test Croesus seems to deduce that oracles are always straight, in the sense that they mean what he, Croesus, wants them to mean. When the Delphic oracle responds to his request concerning warfare against Persia that Croesus will destroy a great empire, he immediately assumes this to refer to the Persian empire.[29] It does not even cross his mind that the empire could be his own. Herodotus says of Croesus' reaction to this oracle: "Croesus was overjoyed when he learned the answer which the oracles had given, and was fully confident [πάγχυ ἐλπίσας] of destroying the power of Cyrus."[30]

Similarly, Herodotus comments on Croesus' reaction to the oracle about the mule on the throne of the Medians: "This reply gave Croesus more pleasure than anything he had yet heard; for he did not suppose that a mule was likely to become king of the Medes. . . ."[31] To his inquiry as to how long his reign over Lydia would endure, the oracle had provided him with an obscure response that seemed to link the end of the Mermnad dynasty to a mule being king over the Persian empire. Contrary to Croesus' understanding, the oracle was already fulfilled by Cyrus' being king over Persia. For just as a mule is the offspring of a horse and a donkey, Cyrus was the child of a noble Median mother and a baser Persian father.[32]

Each time Croesus receives a crucial response from Delphi, he reacts to it with a feeling of (excessive) pleasure rather than careful reflection.[33] For too long he holds on to his perception that everything seems to be on target, turning a blind eye to the many hints of the doom to come. Croesus does not appreciate the problem of perspective, understanding, and interpretation. He does not consider that oracles might have a meaning other than the one that fits in best with his plans.

On one reading, Herodotus' *Croesus logos* is a story of what happens if one challenges and oversteps the border between the divine and human spheres. Croesus' fall can be read as an indirect result of the lack of orientation that results from his misreading of Delphic oracles. Croesus' disorientation is expressed in the narrative by the many inversions of his expectations; the *Croesus logos* is a story of sudden and unexpected turns. This is a world in which oracles that seem at first sight to point to success turn out to predict failure, a world in which dumb sons learn to speak, and in which someone commissioned to protect a king's son becomes his killer.[34]

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28. See Hdt. 1.49.

29. Hdt. 1.53.3.

30. Hdt. 1.54.1.

31. Hdt. 1.56.1.

32. Cyrus' mother was the daughter of a Median king, his father was Persian and a subject of the Median empire (Hdt. 1.91.5–6).

33. See the use of the verbs ὑπερήδομαι (to rejoice exceedingly) and ἥδομαι (to take delight) in Hdt. 1.54.1 and 1.56.1. On the related motif of laughter and its link to human ignorance in Herodotus see Lateiner 1977 and Flory 1978.

34. See Hdt. 1.85.1 and 1.35–45.3.

Thus, communication with Apollo does not help Croesus to gain greater knowledge or a deeper understanding of the past, present, and future. He does not understand Apollo's language. Because he overlooks the difference between the human and divine spheres, Croesus deprives the oracular language of its semantics.[35] He cannot benefit from the oracular knowledge. He does not make use of the independent perspective of the gods to find out what is going on in his world.

LESSONS LEARNED (TOO) LATE

After receiving the oracle's response about Persia, Croesus gets rapidly tangled up in actions that will lead directly to his fall. Herodotus introduces this succession of events with the comment that "Croesus, who had failed to grasp the true meaning of the oracle, now prepared an expedition against Cappadocia, sure of success in bringing down the power of Cyrus and the Persians."[36] Even in the moment when Croesus is captured, divine prediction proves true. In his account of the fall of Sardis, Herodotus recalls the prophecy once given to Croesus about his mute son. The oracle had predicted that he would speak first "on a day of sorrow" (ἐν ἤματι πρῶτον ἀνόλβῳ).[37]

The scene with Croesus on the pyre, his subsequent deliverance, and complaint at the Delphic oracle form the climax of the *Croesus logos*.[38] One more time Croesus communicates with Delphic Apollo. After Apollo has extinguished the fire and thus rescued Croesus from the pyre, Cyrus asks Croesus who it was who persuaded him to become his enemy. Croesus blames Apollo and asks for permission to send envoys to Delphi to heap reproaches on him for his misleading oracles. The answer that Apollo gives to Croesus' envoys is one of the most elaborate responses about which Herodotus tells us. It skillfully lists different reasons for Croesus' fall; it also closes the cycle of prediction and fulfillment started at the beginning of the *Croesus logos* with the Delphic sanction of Gyges' kingship. The oracle had foretold the end of Mermnad succession five generations later:

> . . . the Priestess replied that not God himself could escape destiny [τὴν πεπρωμένην μοῖραν ἀδύνατά ἐστι ἀποφυγεῖν καὶ θεῷ]. As for Croesus, he had expiated in the fifth generation the crime of his ancestor, who was a soldier in the bodyguard of the Heraclids, and, tempted by a woman's treachery, had murdered his master and stolen his office, to which he had no claim. The God of Prophecy was eager that the fall of Sardis might occur in the time of Croesus' sons rather than in his own, but he had been unable to divert the course of destiny [οὐκ οἷός τε ἐγένετο παραγαγεῖν Μοίρας]. Nevertheless what little the Fates allowed, he had obtained for Croesus' advantage: he had postponed the capture of Sardis for three years, so Croesus must realize that he had enjoyed three years of freedom more than was appointed for him. Secondly, the god had saved him

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35. This point is emphasized by Sebeok and Brady's observation "that Croesus interprets each silent communication (with the gods) accurately, but those communications encoded in speech both baffle and mislead him" (Sebeok and Brady 1979, 16).

36. Hdt. 1.71.1.

37. Hdt. 1.85.2.

38. Hdt. 1.86.3–91.6. For a comparison between Herodotus' account of this scene and other versions of it see Burkert 1985 and Flower 1991.

when he was on the pyre. As to the oracle, Croesus had no right to find fault with it: the god had declared that if he attacked the Persians he would bring down a mighty empire. After an answer like that, the wise thing would have been to send again to inquire which empire was meant, Cyrus' or his own. But as he misinterpreted what was said and made no second inquiry, he must admit the fault to have been his own. Moreover, the last time he consulted the oracle he failed also to understand what Apollo said about the mule. The mule was Cyrus, who was the child of parents of different races—a nobler mother and a baser father.[39]

If the gods cannot escape destiny, then this is true even more so for human beings. The statement of the Pythia, that even the God cannot really alter a fated course of events, provides Croesus with the next level of insight into the limits of the human condition. Croesus challenged the line between the human and divine spheres not only in the way in which he sought to communicate with Delphic Apollo, but also when he thought he could alter a fated course of events. For once he had attempted to prevent a dream from becoming true in which he saw his son Atys being killed by an iron spear.[40] This plan to change the future course of events as forecast by the dream was another attempt to cross the boundary of the humanly possible and to usurp a quasi-divine position. Croesus was proven wrong when Atys died in the very way he had foreseen in the dream.[41] At that time Croesus had suspected Apollo as the active agent behind his son's deadly fate: "Some god is to blame—some god who long ago warned me of what was to happen."[42] Now he learns that Apollo is not in charge of things, that even Apollo cannot fundamentally alter, but only predict, what is fated, and that his oracles require careful examination.

Only at the end of the *Croesus logos*, when he finds all his dreams and desires shattered, does Croesus learn about the complex interaction of the various reasons for his fall and about his mistakes in reading prophecies. The oracles that Croesus had received from Delphi predicted quite the opposite of what he had anticipated. "When the Lydians returned to Sardis with the Priestess' answer and reported it to Croesus, he admitted that the god was innocent and he had only himself to blame."[43]

Why does Herodotus now present Apollo's communication with Croesus in plain and straightforward language, whereas he formerly relied heavily on oracular obscurity? One way of answering this question would be to point out that this last encounter of Croesus and Apollo is different in nature from all their earlier communications. The purpose of this last response that Apollo delivers to Croesus is to educate him about the true circumstances of his fall and thus to bridge the gap between the human and the divine perspectives. For this purpose Apollo has to choose a language that does not

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39. Hdt. 1.91.1–5.

40. Hdt. 1.34.1–3.

41. Despite the precautionary measures Croesus had taken (he had all spears, javelins, etc., removed from Atys' surroundings), he allowed him to join the hunt of a wild boar, during which Atys was accidentally hit by the spear of one of the hunters (Hdt. 1.34.3–45.3).

42. Hdt. 1.45.2.

43. Hdt. 1.91.6.

itself represent this gap in perspective and knowledge. And since humans cannot, as the *Croesus logos* so colorfully depicts, communicate with the gods on one level and in divine language, Apollo has to address Croesus in human language to get his messages across.

Even more significant, however, is that Croesus is in the middle of a transformation from someone who seeks the advice of oracles (even though he is unable to make use of it) to someone who becomes himself a quasi-oracular voice, advising those in power with respect to the future consequences of their actions.[44] This was already the case when Croesus, after he was captured, advised Cyrus not to allow his soldiers to plunder Sardis.[45] Later in the *Histories* Croesus will act as the wise adviser to Cambyses and warn him against the consequences of his violent killings of his own countrymen.[46] His rescue from the pyre through Apollo and his gradual insight into the human condition further qualify him for this quasi-oracular mission by moving him closer to Apollo. Thus, Apollo's speech does not in its own semantics stress the difference in perspective and knowledge between the human and the divine spheres.

But Croesus is not the only one who assumes a quasi-oracular voice, for so does Herodotus. The writing of history, like oracular utterances, connects and negotiates between the different dimensions of time, and in this I see the main affinity between the writing of history and the telling of oracle stories. When Herodotus includes oracles in his historical account, when he tells us stories about oracular consultations, he sketches a sophisticated collage of the different dimensions of time. The narrative strategy of oracle stories integrates Apollo's prophetic insight into the future into accounts about the past. Oracle stories connect past, present, and future in many ways. They relate these aspects to each other in different combinations and thereby blur the boundaries between them. Oracle stories are about the past. They tell us about past events. But they are also about the future, the future in the past. They are accounts of futures past. These stories show human beings challenged by the uncertainty of their future; how, facing this challenge, they seek advice from Apollo. Oracle stories frequently also tell how the oracles were interpreted and how their protagonists acted according to their own readings or misreadings of divine advice. Moreover, they reveal information about how successful these actions were. Oracle stories are written in retrospect and told for a present.[47] The challenge that the uncertainty of the future presents[48] becomes more tangible through the construction of narratives, which backdate those challenges. Oracle stories are case studies of successful or unsuccessful management of the uncertainty of the future. The reader of such stories always knows more than their protagonist(s). The reader can analyze why the protagonists' readings of Delphic oracles were successful and why they were not. Thus, oracle stories demand interpretation, but at the same

44. Compare Hartog's points on Solon in n. 53.
45. Hdt. 1.88.2–89.3.
46. Hdt. 3.36.1–2.
47. Compare Maurizio's points on the shaping of oracle stories in oral tradition (Maurizio 1997, 318).
48. On the openness of the future and its relevance for the historian see Meier 1996, 45–81.

time they also prompt reflection on the process of interpretation. Perhaps, then, it might follow that we are supposed to subject the historian's voice to the same kind of scrutiny that consultants at the oracle should use to investigate its language.

The Oracle as a Mouthpiece for the Historian

A detailed investigation of how Herodotus makes use of the authoritative voice of the Delphic oracle has revealed that oracles, predictions, and omens are indeed "good to think with" for the historian. Like Herodotus, they have a retrospective and prospective view on history. As another authoritative voice in the *Histories* besides that of Herodotus himself, they add their semantic potential to the story and to the way in which it is told.

But why do prophecies play a particularly significant role in the first *logos*, the beginning of the *Histories*? In the beginning of his work, Herodotus has to establish his authority as the narrator of a text. Herodotus wants to make his audience believe his ἱστορίης ἀπόδεξις "so that human achievements may not become forgotten in time, and great and marvelous deeds—some displayed by Greeks, some by barbarians—may not be without their glory. . . ."[49] To achieve this, he has to be a credible authority for the research he has carried out and for the way in which he lays out his knowledge in an extended narrative.[50] The authority of Herodotus as researcher and narrator of the *Histories* is built upon observation and investigation.[51] In contrast to Herodotus' authority, which is based on his claim to give a well-researched account, the authority of the oracle is based on its claim to reflect the knowledge of Apollo. As such, it is not subject to the same kind of "rationality" expected from Herodotus.[52] Rather, in contrast to the expertise of the historian as observer, researcher, and narrator, oracular expertise lies in the field of what cannot be exactly known by humans. This becomes evident from Delphi's self-statement of what oracular knowledge is all about in lines 1 and 2 of the response given to Croesus during the oracle test: "I know the grains of sand on the beach and measure the sea; I understand the speech of the dumb and hear the voiceless."[53] The fields of expertise of oracle and historian interact and complement each other.

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49. Hdt. *praef.*

50. See Hartog 1999, 193–95. For an investigation of remarks that make visible Herodotus' presence as narrator of the *Histories* see Marincola 1987; Dewald 1987; de Jong 1999, 220–29; Dewald 2002.

51. On the historical method of Herodotus see (among others) Immerwahr 1966, 4–7; Verdin 1971; Lateiner 1989; Christ 1994, 167–202; Bakker 2002; Cartledge and Greenwood 2002; Hornblower 2002; Cobet 2002.

52. It has repeatedly been noted in modern scholarship on Herodotus that his "rationality" in the way he chooses, arranges, and outlines his material must not be confused with and measured by modern definitions of rationality and "truthfulness." See, for example, Immerwahr 1966, 6, 10–11; Bakker 2002.

53. Hdt. 1.47.3. From this perspective the figure of wise adviser holds an interesting position between divine and mortal knowledge. Being part of the narrative, the wise adviser, like the protagonist, cannot know what exactly is going to happen in the future, but is aware of this limitation of human perspective and thus can communicate it. This becomes visible, for example, in the figure of Solon, who acts as a wise adviser to Croesus earlier in the *Histories* (Hdt. 1.29.1–33): ". . . Solon is not in a position to know the end (*teleute*) or the way leading to it, but he does know that one has to wait until the end before risking a general statement about a human destiny. Knowing that he does not know, Solon occupies none the less a quasi-oracular position vis-à-vis Croesus . . ." (Hartog 1999, 190).

John Gould and others have observed a widespread scholarly unhappiness about Herodotus' use of religion in the *Histories*.[54] This unhappiness seems to be connected with the fact that we see in Herodotus the "father of history," and that we would like to find out his own outlook on history in his writing. With my reading of the *Croesus logos*, I hope to have contributed to the understanding that Herodotus' use of prophecy reveals anything but naïveté and a lack of critical analysis. I argue here that the detailed reading of the *Croesus logos* as an extended oracle story suggests that Herodotus uses prophecies as the vehicle for statements that require a greater authority than the historian can possess. The authoritative voice of the Delphic oracle as presented by Herodotus can approve changes in power (as in the case of Gyges, who loses his royal power to his bodyguard Cambyses),[55] legitimize a political order (like the Spartan constitution),[56] and condemn impious human deeds like the destruction of a temple by Alyattes, Croesus' father, who had burned down the temple of Athena at Assesos.[57] Moreover, it also provides a complex causal framework for the fall of the main protagonist, Croesus, that combines elements of fate and human responsibility. The *Croesus logos* explains the events that led to Croesus' fall and puts them into a larger framework of prediction and fulfillment. The way in which Croesus misreads the oracles adds a religio-philosophical dimension to the story of his fall, which Herodotus cannot himself provide in an authoritative way. Thus, in his skillful collage of the omniscient voice of oracles, the voice of the similarly omniscient narrator, and the limited perspective of the protagonist, Herodotus manages to build a complex picture of why empires can fall. He teaches us a worldly lesson, but one that has a divine dimension. However, as Henry Immerwahr rightly states, "The pattern of rise and fall is tragic only when we confine our point of view to the individual agents of historical action. When we look at the overall pattern, the tragic fate of states and individuals is seen to be a mechanism for the perpetuation of world order. The pattern of such order is neither theological nor moral, but existential."[58]

Does this mean that Delphi's moral decisions should be understood as Herodotus'?[59] One might be tempted to object that oracles were an important part of the world Herodotus set out to describe, that he included oracles because they played a significant role in the lives of his historical characters. This must certainly be right. However, while we cannot always reconstruct whether a given oracle was really spoken at Delphi or whether it was a later

54. See Gould 1994, 91, and Harrison's discussion of Gould in Harrison 2000, 11–18. See also Bichler and Rollinger 2000, 156–57, with further references.

55. Hdt. 1.13.2. For more examples of a change in power legitimized, caused, or sanctioned by a prophecy, see (among others): Hdt. 2.139.2, 4.161.2, 5.92e, 6.52.5. See also Kirchberg 1965, p. 11, n. 2.

56. Hdt. 1.65.3.

57. Hdt. 1.19.3. The Pythia here communicates her disapproval to Alyattes by denying him an answer to his question concerning a malicious illness that befell him after the incident until he had rebuilt the temple.

58. Immerwahr 1966, 307.

59. Plutarch certainly seems to think so when he accuses Herodotus of using "the Pythian god as his mouthpiece" in Hdt. 8.122 (Plut. *On the Malice of Herodotus* 871E).

"historical" forgery or even entirely a Herodotean invention, we can fruit-fully explore both how Herodotus represents the oracular discourse within his own writing, and what role oracles play in the argumentative structure of his history.[60]

The complex way in which Herodotus includes the divine voice of the oracle in his historical narrative corrects the scholarly assumption that Herodotus' use of religious phenomena is a deplorable failure of his otherwise acute analytical skills and skepticism. Rather, it appears to be an important strategy that allows Herodotus to include a religious dimension as a point of reference for historical events and to make points of a more general nature. Oracles in Herodotus' historical narrative have an authoritative power. But at the same time, the way in which Herodotus incorporates the oracular discourse in his own work makes his audience think of historical causation as something that unfolds in the contested space between human and divine agency.[61]

The Croesus Logos as a "Great Historical Oracle"

François Hartog states that "the whole history of Croesus can be understood as a long *exemplum* or, as we might describe it, a great historical oracle."[62] The story of Croesus' fall can indeed be read as a "prophecy" of what we will find happening time and again in the *Histories*. It is the story of a ruler who, at the beginning of the *logos*, is at the peak of his power. Croesus, however, seems to lack a sense of balance and proportion. Without a sound point of reference for his judgments, he gradually transgresses the limits of his power. "Croesus, at first, is satisfied with Western Asia, then he attempts to conquer the portion held by the Persians, and finally he loses everything."[63] His indifference towards the natural boundaries that limit his royal power corresponds to his violation of the boundary between the human and divine spheres in his communication with Delphic Apollo.[64]

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60. Questions of authenticity have, for a long time, dominated research on Delphic oracles. See (among others) Crahay 1956, 185–207; Parke and Wormell 1956, 1:126–40; Fontenrose 1978, 301–3; Shimron 1989, 42–49. Maurizio (1993, 118), however, has rightly argued that this definition of the oracles' authenticity is misconceived because it missed the nature of the oracular discourse and its transmission. In this article, I move beyond questions of authenticity by exploring how oracles are featured in Herodotus' *Histories*.

61. Accounts of oracle consultations suggest different ways in which to interpret a given course of events within the spectrum between fate and human responsibility. Fate and human responsibility are by no means mutually exclusive. They frequently account together for a given course of events. But they do this in a complex interaction between human and divine spheres. Therefore, the observation Harrison has made on an oracle story in Herodotus' *Histories* is clearly applicable to Delphic oracle stories in general: "The well-worn term 'dual determination' is clearly inadequate to describe the complex interrelation of human and divine causation" (Harrison 2000, 229–30, on Hdt. 9.93.4). On fate and human responsibility in the *Histories*, especially in the *Croesus logos*, see Shimron 1989, 26–57; Harrison 2000, 223–42; Waters 1985, 97–106. On causation in Herodotus more generally, see Immerwahr 1956; Lateiner 1989, 189–210.

62. Hartog 1999, 191.

63. Immerwahr 1966, 82.

64. The transgression of a natural boundary as an act of hubris is a common motif in Herodotus and in Greek culture more generally. For more violations of the natural order by human beings see Hdt. 1.75, 1.174, 1.189, 7.22, 7.35. Compare also the depiction of Xerxes' bridge of boats over the Hellespont as an act of hubris and an offense against the gods in Aesch. *Pers.* 739–52.

Such hubris, Herodotus wants us to believe, must necessarily result in failure.[65] As Immerwahr notes, "in Herodotus it is possible for a ruler to enjoy his power while 'sitting still,' to use a phrase commonly employed by the historian. The activism of states in Herodotus is due not to power as such, but to *hubris* in some form, and thus a moral judgment is always implied."[66] Thus, the *Croesus logos* indeed seems to "typify, in the manner of a parable, the whole fate of man."[67] It is the story of a political power gradually entering a state of imbalance.[68] As such it exemplifies *in nuce* the fate all powers will face that disturb the natural order of things.[69]

I shall give one example to demonstrate that the use of oracles as an authoritative voice is indeed paradigmatic for Herodotus' *Histories* more generally. Later in Book 1 Herodotus tells of the Mede Harpagus who, on behalf of the Persian king Cyrus, subjugated the Ionian Greeks in the run-up to the Persian Wars.[70] In his account, Herodotus includes a story concerning the people of Cnidos, a Spartan colony situated on a long, thin spit of land on the west coast of modern Turkey. These people surrendered to Harpagus without resistance, and Herodotus uses an oracle story to explain why. When the Cnidians heard of the approaching army they decided to dig through the land connecting their peninsula with the mainland to protect themselves from invasion. But when they had started digging, strange incidents happened: "A large number of men worked at it, but it was observed that the workmen got hurt by splinters of stone in various places about the body, especially in the eyes, more often than might have been expected."[71] Thus, as nobody could explain these phenomena, the Delphic oracle was consulted and the following answer received:

Ἰσθμὸν δὲ μὴ πυργοῦτε μηδ' ὀρύσσετε·
Ζεὺς γάρ κ' ἔθηκε νῆσον, εἴ κ' ἐβούλετο.

Do not fence off the isthmus; do not dig.
Zeus would have made an island, had he willed it.[72]

The story ends with the information that the Cnidians gave up their plan, stopped digging, and surrendered to the approaching Persian army.

One function of this story is to explain why the Cnidians surrendered to the approaching Persian army without resistance.[73] At the same time, the appearance of disease and other bodily afflictions works as a divine sign that a fundamental norm was being violated by mortal men. In the oracle consultation following the strange incidents, the Cnidians learn about the nature of

65. On concepts of hubris in Greek culture and its significance, see Fisher 1992.
66. Immerwahr 1966, 207.
67. Immerwahr 1966, 154. See also Flower, 1991, 60.
68. "Herodotus criticizes imperialistic expansion. Behind such a critique there is the notion of balance which comes from Ionian philosophy" (Alonso-Núñez 1988, 130).
69. On the order of nature as a principle in Herodotus' conception of history, see Immerwahr 1966, 306–26.
70. Hdt. 1.162.2.
71. Hdt. 1.174.4.
72. Hdt. 1.174.5.
73. See Crahay 1956, 328; Fontenrose 1978, 306; Parker 1985, 316.

their offense that triggered divine wrath. Their attempt to change the geography of their peninsula is an intrusion into the sphere of the gods. Zeus shapes the natural order of things, not mortal men. That the Cnidians lost sight of their natural place in the world by acting like gods is thereby nicely expressed in the image of their eyes being especially affected by disease.

Herodotus knows many such stories in which famine, disease, and infertility appear as divine signs following a certain action on the part of the human protagonists.[74] The typical pattern of such stories is that those concerned by these afflictions normally do not understand the meaning of the signs and therefore consult the oracle at Delphi. While his historical protagonists learn what it was that triggered divine anger, Herodotus is able to communicate a certain moral through the whole story—for example, that humans should not attempt to change the natural order of things and that doing so does not bring success.

Herodotus builds up patterns of similar events throughout his *Histories* and thereby makes the single episode meaningful for the whole of his work. Oracle stories like the one about the Cnidians are little pieces of the big jigsaw puzzle that is the *Histories*.[75] "Historical time" for Herodotus falls into many small "times" of individual rulers or empires. When connected to each other in the right way, they form patterns that give an understanding of how (and why) single rulers, cities, and large empires (including the Persian one) rise and fall.

Conclusion

A look at different examples of oracle stories in the *Croesus logos* has revealed that Herodotus uses Delphic oracle stories as the vehicle for statements that require a greater authority than the historian can possess. This is of particular significance in the beginning of his *Histories*, when Herodotus has to establish his authority as the narrator of a text written outside the conventional contemporary genres. For these purposes, Herodotus at times chooses to deviate from or even reverse typical elements and structures of accounts of oracle consultations appearing elsewhere in classical literature to make specific points. The hubris of Croesus, who thinks that he can communicate with the gods on their level, is expressed through the inversion of the normal situation of oracle consultations. This features most prominently when Croesus reverses the roles between oracle and consultant during his oracle test. Humans normally consult an oracle with a genuine interest in benefiting from the overall perspective of the gods to supplement their own knowledge. In the *Croesus logos* the main protagonist always already believes himself to know the answer and therefore fails to gain a true understanding of his situation.

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74. See Demont 1988.

75. Herodotus communicates his approach to history in many (small) episodes that have to be pieced together like a jigsaw puzzle: ". . . history becomes intelligible only when individual happenings are viewed together as parts of an orderly process. Thus the work of Herodotus mirrors reality not only in the individual *logos*, but fundamentally also in the perception of the relations between single *logoi*" (Immerwahr 1966, 148).

This depiction of Croesus and other protagonists who misread oracles, predictions, and omens in the *Histories* is a smart historiographic tactic on Herodotus' part.[76] It illustrates the way in which Herodotus uses religion to communicate his own understanding of the world. What is special about oracle stories within Herodotus, and what makes them such a central part of his work, is that they do not remain on the level of Herodotean narrative only. They are a necessary part of the world Herodotus describes, of the motivation, communication, and argumentation of his human protagonists. But at the same time they are much more. They are a mode of Herodotean reflection.[77] Herodotus speaks to his audience through his oracle stories.[78]

Ironically, perhaps, Herodotus gets away with what Croesus is punished for: the exploitation of divine language for his own purposes. Herodotus is not falling back on oracles to explain phenomena for which he could not find another, rational cause or explanation. Rather, Herodotus uses oracular language as a strategy to establish and maintain his own authority as researcher and narrator of the *Histories*.

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76. Here I risk disagreement with Harrison, who warns us against an "excessively ingenious" Herodotus (Harrison 2000, 2).

77. Compare Crahay's suggestion that Herodotus' philosophy of history is expressed through oracles: ". . . les oracles . . . constituent une espèce de philosophie de l'histoire où s'exprime sous une forme pseudo-prophétique la leçon de l'événement" (Crahay 1956, 22). On Herodotus' philosophy of history, see also Pippidi 1960.

78. In this respect Herodotus differs significantly from Thucydides, who clearly separates his own analytical voice from the oracular discourse within his history. Like Herodotus, Thucydides includes oracles, predictions, and omens as part of the motivations that drive his historical characters. But he seeks to establish his authorial voice in critical opposition to the oracular discourse and thereby, implicitly, to Herodotus' use of oracle stories. He does not imply any deeper meaning in the oracle stories he tells. Despite such differences, however, Thomas has rightly argued (2000, 168–212) that the differences in the critical discourse between Herodotus and Thucydides should not be overstated, as Herodotus at times uses critical language similar to that of Thucydides. On Thucydides' use of oracles and on his attitude towards religion more generally, see Oost 1975; Dover 1988; Marinatos 1981; Hornblower 1992; Crane 1996, 163–208.

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