A story of blood, guts and guesswork: synthetic reasoning in classical Greek divination

'Bird signs? You want to plan a strategy based on bird signs?' scoffs Eric Bana's Hector in Wolfgang Petersen's *Troy*, when he is confronted with an attempt at divination. When the Homeric Hector encounters exactly the same omen, he too rejects it and condemns the hapless Polydamas, who reported it, as a coward. Yet although these two Hectors reject the advice of divinatory signs, they do so on very different grounds. Whereas the modern Hector denies the relevance of irrational factors such as divination, and indeed religion more generally, to the pragmatic realm of warfare, the Homeric Hector dismisses only the specific omen that Polydamas reports and remains quite convinced that Zeus has promised him victory. The gap between these two Hectors is emblematic of the modern difficulty not only of accepting quite how much divination there was in antiquity and how seriously it seems to have been taken, but also of comprehending how such seemingly irrational practices could have been employed in even the most serious of undertakings.[1] To be 'modern', in this context, is not simply to be contemporary, but to espouse particular assumptions about rationality, causation, knowledge and the secular nature of world, all of which militate against the ready comprehension of divination.

The purpose of this paper is to explore the cognitive process by which divinatory signs are brought to bear on practical situations. The fundamental question it seeks to answer is where the meaning generated by divination comes from. This question will be explored through consideration of a number of well-known oracle-stories from Herodotus, and some examples of various kinds of divination from other authors. The paper's central claim will be that the reasoning that underpins divinatory thinking, and hence the meaning of oracles and omens, is fundamentally relational. In other words, the meaning that is found in divination is akin to the meaning that is found in a story, in which each component of the narrative influences the meaning of the other components, so that the overall meaning does not emerge until the story is complete. To plan on the basis of divination, therefore, is not to bring a piece of knowledge independently derived from (for example) a bird-sign to bear on a separate and, in principle, unconnected situation, but to bring the divinatory sign into relation with a practical setting so that each illuminates the other. It is this act of relating that generates the knowledge and insights supposedly gained by divination.

In western scholarship, divination has frequently been evaluated against scientific models of truth and prediction. Such models place heavy emphasis on replicability and objective verification as the essential hallmarks of truth. However, as anthropologist Rosalind Shaw argues, this 'positivist

[1] Petersen 2004:00.55.25; Homer, *Iliad* 12.195-250. In both cases, the omen is an eagle attempting to carry a live snake, which bites it. In the *Iliad*, this omen is spotted in the heat of battle, and Polydamas is presented as one Trojan warrior among others. In *Troy*, the scene is transposed to a council chamber and Polydamas is presented as an aged priest, superstitious and ineffectual, in contrast with Hector's practical man of action. This transposition accentuates the gulf in understanding between modern and ancient responses to divination (cf. Price 2008:125-26).

preoccupation with knowledge as verifiable observation' tends to 'obscure … the existence of alternative conceptions of truth' and readily casts divination as 'failed scientific explanation'.[2] The alternative conceptions of truth that Shaw alludes to include notions such as the truth of the binding word – for example, the oath of a witness or the oath sworn to seal a vow – and the model of truth that Shaw herself espouses in her own analysis of divination, the truth of 'performative efficacy'.[3] In this view, the truth of divination 'is in the action generated, the social reality reconstituted, and the resultant well-being of the people; it is not to be found in an abstract system or specific verifications of separate oracular pronouncements'.[4] That is, divination is valuable not because it makes objectively verifiable predictions of future events or diagnoses of the past causes of present problems, but because it enables a society to resolve its current crises by generating an authoritative understanding of the current situation, its aetiology and opportunities for future action.[5]

But how does divination do this? Analyses such as Shaw's, which evaluate divination by its power to effect change, tend to emphasise the sensitivity of divinatory practices to the nuances of the societies in which they take place. Central to the success of divination is the active involvement of both diviner and client. David Parkin, for example, commenting on Kenyan divination, regards the diviner and client as making up a 'co-operative enclave' which jointly arrives at a divinatory outcome. In similar fashion, Susan Whyte, commenting on Nyole divination in eastern Uganda, offers a detailed discussion of the back-and-forth interpretative play between the two sides, in which the diviner's skill is complemented by the client's detailed knowledge of the specific situation. Significantly, this creative dialogical play is often downplayed or effaced completely in indigenous accounts of divination, in which the divinatory outcome is what matters.[6] Metaphorical, ambiguous and polysemic language is also widely found. While a scientific or positivist approach might conclude that such language is there to protect divination from disproof and allow the wily soothsayer to evade criticism for poor results or to claim credit for what was really just good luck, Shaw and Parkin argue that ambiguity and polysemic language are in fact central to the ability of divination to generate meaningful answers to questions. Parkin in particular highlights a transition that takes place in the course of the divinatory session, from ambiguous language at the beginning to unambiguous and specific language as a decision is reached. He characterises this as a transition from an uncertain and chaotic 'simultaneity', in which multiple possibilities are entertained in parallel, to a 'sequential'

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[2] Shaw 1991:137. When divination is seen in these terms, those who practice it must either be 'charismatic charlatan[s]' who manipulate their credulous clients, or just as credulous as those who consult them (Peek 1991:3).
[3] Shaw 1991:139-40.
[4] Peek 1991:135, summarising Shaw's argument. Cf. Fernandez 1991:217.
[5] Parker (2000:77-78) similarly highlights the pragmatic orientation of much divination as a 'guide to action' and its value in offering 'apparently objective and uniquely authoritative' advice, though he does not explicitly focus on the particular models of truth that underpin this orientation.
[6] Parkin 1991:187; Whyte 1991, esp. 170-71. Classical scholars have also begun to recognise the part that the consulter plays in divination, and increasingly regard the interpretation of an oracular response as integral to the divinatory process (e.g. Maurizio 1997:316; Parker 2000:80; Maurizio 2013).

ordering of possibilities which eventually yields a stable answer. The initial problem of divination is a 'superabundance' of potential meaning which must be skilfully reduced to a single, stable solution.[7] Cryptic, allusive and often fractured language is vital to the early stage of this process, as it allows the diviner to convey a rich multiplicity of allusively-formulated, partially grasped and cognitively simultaneous alternatives out of which sense must be made to emerge.[8]

The prominence of cryptic and polysemic language in these anthropological examples naturally brings to mind the famously cryptic and polysemic Delphic oracles in Herodotus' *Histories*. The series of high-profile prophecies in book 1 is characterised by this kind of language, from the famous prediction that Croesus would destroy a great empire if he fought the Persians, to the subsidiary response that he should not be ashamed to flee when a mule sat on the Persian throne, and the equally-cryptic oracles given to the Spartans concerning Tegea.[9] We might even see in the Pythia's response to Croesus' 'test-question' an allusion to the problem of the superabundance of potential meaning. Before Croesus entrusts his main question to an oracle, he first tests a number of oracles in order to establish which, if any, of them can be relied upon, by sending them a question to which he already knows the answer (Hdt. 1.46). Even when the question is simple – 'What is Croesus doing now?' – and the answer already known to the inquirer, the Delphic oracle insists on reminding Croesus how much more complexity there is to the world than he or any mortal can fully grasp. The oracle prefaces its answer to Croesus' question with the statement that it can number the grains of sand, measure the sea, understand the dumb and hear the voiceless (Hdt. 1.47). Given this complexity, the wise approach would be to scrutinise the oracle's response very carefully, and not to press on impetuously, as Croesus does, missing the ambiguity of the oracle and simply assuming that it supports his plans.

Croesus' failure to explore the meaning of the oracle properly and his subsequent downfall have been explained in many ways. For example, Matthew Christ argues that Herodotus presents Croesus' testing of the oracles as a shrewd example of rational research, similar to Herodotus' own, and attributes Croesus' fall to his arrogance, which leads him to abandon his rational evaluation at the critical moment.[10] Elton Barker emphasises the political context of Croesus' fall, linking Croesus' failure to perceive the ambiguity of the oracle to his status as the arrogant head of a tyrannical regime in which only one voice, his own, is ever heard, and in which the kind of open and meaningful debate that the polysemic oracle requires is impossible.[11] Julia Kindt sets the story in a religious and epistemological context and attributes Croesus' downfall to his failure to perceive the gulf between mortal and divine perspectives and his arrogant belief that he can approach Apollo as an equal, despite

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[7] Parkin 1991. 'Superabundance': Whyte 1991:165 and 170; cf. Werbner 1973.

[8] Shaw terms this ability of divination to encompass many potential meanings in its ambiguous and allusive language 'cryptic potency' (Shaw 1991:139-41).

[9] Destroy a great empire: 1.53.3; mule: 1.55.2; Spartan oracles: 1.66.2 and 1.67.2-4.

[10] Christ 2013:237-42.

[11] Barker 2006, esp. 9-14. Barker contrasts Croesus' mishandling of his oracle with the Athenians' open approach to interpreting the 'Wooden Wall' oracle by public debate (2006:19-22). Cf. Maurizio 1997:328 n. 67.

the oracle's warning that divine perception far exceeds mortal.[12] It seems that in Herodotus, then, the ambiguity of the oracle can be an opportunity for rational exploration, a test of the moral or political character of the inquirer, and an emblem of the limits of human knowledge. However, Herodotus' tales of oracular ambiguity can also shed light on actual divinatory thinking in antiquity.

Herodotus' Delphic oracles, however, cannot be taken at face value as transparent historical sources. The editors of both the major collections of Delphic responses regard them as spurious in one way or another. Parke and Wormell accept contact between Lydia and Delphi before and during Croesus' reign, but reject both Croesus' testing of the oracle and the responses given to him afterwards. They do, however, accept the two oracles given to the Spartans concerning Tegea as genuine.[13] Fontenrose is more sceptical and judges both the oracles given to Croesus and those given to the Spartans inauthentic.[14] Not only the folkloric elements of these oracles but also their elaborate hexameter verse-forms and careful ambiguity arouse suspicion. These elements contrast markedly with those responses that are more readily accepted as historical, in which a straightforward answer was given to a question posed in a binary format, along the lines of 'would it be more profitable and better to do x?'[15] By these standards, then, Herodotus' Delphic oracles represent, at best, very distorted versions of actual consultations and, at worst, products of Herodotus' historical imagination. However, it can be argued that there is more than one approach to establishing the authenticity of Herodotus' Delphic oracles. Lisa Maurizio notes that Parke, Wormell and Fontenrose judge Delphic oracles authentic if they can be proven to contain or closely reflect the actual words spoken by the Pythia.[16] She criticises this kind of approach, arguing that, in strict logic, no oracle in the Delphic tradition can be demonstrated to record the actual words of the Pythia, because we have no way of accessing that original utterance and therefore no sure means of establishing this kind of authenticity.[17] Moreover, she argues, this approach to authenticity is based on assumptions that properly belong to a literary tradition in which original authorship is both important and susceptible to proof or disproof. It is more accurate, she argues, to regard our written reports of Delphic oracles as oral-derived accounts, that is, written snapshots of and contributions to a long tradition of oral transmission.[18]

In the case of an oral tradition, transmission is really a misnomer. Whereas in a textual tradition, at least as now understood, the important thing is the verbatim transmission of the original text, with nothing added or removed, in an oral tradition, every performance is in effect a

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[12] Kindt 2006:37-41.
[13] Parke and Wormell 1956:1.131-39 and 1.94-97.
[14] Fontenrose 1978:111-115 (Croesus) and 123-124 (Sparta's Tegean oracles), Q99-101 and Q88-90 respectively in Fontenrose's catalogue.
[15] For a recent summary of the debates on verse oracles and the typical format of questions, see Bowden 2005:21-24 and 33-38.
[16] Maurizio 1997:309 and 311.
[17] Maurizio 1997:312.
[18] Maurizio 1997:313-14.

recomposition of the previous version. Often this is masked by an explicit assertion that the current performance is 'just the same' as the previous version and thus, by implication, the original. The authenticity of such recompositions-in-performance is determined by the audience, which has the power to reject the new performance or accept it as a valid part of the tradition.[19] In such a setting, it is a mistake to judge authenticity by estimating the fidelity of the historical record to the hypothesised original words of the Pythia. Indeed, so central are the processes of reperformance, recomposition and authorisation to the divinatory process, and so important is the interplay between performer and audience, that one may even speak of the authorship of oracles being shared between the Pythia and the recipients of her words, both the original enquirer and those who follow afterwards.[20]

When this approach is applied to oracles, it suggests that the Greek world was awash with orally-transmitted oracles that were, in effect, recomposed in performance to suit the current circumstances. A clear example of this is the oracle 'remembered' by certain Athenians during the plague that struck Athens early in the Peloponnesian War. Certain elderly Athenians claimed to remember an old prophecy that 'war with the Dorians comes, and a plague will come at the same time'.[21] Others said that the prophecy foretold a famine, the operative Greek words being λοιμός (plague) and λιμός (famine). Thucydides' comment on this is that people adapt their memories to suit their current sufferings, and that if, in future, a war with the Dorians were accompanied by a famine, the other version of the oracle would be recalled.[22] Thucydides' comment may be dismissive, but if we view this way of using oracles through the lens of performative efficacy, then it is likely that this flexibility is actually central to the practical value that oracles hold. In this case, the oracle has an explanatory function, giving some kind of meaning to the terrible and unprecedented plague the Athenians were enduring. It is noteworthy that the attempt to challenge the oracle on grounds of literal authenticity – that is, fidelity to a supposed original source – fails: the fact that the city is gripped by plague gives relevance and utility to an oracle that relates to a plague and outweighs any quibbles about whether the oracle originally referred to a famine instead.

Several important points emerge from Maurizio's discussion. First, while her model of an oral tradition of Delphic (and other) oracles undermines any possibility of using Herodotus to recover the actual words spoken by the Pythia on any particular occasion, it offers a strong defence of the idea that Herodotus' account must have been plausible to his audience in his own lifetime.[23] If we accept that his Delphic oracles are written recompositions of stories already in circulation in the oral

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[19] Maurizio 1997:314-15.
[20] Maurizio 1997:316. Cf. Maurizio's statement that 'Delphic divination belonged to creative and engaged clients and story-tellers as much as to its shrine' (2013:75). This is a development of the now-common observation that debate over the interpretation of the oracle's words did not distort the divinatory process but was integral to it (e.g. Parker 2000:80; Harrison 2000:149-50; Kindt 2006:39).
[21] Thuc. 2.54.2: ἥξει Δωριακὸς πόλεμος καὶ λοιμὸς ἅμ᾽ αὐτῷ. See Maurizio (1997:317-18) for discussion.
[22] Thuc. 2.54.3: οἱ γὰρ ἄνθρωποι πρὸς ἃ ἔπασχον τὴν μνήμην ἐποιοῦντο. ἢν δέ γε οἶμαί ποτε ἄλλος πόλεμος καταλάβῃ Δωρικὸς τοῦδε ὕστερος καὶ ξυμβῇ γενέσθαι λιμόν, κατὰ τὸ εἰκὸς οὕτως ᾄσονται.
[23] Cf. Maurizio 1997:317.

tradition, and that his recompositions were accepted by his audience as valid, and possibly even authoritative, then we may take a further step and infer that Herodotus offers us an insight into contemporary thought-processes of using oracles. That is, Herodotus' Delphic oracles were plausible to his audience because they conformed to contemporary ideas of oracular divination.

Second, Maurizio's idea of oracles being recomposed in performance, as in the 'plague' oracle in Thucydides, presupposes a theory of knowledge that differs markedly from that implied by a literary tradition. A literary tradition, in contrast with an oral tradition, is sustained not by recomposition but by reproduction – that is, by the verbatim transmission of an original text that preserves unchanged the exact words of the founding author. When the concept of transmission by recomposition is applied more broadly, it has far-reaching implications not only for our understanding of how knowledge is gained, used and passed on, but also, more radically, for the very nature of that knowledge. As the anthropologist Tim Ingold suggests, a model based on transmission 'implies that knowledge already acquired is imported into contexts of practical engagement … and therefore that the knowledge is, in itself, context independent'.[24] By contrast, Ingold maintains that knowledge is inherently relational and is generated in the context of practical action. Knowledge is not a fixed object to be passed along and applied mechanically to new contexts, but is generated and regenerated in the process of practical action, which always takes place in its own particular context. Where previous knowledge is brought to bear, it is via an active process that seeks relations between remembered experience and the current situation, and in doing so, changes the meaning of both. The upshot of this, he argues, is that 'we can understand the nature of things only by attending to their relations'.[25] In other words, we know what things are only through how they relate to other things and to ourselves. As in a story, the meaning of the elements does not become clear until the story is complete, and the relationships between all elements are known.[26] It follows from this that a change in relationships between things amounts to a change in their very nature and meaning. As Jerome Bruner puts it, 'parts and wholes in a narrative rely on each other for their viability'. That is, 'The act of constructing a narrative … is considerably more than "selecting" events either from real life, from memory, or from fantasy and then placing them in an appropriate order. The events themselves need to be *constituted* in the light of the overall narrative'.[27] The same principles may be applied to oracles, and to the practical situations in which oracles are used, but in that case, crucially, part of the story is

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[24] Ingold 2011:142.

[25] Ingold presents this position through a contrast with what he terms the 'classificatory' system of knowledge, in which 'every thing is what it is due to its own given nature' which is fixed and inherent, so that 'we do not have to attend to their relations to know what things are' (2011:160-61).

[26] Ingold 2011:162. For fuller discussion of these ideas, see Ingold 2000, particularly 132-51 on transmission, 219-42 on wayfinding, navigation and storytelling, and the fundamental discussion at 13-26. Antecedents to the relationalism that Ingold espouses can be found in, among others, Bateson 1973 and Merleau-Ponty 1962, both of which inform Ingold's position. A parallel emphasis on 'perspectivism' has emerged in Americanist, particularly Amazonian, anthropology, e.g. Viveiros de Castro 1998, Vilaca 2005, while studies that emphasise the embodiment of consciousness challenge the division between subject and object and thus also move towards relational approaches (e.g. Csordas 1990, Kapferer 1997). See also Bruner 1991.

[27] Bruner 1991:8.

still in the future, still unknown and hypothetical. The rest of this paper will explore this relational approach to divinatory knowledge through a series of case-studies.

The first case-study concerns an oracle given to the Spartans in their lengthy campaign to subdue Tegea. Having already failed to conquer Tegea once, the Spartans have consulted Delphi and been told to retrieve the bones of Orestes. Unable to find him, they ask Delphi for further guidance, and are given a deeply cryptic response:

> There is a place, Tegea, in the level plain of Arcadia,
> Where two winds are blowing under strong constraint;
> Striking and counter-striking are there, and woe is laid upon woe;
> There the life-giving earth holds Agamemnon's son.
> Bring him home, and you will be Tegea's protector.
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> <div align="right">Herodotus, Histories 1.67.4.</div>

The oracle is eventually deciphered by Lichas, a former Spartan cavalryman, by a combination of 'luck and wisdom' (συντυχίη ... καὶ σοφίη, 1.68.1). Visiting Tegea, Lichas enters a smithy, where he expresses wonder at seeing the iron being worked. If the Spartan marvelled at iron-working, the smith remarks, he would have been truly astounded at the gigantic coffin he had found while digging a well in his courtyard (1.68.2-3). At this point, realisation dawns on Lichas. Herodotus talks us through his reaction:

> He considered what had been said and put it together for himself (συνεβάλλετο) that this was Orestes, according to the oracle, putting it together (συμβαλλόμενος) like this: he found (εὕρισκε) that the blacksmith's two pairs of bellows were the 'winds', the hammer and anvil were the 'striking and counter-striking', and the beaten-out iron was the 'woe laid upon woe', drawing this inference (εἰκάζων) because the discovery of iron had been an evil for mankind. He put these things together (συμβαλόμενος δὲ ταῦτα) and, returning to Sparta, he declared the whole matter to the Spartans.
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> <div align="right">Herodotus, Histories 1.68.3-5.</div>

Herodotus' account heavily emphasises a process of 'putting together' that leads to 'discovery' (συμβάλλω and εὑρίσκω) – in other words, the bringing into relation of the ambiguous words of the oracle, on the one hand, and, on the other, elements of Lichas' immediate environment, the smithy. Lichas puts together the words of the oracle, the words of the smith, and the equipment of the forge and, as a result, discovers the identity of the enormous body buried outside. Crucially, this is not a one-way process in which the oracle is mechanically applied in a context-independent manner. Before Lichas enters the smithy and talks to the smith, he has no idea that the oracle means Orestes is in a smithy. The oracle is so ambiguous that it is effectively meaningless to him, or at least without stable, usable meaning. (Or rather, we might say that it has only a jussive meaning for him – he must

search for its true meaning.[28]) Likewise, the smithy itself is an opaque environment: it is not obvious, even to the smith who dug him up, that it is Orestes who is buried in the back yard. The meaning of the elements in play – the oracle, the smithy, the body – becomes clear only when they are brought into the right relationship.

This relational, synthesising aspect of oracle-use is further reflected in the participle εἰκάζων ('drawing this inference', Hdt. 1.68.4). Εἰκάζω may also be translated, rather less charitably, as 'guess' and indeed this sense is prominent in Euripides' well-known remark that 'the best seer is the one who guesses (εἰκάζει) well'.[29] We might suspect Euripides, or his unnamed character, of tendentiously exploiting the range of meaning of this verb. The semantic range of εἰκάζω includes to liken, compare, infer from comparison, estimate and conjecture as well as to guess.[30] Though the inclusion of this last sense, albeit as something of an outlier, allows hostile speakers, such as Euripides' character, to disparage divination as mere guesswork, the central cluster of meanings connected with representation, likening and comparison make this verb curiously appropriate to the activity of divination, a task which crucially involves seeking resemblances, putting things together, connecting features and bringing them into new relationships with each other. Indeed, Plutarch, who preserves this remark at *de defectu oraculorum* 432c, is quick to emphasise how much thought goes into divination, stressing that the best *mantis* (seer) is an intelligent (ἔμφρων) man who follows the promptings of that part of his soul that possesses sense (νοῦς) and which operates in accordance with reasonable probability (μετ' εἰκότος).

This relational and synthetic principle is further illustrated by another famous Herodotean oracle, the 'wooden wall' oracle. This prophecy, which promises the Athenians that the 'wooden wall' alone will resist the Persians, is presented by the Pythia as a 'word made firm as adamant' (ἔπος ... ἀδάμαντι πελάσσας, Hdt. 7.141.3). However, while the word itself is inflexible, its meaning is anything but.[31] Once again, the problem is how to derive meaning from an ambiguous oracle, and at stake is the proper way to relate the oracle to the physical substance of Athens – its houses and temples, its Acropolis, its navy. In the ambiguity of the oracle lies both a deficit and a superabundance of meaning – it could mean anything, and therefore, in practical terms, it means nothing. As Herodotus presents the story, the Athenians have successfully whittled down the excess of meaning to just two options, a wooden fence round the Acropolis or their wooden warships (7.142). However, the final step in specifying the meaning of the oracle cannot be achieved until the relationship between its source, Apollo, and its recipients, the Athenians, is taken into account. Themistocles points out that

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[28] Maurizio (2013:77) also argues that Greek oracles instigate a search for meaning but do not dictate how to achieve it. Cf. Kapferer (1997:229) on dreams in Sinhalese sorcery practices, which 'impel those who experience them to search for their meaning' and which are 'packed with the portent which extends towards a meaning which is not yet there'.

[29] μάντις δ' ἄριστος ὅστις εἰκάζει καλῶς, Eur. fr. 973 Nauck.

[30] LSJ s.v. εἰκάζω. For the history and core sense of εἰκάζω, see Chantraine (1968-1980:2.354-55), who views its meaning as progressing from image and resemblance to comparison and conjecture.

[31] Cf. Maurizio 2013:70.

the oracle would not have called Salamis 'divine' if the Athenians were destined to be destroyed there, and that the destruction the oracle foretold must therefore be intended for the Persians (7.143.1-2). The oracle's meaning is so intensely relational that it depends not only upon the relationship between the Pythia's words and the environment of Athens but also upon the relationship between the ultimate author of the oracle, Apollo, and its recipients.[32]

A caveat must be added to the idea that Herodotus offers us an insight into contemporary thought-processes of using oracles. If the Delphic oracle in reality did not speak in ambiguous riddles, but instead gave straight answers to binary, yes/no questions, then how can it be said that Herodotus offers us any insight at all into Greek divinatory thinking? At this point, I shall merely offer some hypotheses. It may be profitable to draw a distinction between responses delivered directly by the Pythia to questions posed in a binary format and Delphic responses that have to some extent been cut free from Delphi itself and entered an oral tradition of oracles. Yet this distinction should not be seen as impermeable. Maurizio has argued that the ambiguity of Herodotus' Delphic oracles results from active interpretation of responses by the immediate enquirers, those they consulted at home and those who recalled the oracle later, who between them transformed simple answers into complex riddles through their strenuous efforts to adapt oracular responses to their circumstances and objectives.[33] We might say, therefore, that the interpretative enclave identified by anthropologists in contemporary divination should be extended in ancient Greece to include the afterlife of Delphic responses as they are passed on, reperformed, recontextualised and recomposed, yielding new meanings for new circumstances.[34] It would follow from this that Herodotus' Delphic oracles can indeed shed light on divinatory thinking in general, even if they do not shed light on the historical specifics of particular consultations of the Delphic oracle, because they are products of the same thinking-practices extended over time. In any case, since the focus of this paper is on the process of interpretation in divination, rather than on the historicity of Herodotus' oracles, one might still argue that the process of distilling a complex and problematic situation down to a single question that could be put to the oracle in binary format itself requires a considerable effort of synthetic reasoning, albeit before rather than after the consultation. Moreover, whatever one's view of Herodotus, there is good evidence from a wide range of other modes of Greek divination for an important role for ambiguous signs that demand interpretation through synthetic and relational reasoning. Examples may be found across the full range

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[32] The historicity of these oracles has been fiercely contested. Bowden (2005:100-107) usefully surveys the debate and suggests that some form of consultation would have been needed to sanction the evacuation of Athens, since evacuation entailed abandoning sanctuaries to be looted and destroyed. The historicity of these oracles is less important for present purposes than the insight Herodotus' reconstruction of the consultation and debate gives into contemporary conceptions of divination.

[33] Maurizio 2013:75.

[34] In the case of the 'wooden walls' oracle, these meanings could range from 'How shall we escape the Persians?' to 'How did our ancestors defeat them?' the former having a prospective, practical force and the latter having a retrospective and perhaps ethical force.

of Greek divinatory practice, from sacrificial divination, divination by chance events (cledonomancy), and the use of pre-existing prophecies.[35]

A first example may be found in book two of Xenophon's *Anabasis*. After the Battle of Cunaxa, Xenophon and the Ten Thousand Greek mercenaries are at a loss. Though they triumphed in their section of the battlefield, their patron, Cyrus the Younger, was killed, leaving the Greeks stranded far from home. The Greek commander, Clearchus, trying to work out what to do next, conducts a sacrifice to investigate possible courses of action. A distinctive feature of Greek sacrificial divination, in contrast with Etruscan or Mesopotamian techniques, is that there seem to have been very few signs that had a clearly defined meaning. If the lobe of the victim's liver was missing, this was invariably taken as a very bad omen, but otherwise it seems that subtle variations of colour and texture were the main elements a Greek diviner had to work with.[36] In any case, the connection between the entrails of a sacrificial victim and the disposition of troops is far from transparent, so interpretation would require great creativity. Although Clearchus himself was confident in the prowess of his men, and even proposed carrying on the fight on behalf of Cyrus' friends (2.1.4), the sacrificial signs urged retreat. We might suspect a hunch on the part of Clearchus, his officers or his *mantis* that such a proposal would be unwise, nevertheless Xenophon's account of Clearchus' reporting of the omens suggests some initial puzzlement on Clearchus' part at the results:

> My friends, when I sacrificed with a view to advancing against the King, the omens were not favourable. And with good reason (εἰκότως), indeed, they were not favourable; for, as I now ascertain (ὡς γὰρ ἐγὼ νῦν πυνθάνομαι), between us and the King is the Tigris, a navigable river, which we could not cross without boats – and we have no boats. On the other hand, we cannot stay where we are, for we cannot get provisions; but as for our going to join the friends of Cyrus, the omens were extremely favourable.
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> Xenophon, *Anabasis* 2.2.3.

The phrase 'as I now ascertain' (ὡς γὰρ ἐγὼ νῦν πυνθάνομαι) suggests a process of enquiry subsequent to the sacrifice that aimed to relate the sacrificial signs to features of the practical setting in which Clearchus was operating and which he was testing for possible courses of action. The sacrificial signs made good sense to Clearchus (that is, they appeared εἰκότως) only once he had set them in the context of the geography of the region: any advance would soon be halted by the River Tigris, which the Greeks could not cross. In the light of Ingold's ideas about the relationality of knowledge and Bruner's remarks about narrative, we might regard this process of enquiry not as a process of uncovering the pre-existing and independently-given meanings of the sacrificial signs or of the river, but as a process of constituting the significances of both by actively bringing them into relationship with each other in the context of the Greeks' practical capabilities. We might say that the

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[35] Both Maurizio (2013:70-72) and Harrison (2000:122-23) see parallels between Delphic oracles and cledonomancy and discuss them in tandem.

[36] Collins 2008, esp. 320-23.

signs were validated in their negativity by being brought into relation with an impassable obstacle, while the impassability of that obstacle may have been confirmed, or at least emphasised, by being linked with the omens. After all, a more gung-ho commander might have declared there was no good reason for the signs to be negative, accused his *mantis* of incompetence or cowardice, and pressed ahead either in ignorance of the barrier the Tigris would present, or in confidence that he would find boats when he got there.[37] In such an admittedly counter-factual case, the signs would be drawn into relation with the character of the *mantis* and dismissed as meaningless, while the Tigris would not be brought into consideration at all. In either case, as Ingold's remarks on the nature and generation of knowledge might suggest, the nature of the signs (valid or invalid) and the nature of the Tigris (passable, impassable or irrelevant) become known to Clearchus only through the relationship between them, a relationship which Clearchus himself actively constituted through the synthesising process of divination.

The operation of this relational mode of thinking can be seen in two further pairs of episodes, in each of which ostensibly identical signs are interpreted in very different ways. They illustrate the way in which the act of setting a sign in different contexts gives different meanings to the sign itself and to the setting in which it is put and creates different narratives that link them together and mandate different proposals for action.

In the first pair, sneezes are the sign. In the first episode, the sneeze is taken as confirmation of a proposed plan, while in the second, it is skilfully diverted so as not to disrupt action that is already under way. The first example occurs shortly after Xenophon enters the action of the *Anabasis* as a character in his own right. With the Greeks once again at a loss, this time after the treacherous execution of their commanders during negotiations with the Persians, Xenophon resolves to take the lead. He makes a rousing speech, in which he attempts to persuade the Ten Thousand that – with the help of the gods – their best hope of safety lies in fighting their way out of Persia. As he utters the word 'safety' (σωτηρία), one of the men sneezes. As Xenophon-the-author presents the incident, this is spontaneously interpreted by the rest of the army as a positive omen. In one movement, they fall to their knees and worship 'the god' (τὸν θεόν). Xenophon-the-character swiftly identifies this god as Zeus Sōtēr, on the basis that he had been speaking of σωτηρία when the sneeze occurred, and proposes that they sacrifice to him when they reach a friendly land, a proposal which is universally accepted (Xen. *An.* 3.2.8-9).

The second incident is recounted in Polyaenus' *Strategemata* 3.10.2. As the fourth-century Athenian general Timotheus was preparing to set sail with his fleet, one of the sailors sneezed. The helmsman took this as a bad omen and ordered a halt, but Timotheus disarmed the sign by saying with

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[37] Cf. the disastrous decision of Neon to ignore negative sacrificial omens at Calpe Harbour in *Anabasis* 6.4.23-24. Accusations against *manteis*: see Soph. *OT* 380-403 and *Ant.* 1033-63 and discussion in Flower 2008:132-52.

a smile that it was hardly surprising if, with so many men present, one of them should sneeze. The sailors laughed and set sail.

Neither account can be regarded as an unmediated account of real events. Xenophon represents himself as a model commander throughout the *Anabasis*, while the second example is preserved without further context in a didactic collection of deeds and sayings of great commanders compiled some five hundred years after the incident supposedly took place. However, for this very reason, both can be taken as examples of the principles governing the use of chance omens. In both cases, what it is at stake is the frame within which the sneeze should be understood and within which its significance should be constituted. In the *Anabasis*, the coincidence of the sneeze with the word safety, occurring as it does during a moment of crisis and indecision, is intuitively seized upon as meaningful by the army. It allows Xenophon's plan of action to be seamlessly connected to a vision of future safety, a connection which is quickly consolidated by Xenophon's proposal of thank-offerings to Zeus Sōtēr. In Polyaenus' example, by contrast, all such future-orientated narratives are quashed by Timotheos, who places the sneeze in a framework of pure contingency rather than entailment, a frame in which meaningful links between events are denied, no future can be foretold, and the sneeze means nothing at all. The contrast suggests that in neither case is the significance of the sneeze inherent in the sneeze itself. Instead it emerges through the relations that are created between the sneeze and the setting in which it occurs. This synthesis is an active process, and in both cases, it is a collective undertaking, requiring validation by the audiences of mercenaries and sailors.

How active and open to contestation the processes of framing, synthesis and narrativisation can be is suggested by the second pair of episodes, both of which concern eclipses. In 413 BC, the Athenians' withdrawal from Syracuse was famously delayed by an eclipse of the moon. According to Thucydides (7.50.4), most of the Athenians were greatly disturbed by the eclipse and urged their commanders to wait. Fatally, Nicias, the overall commander, concurred. In 357 BC, an eclipse also threatened to derail Dion's campaign to overthrow the tyranny of Dionysius of Syracuse. Plutarch grants Dion sufficient scientific knowledge not to fear eclipses, but states that his men were unsettled and needed reassurance from Dion's *mantis*, Miltas. Miltas persuaded them that the omen should be read not against them, but against Dionysius. The omen, he said, portended the eclipse of something that was currently resplendent, and there was nothing more resplendent than the tyranny of Dionysius (Plut. *Dion* 24.1-2). Whereas Nicias was unwilling or unable to reframe the earlier eclipse in favourable terms, Miltas successfully redirected the ominous force of his eclipse by placing it in an alternative relational frame, one which linked the light of the moon to the splendour of Dionysius. By changing its referent, Miltas did not deny the significance of the eclipse, as Dion's scientific outlook might have done, but redirected it. He thus effectively recomposed an omen that the men had already interpreted for themselves, and did so convincingly enough for them to accept his version as authoritative.

One might note, however, that all these depictions of divinatory foresight were created with the benefit of hindsight. The perspective of the authors therefore differs markedly from that of the historical actors they describe. Whereas the author knows how events turned out and can thus seamlessly match divinatory predictions to the actual outcome, the protagonists had no such certain knowledge and could only hypothesise about the future, however actively they were trying to shape it. Accounts of past divination are therefore constructed on a radically different epistemological footing from the events they purport to describe.

In the episodes discussed so far, we have seen that divination generates useful insights through a process of synthesis and relational reasoning. Divination is thus a particularly acute illustration of the idea that we may understand a thing only by attending to its relationships. This lends divinatory foresight the structure of a narrative, in which, as Ingold and Bruner suggest, the meaning and indeed the nature and identity of the individual elements and of the overall story itself are not given in advance but are formed and known through their interrelationships. It follows from this that the meaning both of the overall story and of the individual elements within it cannot be known until the story is complete, the episode has run its course, and all its elements are known. Since divination plays on the past, present and future, it projects a narrative which contains elements that are still to come and which, at the time of divination, are merely hoped for, feared or imagined – the destruction of the Persians, discovery of Orestes, fall of Dionysius, and so on. Lying in the future, they must remain provisional until they are definitively realised through action. However, this provisionality is problematic only if we expect divination to function as a form of scientific prediction, rather than as a tool for guiding action. If instead we see the value of divination as lying in its performative efficacy, then provisionality is an inherent feature of the divinatory process. The only way to establish definitively that the omens spoke with good reason is to pursue the path that they recommend. Only with such hindsight can the foresight yielded by divination be fully vindicated. In other words, the final element of the divinatory episode is not the *mantis*' announcement or the Pythia's utterance, nor even its interpretation by the enquirer, but the success or failure of the action taken as a result.

One might therefore expect the Greeks not to have obeyed omens and prophecies mechanically or slavishly but to have been alive to the possibility of fresh interpretations arising as a course of action unfolds. Indeed, the active interpretation displayed by the successful protagonists in the examples discussed earlier suggests just this point. However, the provisionality of divination is most clearly visible in accounts of failed interpretations, such as Croesus', which unfolds from a failure of such awareness: Apollo even rebukes him for failing to recognise that other interpretations were possible: he should have asked which 'great empire' was meant (Hdt. 1.91). In such cases, the final element in the divinatory episode – the outcome of the actions taken – alters the nature and meaning of the preceding elements. This suggests that omens were in principle open to being reinterpreted, right up to the point at which they were confirmed or denied in action.

We can see this more clearly still in Mardonius' disastrous use of prophecy before the battle of Plataea, as recounted by Herodotus. Frustrated by inaction, Mardonius decides to attack the Greeks, against the advice of his allies. Summoning his officers, he asks them if they know of any prophecy about the Persians being destroyed in Greece. When they are silent, cowed by his authority, he announces that he knows of a prophecy that states that the Persians will come to Greece, plunder the temple at Delphi, and then be destroyed.[38] He declares that the Persians should therefore neither approach the temple, nor try to plunder it, and that they will thereby escape destruction (Hdt. 9.42.3). He then orders the army to prepare for battle. Herodotus then intervenes to correct Mardonius. Whereas Mardonius believed that the prophecy related to the Persians, Herodotus relates it instead to the Illyrians and the army of the Encheles (9.43.1). Mardonius' defeat and death at the battle of Plataea brutally expose the provisionality of his interpretation, and demand that the prophecy either be abandoned or remapped.[39] Rather than dismissing the prophecy altogether, Herodotus finds it a new relational frame and thus preserves its potency as a prophecy.

To conclude, the examples presented here show ancient Greek divination as a skilled and sensitive process of making practical sense out of situations that escape normal comprehension by providing a means of synthesising numerous factors in the practical environment of the people concerned and reducing a surfeit of possibilities to just one. Because of its synthetic and improvisational character, the use of divination, whether by oracles, sacrifice or other means, was not a matter of mechanically applying previously-acquired knowledge to a novel situation, but of generating new knowledge and insights via a process of bringing prophecies or divinatory signs into a productive relationship with salient features of the lived-in world. This involved participants in a wide range of decisions: which oracles to bring to bear; what to take as an omen and what not; what counted as a salient feature of the environment and what was irrelevant; and how to relate them all to each other. Since the practical meaning and referents of both oracles and omens were underdetermined and negotiable, a stable meaning could be settled only by this process of synthesising omen and world, a process which generated new meanings and significances for both the divinatory sign and the features of the world with which it was brought into relation. These meanings were negotiated communally, and the acceptance of an interpretation depended on many things, such as the persuasiveness of the interpreter, the trust placed in him or her by the audience, and the plausibility of the interpretation. It would be easy to view this flexibility as a sign of charlatanry, but that would be to apply an inappropriate model of truthfulness to divination, a model based on ideas of scientific prediction. Divination is better viewed in terms of its performative efficacy, its ability to help people through difficult situations. Dealing with the relative merits of proposed future actions, divination yields insights that are akin to a story in which the end is imagined but not yet known.

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[38] Maurizio (1997:328 n. 67) notes how Mardonius suppresses debate here.
[39] We might note that the Persians had in fact tried to sack Delphi (Hdt. 8.36-39), though Herodotus does not comment on this here.

Divination's insights can be fully validated only by being put into practice and converted step by step from suggestion to reality. As befits a practice that offers performative efficacy not objective prediction, its insights remain provisional until the practical outcome is known. Divination offered the Greeks a means of gaining foresight by synthesising what they knew and what they suspected about their practical setting, but it was a foresight that could be confirmed only in hindsight.

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