

# 'Work with the god': military divination and rational battle-planning in Xenophon

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## **‘Work with the god’: military divination and rational battle-planning in Xenophon**

The prominence of divination in the ancient world raises many questions from a modern, perspective, all the more so given that it was used so routinely in the deadly business of war. What right-thinking commander, we might ask, would seek guidance on a battle-plan by picking over the entrails of a slaughtered animal or by observing the flight of birds? The role of divination in military planning throws questions of rationality and irrationality into sharp relief and, in doing so, offers us an opportunity to examine the relationship between the seemingly-irrational practices of divination and what, for want of a better word, we might regard as normal, rational planning. This paper argues that the apparent disjunction between the seeming irrationality of divination and the needs of a commander preparing for battle is a product of our own misconceptions both about the nature of divination as a source of useful knowledge and about the relationship between human effort and divine assistance in classical Greek thinking about warfare. As this paper will show, far from being separate from, and opposed to, a rational assessment of the military situation, divination was fully integrated into the decision-making process and could provide a vital aid to a commander’s thinking.

Divination in warfare has additional merit as a point of entry, in that wars and warfare were important topics in antiquity and loom large in both the written and material records. The works of Xenophon are of particular interest. Born in Athens probably around 440 BCE, Xenophon had a mixed career, which encompassed not only extensive military experience in a range of settings but also the production of a significant body of literature, which included historiography, technical treatises, and philosophy.<sup>1</sup> He makes frequent reference to divination and the proper handling of omens in a number of these genres. His *Anabasis* recounts his experiences as one of a large contingent of Greek mercenaries, the so-called Ten

Thousand, as they struggled to return to Greece after supporting a failed attempt on the throne of Persia, led by Cyrus the Younger. Divination is a frequent occurrence and omens of all kinds are regularly noted and sometimes discussed at length. Xenophon's *Hellenica*, which continues the narrative thread of Greek history from the end of Thucydides to the battle of Mantinea in 362, also regularly notes the omens obtained, interpreted and sometimes ignored by commanders.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, divination features prominently in Xenophon's philosophical, including his *Apology of Socrates* (12-14) and the opening of his *Memorabilia* (1.1.2-5 and 1.1.7-9), and his technical writing, in particular his short treatise, the *Cavalry Commander*.

As well as being a soldier, Xenophon was also a friend and student of Socrates. In both his *Apology of Socrates* (12-14) and his *Memorabilia* (1.1.2-5), Xenophon likens Socrates' divine sign, or *daimonion*, to more conventional forms of divination, such as the observation of birds, sacrifice and indeed the Delphic oracle. More significantly for the purposes of this paper, Xenophon uses Socrates to articulate a view of the proper limits of divination and the epistemological conditions under which its use is legitimate. Xenophon's Socrates draws a sharp distinction between those matters about which mortals can and cannot learn by their own intelligence, and insists that divination may properly be used only for the latter (*Memorabilia* 1.1.7-9). We will return to this topic later. We turn now to the relationship between the religious and the practical in the *Cavalry Commander*.

### **The symbolic and the real at war**

Xenophon opens the *Cavalry Commander* with an injunction to the prospective commander *first* to seek the help of the gods – before he even procures or trains either horses or men, let alone leads them into battle – and closes it with an explanation of why he has laced his deeply practical treatise with exhortations to “work with the god” (σὺν θεῷ πράττειν, 9.8). In

between, he offers advice on a range of matters, including the selection and training of both horses and men, leadership, and tactics for use in a wide variety of situations, all of which will bring success as long as they are carried out  $\sigma\upsilon\nu$  θεῶ, ‘with god’.<sup>3</sup> This blend of piety and practicality is far from unique to the *Cavalry Commander*, though it is particularly conspicuous there. Modern interpreters have struggled to comprehend it since at least the late nineteenth century. In his monumental work, *The Greek State at War*, volume three of which concerns religion in Greek warfare, W. Kendrick Pritchett outlined a dispute between the great classicist, Ulrich von Wilamowitz-Moellendorff, and the German military historian, Hans Delbrück, which exemplifies the problem. Wilamowitz had accepted Herodotus’ claim (at *Histories* 6.112) that, at the battle of Marathon, the Athenians had charged a full mile at top speed to attack the Persians. This superhuman feat was possible, he felt, because the goddess Artemis had given the Greeks strength. Delbrück, by contrast, arguing on the basis of his knowledge of warfare and contemporary military practice, dismissed such explanations, ridiculed what he saw as Wilamowitz’ credulity and went on to produce his own (now thoroughly discredited) reconstruction of the battle.<sup>4</sup>

More recently, J.K. Anderson, in his *Military Theory and Practice in the Age of Xenophon*, has offered a thinly-veiled version of this position, presenting battlefield omens either as a useful excuse for a general to do what he wanted to do anyway, or as an irrational impediment which a wily commander must circumvent. Unfavourable omens, Anderson suggests, might be used as an “excuse for not doing something”, as when Cleander declined to take command of the survivors of the Ten Thousand, or “for holding back soldiers until their general’s plans became ripe.” In support of this view, Anderson cites Dercylidas’ decision to delay his assault on the city of Cebren in Aeolis. Even though the risk of a Persian relief force arriving made a swift assault desirable, unfavourable omens caused Dercylidas to

wait for four days. In the end, the omens became propitious just as the city governor bowed to pressure from his garrison of Greek mercenaries and opened the gates. Anderson wryly concludes that “We may draw our own conclusions about his ‘inaction’.”<sup>5</sup> In a similar vein, Anderson notes “the manner in which the omens changed at the battle of Plataea, at the very moment when Pausanias saw that the time was ripe for the decisive charge.”<sup>6</sup> Likewise the fourth-century Athenian general, Iphicrates, when faced with unfavourable omens, would change his position and sacrifice “again and again” until he received a favourable response.<sup>7</sup> On another occasion, Agesilaus concealed news of a defeat by sacrificing as if in celebration of a victory in order to boost his men’s morale.<sup>8</sup> In Anderson’s analysis, then, the best that a military *mantis* might achieve was to give the general a good pretext for following a plan he had already devised for himself, or to provide encouragement to the troops.<sup>9</sup> Xenophon’s own professed reliance on divination in the *Anabasis* Anderson seems to regard as an abrogation of the commander’s responsibility to make his own decisions: as he puts it, “Xenophon seems to have found relief in letting the gods decide at critical moments.”<sup>10</sup> His phrasing is revealing, and the unfavourable contrast he draws between Xenophon and other commanders is unmistakable. Similar positions can be found in a range of other historians of both religion and military matters, including Nilsson, Hignett and Burn. All discuss the omens that delayed the Spartan charge at Plataea, and all conclude that Pausanias manipulated them in order to launch his attack at some optimal moment which he chose for reasons compatible with modern military thinking.<sup>11</sup>

Pritchett, for his part, rejects the idea that “the interpretation of omens [was] a mere form utilized by agnostic generals to inspire or restrain their superstitious soldiers.” Instead, he argues, “the *mantis* was expected by the exercise of his art to work success for his clients; and this art involved no little sagacity, evolved both from a knowledge of his *techne* and his long

experience in military matters.”<sup>12</sup> By contrast with the Delbrück-Anderson view, in Pritchett’s analysis, these religio-military specialists exercised a strong, independent voice. In support of this view, he cites “the number of important occasions on which the *manteis* reported the sacrifice as unfavourable, that is against the plans put forth by the hegemon” and which led to those plans being abandoned. This he regards as “testimony to the conscientious spirit in which the *manteis* must have carried out their tasks.” He concludes that military *manteis* “regarded themselves as the official means of ascertaining the will and intention of the gods, quite apart from the exigencies of the tactical situation.”<sup>13</sup>

Thus the modern literature on ancient military divination generally falls into two opposing camps. Robert Parker neatly summarises them: “for some, military divination is all a sham, a set of mechanisms deployed by generals to improve morale when they choose to attack, and to provide an excuse when they choose not to” while others “credit the Greeks or some Greeks with a genuine willingness to suspend their rational sense of their own advantage, and to entrust themselves more or less blindly to divine guidance.”<sup>14</sup> Neither extreme seems wholly satisfactory. Parker advocates a “middle way” based on the idea that “enough flexibility was built into the sacrificial system to allow one both to be a more or less sincere believer, and to act most of the time more or less as one felt to be sensible in secular terms.” He suggests that “the only projects which a general really abandoned because of bad omens were ones which he genuinely suspected might not be advisable.” After all, if a general were truly convinced of the merits of a plan, he could, as is well attested, repeat the sacrifice in the hope of getting the positive omens he sought.<sup>15</sup>

This paper also advocates a middle way, based on a reassessment of the nature of religion in the Greek world and, in particular, the relationship between religious ways of knowing and

practical action. The sceptical position outlined above reflects modern incredulity that anyone could think that religious factors might play a part in deciding a battle, other than in the limited sense that their psychological impact could affect the morale of the combatants. This incredulity in turn rests on an assumption that an opposition exists between the religious domain, conceived of (at best) as a domain of symbolic action, and the military, conceived of as a domain of practical action.<sup>16</sup> Exceptions may be made in specific instances, such as when religious factors affect motivation and morale, or religious scruples constrain military action, or when such scruples are exploited for strategic or deceptive purposes, but all of these are areas in which the psychology of the combatants is at play, and we may allow that beliefs we do not share may nevertheless have real effects on the minds and behaviour of those who do.<sup>17</sup> With due allowance made for such cases, however, the fundamental position remains that war is a practical matter, and practical problems – such as the outcome of a battle – are not to be resolved by symbolic means. Thus, the symbolic actions of the *manteis* may happen to coincide with the practical decisions of the commander, but this coincidence extends only to providing religious sanction for the commander's rejection of a plan which he already knows on rational grounds to be flawed, or support for a plan which he already knows on rational grounds to be good. The regularity with which ancient writers link success in battle with favourable omens beforehand leads the self-consciously rational modern mind to seek a rational explanation, and to find it in the cunning of the general, concealed behind the superstitious flummery of divination.

The central argument of this paper is that this position rests on a false dichotomy between the religious and the practical. This paper argues that the gaining of good omens is an integral part of the process of devising a successful strategy. Rather than viewing religion as something which attempts to transcend the mundane world in pursuit of spiritual ends – a

view that reflects the priorities not only of Christianity but also of a secular outlook that seeks to exclude religion from domains of power, such as politics, law or science<sup>18</sup> – we should view it, in this context at least, as a particular mode of engagement with that mundane world, a way of inhabiting it, grasping it, exploring it, and making sense of it, something that does not impose meaning on it from outside, via the workings of doctrine, but which assists its adherents in discovering meaning within it, not in the sense of uncovering eternal truths or finding spiritual enlightenment, but in the practical sense of uncovering reasons, causes, and opportunities for action. Our mistake is to regard divination as a source of knowledge which does not engage with its practical setting, and which therefore yields results which only coincidentally intersect with practical, real-world considerations, if they do so at all. To act on such knowledge would indeed be folly. By contrast, this paper argues that Greek divination was a practice deeply implicated in understanding the dynamics of the lived-in world and in doing so in profoundly practical ways. I shall illustrate these points with reference to Xenophon's *Cavalry Commander* and *Anabasis*.

### **Working with the god in Xenophon's *Cavalry Commander***

As noted earlier, the *Cavalry Commander* begins with an exhortation to the prospective commander to seek the help of the gods, but this is not an exhortation to ask the gods to do the work for the commander, but to grant it to the commander to think, speak and act in such a way that his command will be most pleasing to the gods, and most advantageous for himself, his friends and his city (1.1).<sup>19</sup> The assistance of the gods is therefore sought not in the form of miraculous interventions as a substitute for human effort, but in order to facilitate the proper direction of that effort.



This theme emerges more clearly as the text unfolds. After a discussion of the benefits of deception in warfare, Xenophon urges his reader to recognise that the greatest successes in warfare have been achieved with the aid of deception. The ability to deceive is therefore something which a prospective commander needs and which he must “both seek from the gods and devise for himself” *καὶ παρὰ θεῶν αἰτητέον ... καὶ αὐτῷ μηχανητέον*, 5.11). After further discussion of military deceptions, Xenophon advises his reader to “work with the god” (*σὺν τῷ θεῷ πράττειν*) when putting such schemes into practice, so that “the gods being propitious, fortune too may favour you” (*ἵνα καὶ ἡ τύχη συνεπαινῇ θεῶν ἴλεων ὄντων*, 5.14).

Likewise, when discussing the relationship between the commander and his men, Xenophon again invokes the goodwill of the gods – no commander can make anything of his men “unless, with god’s help (*εἰ μὴ σὺν θεῷ*), they are ready to hold their commander in friendly regard and to think him wiser than themselves in leading actions against the enemy” (6.1). However, he immediately follows this with detailed practical advice on how to bring about this happy state of affairs. The good commander should take care to look after the interests of his men, and should see to it that they have food, are safe in retreat and protected when at rest, and that, when on garrison duty, they have fodder for their horses, tents, water and firewood and everything else they need (6.2-3). Above all, he should lead by example and be an expert horseman and fighter, able to do everything he asks his men to do (6.4-5). If, on top of all this, the men are sure that their commander will not lead them against the enemy without a plan (*εἰκῆ*), without the gods (*ἄνευ θεῶν*) or contrary to the sacrificial omens (*παρὰ τὰ ἱερὰ*, 6.6), they will be all the readier to obey him. To win the goodwill and obedience of one’s men, therefore, is not an arbitrary gift of the gods, but results from hard work, forethought and planning combined with their favour.

In only one passage does divine assistance appear to replace human effort, and that is when Xenophon warns the Athenians not to expect the Periclean defensive strategy of the fifth century to work against the enemies the city faced in his own day. If the Athenians decide to rely on their walls and their navy, as they did during the Peloponnesian War, and expect the cavalry to protect Attica without support, then, as it were, Heaven help them: the Athenians will need, first, the gods as their “strong allies” (συμμάχων ἰσχυρῶν) and, after that, an outstanding cavalry commander (7.4). Intriguingly, the same discussion also features the motif of divine assistance as a supplement and support to human effort. If instead of relying on the cavalry alone, Xenophon argues, the Athenians field their full forces against an invader, both infantry and cavalry together, then the prospects are good, for – “with god” (σὺν θεῷ) – the cavalry will prove superior if they have been properly looked after beforehand, and the infantry will also be strong if – again “with god” (σὺν θεῷ) – they have been properly trained (7.3). The contrast is quite clear in this passage between divine intervention as a substitute for human effort and divine sanction as a necessary supplement and underpinning to it. To rely on the former is reckless, to invest in the latter is wise and will – gods willing – lead to success. The same point is repeated towards the end of the *Cavalry Commander* at 9.2: whatever the field of activity, whether farming or sailing or commanding, good decisions, Xenophon maintains, will not bear fruit unless care is taken that, “with the gods” (σὺν τοῖς θεοῖς), they are put into practice. Throughout the *Cavalry Commander*, then, Xenophon consistently asserts both that one must take action to ensure success, and that the gods’ help is a necessary requirement. For Xenophon, reliance on the gods does not supplant human effort but underpins it.

Xenophon explains this emphasis on the combination of human effort and divine assistance at the very end of the *Cavalry Commander*, where he reveals that the repeated use of “with god”

(σὺν θεῶ) is no mere verbal tic but a significant element of his military thinking. If the reader “wonders” (θαυμάζει) that he has written so many times that one should “work with god” (σὺν θεῶ πράττειν), he would wonder less, Xenophon asserts, if he had often been in danger himself (9.8). In war, he says “enemies plot against each other, but rarely know what will come of their plots” (9.8). Under such circumstances, he continues, there is no other source of advice but the gods. “They know everything, and warn (προσημαίνουσιν) whoever they wish in sacrifices (ἐν ἱεροῖς), in bird-signs (ἐν οἰωνοῖς), in speech (ἐν φήμασι), and in dreams (ἐν ὀνείρασι)” (9.8-9). In other words, while it is necessary to train hard, plan intelligently, prepare thoroughly and act decisively, it is still possible for a plan to come unstuck in the execution, and one can never be quite sure what the enemy will do.<sup>20</sup> In short, a wealth of unknown and unknowable factors affects the outcome of any encounter, and a mortal commander can do only so much to prepare. So while Xenophon exhorts the prospective commander to take all possible measures to ensure success, he also urges him to cultivate the gods so that they will warn him of hidden dangers and lead him towards advantageous strategies.<sup>21</sup> In short, good planning and preparation do not stand in opposition to reliance on the gods. Instead, good preparation includes the maintenance of relations with the gods so that they may be relied upon to assist with those factors that elude human ability to plan and anticipate. There is, for Xenophon, no dichotomy between practical action and the cultivation of the gods. To cultivate the gods is in itself a practical action.

### **Divination and truth**

This final passage of the *Cavalry Commander*, with its suggestion of Rumsfeldian known unknowns and unknown unknowns, and its reference to warnings given in sacrifices, omens, voices and dreams, leads us to the topic of divination and into the heart of the dispute over the relative roles of pragmatism and piety in Greek battle-planning. Divination has often been

seen through the lens of a positivist model of truth, in which the efficacy of divination rests on its ability to produce objectively verifiable predictions. Since such prediction is – to the modern mind – impossible, diviners must either have deceived their clients or themselves or both. Thus, the diviner often appears in the western tradition as a “charismatic charlatan” who uses “esoteric knowledge” to exploit the credulity of others.<sup>22</sup> Divination, meanwhile, is readily seen as a kind of “failed scientific explanation.”<sup>23</sup> Robert Parker’s article ‘Greek states and Greek oracles’ challenged this view, arguing that what the Greeks sought from their oracles was not prediction of future events but guides to practical action.<sup>24</sup> It is possible to develop this position further. Divination, we might say, has less to do with this objective, propositional notion of truth, and more to do with a notion of truth based on what anthropologist Rosalind Shaw has termed “performative efficacy.”<sup>25</sup> That is, divination is ‘true’ not if it makes predictions which are objectively verifiable, but if it guides action which turns out to be effective.<sup>26</sup>

The examination of the kind of truth implied by divination has been taken further by Martin Holbraad, who offers what he terms an “ontography of the concept of truth” that underpins Cuban *Ifá* divination.<sup>27</sup> Holbraad sets out to explore what truth might mean in the context of *Ifá* divination and how it differs from the positivist or representational notions of truth rejected by Shaw and others. Noting the prominence of the imagery of paths (*caminos*) and movement in *Ifá* divinatory language, Holbraad argues that the truth-claims of *Ifá* divination derive from a “motile” form of truth based on what he terms a “motile logic”.<sup>28</sup> In this logic, meaning is not stable but is regarded as fundamentally fluid and in motion until it is briefly crystallised in the final divinatory verdict. The meaning that is contained in such verdicts is arrived at by a process of bringing into conjunction seemingly unrelated “paths” of meaning, which include not only details of the client’s circumstances but also the “paths” (or myths) of

the various divine beings invoked in *Ifá* divination.<sup>29</sup> The truth of the verdict is not therefore to be evaluated in static representational terms, that is, in terms of its accuracy (or otherwise) in representing stable (but previously unascertained) facts of the world. Instead, the truth of divination is better regarded as “revelatory” in that it stems from the “modification that results when two initially independent strands of meaning are brought together.”<sup>30</sup> The truth of *Ifá* divination thus lies in the productive conjunction that it draws between multiple trajectories of meaning.<sup>31</sup>

The language and imagery of motility, so prominent in *Ifá* divination, is largely absent from representations of Greek divination. However, a similar emphasis on the bringing together of initially unrelated phenomena so as to disclose or reveal hidden potentials for action and understanding may be detected in a range of Greek accounts of divination including, as we shall see, a number of those in Xenophon.

As might be expected, Herodotus gives us some of the clearest examples. The historicity of Herodotus’ accounts of Greek oracles and divination is, of course, open to question.<sup>32</sup> However, though Herodotus may not accurately represent the words of the Pythia, or the deliberations of real, historical Greeks, either before or during the Persian wars, his representations of oracles and divination still represent a culturally-informed reconstruction of events. This is not to say that they are valuable because they offer a close approximation of actual historical events. Their value lies instead in the manner in which Herodotus reconstructs the interpretation of oracles, which sheds light on the way in which he and his contemporaries thought about and employed oracular pronouncements and divinatory outcomes.<sup>33</sup> In other words, their value as evidence lies in their cultural verisimilitude, not their historical veracity. Herodotus’ representations of divination suggest that Greek

divination, much like *Ifá* divination, depended on a relational process in which seemingly-unconnected phenomena were brought into productive conjunction.

For example, in his account of the discovery of the bones of Orestes by the Spartan former-cavalryman, Lichas, Herodotus places great emphasis on the process of ‘putting together’ (συνβάλλω) by which the Spartan linked together the cryptic statement of the Delphic oracle, the chance remark of a Tegean blacksmith and the equipment in his forge to reveal the hidden significance of both the oracle and the smith’s words and locate the hero’s bones.<sup>34</sup> A second example may be found in Herodotus’ well-known account of the debate over the prophecy given to the Athenians that the “wooden wall” would protect them. In this case, an authoritative but ambiguous statement by the Delphic oracle was mapped against a range of potentially-viable interpretative options, which included. Among other possibilities, the Athenian fleet or the thorn hedge or wooden palisade (ρήχός) which had protected the Acropolis in the olden days.<sup>35</sup>

In both episodes, the meaning of the oracle’s verdict was intensely relational, in that its meaning was unstable (ambiguous and therefore fluid and elusive) until it was successfully brought into conjunction with salient features of the enquirers’ respective contexts. The task facing both sets of enquirers, then, was to find the correct context, and the correct features of that context, which would ground the meaning of the oracular verdict and thus reveal the hidden potential of the situation.<sup>36</sup>

However, in neither case should we regard the salient features of the situation as self-evident or, indeed, as salient in their own right. Their salience is constituted by the enquirers themselves through the dynamic process of seeking correspondences between the oracular

statements and features of the lived-in world. In both examples, the interpretative process begins with the enquirers confronted by an overabundance of half-formed possibilities which must first be constituted as objects of examination and then whittled down to a single answer. This is no easy task. So elusive were the referents of the oracle given to the Spartans that, before Lichas unravelled it, they were looking everywhere (πάντα διζήμενοι, 1.67.5) for Orestes' bones without success. Likewise, in the Athenian case, the hedge or fence around the Acropolis and the wooden hulls of warships were but two among many potential referents for the "wooden wall", albeit the most significant (7.142.1).

In this respect, Herodotus' presentation of Greek divination has much in common with anthropologists' reports of contemporary forms of divination, which often proceed from an initial "superabundance" of meaning, in which cryptic and allusive language allows many possibilities to be entertained at once, to a later stage of crystallisation of a single, usable outcome.<sup>37</sup> Moreover, the process of reducing the initial excess of potential meanings to a single outcome does not proceed by importing a meaning which is given in advance in the divinatory signs into a situation the contents of which are already fully known. It is instead a process of bringing two sets of ambiguous and polysemic phenomena, the divinatory sign and the situation in which it is interpreted, both of which are fluid in meaning, into alignment with each other so that the meaning of both becomes stable. We may thus think of Greek divination as a process of synthesis, in which divinatory signs, whether they be the utterances of an oracle, signs observed from a sacrifice, the flight of birds or a chance remark, are brought into meaningful relation with the shifting circumstances of the enquirer.<sup>38</sup>

The value of such relational and synthetic approaches for our purposes is that they relieve ancient divination of the burden of providing objective knowledge about the state of the

future battlefield, deriving from some supernatural source. Instead, they recast the process of divination as one which affords the general and the *mantis* working together an opportunity for, and a means of, reflecting upon their knowledge, however partial, of the tactical situation.<sup>39</sup> It is a process through which they may give shape to hopes and fears, hunches and intuitions, draw them into overt reflective discourse, and use them to generate and speculate about possible courses of action. The resulting knowledge is not objective but rather is intensely situated, closely linked to the circumstances in which it is generated, and it is practical rather than abstract in nature.

This is, of course, a highly speculative claim. Little is known about precisely what signs the Greek *mantis* looked for in the entrails of a sacrificial victim. Collins' study of Greek extispicy highlights the absence of the lobe of the liver as more or less the only sign with a definitive interpretation (always presaging disaster). He identifies various other features, such as the shape, colour, texture, bloodiness and striation of the liver, as objects of interpretation. However, he is unable to identify standard or even firm interpretations of variations in these areas.<sup>40</sup> Nothing resembling the famous model liver from Piacenza has yet been found in Greece. Although this does not preclude the existence and use of such devices, or their equivalents in less durable materials, it may well be that the reading of the liver in Greece was conducted on a less structured basis than it was in other cultures. In the absence of direct information about the divinatory process, then, I will focus instead on the way that certain figures in Xenophon's works, including Xenophon himself, responded to and interpreted divinatory signs. We may be sceptical about the precise details of these accounts, particularly as Xenophon himself emerges so well from many of them.<sup>41</sup> However, even if we doubt their fidelity to actual events, Xenophon's representations of the divinatory process may be regarded as plausible representations of a general manner of interpreting divinatory signs in



Greek culture.<sup>42</sup> The examples to be discussed show an intense dialogue between the outcome of divination and rational reflection on the prevailing circumstances. They indicate that divination was in fact an integral part of the commander's strategic planning.

### **Divination in the *Anabasis***

The first example is drawn from the *Anabasis*, shortly after the battle of Cunaxa. The Greeks, having triumphed in their section of the battlefield (1.8.21), had spent the night unaware that Cyrus had been killed (1.10.16), learning only the next morning that he was dead (2.1.3) and that they were now stranded deep inside Persia, facing an angry king. In between receiving messengers from Cyrus' surviving allies and representatives from the Persian king, the overall Greek commander, Clearchus, had time to conduct a sacrifice and examine the entrails closely. He reported to the other generals and commanders that, when he sacrificed with a view to advancing against the King, the omens were unfavourable (οὐκ ἐγίγνετο τὰ ἱερά) – and with good reason (εἰκότως), he added (2.2.3). The reason for this was not, as we might assume, because Cyrus was dead or the battle had been lost. After all, the Greeks had prevailed in their section of the battlefield and had even begun to pursue their fleeing enemies (1.10.4). Moreover, earlier that day, Clearchus had offered to advance against the King and put Cyrus' friend, Ariaeus, on the throne instead (2.1.4). Clearly he did not lack confidence in his men's abilities. As he told the generals, the obstacle, as he had now ascertained (ὥς γὰρ ἐγὼ νῦν πυνθάνομαι, 2.2.3), was that the river Tigris lay between the Greeks and the King, a river which could be crossed only by boat, and the Greeks had no boats. The Greeks, he continued, could not stay where they were, because they could not get provisions there, but the omens had been very favourable (πάνυ καλὰ ... τὰ ἱερά ἦν, 2.2.3) for withdrawing and joining Cyrus' friends.

These omens may have been something of a surprise to Clearchus, given his earlier confident offer to continue the fight on Ariaeus' behalf. His statement that the omens were bad with good reason (εἰκότως) perhaps anticipated similar surprise on the part of his audience. His emphasis on his subsequent investigation – “As I now ascertain” (ὥς γὰρ ἐγὼ νῦν πυνθάνομαι) – is also of interest. It suggests a process in which a set of signs which were already constituted as significant (the entrails of a sacrificed animal) drove a process of enquiry (πυνθάνομαι) which ultimately led Clearchus to discover something about his context which he did not previously know, or did not realise was important, namely that the Tigris was between him and his enemy. The entrails had to be significant, because the ritual killing of the animal made them so, but they were far from self-explanatory. Clearchus neither bent the omens to suit his predetermined plan (which they contradicted) nor followed them blindly. Instead, he worked to find out why they were negative, and if there was anything he could do about it. In the end, he learned that the omens indeed spoke reasonably, εἰκότως.<sup>43</sup>

Our second example is also from the *Anabasis*, but features Xenophon himself (Xenophon the character) as the commander. After fighting their way out of Persia, the Greeks had arrived at Calpe Harbour on the Black Sea coast. They were short of supplies, somewhat fractious, having temporarily split into three separate factions, and bloodied, one of those factions having been attacked on the way to Calpe. On the first day at Calpe, Xenophon sacrificed with a view to marching out to get provisions and to bury the victims of the attack. The omens were good, and the excursion proceeded (6.4.9). However, on the following three days, even with food running out, the omens were bad, both for foraging and for leaving altogether (6.4.13-22). On the third day, a foraging party set out despite the omens and was attacked with the loss of around five hundred men (6.4.23-25). The survivors were saved by

Xenophon, who managed to obtain favourable omens for a rescue sortie by sacrificing a draft bullock (6.4.25).

What is interesting is the process of speculation that the stubbornly negative omens prompted. As with Clearchus' omens after Cunaxa, the Calpe omens led the men's attention back into their surroundings in search of a reason why they should not leave their camp. One suggestion was that the omens were false and that Xenophon had coerced the *mantis* to announce bad omens because he wanted to stay at Calpe and found a colony (6.4.14). Other suggestions, however, sought to relate the omens to features of the men's environment which were known or could be guessed at from recent events.

The first suggestion was made by one of the men. The omens were reasonable (*εἰκότως*) he said, because, as he had learned from a passing ship, the Spartan *harmost* of Byzantium was coming with boats to pick them up, so they should stay and wait for him (6.4.18). However, they still needed food while they waited, so Xenophon sacrificed with a view to a foraging expedition – again with negative results, despite three attempts (6.4.19). When the results remained negative for foraging on the following day (the third day of bad omens), Xenophon himself speculated that the enemy had regrouped nearby and that fighting would be necessary. He suggested that the men move their camp from the beach to the headland and sacrifice again with a view to marching out to fight (6.4.21). The men rejected this suggestion, presumably still suspecting Xenophon of wanting to found a colony on the headland, sacrificed again, using another draft animal. Despite obtaining yet another set of negative results, they ignored the omens and embarked on their disastrous foraging expedition (6.4.22-23).

Both of these proposed interpretations weave back and forth between known elements of the speaker's setting and the signs yielded by divination, using a process of recursive reasoning to synthesise omens and context and disclose hidden significance and new possibilities for action. The first speaker brought together the signs from sacrifice and the news he heard from the passing ship to produce an explanation for the negative omens which licensed a future course of action. Xenophon's own suggestion was based on a similar procedure. He knew that the enemy was nearby, because he had had to prepare to fight them on the way to Calpe Harbour (6.3.10-23), but he lacked concrete information about their current position and intentions. Since the omens were so resolutely negative, he speculated that enemy action was the cause. His proposal, like the other speaker's, was very practical: he suggested that the Greeks should change their tactical disposition by taking the headland as a stronghold and then venture out, ready for battle. This, he suggested, might lead to better omens (6.4.21). Eventually, he got his way, but only after the disastrous foraging expedition. Once the Greeks moved their camp to the headland and fortified it (6.5.1) – lo and behold – favourable omens were obtained. Moreover, not only did the very first sacrifice produce good omens, but an eagle was also spotted in an auspicious quarter (6.5.2), reinforcing the positive verdict. A two-way relationship between divinatory signs and the lived-in world thus underlay Xenophon's suggestion: he suggested that concrete, tactical changes might lead to better omens being gained. These tactical changes put the Greeks in a stronger position to deal with their enemies. They would neither be encumbered by their baggage train, as they would have been had they tried to leave Calpe altogether, nor be dispersed and vulnerable, as the foraging party had had been (6.4.24). Moreover, they had a secure location to retreat to if necessary. Once the Greeks adopted this strong position and aggressive plan, the omens announced that they might advance. We might also note the fortuitous arrival of a ship from Heraclea which brought the Greeks barley meal, sacrificial victims and wine (6.5.1), which further

strengthened their position. Given the apparent lack of definitive interpretative markers in Greek hepatoscopy – missing liver-lobes excepted – we may reasonably speculate both that doubts about the security of the Greek position lay behind the initial run of negative omens and that renewed confidence derived from the new plan and the timely arrival of supplies prompted the more favourable interpretation on the final day.<sup>44</sup>

### **Divining the practical**

These examples suggest that, in principle, divination was an activity deeply embedded in military thinking and deeply concerned with the real. Rather than providing information which was, at best, only coincidentally related to the tactical situation, it led its users' attention further into their world, allowing them to speculate about the possibilities latent within it and their own possible courses of action. This view contrasts markedly with the rationalising approaches outlined earlier, in which divination could at best provide a morale-boosting cover for a decision which the general made for himself by other means. Thus, as noted above, Anderson argued that Dercylidas was not really delayed before the walls of Cebren by unfavourable omens but instead had his own reasons for waiting which the omens usefully supported. It would not have been unreasonable for Dercylidas to have calculated that a delay might serve his ends. Six cities had already gone over to him voluntarily, three of them garrisoned by Greek mercenaries who had defected out of unhappiness with their conditions (Xenophon, *Hellenica* 3.1.16). While Cebren was a strong city (3.1.17) and direct assault would be difficult, it too was garrisoned by Greeks, who might also defect – as, indeed, they did (3.1.18). While Anderson is therefore surely correct in suspecting that military considerations motivated the delay, the episodes from the *Anabasis* suggest that the assumption of a separation between irrational divination and rational military planning is unwarranted. In view of the *Anabasis* episodes, there is no reason to suppose that practical,

military considerations, such as the strength of Cebren's defences, the need for a swift victory before help could arrive, and the likelihood of a revolt by the garrison, could not have been weighed up and evaluated against each other through the mechanism of divination.<sup>45</sup> Seen from this perspective, for a commander to pay attention to omens should be seen neither as a pretext for an already-formed plan nor as a lapse of reason, but as part of his scrupulous assessment of his situation.<sup>46</sup>

This principle can also be seen in an episode in Xenophon's *Hellenica* which depicts a commander's response to the apparently unambiguous omen of a liver without a lobe. The Spartan king, Agesilaus, received this omen while campaigning in Asia Minor in the 390s and promptly retreated to the coast (3.4.15). Taken out of context, this might suggest either the needless retreat of a superstitious commander or the calculating use of an omen to justify a decision made on rational grounds. However, when seen in context, it may instead be interpreted in terms of an indisputably negative omen prompting a careful review of the situation and leading to a proportionate response.

The day before the lobeless liver was discovered, Agesilaus' cavalry had been soundly defeated in a skirmish with enemy horsemen (3.4.13-14). Xenophon links this defeat to the negative omen very closely, presenting the defeat, the lobeless sacrifice and Agesilaus' quick turn towards the sea as a single, flowing sequence (3.4.15). Only afterwards does Xenophon pause to explain Agesilaus' reasoning: realising that, unless he strengthened his cavalry, he would be unable to campaign successfully in the plains, he retreated to the coast to recruit more (3.4.15-16). Xenophon's presentation of this episode suggests neither a naïve overreaction nor a calculating ploy, but another instance of the kind of relational reasoning outlined earlier. Agesilaus had sought omens for an advance. The lobeless liver strongly

argued against that, but, on its own, made clear neither why Agesilaus should not advance nor what he should do instead. After all, though the cavalry had been defeated, Agesilaus' infantry had repelled the enemy without loss, so he could perhaps still have hoped for success. However, an omen of such marked negativity warranted careful consideration. The obvious context for the omen, at least as Xenophon presents it with the benefit of hindsight, was the poor performance of the cavalry. Once the negative omen had been related to the cavalry defeat, it could be taken both as a clear sign that stronger cavalry really was required and as a dire warning of what might happen if it were not procured. Thus, while Agesilaus may initially have been tempted to continue his campaign regardless, since he had, after all, sacrificed with a view to advancing, the lobeless sacrifice seems to have prompted a reconsideration. In the event, his response was not a headlong flight, but a strategic and temporary retreat.<sup>47</sup> Even when the most daunting omen presented itself, then, the canny commander's response could be practical, contextualised and measured.

### **Socrates and the limits of divination**

The overall argument of this paper has been that Greek military divination is a form of reasoning that assists a commander in understanding his situation and his potential for acting within it. We might therefore wonder how far it differs from any other mode of thinking or planning. At this point, it is useful to recall Xenophon's Socratic connections. Xenophon's statement that, in war, "enemies plot against each other, but rarely know what will come of their plots" (*Cavalry Commander* 9.8) evokes the programmatic statements about the uses of divination made by Socrates in the *Memorabilia* (1.1.6-9).<sup>48</sup> There, Socrates asserts that, while skill in a wide range of activities – including generalship (στρατηγικόν, 1.1.7) – can be attained by human intelligence (ἀνθρώπου γνώμη, 1.1.7), the gods have reserved the most important aspects of them (τὰ ... μέγιστα, 1.1.8) to themselves and they are not revealed to

mortals (οὐδὲν δῆλον εἶναι τοῖς ἀνθρώποις, 1.1.8). Thus, the man who sows a field cannot tell who will reap the harvest, the man who builds a house cannot tell who will live in it, and the man able to command cannot tell if it will benefit him to do so.<sup>49</sup> Likewise, the politician cannot tell whether it will benefit him to lead the city, the man who marries a beautiful wife for his pleasure cannot tell if she will cause him pain instead, and the man who cultivates powerful friends in his city cannot tell if he will be banished from it because of them.<sup>50</sup> Socrates asserts that those who think that such things are entirely within the reach of human understanding and that there is nothing “of the divine” (δαμόνιον, 1.1.9) in them are mad – but so too are those who use divination in matters which the gods have granted to mortals to judge by their own enquiry (1.1.9). Socrates thus establishes a distinction between proper and improper objects of divination. To seek to learn from the gods about self-evident matters, such as whether it is better to employ an experienced or an inexperienced driver or steersman, or about any matter which can be decided by calculation, measurement or weighing, is to do what is not permitted (ἀθέμιτα ποιεῖν, 1.1.9). By contrast, in matters which are not clear to humans (ἃ δὲ μὴ δῆλα τοῖς ἀνθρώποις ἐστί, 1.1.9), it is necessary to learn from the gods by divination.

Socrates’ statements suggest the same relationship between human effort and divine assistance as seen in the *Cavalry Commander*. Humans must understand all that they can by their own means. Divination is properly to be used only for those matters which resist human understanding. The appeal to the gods for information thus supplements and extends, but does not substitute for, human effort. This synergy between mortal and divine rests in turn on an epistemological distinction between those matters which are susceptible to mortal reasoning and those which are not. However, if, in our terms, divination is to be seen as a purely human form of reasoning, then this distinction must be recast for analytical purposes,



not as a distinction between realms of knowledge appropriate to different orders of being, such as mortals and gods, but as a distinction between different orders of objects of knowledge and different, but wholly human, ways of knowing them.

Socrates' reference to matters susceptible to calculation, measurement or weighing suggests that illegitimate objects of divination are those which are susceptible to being adequately known via the positivist or representationalist mode of truth outlined earlier. Knowledge about such matters may be evaluated in terms of how accurately it represents an objectively existing situation. Legitimate objects of divination, by contrast, concern matters which cannot be checked in this way. The examples of legitimate uses of divination which Socrates gives concern the outcome of the exercise of human abilities. In all of them, one may exercise one's skills competently but still not be able to predict the outcome. Representations of such outcomes cannot be checked against the facts of the world because the facts of the world which they represent and against which they must be checked have not yet come to pass. The farmer will not find out who will reap the harvest until harvest-time. The general will not know if it will benefit him to take command until he has actually done so. Moreover, the success of many of these enterprises depends not only upon one's own skill but also upon the intentions and actions of others, such as the beautiful wife, the powerful friends, or the commander's adversary. Legitimate objects of divination are contingent, fluid and provisional as potential objects of knowledge. They can be stable as objects of knowledge and be fully known only in hindsight, that is, only after human ability has been put to work and the outcome has become clear. In this respect, they are closely matched to the relational, synthetic and fluid ways of knowing employed in divination. We might go as far as to say that they are accessible only to a form of reasoning that gives form to the fluid and the contingent and brings it into the realm of reflective reasoning. Divination may therefore serve

as a means of mapping the unmappable, as it were, of teasing out hunches and quantifying gut feelings. In our terms, it does not and cannot draw knowledge from an exterior source (the gods), but it can give a voice to unvoiced, half-formed understandings of the world, crystallising them so that they may be consciously examined and perhaps acted upon.<sup>51</sup>

We can, then, it seems, characterise Greek divination without reference to the gods. Such an approach, however, is at odds with the Greeks' own perspective, in which the gods are the authors of the signs interpreted in divination and the guarantors of its efficacy. Moreover, as Xenophon emphasises, divination takes place in the context of a relationship with the gods that is essentially social. Thus, in the *Memorabilia*, the gods give signs to those whom they favour (τοὺς θεοὺς γὰρ οἷς ἂν ὄσιν ἴλεω σημαίνειν, 1.1.9), while, in the *Cavalry Commander*, they are, he reasons, more willing (μᾶλλον ἐθέλειν, 9.9) to guide those who serve them well when times are good and do not approach them only when they are in need. We might read this simply as a commonplace of Greek religion. However, in the context of divination, it may take on additional significance as a motivating factor in the interpretation of ambiguous divinatory signs.

As David Zeitlyn has noted, the perception that a rational being lies behind a series of signs is a strong inducement to the enquirer make sense of those signs, or rather, as it appears to them, to find the sense hidden behind them, even – or perhaps especially – when they appear to contradict themselves. Contradiction can thus be a spur to inventive and subtle rethinking both of the question and of the situation.<sup>52</sup> The Mambila divination from Cameroon that Zeitlyn studies operates on binary principles, and so is more akin to Greek lot-oracles than sacrificial divination or the observation of bird-signs. However, his analysis has important ramifications for the understanding of non-binary forms of divination as well. If the gods are

assumed to be sending messages by means of sacrificial signs – not to mention birds, voices, dreams and many other means – then it behoves mortals to work out what those messages are and not just to shrug them off, however obscure, ambiguous or contradictory the signs may be. The conviction that the signs are sent by the gods for the guidance of mortals thus creates a powerful incentive to attempt to uncover their meaning. While this attempt presents itself as an effort to discover a meaning which is already present in the signs, in reality, as the argument above suggests, it is the enquirers who actively create that meaning by drawing the signs into a meaningful relationship with the world around them. In our terms too, then, the gods underwrite Greek divination: the conviction that the signs originate with the gods underwrites the process of sense-making that leads the Greeks both to identify divinatory signs and to render them meaningful.

## **Conclusion**

What the episodes discussed here indicate is that military divination – and indeed divination in general – did not operate in isolation from rational reflection on practical circumstances, but instead stimulated such reflection. In response to negative signs, in a military context, interpretation proceeds by intense probing of real and suspected dangers to arrive at an interpretation of both sacrificial entrails and tactical situation that adequately integrates and synthesises both. If viewed from the perspective of a model of truth based on performative efficacy rather than objective verification, military divination can be seen as a thinking tool for a general who is both rational and pious, and a means of generating workable, practical knowledge in circumstances of great uncertainty. It offers a means of refracting hopes and doubts through an external medium as part of a process of devising a plan. Far from representing a failure of reason, divination represents a focused attempt to extend the reach of reason into realms of uncertainty.

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<sup>1</sup> As Badian (2004, 40) notes, precise details of Xenophon's life are difficult to pin down, including his dates of birth and death. He took part in Cyrus the Younger's rebellion against Artaxerxes II and later served in Spartan campaigns in Asia Minor, developing a close relationship with Agesilaus. Exiled from Athens, probably in the 390s, he settled at Scillus in Elis, where the Spartans granted him an estate. His literary career probably began there. Evicted from Scillus by the Eleans after the battle of Leuctra, he may have died in Corinth ca. 360/59, or possibly back at his estate in Scillus, where one account locates his grave. See Badian 2004 for detailed discussion of Xenophon's biography, and Cawkwell 2004 on the composition of the *Anabasis*.

<sup>2</sup> E.g. 3.4.23, 4.2.20, 7.4.30 (sacrifice before battle); 4.7.7 (before building a fort); 3.4.3, 3.5.7, 4.7.2, 5.1.33, 5.3.14, 5.4.37, 5.4.47, 6.5.12 (Spartan border-crossing sacrifices; see Pritchett 1979, 68-71); 4.8.36 (omens ignored); 3.4.15, 4.7.7 (bad omens lead to change of plan, **discussed below**).

<sup>3</sup> Selection and training: 1.5-6, 1.17-21; leadership: 6.1-6, 8.21-22; tactics: 4.1-6, 5.1-15, 7.6-15, 8.17-20.

<sup>4</sup> Pritchett 1979, 1-3. As Pritchett notes, Wilamowitz did not, of course, mean that a miracle had genuinely taken place, but that belief in the support of the goddess had spurred the Athenians on.

<sup>5</sup> Anderson 1970, 69-70, discussing *Anabasis* 6.35-36 (Cleander) and *Hellenica* 3.1.17-19 (Dercylidas).

<sup>6</sup> Anderson 1970, 290 n. 17 on Herodotus 9.61-62. **See note 11 below.**

<sup>7</sup> Anderson 1970, 70 on Polyaeus, *Strategemata* 3.9.9.

<sup>8</sup> Anderson 1970, 70 discussing *Hellenica* 4.3.13-14.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Nilsson (1940, 125-27), who regarded divination and reliance on omens as "hindrances to military action" but recognised their psychological value. Parker (1989, 157-58) notes a shift away from rationalising views in some works of the 1970s and 1980s.

<sup>10</sup> Anderson 1970, 70 on *Anabasis* 6.1.31, 6.2.15, 7.6.44.

<sup>11</sup> Nilsson 1940, 126; Hignett 1963, 336; Burn 1962, 538, all discussed by Pritchett 1979, 79. Burn speaks of the value of sacrifices and omens for keeping the men in hand. Nilsson speaks explicitly of the omens as a "pretext." Both Nilsson and Hignett envisage the Persians drawing nearer, with Pausanias delaying until they came within reach. Herodotus' picture of the battle is incomplete and dramatized, but this passage provides little explicit support for such views. While Herodotus certainly does have the Persians advancing in 9.60.1, by the time Pausanias is sacrificing (9.61.2), they have made a fence of their shields and begun shooting at the Spartans (9.61.3). The reference to the barricade of shields suggests that the Persians halted their advance once they had the Spartans within range. The idea that the Persians continued to advance seems to arise from the need to give Pausanias a reason for holding back, which is itself required as an explanation of his adherence to the outcome of the sacrifices. In other words, since (it is supposed) Pausanias cannot have stood still under enemy fire simply

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because of bad omens, a better reason must be supplied, and the Persians' movements are reconstructed so as to supply it. In the light of the discussion below, we might perhaps detect in the negative omens a moment of indecision on Pausanias' part, in the face of an army which approached like a phalanx but then converted itself into a kind of fortification and attacked from a distance. (Note also his reluctance to face the Persians and his preference for having the Athenians face them instead at 9.46-48.) The impasse was broken by the Tegeans' charge, which changed the dynamics of the battlefield and hence the salient features captured in divination. In other words, once the Tegeans charged, it was obvious what Pausanias had to do. This interpretation, however, may be asking too much of the text. Harrison (2000, 152-53) has detected a contrast between Pausanias' exemplary obedience to omens and Mardonius' more cavalier attitude, and sees the story as a model of how to respond when the divination contradicts one's own assessment of one's best interests.

<sup>12</sup> Pritchett 1979, 58.

<sup>13</sup> Pritchett 1979, 77-78. Divination has received relatively little attention in recent scholarship on ancient warfare. Krentz notes the role of prayer, sacrifice and divination in the departure of military expeditions, after victory and on successful return (2007, 156-8, 173 and 185), but does not otherwise explore the rationale behind it; Wheeler and Strauss briefly outline pre-battle sacrifice and its value as assurance of a just cause (2007, 203-4, 213); Whitby notes the difficulty of reconciling modern, secular interpretations of strategy with our sources' assertions of religious motivations (2007, 66). Van Wees' brief discussion sets military divination in the context of the heightened demands of classical hoplite battle and sees it primarily as reassurance. However, he also notes a combination of "piety and expediency" in Greek warfare, noting that the Spartans were both the dominant military power in Greece and the state most concerned with religious scruples in war (2004, 119-21). Nevertheless, detailed discussion of military divination and the mentality behind it is usually left to scholarship on religion, e.g. Parker 1989, 154-60, Jameson 1991 (particularly 204-9), Vernant 1991, Parker 2000 (particularly 304-7).

<sup>14</sup> Parker 2004, 143-44.

<sup>15</sup> Parker 2004, 144, cf. Parker 1989, 159-60.

<sup>16</sup> See, e.g., Asad's acerbic remark (1993, 55) that ritual is easily recognisable because "ritual is (is it not?) symbolic activity as opposed to the instrumental behaviour of everyday life." Bell notes both the centrality of belief to modern conceptions of religion and the status of belief as "our characterization of the specific illusions of others" – that is, our term for ideas which *they* appear to take seriously but which *we* cannot accept as part of the real (Bell 2002, 100-104 and 106). Cf. Davies 2011, 406-8.

<sup>17</sup> Scruples: e.g. Spartan absence from Marathon (Hdt. 6.106-7), Cleomenes' burning of 'Argos' (Hdt. 6.79-80); Argive attempts to claim a sacred truce (Xen. *Hell.* 7.2-3).

<sup>18</sup> Christianity: see, e.g., Davies 2011, 397. Containment: Asad 1993, 28; Davies 2011, 406-8; Bell 2002, 100-106 (above, [note 16](#)).

<sup>19</sup> Only once the goodwill of the gods has been gained, the commander may begin to recruit horsemen (1.2).

<sup>20</sup> Cf. Artabanus' warning to Xerxes that sometimes a great army is destroyed by a smaller one when the god sends panic upon it, and it perishes in an unworthy manner (Hdt. 7.10e). It is hard not to read Xenophon's graphic account of the massacre of panicking Argive forces by the Spartans in Corinth in 393 in this light: "the god gave them an achievement (ἔργον) of such a kind that they could not have prayed for ... how could one not think of it as something divine (τις θεῖον)?" (*Hellenica* 4.4.12).

<sup>21</sup> The wish in 1.1 that the gods might grant it to the commander to think, speak and act in the most advantageous way suggests that the gods' help might extend to indicating positively beneficial plans as well as warning against dangers.

<sup>22</sup> Peek 1991, 3.

<sup>23</sup> Shaw 1991, 137.

<sup>24</sup> Parker 1985, 299-300.

<sup>25</sup> Shaw 1991, 139.

<sup>26</sup> Peek 1991, 135. Cf. Maurizio's remark that "that 'truth' in oracular tales was determined by application and interpretation, not fidelity to or recovery of an original utterance" (1997, 329).

<sup>27</sup> Holbraad 2012, 86.

<sup>28</sup> Holbraad 2012, 97-100.

<sup>29</sup> Holbraad 2012, 96-103.

<sup>30</sup> Holbraad 2012, 101.

<sup>31</sup> Cf. "Verdicts are rather temporary truth-claims that emerge as and when the world reveals itself to itself, if you like" (Holbraad 2012, 103).

<sup>32</sup> The two main collections of Delphic responses, by Parke and Wormell (1956) and Fontenrose (1978), both regard many of Herodotus' Delphic oracles as inauthentic. For useful discussion, see Bowden 2005, 69-73.

<sup>33</sup> Maurizio (1997, 308-316) argues that, since the Pythia's precise words cannot be recovered, it is inappropriate to test the authenticity of Herodotus' Delphic oracles against a putative original utterance. They should instead

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be evaluated in the terms of an oral or oral-derived tradition, in which each reuse of an oracle is in effect a reperformance and recomposition, which would be accepted or rejected by its audience not for its fidelity to an original but for its validity as a contribution to the tradition, that is, for the extent to which it embodied the principles and style of the tradition. Herodotus' depictions of divination may therefore be taken as culturally-competent contributions to a contemporary tradition of divination, and therefore as evidence for Greek divinatory thinking. Cf. Anderson 2018, 57.

<sup>34</sup> Hdt. 1.67-68, discussed in greater depth in Anderson 2018, 55-56. See also Barker 2006, 15-17.

<sup>35</sup> Hdt. 7.141-42. Cf. Anderson 2018, 56-57. On the translation of ῥηχός, see How and Wells 1912, *ad loc.*

<sup>36</sup> In the Athenian case, this context included the relationship between the Athenians and Apollo. The decisive argument that the prophecy was too mildly-worded to indicate an Athenian defeat at sea and must therefore refer to the defeat of the Persians relied on the assumption (not unreasonable in the light of 7.141.3) that the gods were well disposed towards the Athenians and were not luring them to their destruction.

<sup>37</sup> "Superabundance": Werbner 1973, cf. Whyte 1991, 170. On the reduction of multiple possibilities to a single conclusion, see Parkin 1991.

<sup>38</sup> Any such synthesis is at best provisional until it is tested in action, as is suggested by the numerous cautionary tales in Herodotus, such as Croesus' disastrous interpretation of the 'mighty empire' oracle (1.53-56, 1.84-91) and Mardonius' misapplication of an oracle about the army of the Encheles (9.42-43). See Anderson 2018, 61.

<sup>39</sup> On the integration of both commanders and *manteis* in discussion, see Pritchett 1979, 56-7, Parker 2000, 305. Cf. *Anabasis* 2.1.9 (Clearchus is called away to inspect entrails which have been extracted in his absence); 5.2.9-10 (advice from the captains and *manteis* is seamlessly integrated); 6.4.15 (inspection of the entrails is opened to any *manteis* who happened to be in the army). Xenophon's recommendation that a commander learn the basics of divination in order not to be at the mercy of his *mantis* (*Cyr.* 1.6.2, cf. *Anab.* 5.6.29) further suggests that dialogue is important. Plato's assertion at *Laches* 199a that the general should command the *mantis* and not the other way round is compatible with such a view: all it need mean is that the final decision is the general's. On divination as an intrinsically dialogic process, see Whyte 1991, Parkin 1991, 187; cf. Parker 1985, 301.

<sup>40</sup> Collins 2008, cf. Parker 2004, 144-45.

<sup>41</sup> As Cawkwell (2004, 60) remarks, "The Xenophon of the *Anabasis* always was right and righteous."

<sup>42</sup> See Parker 2004, 135-7 on plausibility.

<sup>43</sup> Despite the bravado of 2.1.4, we may suspect that the outcome reflects unspoken doubts on the part of Clearchus or his advisers. The Greeks had, after all, been told by the King's representative (2.1.11) that they were hemmed in by impassable rivers and facing overwhelming multitudes of men. For further discussion of relational reasoning in this passage, see Anderson 2018, 57-9.

<sup>44</sup> Cf. Parker 2004, 145-46 on this episode and on nervous commanders being sensitive to even the smallest defects in a liver.

<sup>45</sup> Such an interpretation makes sense of Xenophon's emphasis on Dercylidas' anger at the governor's intransigence (3.1.17), frustration at the omens (3.1.17) and exasperation with one of his captain's unauthorised and unsuccessful attack on Cebren's water-supply, which he feared would demoralise the men before the real assault (3.1.18). This does not suggest a commander coolly biding his time while hiding behind compliant omens, but rather one frustrated by unexpected obstacles, including adverse omens which perhaps reflected the difficulty of taking Cebren by force.

<sup>46</sup> Iphicrates' practice of responding to negative omens by changing his position and sacrificing again (above, page 4) may be reinterpreted in this way in the light of Xenophon's strategy at Calpe. If divination is understood as a tool for understanding the hidden realities of the battlefield, then poor omens indicate a flaw in one's battle-plan which can appropriately be remedied by changing the real disposition of the troops.

<sup>47</sup> We might compare Agesilaus' response to a lobeless liver to that of Agesipolis (*Xen. Hell.* 4.7.7). Coming at the end of a successful campaign in the Argolid, when he was contemplating building a fort in the passes of Mount Celusa which opened into Argive territory, we might consider that the lobeless sacrifice encouraged him to feel he had achieved all he could and thus to return home (cf. Parker 1989, 156 and n. 71). Parker (1989, 160) also notes Agesilaus' retreat, suggesting that Agesilaus had practical reasons for withdrawing and noting the lack of irony in Xenophon's juxtaposition of omens and tactical reasoning. I read Xenophon's deadpan presentation as a sign that he considered divinatory and tactical reasoning to be unified.

<sup>48</sup> On which see Bowden 2004, 233. I am grateful to Crystal Addey and Matthew Shelton for pointing out the similarity of the two passages. On Xenophon as a Socratic writer, see Waterfield 2004.

<sup>49</sup> We might note that Xenophon found himself in this position at *Anabasis* 6.1.19-31, as did Cleander, the Spartan *harmost* of Byzantium, at *Anabasis* 6.6.35-36. Both were offered command of the Ten Thousand. Both declined it after receiving negative omens from sacrifice. Tellingly, Xenophon decided to consult the gods when he reflected that the future is unclear (ἄδηλον, 6.1.21) to all men.

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<sup>50</sup> The close connection between mortals' inability to tell the outcome of their actions and the gods' withholding of this knowledge is emphasised by the repetition of οὔτε... δῆλον... ("it is not clear") in all six examples, which echoes the phrase οὐδὲν δῆλον ("not revealed") in 1.1.8.

<sup>51</sup> We might see in this a distant echo of the claim made by Herodotus' Delphic oracle that it can number the grains of sand, measure the sea, understand the dumb and hear the voiceless (Hdt. 1.47).

<sup>52</sup> Zeitlyn 1990, 654-57. Zeitlyn draws on an experiment by Harold Garfinkel in which American university students were offered counselling over an intercom system. Students could talk freely to the counsellor but any questions they asked had to be susceptible to yes/no answers. Unbeknownst to the students, the counsellor's answers were randomly predetermined, and all students received the same sequence of responses. Despite the randomness of the counsellor's answers, students generally assumed there was a logic behind them and worked to uncover it.