

Interpreting the Divine in Herodotus: Narratives of Re-Consultation

In Herodotus's *Histories*, Croesus's multiple oracle consultations present an apparent contradiction between unavoidable fate and Croesus's responsibility for his downfall. In response to Croesus's complaint against Apollo, the Pythia blames Croesus instead: οὐ συλλαβὼν δὲ τὸ ῥηθὲν οὐδ' ἐπανειρόμενος ἑωυτὸν αἴτιον ἀποφαινέτω ("Because he did not understand what was said and did not ask again, he should acknowledge the blame as his own" 1.91.4). Croesus accepts responsibility after this reply. Yet, the Pythia complicates the situation by stating that not even a god can avoid fate (1.91.1). Though it is too late for Croesus, this apparent contradiction raises questions about the potential success of re-consultation. This paper examines examples of re-consultation, which I call "re-consultation narratives," in the rest of the *Histories* and argues that, while re-consultation itself cannot change fate, persistent inquiry can still result in more successful outcomes.

Oracles and other types of divine communication in Herodotus's work have been much discussed in previous scholarship (e.g., Barker 2006, Harrison 2000, Kindt 2006, Kurke 2009). Yet, though Leslie Kurke briefly discusses the Spartans' search for the bones of Orestes as "reconsultation," scholars have not addressed the specific patterns of re-consultations in Herodotus's work. As Alexander Hollman (2011) notes, oracles can allow for a type of "dialogue" between humans and the divine. This element of dialogue is particularly pronounced in the repeated exchanges involved in re-consultation. My exploration of re-consultation narratives examines this particular type of divine-human dialogue and contributes to broader discussions about the roles of fate and human agency in Herodotus's work.

I divide re-consultations in Herodotus into three broad categories: re-consultations as reminders, failed re-consultations, and successful re-consultations. I address one narrative from each of the three categories to show the range of Herodotus's re-consultation narratives and to analyze how successful re-consultation differs from the other two types.

My first example is that of Battus's foundation of a colony in Libya; here the act of re-consultation occurs after someone fails to complete a divinely assigned task; it functions as a reminder to the characters to follow through after the initial consultation. The Cyrenean version of Battus's story involves an initial consultation and immediate re-consultation (4.155), then a second and third re-consultation (4.156-157). With each of these re-consultations, Battus and the Therans make some progress toward fulfilling the oracle's initial command to found a colony as they try to avoid divine punishment by discerning how to work in accordance with fate.

In the second category, characters undertake a re-consultation, but also make some error leading to failure. Astyages consults the Magi to interpret his dreams about his daughter Mandane and acts based on their interpretation that his grandson will take over his rule (1.108). When his plan to kill his grandson fails, he re-consults the Magi, who eventually change their interpretation to suggest the dream has already been fulfilled in a harmless manner (1.120). Astyages makes a re-consultation, but he is not re-consulting an oracle or receiving another dream; rather, he re-consults human priests who interpret divine dreams. Because the Magi are influenced by Astyages's power as a tyrant, their second response appeases him rather than offering a genuine interpretation. Astyages ends up following his own preconceived re-interpretation rather than truly inquiring again, resulting in a failed re-consultation.

Finally, in the category of successful re-consultation, when the Athenians consult the oracle at Delphi about the Persian expedition, they respond to a dire first oracle with a re-

consultation that results in a second oracle (7.141). The Athenians' persistence in their inquiry goes beyond re-consultation, extending to interpretation. They do not simply ask official interpreters, but present the report to the people, who debate different interpretations (7.142-143). In doing so, they find an innovative response to fate through a metaphorical interpretation. Though Athens is indeed sacked, the Athenians' persistent inquiry still allows them to become σωτήρας ... τῆς Ἑλλάδος ("saviors of Greece" 7.139.5).

In response to the question of the Croesus *logos* with which I began, I suggest that Herodotus portrays re-consultation as potentially, but not always, successful, depending on a character's strategy of inquiry. Re-consultation cannot change fate, but an attitude of persistent inquiry can lead to innovative responses to fate that allow humans to gain some additional agency despite the impossibility of avoiding fate altogether.

Works Cited

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