

Croesus' Tragic Sacrifice  
Sophie J. Mills (University of North Carolina, Asheville)

The multiple affinities between common structures in tragedy and Herodotus' account of Croesus' precipitous fall from prosperity to misery have been well-documented in earlier scholarship. This paper will follow in this tradition, but instead of concentrating on the grander affinities between the Croesus narrative and tragedy, it will focus instead on chapters 50-51 of Herodotus' first book and argue that these two relatively neglected chapters exemplify both the influence of tragedy on Herodotus and certain Herodotean preoccupations.

Chapters 50-51 list the spectacular offerings Croesus sends to Delphi to propitiate the oracle in order to receive a favourable answer to his request about the feasibility of conflict with Cyrus. Three thousand animals are sacrificed in the service of this plan, countless gold and silver objects and purple clothing are burned, while in addition, Croesus sends mixing bowls of exceptional size to Delphi as offerings. It is clear that Herodotus' motivation in listing all these items in such detail derives, at least in part, both from his desire to show off his extensive knowledge of the contents of Delphi's fabulous inventory of offerings, and because such exceptional excess clearly falls into the category of the "wondrous" deeds whose memory he wishes to preserve for posterity (1.1).

Yet the extraordinary excess of Croesus' offerings – surely unparalleled in what we know of typical sacrificial gifts - is dangerous precisely because it transcends normal practice. While it illustrates Croesus' tremendous power, both political and economic, as we know from Herodotus' report of the advice given to Croesus by Solon, divinity is jealous, apt to stir things up (1.32.1), and a human being at his zenith of political and economic power is exactly the sort of human being who is likely to come to the hostile notice of the jealous god. So paradoxically, at the very time when Croesus is making his best efforts to propitiate the god by offering such a vast abundance, the very offerings his prosperity enables him to make, bring his prosperity to divine attention and make him vulnerable to divine jealousy. In this, his fate resembles that of the quintessential tragic hero. Much like Sophocles' Oedipus, in fact, the more he thinks he is protecting himself against fate, the more he is being drawn into disaster. Again, like a tragic hero, and like Polycrates in Herodotus 3.40-43, he makes the mistake of assuming that he can control his own fate through the act of sacrifice. But a sacrifice of his own choosing is a useless act, since his loss – like that of Polycrates' ring - cannot genuinely affect him materially and will have no mitigating effect on a hostile divinity. Thirdly, the deliberate destruction of the cloth and the other material symbols of Croesus' prosperity echoes elements of the exchange between Agamemnon and Clytemnestra in Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* (944-65) in which Clytemnestra argues that the vast resources of the house can be used in any way they wish, while the very real dangers of such a belief are expressed by Agamemnon.