

Accept What Is Given: A Reading of Herodotus 8.114

Herodotus uses language strongly associated with receiving oracles, even in situations where an appointed religious authority is absent. Angus Bowie notes Herodotus' use of such oracular language in 8.114-115 (Bowie, 2012). When a Spartan herald arrives in Thessaly to demand satisfaction from Xerxes for killing Leonidas, he is instructed to accept what is given to him (*to didomenon ex ekeinou dekesthai*) from Xerxes. Xerxes responds by laughing derisively at him – always a bad indication in Herodotus, as Donald Lateiner points out – and promising that Mardonius will give satisfaction (*dikas dosei*) as is appropriate (*prepei*) (Lateiner, 1980). The herald's response is in accordance with what he is instructed: he accepts what he is given (*dexamenos*).

Despite the brevity of this passage, it is filled with language both charged and ambiguous. In ancient Greek literature forms of *dekesthai* are standard in the receiving of oracles. In 8.114 we see the oracular working on two different levels, since, in the first place, a Delphic oracle had approached the Spartans and instructed them to send a herald to Xerxes and accept whatever he might be given, and in the second Xerxes delivers a prophetic message. Xerxes' response is oracular for two reasons: firstly, it rests on his use of a verb in the future tense, common among oracles (*dosei*). Secondly, his words come true in an unexpected manner, thanks to his use of an ambiguous idiom, one that can mean “give satisfaction” as well as “pay the penalty” (*dikas dosei*). Donald Lateiner indicates that this is the only use of the idiom in Herodotus' narrative itself, though it appears a handful of times in *oratio recta* and *oratio obliqua* (Lateiner, 1980).

This combination of confidence in the surety of an event's fulfillment (the use of the future tense) and the ambiguity of *dikas dosei* suggests that, in this passage, Xerxes is something of a prophet. The role of this passage warrants further study, to be provided by this paper.

Xerxes not only gives an oracle to be accepted by the herald, but in turn must accept the truth of his message – however unexpected – when Mardonius is killed at Plataea. When detailing Mardonius' death at 9.64, Herodotus once again refers to Xerxes' prophecy, reminding his reader of the fulfillment of the king's words, specifically referring to the satisfaction given (*dike*). Furthermore, Herodotus refers to the *chresterion* (“oracle”) given to the Spartans, though the term is ambiguous. Is the historian referring to the oracle that instructed the Spartans to send a herald to Xerxes, or to the oracular message that Xerxes himself delivers?

In this paper I argue that Herodotus revels in the ambiguity of this oracular language, simultaneously reinforcing and challenging his readers' notions of the nature of prophecy. In doing so I build off the work of Lateiner and Bowie (Bowie, 2012; Lateiner 1977, 1980, 2005), using recent scholarship from Jonas Grethlein and Thomas Harrison to provide historiographical and religious context (Grethlein, 2009; Harrison, 2000).

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