

## A Tragic History: Oracular Interpretations in the Stories of Croesus and Agamemnon

There are many tragic motifs scattered throughout *The Histories*, including self-sacrifice, sacrilege, madness, revenge, and divine revelation. These markers of tragedy clearly link Herodotus to the tragedians that came before him, and this link has been well established by other scholars. (Griffin 2006, Said 2002, Gill 1996). While oracles are not unique to tragedy, they often play a pivotal role in shaping the “tragic trajectory” that is not seen in other genres. In this way, many episodes in Herodotus are also driven by oracles, which provides an important connection to his tragic roots.

There has been extensive work done on the links between Aeschylus’ *Persae* and *The Histories*. (Parker 2007, Kirk 1955) Not only subject matter, but most importantly Aeschylus’ active participation in the engagement would compel an inquirer like Herodotus to look at Aeschylus’ account of the Persian Wars. However, it would be foolish to think that only one play of this distinguished author affected the “Father of History.” Although themes and motifs of tragedy in Aeschylus’ other plays can be found all over Herodotus, the theme of oracles in the stories of Agamemnon and Croesus show the best link between these two authors.

In this paper, I explore the parallels between the stages of oracular interpretation in the stories of Croesus and Agamemnon. In passing, Jasper Griffin identifies four key moments in a prophecy. (Griffin 2006) The first stage is the fearful revelations, which manifest in two ways: the ancestral wrong, and the contemporary divination. Next, the actors attempt to avoid and flat out ignore the oracles while also misinterpreting their prophecies. Despite their attempts, the oracle comes true and finally, the kingdom is ruined. Though Griffin only mentions this in passing, I expand on this crucial connection in the prophetic episodes of Croesus and Agamemnon.

Fearful revelations are key to the continuation of the narrative in tragedy. They not only establish the inevitability of the outcome, but also set the stage for the tragedy itself. In both the story of Croesus and Agamemnon, an ancestral evil is first committed by their family. For Croesus, this is represented in the story of Gyges (Hdt. 1.12-13) while the “Banquet of Thyestes” is acknowledged by Cassandra, though the full story is not told in this play: “the roasted meat on which their father was fed.” (Aesch. Ag. 1097) These past acts of disgrace foretell of a disastrous outcome. The second and most vital aspect is the oracular announcement of impending doom. In the story of Croesus, he inquires of both the oracle at Delphi, as well as Amphiareios, whether he should wage war against the Persians. Both oracles reply that if he attacked them, “he would destroy a great empire.” (Hdt. 1.53) In Agamemnon’s case, he does not inquire of the oracle himself but Cassandra is told his fate by Apollo. (Aesch. Ag. 1090-92)

After the “truth” has been revealed, the actors make two critical errors. The first is ignoring their ancestral warnings. In Herodotus, the Lydians paid no heed to the Pythia, ignoring the prophecy “until it actually came to pass.” (Hdt. 1.13) This was Herodotus’ signal to the ancient reader that there was tragedy to come. In Agamemnon’s tale, the Chorus responds that she is “out of [her] mind, I think a god has seized it!” (Aesch. Ag. 1140) The second error occurs when the actors misinterpret the will of the gods. Croesus believes the kingdom to be destroyed was that of Cyrus. (Hdt. 1.54) The misinterpretation found in the story of Agamemnon is not as clear and linear as the story of Croesus. However, by the very fact that Cassandra is providing the oracle, misinterpretation is inherent.

As was predicted, the oracle in these tragedies comes true and their kingdoms are subsequently ruined. With the sounds of his mute son, Croesus is captured and his kingdom ruined. (Hdt. 1.85) The fate of Agamemnon is off stage, killed by his wife, Clytemnestra who

runs the kingdom into ruin with Aegisthus. (Aesch. Ag. 1343 - 1354) By using narrative patterns embedded in tragedy, Herodotus shows a deeper, moralistic approach to the study of history; and moreover, Herodotus understood human nature to be inherently tragic. Tragedy inserts moral questions into *The Histories* and puts into perspective the true nature of human actions.

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