

# The Social Effects of the Oracles

## Text Analysis Based on Herodotus' Histories

Renwen Zhang<sup>1, \*</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Chongqing Foreign Language School, Chongqing, China

\*Email: [guanghua.ren@gecacademy.cn](mailto:guanghua.ren@gecacademy.cn)/m15213203933@163.com

### ABSTRACT

Herodotus is considered the founding work of history in Western literature, which is written in 430 bc in the Ionic dialect of classical Greek. His History is served as a record of the ancient traditions, politics, geography, and clashes of various cultures which is known in Greece, Western Asia and Northern Africa at that time. Although it is not a fully impartial record, it remains one of the West's most important sources regarding these affairs. Moreover, it establishes the genre and study of history in the Western world. This essay mainly discusses the relationship between God, king and people in Herodotus, and analyzes the reasons why Herodotus describes mythological history from the stories of Gods deliver information to people through Oracle and other ways in Herodotus. Through the analysis and discussion of the Oracle story, it can be seen that Herodotus tried to describe a wonderful and mysterious historical picture, including religious thinking and historical understanding in ancient Greece. This paper has certain reference value and Enlightenment for relevant historical research.

**Keywords:** *Herodotus, Histories, Oracle.*

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Historically, ancient societies had a strong belief in the existence of gods. People often give everything they have to the gods, hoping to get answers to their questions. Understanding the ancient people's respect and belief in Greek mythology, from their own behavior, tradition and politics, it is not difficult to see that their lives were affected by their belief in gods. There seems to be a subtle relationship between the power and the will of God, which determines that the right to be a king is given by God. Gradually, the king began to use the divine power to give orders, launch wars, and become the king of the gods. The divinity of great kings is closely related to the development of ancient empires. This cultural phenomenon is called Oracle.

In ancient Greek society, the release of Oracle usually came from priests or priestesses, through whom people asked questions and received answers to the gods [1]. Oracles were also commonly used to interpret dreams, to explain and guide people's behavior, and sometimes to explain the meaning of consecrated animal organs, which laid the foundation for the formation of natural law[2]. Ancient Greeks, Romans, and other peoples also had similar cultural phenomena and traditions of dealing with public policies and private affairs by asking gods [3].

Herodotus is undoubtedly recognized as the "Father of History" in the West, and his masterpiece "History" has also become the foundation of ancient Greek history [4]. "History" was written in the Ionian dialect of classical Greek in 430 BC. It mainly records the ancient traditions, politics, culture, geography and military conflicts of various cultures known in Greece, West Asia and North Africa at that time [5]. Although it is not yet a completely fair and objective record of history, it is still the most important historical resource for understanding the history of ancient Greece and the West. In addition, it also established the historical type of the Western world to a certain extent, and became an important material for historians to reconstruct historical texts [6].

Herodotus mentions the oracle of Delphi in many places, and there is a relatively complete record of the oracle of Delphi, such as "Go to Delphi to ask for the oracle" is a frequently used word [4]. This recording and writing reflects the time when Herodotus lived, the oracle of Delphi frequently appeared and played a key role and important influence in the daily life of the ancient Greeks.

Through combing and analyzing the content of Herodotus, this article reveals how the leaders of the empire used the oracles to build confidence and arrange for wars, and how the oracles were convinced. In addition,

this article also attempts to discuss Herodotus's writing method of describing the history of these myths and the writing motivation behind it.

## 2. TEXT ANALYSIS OF ORACLES

Receiving oracles was one method for leader of an empire to increase their divinity and connect their relationship with gods. They usually made use of oracles to obtain an answer from their gods, to ensure the required results to solve a problem and build up their own confidence by offering tributes and ordering people to do the same. In Herodotus' *Histories*, when Croesus ordered Lydian to ask the oracles whether he should send an army against the Persians, the Pythian priestess answered, "Lydian, beware of the day when a mule is lord of the Medians: Then with thy delicate feet by the stone-strewn channel of Hermus. Flee for thy life, nor abide, nor blush for the name of a craven. [4]" In this prophecy, Croesus believed that he was the "mule", the lord of the Medians. Croesus was so pleased by the oracle, it made him believe that he must be the one who would win the war between his empire and the Persians. He began to get ready for battle and confidently believed he was going to win. Usually, this showed that the oracle would influence an empire leader's decision and made him consider it to be something that will come true in the future. So the oracles would almost certainly influence the fate of a king, depending on whether the king interpreted the oracles accurately. When Croesus was defeated by Cyrus's army, he wondered why the god lied to him. He also got his answer when he accomplished his will [4]. Therefore, the god didn't lie to Croesus, but told him the truth as the oracles indicated. The tragedy of Ionia was caused by his misunderstanding of the oracles. "he confessed that the sin was not the god's, but his own" [4]. Croesus was certain that he was wrong because he misunderstood the oracles. In turn, the oracle from the god was confirmed as being true. Croesus was intrigued, but also defeated because of the oracles, demonstrating a bound relationship between the king and the gods.

It's clear that consequences from oracles are meant to come true, people always interpret the oracles in various ways from Herodotus, making it difficult to make decisions under conditions such as wars, activities, etc. After Xerxes invaded Greece, Athenians came to Delphi to get oracles from the gods. The oracle caused a huge contradicts: people have different perspectives on explaining the meaning of the oracle, but the last two sentences of the oracles clearly indicated the result: Greek army would lose in this battle. Eventually, Themistocles believed that their enemy would lose, not them, so that they should be fully prepared for the battle. Greeks firmly believed and agreed that explanation. And they won the Salamis sea-battle and defeated the Persians as expected [7]<sup>53</sup>.

In another case, when the king did not follow God's Oracle, it led to a dark response. One time the oracles indicated king of Thera to build colonies in Libya, but the king didn't do what the oracles showed him. The reason why he didn't do was that people in Thera didn't know the exact location of Libya. They refused to take risks to look for such a place to build colony. It turned out that the consequence was seven-years' drought in Thera. After the repercussion, people in Thera finally made their way to Libya. Another example was from Artemision, the oracles warned Euboea that there would be a series of catastrophes, while they ignored the oracles and put themselves into that situation [7]<sup>53</sup>.

That gods also had the right to select a king was an inherent belief of ancient people. Influenced by the myths of Greek gods, people of ancient times trusted that their king was to be chosen by the gods, for he could administer the empire. From Herodotus, Pisistratus regained his sovereignty with the aid of a woman named Phya, who dressed like Athene and told the citizens that she had brought Pisistratus back. "So the heralds went about and spoke thus: immediately it was reported in the demes that Athene was bringing Pisistratus back, and the townsfolk, persuaded that the woman was indeed the goddess, worshipped this human creature and welcomed Pisistratus.[4]" This clarifies that the folks worshipped Athene as a god and therefore believed that Pisistratus was undoubtedly the one capable of managing the entire empire. In fact, no matter how stupid Herodotus thought it was, it all came true, as he mentioned that, "This offer being accepted by Pisistratus, who agreed on these terms with Megacles, they devised a plan to bring Pisistratus back, which, to my mind, was so exceeding foolish that it is strange (seeing that from old times the Hellenic has ever been distinguished from the foreign stock by its greater cleverness and its freedom from silly foolishness) that these men should devise such a plan to deceive Athenians, said to be the cunningest of the Greeks.[4]" We can perceive that the divinity of kings is rooted in ancient Greek people and is further approved by Herodotus' statement. In addition, people's worship of the gods is made known by the records of Herodotus. Sometimes God only shows his spirit. For example, when Phidippids was sent to Sparta by Athenian generals, he saw pan show his spirit on the way. There are also some revelations that people at that time generally believed to be some good or bad omens. When Scyles, a Skite, was preparing to participate in the secret instrument of Dionysus, his house was burned by lightning. This was a warning from heaven, but Skuras insisted on participating in the sacrifice and was finally killed by his own people. For another example, before and after Xerxes led his army through Hellespontias, there had been such accidents: a mule gave birth to a pony with male and female reproductive organs, and a mare gave birth to a hare. This is considered an obvious omen that

Xerxes will eventually die of unnatural death, even if he returns to his country.

From the Oracle story depicted by Herodotus, it is easy to conclude that the ancient Greeks had a deep faith in God and his instructions or information, even if they were not sure of the meaning of the oracle. Although they did not personally contact the gods, they believed that the gods had been watching them so that the gods could send them a message through the Oracle, telling them what would happen, whether it was right to make this decision, or what they should do for the upcoming events. In addition, people should not deny the Oracle, otherwise they will face predictable situations, and no one can help, including Gods.

But why did Herodotus choose to confuse myth with history and what really happened at that time. Are his documents and descriptions credible? Why are there so many activities related to Herodotus's gods and supernatural spirits? Obviously, Herodotus was further influenced by ancient myths, so he could write stories about God. These questions seem to be answered from Herodotus's background, people's lifestyle and beliefs at that time.

Before 5 BC, the social atmosphere around the Mediterranean created such an important environment for Herodotus's creation. From Tang Hui's view of Herodotus's mythology and history, there are many temples in Athens, which worship the tablets of God. Some gods protect the city, others protect the family, and each god only performs his own duties. During the festival, the worshippers scrambled to sacrifice to the respected gods, and did not dare to ignore them. Athens has a collection of oracle bones. The city hall supports a group of "Taoists" who can predict the future. "Fortune tellers", priests and "dreamers" can be seen everywhere in the street. Athenians believe in so-called symbols. If you sneeze or shout in your ears while doing something, you can't do it. Before going to sea, the Athenians always prayed for good and bad luck. If it is marriage, it also depends on whether the birds in the sky are auspicious. If you are ill, you will wear an amulet around your neck. Despite the scale of the civic assembly, it will end as soon as someone says there is an ominous omen in the sky. Once the ongoing sacrifice is interrupted by some bad news, it must start again. Athenians must bless before they speak. All speeches at the Congress must first pray to the gods enshrined in the city-state, and then turn to the theme. If you speak to the people, you must ask the gods to show you [8]<sup>18</sup>.

From the above description of the general environment of religion and belief in God at that time, we know that Herodotus will be more or less affected by the surrounding environment at that time: the people around him have great respect and belief in God. The position of the gods in Herodotus's heart is also unshakable. At the same time, Xi Hao's research also shows Herodotus's two

narrative tendencies. He recorded the stories of many mortals who were retaliated by God for blasphemy in history, which reflected Herodotus's religious emotion of believing in God. This once again confirmed that Herodotus was deeply influenced by religious thought. His description of the Oracle is also in line with the traditional religious thinking mode of ancient Greece [9]<sup>78</sup>. Although Herodotus was deeply influenced by the religious environment at that time, he tried to make a description loyal to historical facts. Hugh Bowden, a British scholar, believes that Herodotus may write many aspects of history in order to more effectively describe the implied truth he recognized. He sometimes relies on unreliable materials. On the whole, however, Herodotus's description of the oracle of Delphi is possible, even though he intends to romanticize and heroic it and tries to make a description faithful to the facts [9] 78. It can be seen that Herodotus did not completely rely on myths and stories when recording history, but described the Oracle with a rational attitude to ensure a certain historical authenticity [9]<sup>78</sup>.

In this way, Herodotus was influenced by the mythological thinking and social atmosphere at that time, which made him deeply believe in God and mythology. With this belief, Herodotus's story can be seen as a combination of history and mythology. But how does he ensure that some of the history he records has actually happened? Herodotus tells a typical myth of finding a sense of belonging and obtaining qualification certificates. The residents of Lemno islands used to be oceangoing people living in Athens, but later they were expelled and moved to the island because they were unfair to the Athenians[8]. In retaliation, they plundered many Athenian women as concubines. The children of these Athenian women and girls learn the Athenian language and customs from their mothers. When they grew up, they united and thought they were descendants of Athenians, which was incompatible with the islanders. Lemno felt threatened and killed all Athenian women and their children. As a result, they angered the gods and caused disaster. Finally, they must promise the Athenians that one day they will give their land to the Athenians [8]<sup>23</sup>. From this point of view, Herodotus fabricated this story to provide evidence of the invasion of southern Greece. The actual role of myth in this story is so obvious that its historical authenticity is acceptable.

Another example is the analysis of Delphi oracle. The argument between the Egyptians and the Athenians lasted a long time. The closest time to Herodotus's life was 456 BC. The Athenians defeated and conquered the Egyptians shortly before Herodotus first came to Athens. Herodotus went on to say that although the Athenians obeyed the oracle and endured for some time, they still couldn't stand it. They launched a war against aginas in less than 30 years, which led to their long-term entanglement with aginas [10]<sup>63</sup>. The Oracle here did not really happen, but it is precisely because of this that the Oracle is destined

to encounter this dilemma. From the above two descriptions, Herodotus took the Oracle as part of the story, and the Oracle added a sense of mystery and holiness to these historical stories. The reason is also related to the audience of Herodotus at that time. From the historical background of Herodotus of Xi Haojie and the narration of Delphi Oracle, it can be seen that the readers of Herodotus's works are Greeks growing up under the background of Greek religion. He has widely used Delphi's Oracle Bone Inscriptions in history and may not study its origin carefully[9]. Considering the religious aspects of Greek public psychology and emotion, the content of Oracle narrative can also be accepted without doubt. This also left a vivid picture of Greek religious thought for future generations and provided a religious explanation for the development of historical events.

### 3. CONCLUSION

From Oracle to believer worship, it can be understood that these two factors contributed to how kings established the connection between their divinity and God's myth. People's belief in God and king always let them rely on God's will, which is understandable, because in that era, people had no advanced assumptions or progressive ideas, so believing in their God was the only thing they could do. The king is considered to be chosen by God, so decisions should be made, not the people. This is why imperial leaders strive to establish their divinity from God, make all decisions, and contribute to the development of the Empire.

To sum up, it can be seen from the oracle and the Oracle story that people's interpretation and debate of the Oracle ignore the painful consequences of the "oracle" to "the signs of God in the story". Herodotus discussed the purpose and historical authenticity of the Oracle description and the history involved in the oracle. Herodotus tried to show the past to the world in his own way and describe a wonderful and mysterious historical picture, including his own religious thinking mode, understanding of history and so on. This paper has certain reference value and Enlightenment for relevant historical research.

### REFERENCES

- [1] Wang Yun, The status and role of Oracle and prophecy in ancient Greek society, *Guangxi Social Sciences*, 2007 (12), pp.99-103.
- [2] Wang Taixian, Enlightenment from Oracle to nature: the origin and generation of natural law in ancient Greece, *Modern law*, 2004 (06), pp.16-25.
- [3] Wang Huan, From temple to Countryside: Ptolemy in the context of multicultural society---Egyptian Oracle during Roman rule, *Research on foreign issues*, 2019 (03), pp.50-56.
- [4] Herodotus, *History*, Shanghai: Shanghai Triptych a) Shop, 2008.
- [5] Guo Tao, Herodotus and the writing of "prehistoric history" of Athens, *World history*, 2021 (04), pp.129-147.
- [6] Guo Tao, Dialogue between text and History: Helen's narration in Herodotus's history, *Historical research*, 2020 (06), pp.118-141.
- [7] Wang Ruohan, On the relationship between God and man in Herodotus's history, *Journal of China University of Petroleum*, 2017, 33 (05), pp.49-54.
- [8] Tang Hui, Herodotus's view of mythology and history, *Chinese comparative literature*, 2018 (04), pp.15-25.
- [9] Xi Haojie, Herodotus's historical context and Delphi Oracle narration, *Problems in history teaching*, 2021(03), 77-83.
- [10] Li Yongbin, Analysis of Delphi Oracle, *Research on world religions*, 2011 (05), pp.57-66.