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## Divinity in Book I of the Histories

Stephen Pittman

*College of the Holy Cross*, [slpitt23@g.holycross.edu](mailto:slpitt23@g.holycross.edu)

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## Divinity in Book I of the *Histories*

Stephen Pittman

Herodotus' endeavor, as he expresses in the proem of his *Histories*, to record the great deeds of men, though focused on mankind and the actions of its members and how they were the instruments of fate in the flow of history, is still completely and inseparably full of theological concepts and the use of divinity in the explanation of the patterns of history. Often perceived as taking a distinctly secular approach to the recounting of past events and the stories of kingdoms and wars, Herodotus does not at all achieve something close to the modern scholarly habit of complete avoidance of divine explanations for events or even the mention thereof, save for when referring, for example, to the real religious practices of particular people.<sup>1</sup> This kind of perception seems to mostly stem from Herodotus' juxtaposition with previous, mostly poetic works of recounting historical events among the Greeks, especially Homer's epics.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, Herodotus' dealing with the divine in his *Histories* starkly contrasts with that of the Homeric epics in which gods are granted distinct personalities and relations and the events of the stories are often explained as being the direct results of some kind of divine affair. Although Herodotus clearly does not discuss history in terms of the divine in such a way, he does often make mention of gods and the divine particularly in ethnographic contexts, i.e., where he discusses the gods and religious practices of a people and their origin and in cases of oracular prophecy. But, most significantly Herodotus tends to use the concept of divinity in explaining what appear to be universal truths observable through historical patterns, in particular the movement of fortune from one bearer to another, over which men have no actual control.<sup>3</sup>

Herodotus speaks frequently of the divine in terms of how foreign nations and the Greeks themselves worship their gods and, especially in the case of foreign deities, he explores the origin of their worship and their names.<sup>4</sup> When discussing these, Herodotus seems to be attempting to be merely ethnographically reporting what he can tell about foreign and Greek gods and their worship, such that these mentions of the divine are not being used as some

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<sup>1</sup> Harrison (2000) 32.

<sup>2</sup> Momigliano (1978) 2.

<sup>3</sup> Scullion (2006) 195.

<sup>4</sup> Mikalson (2002) 196-198.

necessary part of the greater historical narrative. However, these offer some insight in how the author perceives divinity. The instances where divinity actually affects the main narrative of the first book are expressed rather subtly and, extremely importantly, in a sort of characteristically vague manner in which usually no specific deity is being referred to.

The word Herodotus commonly uses to express this kind of unspecific divinity is simply *ὁ θεός*, however the word appears in several different ways, sometimes accompanied by the definite article, sometimes without it, and sometimes in the neuter, such as in 1.32.1 (*τὸ θεῖον*). These all slightly change the possible interpretation of the word, whether it might refer to an indefinite god or the general concept of “the divine.” But, as it will be shown, very often *θεός* is lacking a clear antecedent of a named deity and no specific deity can be presumed through context to be what the noun refers to. Therefore, it seems that Herodotus is describing a broader concept of divinity distinct from conventional anthropomorphized conceptions of deities.

Herodotus refers to this unspecific kind of divinity twice when he writes of Solon explaining to Croesus his choice for the second happiest man he has ever seen being the Argives, Cleobis and Biton. In the first instance *ὁ θεός* is preceded by the definite article and is masculine in gender: “...διέδεξε τε ἐν τούτοισι **ὁ θεός** ὡς ἄμεινον εἶη ἀνθρώπῳ τεθνάναι μᾶλλον ἢ ζῶειν” (1.31.3). Now in the previous section to this quotation a festival to the goddess Hera is mentioned (*ὀρτυγῆς τῆς Ἥρας*), making her the last deity to be named, but due to the gender disagreement between *ὁ θεός* and *τῆς Ἥρας*, she is certainly not the same god as is mentioned here in the quotation. The word is likely not referring to a monotheistic god either, or even a single god, but rather a collective or general concept of “the divine,” a meaning one would normally expect to be represented by a neuter plural substantive adjective.<sup>5</sup> In the second instance, more similar to the expected way of expressing the concept, that is through the use of the substantive adjective in the neuter singular, the sense of “the divine,” or rather “the divine thing,” is achieved: “ὦ Κροῖσε, ἐπιστάμενόν με **τὸ θεῖον** πᾶν ἐὸν φθονερόν τε καὶ ταραχῶδες ἐπειρωτᾶς ἀνθρωπῶν πρηγμάτων πέρι,” (1.32.1). This passage also tells a particularly interesting feature of Herodotus’ general concept of “the divine,” and that is that it possesses and acts upon a capacity to be jealous (*φθονερόν*) and a tendency to wreak trouble (*ταραχῶδες*).<sup>6</sup> This

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<sup>5</sup> Asheri (2007) 102.

<sup>6</sup> Harrison (2000) 32-33.

characteristic of the divinity that Herodotus describes gives it a reason, albeit personified, for its taking and giving of fortune, with which it seems to be intrinsically intertwined.

It is perhaps this giving and taking of fortune, from person to person, from nation to nation, that is the strongest theme throughout the first book of the *Histories*. It seemed to Herodotus and has been made apparent to us that this is a significant observable pattern within history, consequent not to something within the power of mankind; although, it seems the actions of men may accelerate the taking action of the divine, such as those that express arrogance. In the case of Croesus, Herodotus presents that Croesus had become the target of the vengeful snatching of luck because he presumed so confidently that he was the happiest man of all whilst inquiring of Solon (1.34.1). In addition to this, in *Histories* 1.91.1, Herodotus mentions that Croesus' fall would be the final, prophesied fulfillment of the divine vengeance for the improper and treacherous deed of his ancestor, Gyges in his ascension to the Lydian throne.

Now in chapter 34, the jealous, taking action of the divinity is described as *νέμεσις*, being the personification of divine retribution, being sent to Croesus “from god” (*ἐκ θεοῦ*) (1.34.1). This is the only usage of the word *νέμεσις* in Herodotus' *Histories*, and, since the goddess by that name, among the many other common, anthropomorphized gods, appears throughout the Homeric epics and other myths as a personified direct agent in the goings on of the world of men, this particular use of the word is especially significant.<sup>7</sup> This, more than other instances, connects the interaction of the divine with the realm of men with the conventional stories most closely.

Herodotus' “divinity” is undeniably linked with the concept of luck and fortune, perhaps as personification or merely the determiner of it. And furthermore, it is possibly above the domain of conventional gods in that a god is generally an agent within the world that is subject to fate itself, as the priestess of Apollo said: “τὴν πεπρωμένην μοῖραν ἀδύνατα ἐστὶ ἀποφυγεῖν καὶ θεῶν,” that is: “it is impossible for a god to escape his given lot,” (1.91.1).<sup>8</sup> Through this statement Herodotus seems to concur with the idea that gods are subordinate to a larger power that dictates their lot, which has long been a theme observable across the myths with

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<sup>7</sup> Harrison (2000) 40.

<sup>8</sup> Translation is the author's own

conventional, anthropomorphic depictions of gods.<sup>9</sup> Now could the unspecified divinity talked about throughout the text be meant by Herodotus to be the setter of such destiny? It would make sense given it is what gives and takes fortune and luck. But surely that divinity could not be subject to the things it itself sets forth, as it is the originator of destiny. And if it were to act upon its jealousy and anger at the arrogance and overly fortunate lives of certain men or states as is described by Herodotus, then would it not be acting according to something set forth by men? And these men would also be the ones whom it allowed to gain the fortune to achieve their proud positions to begin with. Therefore, for it to be motivated by something is for it to be subject to its own power to some degree if it is the setter of destiny. Thus, it was probably useful for Herodotus to use personifying terminology in explaining the ways of the divine, as in divine jealousy, simply because that is a more natural and easily understandable way of describing such a cosmological idea, for it would be hard to try to conceive such a divinity acting based upon no motivations. Therefore, it is possible Herodotus meant not for this divinity exactly to be seen as a definite distributor of the almighty destiny that even gods are subject to, but perhaps as fortune or destiny itself.

It is evident throughout the first book of the *Histories* that Herodotus positions this particular concept of the divine which is associated with fortune and luck as absolutely fundamental to the operations of history and that it plays a highly significant role in his worldview, or at least his symbolic description of the world. His narrative, clearly not lacking with intentional craftsmanship, focuses on the patterns by which luck and glory moves throughout history and that he seems to have firmly supposed that something distinctly divine is part of the moving pieces in those patterns, along with, of course, the actions of men. Thus, however relatively indirect Herodotus' approach towards describing the influence of the divine on history is compared to his predecessors, the concept of the divine is still irremovable from the main messages and ideas he expresses concerning patterns in history and nature of human events.

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<sup>9</sup> Fowler (2010) 322.

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