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Religious Studies Capstone

Religion and War in Classical Greece: The effect of pre-battle sacrifice and omens on strategic decision making.

This detailed discussion analyzes the decisions making processes during the Persian¹ and Peloponnesian wars.² It will focus mainly on sacrifices and omens and explore how these religious events affected the varying levels of warfare. This exploration is based on five separate episodes from the three main Classical Greek³ Historians: Herodotus⁴, Thucydides⁵, and Xenophon⁶. Each of these episodes has, at its beginning, a sacrifice or religious event that must be read. This reading influences the decisions made by the leaders of the armies. There are different variables to consider in each episode; through these explorations conclusions can be drawn about the importance of religion and sacrifice to different people in the Classical Greek world.

In the specific context of omens during war-time and before battles, there are four important variables to consider. The most obvious variable is the omen itself, while the others variables are more subtle. These variables are the diviners⁷, the ones who read the omens, the generals who are held responsible for the result of the battle, and the soldiers.

The most important variable, it appears at first glance, is the sign being read. There were many different types of signs in the ancient world. These signs were

¹ The Persian Wars were an ongoing conflict between the Greeks and Persians. This paper focuses specifically on the invasion of Xerxes, the second invasion of the Persians, 480-479 BCE.

² The Peloponnesian War was a war between Athens and Sparta, the two most powerful city states, which lasted from 431-404 BCE.

³ All of these historians wrote during the Classical Greek time period or 510 BCE to 323 BCE.

⁴ Herodotus was the first of the Greek historians; he lived from 484-425 BCE and wrote the *Histories*.

⁵ Thucydides lived from 460-395 BCE and wrote *The Peloponnesian War*.

⁶ Xenophon lived from 430 -354 BCE and wrote the *Hellenika* which is regarded as a continuation of Thucydides' work.

⁷ This term will be used interchangeably with seer, since, in this context their duties are the same, and in the histories cited, both words are used.

represented in both fictional⁸ and historical works, some being more believable than others. These signs can most simply be defined as a form of communication with the gods.⁹ This paper will focus specifically on communications before battles, whether they were pre-battle sacrifices or natural omens.

Sacrifices and omens were thought of as the manifestation of communication with the gods. Once the sacrifice was made the communication had to be interpreted, bringing us to the second variable on the chain: the diviners. These interpretations came from the diviners who witnessed the omen, or from the ones who had made the specific sacrifices. The diviners were not necessarily trained in their tasks but in some cases proved their worthiness through deeds. Herodotus tells the tale of the rise to prominence of two seers of the Persian war. One gained his status through successfully aiding the Spartans with his seeing ability.¹⁰ The other rose to prominence by performing an act of desperation. He cut off part of his foot in order to escape captivity.¹¹ There is no known specific curriculum or rule book that these diviners followed, and much of what they did was likely subjective.

The third decision making variable was the General, who, despite the diviners interpretation, had the final say in battle decisions. These generals varied in their reverence for religion which influenced their abidance to the omens of the diviner's interpretations of a given omen. Greek religion and belief was not a monolith.

⁸ For further reading see excerpts from the Iliad. Most importantly book 24.309-13

⁹ Naiden, F.S, pp 3-4

¹⁰ Teisamenos, a Greek seer, more detail will be presented further in the paper.

¹¹ Hegistratos, a Persian seer, see previous footnote.

The final variable to consider is the soldiers who the sacrifice results were reported to. The results of the sacrifice could easily have a profound effect on the morale of the soldiers. At first glance these soldiers and their morale don't seem like a major variable as they have limited control, and don't have any real interaction with the sacrifice or the interpreter. The anticipated reaction of the soldiers could easily affect how the diviners chose to interpret their findings or how the generals make decisions because of how much it affected morale. It is evident that the communication with the gods becomes gradually less influential when considering each variable.

Each episode in this paper has at least one of these variables as the focal point for the strategic decisions that are made, and clearly illustrate the importance of each variable.

These decisions may not have been as simple as a diviner reading a sacrifice and informing the general of the results. It seems possible that often the diviners and generals might utilize and twist the outcomes of the sacrifice for their own gain, to build morale, or to ensure beneficial military strategy. These sacrifices most likely also helped keep the will of the soldiers in line with that of the generals.

Herodotus wrote mainly about the Persian wars, which were around 480 BCE. Herodotus' history, however, reaches back to the beginning of the Persian Empire 200 years prior, and has representations of strange supernatural occurrences, which most likely never happened.¹² In contrast Thucydides and Xenophon wrote about the

¹² Herodotus 2.75: here is a story about winged serpents who attempt to fly from Arabia to Egypt. "The story goes that, when spring arrives, winged serpents fly from Arabia toward Egypt, but at this mountain pass they encounter ibis birds, which not only do not let them pass but which kill them."

Peloponnesian war, as they were both alive for it and participants in it.¹³ As such, their testimonies are a bit more credible and reliable.

There are some caveats to consider when doing a close reading of ancient sources such as these. The main caveat being that none of the authors were present for every single event that they wrote about, and therefore had to heavily rely on reports from other sources. Scholars have even purported that Herodotus made his sources up.¹⁴ Thucydides, in contrast, addresses this issue in the beginning of his history:

“With reference to the speeches in this history... it was in all cases difficult to carry them word for word from one’s memory, so my habit has been to make the speakers say what was in my opinion demanded of them by the various occasions, of course adhering as closely as possible to the general sense of what they really said.”¹⁵

In this passage Thucydides is freely admitting that he had to invent and rewrite certain parts of the history he is reporting. Even if we are to trust the credibility of these historians themselves, we must be cautious with anything that isn’t a firsthand account, since it must have come from an outside source.

Herodotus seems to be the least trustworthy of historians based on certain criteria. The most glaring issue with Herodotus is that he attempts to report stories from the distant past. These are stories about the ancient kings¹⁶ and the beginnings of the Persian Empire, events which took place over 200 years before he was born. It would

¹³ Thucydides and Xenophon both give firsthand accounts of the time period.

¹⁴ Fehling, D. *Herodotus and his Sources*.

¹⁵ Thucydides 1.22.1

¹⁶ Herodotus 1.7-1.13

be impossible to report perfectly accurate stories since no source could have been alive at the time. Since Herodotus was the first historian of his kind, he had no material to refer to, and as such had to rely on oral history, which had a propensity to be filled with exaggeration. There is also the question of content with Herodotus. He claims to be attempting to report history, but some of the inclusions in his works are obviously fictional. Finally there is the issue of bias. Herodotus is a Greek and therefore is likely to negatively portray Persians being his enemy, and as such he clearly paints a negative portrait of the Persians.

Thucydides and Xenophon on the other hand were alive for everything that they wrote about and experienced much of it firsthand. Their trustworthiness only comes into question when considering their biases. Both fought on the side of Athens and both at some point joined the Spartans and were exiled,¹⁷ Thucydides during the Peloponnesian war, Xenophon after it.

Even though their exact words cannot be completely trusted they were alive for most of these events which they report. Furthermore the outcome of specific battles was most likely something that was generally known and can be trusted.

As stated above, this paper will be a discussion of the aspects of five different episodes from the Classical Greek historians. There are two episodes from *The Histories* of Herodotus, two episodes from *The Peloponnesian War* by Thucydides, and one episode from the *Hellenika* by Xenophon.

¹⁷ Thucydides exile: 5.26.5, Thucydides was exiled for his failure to save the city Amphipolis
Xenophon's exile: *Anabasis* 7.7.57

For the benefit of structure these episodes will not be discussed in chronological order, but will rather be discussed based on the decision making variable which is evidently the most important: omens, diviners, generals, and common soldiers.

The first episode is from the *Hellenika*.¹⁸ In this episode Agesipolis, a Spartan king invades Argos and there is an earthquake. Typically omens of this kind were viewed negatively,¹⁹ but in this case Agesipolis decided it was positive, and did not retreat. Xenophon then reports that lightning struck, killing multiple men. Agesipolis then makes sacrifices which have negative results, so he retreats and disbands the army.

The second episode is from Herodotus' *Histories*.²⁰ It is about the battle of Plataea. In this battle diviners on both sides make sacrifices and interpret them to mean that whoever attacks first will lose the battle. After both sides continually refuse to begin the fight, Mardonius the Persian general loses his patience and attacks first and fails as a result.

The third episode is from Thucydides' *Peloponnesian War*.²¹ In this episode Nicias, an Athenian general attempts to retreat from a battle in Syracuse. He prepares his army for escape, but on the day marked for departure there is a lunar eclipse and Nicias reads the omen negatively. He decides to halt their departure for twenty seven days, which turns out to be a grave mistake for the army.

¹⁸ Xenophon 4.7.4-7 (Xenophon footnotes will refer to books and sections of the *Hellenika* unless otherwise stated.)

¹⁹ Xenophon 4.7.5

²⁰ Herodotus 9.33-85

²¹ Thucydides 7.50

The fourth episode is Herodotus again.²² In this section Kleomenes, another Spartan king, is attempting to march on Argos. When he reaches the Erasinos River he performs a sacrifice before he crosses. The sacrifice proves unfavorable so Kleomenes does not cross. Instead he travels to Thyrea and crosses over by means of the Mediterranean.

The final episode is from Thucydides. This episode is about a Boeotian general named Pagondas who tries to convince his army to attack the Athenians at Delium. When the Boeotians seem hesitant he holds a speech. In this speech he states that the sacrifices were already propitious in order to raise the morale of the soldiers.

There are many different types of divine communication in Classical Greek history and literature. All of these signs must be read by Diviners or seers. In Homer and other epic poems there are supernatural signs like sea monsters eating priests,²³ or lightning striking as a direct communication from Zeus. Some of these fictional signs even make their way into Herodotus when he refers to a horse giving birth to a hare as a sign of how doomed the invasion of Xerxes was.²⁴ These types of signs were seemingly rumors and though they likely had an effect on morale, it is difficult to analyze them as actual catalysts in the decision making process of the generals. This is because it is impossible to determine whether the generals truly believed that they happened or utilized them strategically to enhance their own agendas.

Aside from sacrificial omens, there were also natural omens, like eclipses, and earthquakes, which had an immediate effect on morale and forced the interpretations of

²² Herodotus 6.76

²³ Virgil, *Aeneid*. 2.201-22: Laocoon, a priest is killed by snakes arisen from the sea.

²⁴ Herodotus 7.57

the seers on the spot. These omens happen in both episodes one and three. In a similar vein as the natural omens, there were communications like bird signs that had to be read on the spot. These signs were characterized by an eagle or another bird of prey flying over a shoulder of someone in power, and were interpreted by which side the bird flew over. Bird signs are primarily seen in Homer and other mythology.²⁵

The most common type of communication with the deities in Classical Greece however was sacrifice. Sacrifices were extremely frequent in Greek culture no matter the reason. One type of sacrifice that is mentioned commonly is the sacrifice of an animal performed before dining on it. There are even foundation myths based around this specific practice.²⁶ There are also specific sacrificial practices that go along with religious ceremonies and mysteries.²⁷ These two types can sometimes overlap. The final type of sacrifice is sacrifice made before battle in an attempt to discover what the outcome of the ensuing fight might be; the type that this paper discusses.

According to Derek Collins, the second most important form of divination²⁸ in Ancient Greece was extispicy. Extispicy was something a seer would do after sacrificing an animal. This would involve removing and reading the liver and entrails of the sacrificed animal. The animals sacrificed were primarily oxen, sheep, and goats.²⁹

Collins states that “the most common time for extispicy among the Greeks and Romans

²⁵ Iliad 24.308-321: more specifically. In this scene Priam is lamenting the death of his son and asks for a sign from Zeus. Zeus immediately send an eagle who flies through the city appearing only on the right hand, the favorable side.

²⁶ Prometheus and the trick of the sacrifice: See Hesiod's *Theogony* for further reading (lines 507-616).

²⁷ Naiden, FS, p 45

²⁸ The first is sacrifice before dining.

²⁹ Collins, 321

was before or during a military campaign.”³⁰ Any anomalies in those entrails would often mean a negative sacrifice, but like so many readings of these diviners, such things were open to interpretation.

Often the representations of sacrifices are taken for granted and information about them is miniscule. Herodotus would state things like “after obtaining favorable omens, they set out...” and he doesn’t bother to go into the details of the omens. Thucydides would write of sacrifices similarly. There is also no guide about how to read the sacrifices, at least not one that has survived.

One of the more specific descriptions of one of these sacrifices comes from the play *Electra*, by Euripides.

“After taking the sacred portions in his hands Aegisthus inspected them. The lobe was missing in the entrails and the portal vein and gall bladder showed that for the observer bad troubles were nearby.”³¹

The exact problems that exist are not explicitly stated, only where the location of the anomalies, and it is clear here how something of this sort could be twisted and a good sacrifice or bad sacrifice might be interchangeable.

The next variable in sacrifice was the diviners. In today’s world one would expect diviners to have some sort of prerequisite or apprenticeship to learn their practice. This was not necessarily the case in Classical Greece. Many representations of seers and diviners that exist come from mythology, like so much of what we know of Greek culture. The most important seer in mythology is Tiresias, who was given the gift of

³⁰ Collins, 321

³¹ Euripides, *Electra*. lines 862-29

prophecy from the gods.³² Herodotus supplies the most helpful anecdote for discovering how real seers and diviners enter their occupations.³³ Herodotus explains how the diviners in the second episode became diviners. Teisamenos was the diviner for the Spartan army. Herodotus outlines his rise to power as such: Teisamenos went to the oracle at Delphi to consult the Pythia about offspring, but she instead informed him that he would win five great contests. Teisamenos believed that the Pythia was referring to sport contests. The Spartans knew that the prophecy referred to war. So they requested that Teisamenos join them on their expedition. He exploited their desperation and gained citizenship. This is how he became the seer for the Spartan army.³⁴

Hegistratos was the diviner for the Persian army and his story is also reported. Hegistratos was arrested and condemned to death by the Spartans for some trespasses against them. When he was captured he cut off a piece of his foot in order to escape.³⁵ He fled to the enemies of the Spartans and this is how he became their seer.³⁶

Clearly none of these seers were formally trained, and there doesn't seem to be any required skill. One was gained his position from a god, another from a prophecy, and the final by a great and terrible deed; none by studying the occupation, or training under other seers. Just as with extispicy there is no specific prerequisite and thus the results can easily be ambiguous.

³² Appolodorus, *Bibliotheca*, 3.6.7

³³ Herodotus 9.35

³⁴ Herodotus 9.35, He did in fact help win five victories.

³⁵ The story of his escape is this: "Although he was confined in wooden stocks rimmed with iron... he first measured how much of his food could be freed from the stocks, and the proceeded to cut it off between the toes and the heel." Herodotus 9.37.2

³⁶ Herodotus 9.37

The third variable, the generals, works to further complicate and corrupt the results of the sacrifice. There are many different types of generals and each might have different opinions on the meaning of an omen. Some were extremely religious and respectful of the gods; others did not have the same philosophy.³⁷ This caused generals to sometimes be at odds with their diviners.³⁸ As the general was the final decision maker and reported the sacrifice himself, he adds another layer of ambiguity to the results. Even if the practice of the diviners was somehow standardized and the results were read in a specific way, the general had the power to ignore them.

The final variable of decision making, and possibly the truly most important was the common soldier. Morale meant everything to the war effort. If the soldiers expected to lose then they likely would not fight hard enough. Is it not possible that the results of the sacrifices were twisted in order to convince the soldiers the upcoming battle was favorable?

As stated above, the first episode is from Xenophon's *Hellenika*. In this section³⁹ Agesipolis, a Spartan general is advancing upon Argos, a city controlled by the Athenians. On their first night as the soldiers were pouring out libations for dinner an earthquake struck.⁴⁰ After an earthquake earlier in the war a Spartan king called back the army,⁴¹ so the soldiers assumed that they would retreat. Agesipolis stated that this

³⁷ Nicias was an extremely pious but the general he was paired with, Demosthenes, put more stock in strategy. For further reading on these generals see the arrival of Demosthenes and the Sicilian Expedition: Thucydides 7.42-7.87

³⁸ Nicias and the Lunar Eclipse, this episode will be dealt with more thoroughly later in the paper.

³⁹ Xenophon 4.7.4-4.7.7

⁴⁰ Xenophon actually states "the god sent an earthquake" 4.7.4

⁴¹ Xenophon 3.2.24: King Agis of Sparta attempts to attack Elis, but an earthquake strikes so he disbands his army, seeing the omen as a communication from the gods.

was not a negative omen, but since they were already in enemy territory when the earthquake struck it meant the god wanted him to continue. There is a short battle and while Agesipolis is encamped after it lightning strikes the camp and kills multiple soldiers. This is still not enough to deter him and he offers sacrifice before starting a siege. The sacrifice is unfavorable; the liver is missing a lobe. So Agesipolis finally gives in to the seemingly overwhelming evidence from the gods that this is an unfavorable endeavor and he disbands his army, but only after doing much damage to the Argives⁴² with his surprise attacks.

Although the main variable in this episode is the sacrifice and omens, it offers a very complete representation of three of the four decision making variables. It contained omens and sacrifices, the interpretation of the general and subsequent decision making, and the response of the soldiers. The first variable, the signs meant to be read, were the earthquake, lightning strike, and failed sacrifice. Here is a rare situation where the details of the sacrifice are elaborated on and the reason for the negative results is stated. "And so he offered sacrifice, but the livers of the victims were found to be lacking a lobe."⁴³ The study of the liver after sacrifice is a common part of extispicy called hepatoscopy, and it was an extremely important part of the sacrifice according to Collins.⁴⁴

As for the earthquake, it was read differently by the separate variables. The soldiers read the earthquake as negative from past experience, while the general read it as positive, either because he truly believed his interpretation, or because he wanted to

⁴² The people of Argos

⁴³ Xenophon 4.7.7

⁴⁴ Collins, 319

use the omen to advance his own agenda. The latter seems very possible, and furthers the idea that maybe the interpretations of these events were really strategic decisions masked as religious ones. It seems that the results of the sacrifices were very beneficial to Agesipolis. They attacked using the element of surprise having ignored what seemed to be an obvious warning from the gods, and he left only after doing considerable damage instead of beginning siege warfare which would have likely exhausted many of his supplies. Could the idea not be entertained that the result of the sacrifice was not as it was reported, and that it was invented as a reason to disband the army after telling them that the earthquake was a sign that the gods wanted them to stay? Each variable can be twisted in some way.

The second episode⁴⁵, from Herodotus is heavily based on similar ambiguity. A battle is about to begin between the Greeks and the Persians. The two sides face each other on opposite sides of the Asopos River drawn up for battle. Here is where Herodotus describes the deeds of the two diviners for each side.⁴⁶ He then states that both diviners receive sacrificial omens the Greek way, which here is most likely extispicy.⁴⁷

When Teisamenos makes his sacrifice, Herodotus says “the sacrificial omens for the Hellenes [Greeks] were favorable if they fought to defend themselves, but not if they crossed the Asopos and initiated battle.”⁴⁸ Surprisingly and dubiously, “The sacrifices conducted for Mardonios also turned out to be adverse if he were eager to initiate battle,

⁴⁵ Herodotus 9.28-9.85

⁴⁶ Teisamenos and Hegistratos (page 9-10)

⁴⁷ Collins, 321

⁴⁸ Herodotus 9.36

but favorable if he fought in self-defense.”⁴⁹ And not only were the Persian sacrifices unfavorable for attack, “but also [the sacrifices] for the Hellenes⁵⁰ who were allied with them (since they had a seer of their own, Hippomachos of Leucas).⁵¹

Due to their dwindling supplies and the growing size of the Greek force Mardonius, the Persian general, gets impatient and elects to attack the Greeks without obtaining favorable sacrifices. There is a hectic battle and the Persians and Spartans are about to fight each other, so the Spartans attempt to make another sacrifice. The Spartans continue to get unfavorable results. The story is then most easily explained directly quoted from Herodotus rather than paraphrased.

“Since they were about to engage in combat with Mardonius and his army before them, they performed pre battle sacrifices, but the omens turned out to be unfavorable for them... Pausanias⁵² turned his gaze toward the Plataean’s sanctuary of Hera and called upon the goddess... And just then, as Pausanias concluded his prayer, the Spartan sacrifices yielded favorable omens.”⁵³

The Spartans finally attack the Persians and win the battle.

In the first half of this episode there seems to be a clear theme. The sacrifices say that crossing a river in order to fight is an unfavorable decision, but defense is not. Now for each of these seers to obtain the same omen, one would assume that each sacrifice had similar anomalies. It does not say how these sacrifices are read

⁴⁹ Herodotus 9.37.1

⁵⁰ Hellene can be read as a synonym for Greek.

⁵¹ Herodotus 9.38.2, unfortunately Hippomachos’ history is not included anywhere in Herodotus.

⁵² Pausanias was the Spartan general at the time.

⁵³ Herodotus 9.61

negatively, what lobe is missing, or what color the liver is. It is possible however, that the seers recognize the disadvantages to attacking first, and use the sacrifices as a means to stop their respective armies from charging. Would it be ludicrous here to propose the idea that maybe the truly “talented” diviners did not actually believe in what they were doing but instead utilized their divine influence to make strategic decisions? If this is true the second variable, the diviners can evidently be more important than the sacrifice itself.

The second half of the episode is a bit more difficult to interpret. There are two possible ways to read it. Either, that the Spartan diviner was attempting to increase the morale of his soldiers by proving that they had the backing of a Goddess, or it is from a story that Herodotus heard from a source that might not have been very reliable.

No matter how the second half is interpreted, it seems very likely that the first half is evidence of the diviners manipulating the results of the sacrifice to hold on to the strategic advantage. The second half could also be interpreted as diviners manipulating sacrificial omens.

The third episode⁵⁴ is from the Sicilian expedition of the Peloponnesian war. The Athenians invaded Sicily in an attempt to conquer it. They were met with heavy resistance from the Syracusans, allies of the Spartans. Ultimately the tides of war turn completely in the Syracusans favor and after a critical battle the Athenians, who are led by the general Nicias, are forced to retreat. They were completely prepared to flee the island in secret, but on the night of the flight there was a lunar eclipse. Nicias takes the

⁵⁴ Thucydides 7.50

sign as a negative omen and refuses to leave until waiting twenty seven days.⁵⁵ This decision ultimately leads to the destruction of the Athenian force in Sicily, and could easily be referred to as one of the main reasons Athens ended up losing the war.

This episode is an exhibition of both the diviners and the general being the most important variables in the decision making process.

It is decided that the gods are against their plans based on this communication and they do not flee. This is a decision based on religion rather than strategy, and the army pays because of it. Thucydides writes an important observation about Nicias. He calls him “somewhat over addicted to divination and practices of that kind...”⁵⁶ This would seem to imply that Nicias respects divination more than other generals. It also seems that Thucydides is criticizing him for following the reading of the sign rather than fleeing anyway. The best strategic decision is not made in this case and Nicias pays dearly for it.⁵⁷

The fourth episode contrasts the third almost directly. This episode⁵⁸ is from Herodotus. It begins with Kleomenes, a Spartan king, leading an army to Argos in an attempt to conquer it. On his way there Kleomenes comes to a river called the Erasinos River. Before crossing he offers a sacrifice. The omens however were not favorable. Kleomenes then tells the river that he respects its wish to protect Argos, but the Argives would not escape. He then takes his army to the Mediterranean Sea where he sacrifices a bull to the sea and sails past the river, circumventing it.

⁵⁵ This was the amount of time deemed necessary by the soothsayers.

⁵⁶ Thucydides 7.50.4

⁵⁷ Nicias will be captured during the next attempt at flight and will be killed.

⁵⁸ Herodotus 6.76

Like Nicias, Kleomenes is met with a negative sacrifice that could change the course of his campaign. Again there is a general as the main driving variable of the decision. Kleomenes, however, takes a different approach, and instead of giving up, he attempts to find a loophole through the negative sacrifice. It is also possible, that like in the second episode, there was a strategic disadvantage to crossing the Erasinios, and travelling by sea might be the safer option.

The fifth and final episode⁵⁹ is from Thucydides, and illustrates the importance of the final variable: the common soldiers. In this scene a Boeotian general named Pagondas wants to attack the Athenians, and in order to rally the soldiers he makes a speech, which Thucydides reports in great detail.

In part of this speech Pagondas states:

“...trusting in the help of the god whose temple has been sacrilegiously fortified, and in the victims which, when we sacrificed, appeared propitious we must march against the enemy...”

After having communicated with the gods he is calling upon the soldiers to trust in their ability to win, for the gods have given them favorable omens. He even says that since he made the sacrifices and the signs were propitious, they are obliged to go through with the attack. Whether the sacrifices were made or not, or whatever anomalies did or did not appear, it is clear that this communication was respected by the soldiers and the common people, and it was a necessary tool in gaining their trust and willingness. The Boeotians win the following battle.

⁵⁹ Thucydides 4.92

At face value, omens and sacrifice seem to be very black and white affairs; it is supposed to be, on a basic level, a communication with the gods. The will of man and the ambiguity of the practice seem to corrupt what is supposed to be simple. There are at least four driving variables in the decisions made after the sacrifice is made or an omen presents itself.

The first variable is the sacrifice or omen itself. Again, this should be simple, a sacrifice should be favorable or unfavorable, but with lacking and dubious information about sacrifices it is impossible to know how open to interpretation they were, but based on the evidence it seems they were very open to interpretation. In the first episode Xenophon shows that the same omen, an earthquake, can be interpreted differently depending on the person and situation.

This leads to the second variable: the diviner. Herodotus shows that the requirements to becoming a diviner were not set in stone and it was not a trade that was learned, but rather an honor that was bestowed. The lack of regularity in the divining trade adds another layer of ambiguity to the sacrifices.

Then there are the generals. Some generals faltered at the omens and sacrifices and gave up when they saw negative sacrifices. Others found ways to circumvent the negative results altogether. It seems likely also that some fabricated or twisted the omens and sacrifices as a means to move their own agenda forward, or to increase the morale of the soldiers.

In conclusion, it seems very likely that these omens and sacrifices were not only a way to communicate with the gods. They could also be used to reinforce strategic decisions and increase the morale of the army, and thus were open to corruption by

seers and generals. In my opinion, it seems that the diviners and generals utilized and twisted the outcomes of the sacrifice for their own gain, to build morale, or to force beneficial military strategy. It is evident that the actual omen didn't matter as much as the circumstances under which it was interpreted.

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