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## The Divine in Greco-Roman Historiography

### The Diversity of Perspectives on the Divine

Among the Greco-Roman historians,<sup>1</sup> there is a wide range of perspectives on the role of the divine in history. While one can make important general distinctions between biblical and Jewish historiography on the one hand and (non-Jewish) Greco-Roman historiography on the other, such distinctions do not imply a uniform non-Jewish perspective. One cannot speak of *the* Greco-Roman view on the role of the divine in historiography or the lack thereof. While it is true, as we will see, that Greco-Roman historians as a group are more focused on human and non-divine factors in historical events and explanations than biblical and Jewish historians are, the Greco-Roman historians differ among themselves over the extent

1. I use the terms “Greco-Roman historians” and “Greco-Roman historiography” throughout to include the historians of the classical Greek, Hellenistic, and Roman periods who wrote in Greek or Latin. See the introductory chapter for further explanation.

to which divine manifestations are included and the credulity with which these manifestations are treated. They likewise differ over the extent to which divine causes can be inferred behind human and natural phenomena.

Sometimes an overemphasis on the perspectives of Thucydides and Polybius leads to the impression that Greco-Roman historiography is entirely humanistic or close to it.<sup>2</sup> Since these two figures are usually regarded as the best historians of the Greco-Roman tradition, it is at times assumed that their views are representative of or even constitutive of Greco-Roman historiography in general. R. G. Collingwood asserted in his classic *The Idea of History* that Greco-Roman history “admits, no doubt, a divine agency; but the function of this agency is strictly limited. The will of the gods as manifested in history only appears rarely; in the best historians hardly at all and then only as a will supporting and seconding the will of man.”<sup>3</sup> Typically Thucydides is seen as the turning point, jettisoning what cannot be denied was the theological perspective of the founding historiographical figure Herodotus. As C. W. Fornara puts it, Herodotus “is unique among Greek historians in also accepting the historical importance of the supernatural”;<sup>4</sup> after Thucydides, “belief in divinity had become irrelevant to historical explanation.”<sup>5</sup>

Contrary to such claims, among the Greco-Roman historians as a whole, Polybius and especially Thucydides are extreme in the degree to which they exclude the supernatural. Indeed, no other

2. The erroneous tendency to take Thucydides as being wholly representative of ancient historiography is also noted by John Burrow, *A History of Histories: Epics, Chronicles, Romances and Inquiries from Herodotus and Thucydides to the Twentieth Century* (New York: Knopf, 2008), 162; John Van Seters, “Is There Any Historiography in the Hebrew Bible? A Hebrew-Greek Comparison,” *Journal of Northwest Semitic Languages* 28 (2002): 1–25, esp. 20.
3. R. G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1946), 41.
4. C. W. Fornara, *The Nature of History in Ancient Greece and Rome* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), 77.
5. *Ibid.*, 81. Similarly, Ernst Breisach, *Historiography: Ancient, Medieval and Modern* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 31.

historiographical work survives from this period that excludes the divine to the extent they do. Other Greco-Roman historians are far more willing to assert or at least consider divine guidance of seemingly natural events and divine intervention in human affairs. The following survey of Greco-Roman historians, which will be by no means exhaustive, will provide a sense of the range of views on the role of the divine in history.

### Herodotus

“There are many clear indications of the divine ordering of things,” asserts Herodotus (9.100.2 [LCL, Godley]), and his fifth-century BCE *Histories* displays this conviction in manifold ways. The gods act in human affairs throughout his work, and the overall course of history is seen to be divinely guided.

Herodotus’s account of the Lydian king Croesus illustrates well the overall theological perspective of the work. The life of Croesus takes up much of the first half of book one of the *Histories* (1.6–92; there are nine books altogether). Herodotus first tells of his military exploits, how Croesus conquers almost all of the nearby peoples (1.26–28). As a result, many famous sages begin coming to his court, among whom is the famous Solon of Athens. Croesus asks Solon who is the most fortunate man Solon has known, thinking it to be himself, and Croesus is disappointed when Solon gives his famous answer that no one can be called fortunate before having died (1.29–33). “For,” Solon ends, “the god promises fortune to many people and then utterly ruins them” (1.32.9 [LCL, Godley]). Immediately following this story is the story of the first of two misfortunes Croesus experiences from the hands of the gods, the death of his son Atys (1.34–45). Herodotus introduces the story by connecting it to the Solon episode: “But after Solon’s departure divine retribution fell heavily on Croesus;

as I guess, because he supposed himself to be blessed beyond all other men” (1.34.1 [LCL, Godley]). The story begins with Croesus dreaming that his son will be killed by an iron spear. Croesus’s response, naturally enough, is to keep his son away from iron spears at all costs. Nonetheless, Atys is killed accidentally in a boar hunt—to make it worse for Croesus, the killer is Croesus’s own guest, whom Croesus had pardoned for killing his (the guest’s) brother, and whom Croesus had sent out specifically to protect Atys.

The second misfortune inflicted on Croesus by the gods is of greater consequence. Having conquered the regions around Lydia, Croesus desires to conquer Persia. Before doing so, he piously seeks the advice of the Delphic oracle. He is given the famous reply that if he were to attack the Persians “he would destroy a great empire” (1.53.3 [LCL, Godley]). Croesus understandably interprets this to mean that he will destroy the Persian Empire, but in fact the oracle means that he will destroy his own (1.71.1; 1.86.1). Later, when Croesus is defeated, his former kingdom now a part of the Persian Empire and himself a prisoner of the Persian king Cyrus, he sends a message to Delphi, chastising the oracle for his defeat, suggesting that the god was ungrateful and should be ashamed for having deceived him (1.90.4). The oracle provides him a fourfold defense (1.91): First, “Fated destiny is impossible to escape, even for a god” (1.91.1).<sup>6</sup> Second, Croesus was being punished for the crime of an ancestor from five generations previous. Third, Apollo negotiated three extra years for Croesus from the Fates (i.e., before his defeat was to occur). Fourth, it was Croesus’s responsibility to seek clarification of the original oracle; he should not blame the god for his own misunderstanding. Croesus, upon hearing this reply, confesses that the fault was his own, after all, and thus ends his story.

6. My own translation (Gk. *tēn pepromēnēn moiran adynata esti apophygēin kai theō(i)*). Godley’s LCL translation, referring merely to one’s “lot,” is too weak.

The portrayal of the gods in Croesus's life displays almost all of the key theological points to be observed in Herodotus's work. First, fate ultimately rules, and not even the gods can resist. This point provides the basic theological framework for all of the *Histories*, and it is a framework firmly rooted in classical Greek thinking, bearing much similarity to Homer and the Greek tragedians.<sup>7</sup> The importance is best seen by its role in one of the central scenes in the work, the story of the Persian king Xerxes's decision to invade Greece (7.8-18). Xerxes initially announces to his court his desire to invade Greece (7.8), but he is opposed by his adviser Artabanus on the grounds that it would be the sort of prideful act that leads to divine opposition (7.10E). Xerxes is at first persuaded, but then he and Artabanus both receive divine dreams insisting they invade and threatening them if they do not (7.14, 17-18). Their decision is thus made for them. Despite Artabanus's wise advice, it was divinely ordained that Persia was to invade Greece and that the invasion was to lead to the Persians' demise. The gods' will was not to be resisted even by piety.<sup>8</sup>

Second, despite this emphasis on fate and the accomplishment of the gods' will, the gods are not purely arbitrary for Herodotus. Often their acts are in response to humans in one of two ways: to bring down the too-successful or to punish wickedness.<sup>9</sup> Success such as Croesus initially had tends to invite the jealousy of the gods (the story of Polycrates of Samos is another good example [3.40-43, 125]), and

7. See Michael Grant, *The Ancient Historians* (New York: Scribner, 1970), 50-52, 55 on the similarities of Herodotus with these. Grant especially emphasizes connections between Herodotus and Aeschylus.

8. For similar examples, see 1.158-59; 2.139. These are discussed by Thomas Harrison, "Herodotus and the Certainty of Divine Retribution," in *What is a God? Studies in the Nature of Greek Divinity*, ed. Alan B. Lloyd (London: Duckworth, 1997), 101-22, esp. 102.

9. See Harrison, *Herodotus and the Certainty of Divine Retribution*, 101-22; Grant, *Ancient Historians*, 47-52; Stephen Usher, *The Historians of Greece and Rome* (New York: Taplinger, 1970), 20-21; Breisach, *Historiography*, 14. Garry W. Trompf, *Early Christian Historiography: Narratives of Retributive Justice* (New York: Continuum, 2000), 22-26, underscores the theme of retribution, in keeping with the theme of his book, providing many examples.

his arrogance in considering himself the most fortunate man alive only added fuel to the fire (recall also that he was being punished for the sins of an ancestor). In typical Greek fashion, the combination of success and arrogance is especially likely to invite divine judgment. Xerxes is the epitome here, of whom Herodotus has Themistocles say that the gods “deemed Asia and Europe too great a realm for one man to rule, and that a wicked man and an impious one who dealt alike with temples and bones” (8.109.3 [LCL, Godley]).<sup>10</sup> Xerxes may have been initially deceived by the gods into invading Greece, but his hubris is shown to be plenty just cause for his failure. Some of Herodotus’s depictions of Xerxes’s outlandish and cruel arrogance have become well known: at one point Xerxes has the water of the Hellespont whipped when an untimely storm impedes his progress (7.34–35); on another occasion he has the son of a supplicant cut in two and the army march through the halves of the body (7.38–39).

A third point from the account of Croesus is the importance of oracles, revelatory dreams, and portents for Herodotus. These account for the great majority of instances of divine interaction with humans in the work. David Aune counts in the *Histories* more than eighty reports from oracles, twenty revelatory dreams, and forty portents.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, while they are frequently misunderstood, they never fail, even when individuals such as Croesus work hard against them. There are a few places where other forms of divine activity occur. Occasionally the gods act in more dramatic fashion, such as causing unusual and dramatic weather phenomena (e.g., 1.87.2), miraculous events (e.g., 8.37), and incredible coincidences (e.g., 9.100–101). But these are much less prominent threads in the fabric when compared to the importance of oracles, dreams, and portents.

10. Grant, *Ancient Historians*, 50.

11. David E. Aune, *The New Testament in its Literary Environment* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1989), 134.

A fourth point is Herodotus's lack of concern for the individual personalities of the gods. While the prominence of Delphi gives Apollo a certain pride of place in the work, more often than not Herodotus leaves unspecified which particular deity or deities are involved in a situation. So the divine retribution against Croesus is simply *ek theou nemesis megalē* (1.34.1). In Croesus's dream, as also with the dreams of Xerxes and Artabanus, the divine source is not named. This lack of concern for particular divine identities is typical. For Herodotus, the gods act together—an important distinction from Homer—and the same gods govern all humanity.<sup>12</sup>

A final point is that Herodotus does not emphasize divine control over history to the exclusion of human causation. Determining human causes for events is an important focus of the work, even amid the many references to the divine. As Michael Grant puts it, in Herodotus “rational explanations of cause and effect . . . blend into the divine pattern.”<sup>13</sup> David Greene's formulation is also felicitous: “There are two worlds of meaning that are constantly in Herodotus' head. The one is that of human calculation, reason, cleverness, passion, happiness . . . The other is the will of Gods, or fate, or the intervention of daimons.”<sup>14</sup>

Thus in the oracle's defense against Croesus's charges, fate is invoked, but Croesus is also blamed for his own actions (or lack thereof). In another example, Herodotus analyzes the Athenians' role

12. So also Burrow, *A History of Histories*, 28; Grant, *Ancient Historians*, 55; Fornara, *Nature of History in Ancient Greece and Rome*, 78 n.; David Greene, *Herodotus: The History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 24–25; Otto Kaiser, “Von den Grenzen des Menschen: Theologische Aspekte in Herodots Historiai I,” in *Das Alte Testament – Ein Geschichtsbuch?!* *Geschichtsschreibung oder Geschichtsüberlieferung im antiken Israel*, eds. Uwe Becker and Jürgen van Oorschot (Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2006), 9–36. Fornara includes a helpful list of the terminology used to refer to the divine by Herodotus, noting that the individual variations do not matter much for Herodotus. Trompf is no doubt correct that Herodotus is ethnocentric in his conception of the gods, but that does not detract from their perceived universality (*Early Christian Historiography*, 25).

13. Grant, *Ancient Historians*, 52.

14. Greene, *Herodotus*, 24.

in repulsing the Persians and considers what might have happened if they had behaved differently (7.139); assertion of divine oversight does not preclude such analysis of human cause and effect. Moreover, the critical stance Herodotus takes toward his material in general applies equally to material regarding the divine. In some places, he provides disclaimers concerning divine intrusions into human life or says he is merely giving his opinion; in other places, he offers human causes as alternatives to divine ones or expresses his own disbelief about supposedly divine happenings.<sup>15</sup> In John Burrow's words, he is "worldly-wise," knowing that religion can be manipulated and forged.<sup>16</sup> In one case, even the Delphic priestess is bribed or manipulated to issue a fake prophecy (6.123).

Nevertheless, we certainly see in Herodotus a portrayal of history intruded upon and guided by divinity. Fornara sums it up well:

Herodotus presupposed a moral universe in which fate or the divine power was intelligent and operative. . . . As we read Herodotus, the conviction grows within us of history unfolding at the silent direction of invisible powers who will interpose themselves on the rare occasion when their will is likely to be thwarted. . . . But of most interest to us is Herodotus's "higher" vision, or rather his fierce determination to persuade the reader that history conforms to a divine plan that, like the will of Zeus, must be fulfilled.<sup>17</sup>

Herodotus thus accepts direct engagement of the gods in human affairs and the divine guidance of the overall course of history.

15. For examples see 1.182; 6.61, 84; 7.170; 8.37; 9.65. As comments Harrison on 6.84: "the conclusion that a vengeful deity lies behind any misfortune is made as a result of a process of deduction that could just as easily have ended in an exclusively human cause" ("Herodotus and the Certainty of Divine Retribution," 103).

16. Burrow, *A History of Histories*, 28–29.

17. Fornara, *Nature of History in Ancient Greece and Rome*, 78



## Thucydides

It is remarkable that so close on the heels of Herodotus comes the historian most unlike him, his younger contemporary Thucydides. The differences between them are sufficiently striking to invite a comparison to the often-observed contrast between Plato and Aristotle.<sup>18</sup> The difference in the role given to the divine is certainly among the most prominent among these differences.<sup>19</sup> Thucydides is rightly considered the most humanistic of the ancient historians.

Thucydides states at the beginning of his narrative of the Peloponnesian War that his goal is to give “the facts of the occurrences of the war . . . not as ascertained from any chance informant nor as seemed to me probable, but only after investigating with the greatest possible accuracy each detail” (1.22.2 [LCL, Smith]). As a part of this focus on facts, he says he will exclude legendary or “fabulous” material (*mythōdes*) from his narrative (1.22.4). While he does not specify accounts involving the divine as being among such material, given the absence of divinity throughout his work, it is not hard to conclude that he meant it as such.

Thucydides accords no place whatsoever to the gods in his narration, nor does he allow for any kind of divine providence, fate, or fortune to work. There are no miraculous happenings. No human is given any kind of divine status. He certainly reports the religious activities of parties in his account, but this is done matter-of-factly (e.g., 2.8.2-3; 2.21.3). When he uses words such as “the god answered them” in response to an oracle enquiry (1.119.3), it seems clear that he is merely reporting the words of the oracle’s human spokesperson,

18. Burrow, *A History of Histories*, 159 makes this comparison, though he has in mind their influence rather than the parallel in contrasts.

19. The most obvious other differences are the contemporary (Thucydides) versus long-haul (Herodotus) approach, and the importance of ethnography and geography in Herodotus versus their absence in Thucydides. The last chapter of the present work will explore some further differences.

not ascribing a divine origin to them.<sup>20</sup> When he actually discusses religious affairs, he is generally skeptical. He criticizes what he sees as superstition on the part of Nicias (7.50.4) and expresses skepticism about the value of oracles (2.54). The one positive role he perhaps allows for religion is in shaping public morality. In describing the decadence into which Athens descended after the plague, he observes, “No fear of gods or law of men restrained” (2.53.4 [LCL, Smith]).<sup>21</sup>

Yet, despite this strong humanistic bent, Thucydides does not exclude the supernatural altogether. In his introduction, as a part of his demonstration that the Peloponnesian War was the greatest of wars, he avers that a great number of natural disasters happened during the war (1.23 [LCL, Smith]):

earthquakes, for instance, for they prevailed over a very large part of the earth and were likewise of the greatest violence; eclipses of the sun, which occurred at more frequent intervals than we find recorded of all former times; great droughts also in some quarters with resultant famines; and lastly—the disaster which wrought most harm to Hellas and destroyed a considerable part of the people—the noisome pestilence.

It is hard to see why he would include such dramatic descriptions as a part of this argument if he did not mean them to be seen as portents, though he does not spell out that conclusion.<sup>22</sup> He likewise later gives specific reports of unusual natural phenomena, and while they may also serve as markers of time, given the introductory remarks it seems likely that they are also meant to be portents (2.28; 4.52.1). He also on occasion gives credit to the correct prophecies of oracles. Regarding an oracle’s pronouncement about the occupancy of a certain fortification, Thucydides says, “And the oracle, as it seems to

20. For similar situations see 1.34.4; 3.92.5.

21. See also 3.82–83. For a discussion of the issue see Usher, *Historians of Greece and Rome*, 63.

22. So Usher, *Historians of Greece and Rome*, 62.

me, came true . . . [it] yet foresaw that the place would never be occupied for any good” (2.17.2 [LCL, Smith]).<sup>23</sup>

Such instances are few and far between, however, and even when they occur they are hardly strong assertions of divinity. Thucydides’s story is one of pure mortals; the gods to him are irrelevant.

### Xenophon

Xenophon’s fourth-century BCE *Hellenica* is on the surface a continuation of Thucydides’s account of the Peloponnesian War.<sup>24</sup> It begins where Thucydides ends (411 BCE, before the war’s conclusion), but rather than simply finishing the story of the war it continues the history of Greece through 362 BCE. Yet, while it may be true that Xenophon “imitated Thucydidean method as faithfully as his ability and peculiar talents would allow,”<sup>25</sup> Xenophon as a historian resembles Herodotus much more than Thucydides.<sup>26</sup> This is particularly so in the role given to the divine in history: like Herodotus, Xenophon sees the gods as guiding the overall course of history and acting in particular moments. Different from both Herodotus and Thucydides, however, is the strong moral concern shaping Xenophon’s work, including his conception of the divine. The consistently moral character of divine activity in the work also

23. See also 5.26.4. Thucydides frequently reports when oracles are sought out, but he usually does so without comment as to the truth of their prophecies (e.g., 1.119.3; 1.134.4; 2.8.2–3; 2.21.3; 2.54; 3.92.5). For a helpful discussion of Thucydides’s treatment of oracles, see Clare K. Rothschild, *Luke-Acts and the Rhetoric of History* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2004), 153–56.

24. Xenophon has three other works that are also historiographical, at least in the broadest sense: the well-known *Anabasis* and two biographical works, *Cyropaideia* and *Agésilas*. I believe that the conclusions I draw regarding the *Hellenica* would apply where applicable to these works as well; I do not think that a more direct consideration of these would change my conclusions significantly.

25. Usher, *Historians of Greece and Rome*, 85.

26. The point was recognized even in antiquity. As noted by T. J. Luce, *The Greek Historians* (London: Routledge, 1997), 112, Dionysius of Halicarnassus argued that Xenophon modeled himself on Herodotus despite continuing Thucydides’s work (*Letter to Pompeius* 4).

relates to a second distinctive feature of Xenophon's portrayal of the divine, the consistency with which the divine acts and orders history.

Frances Pownall has argued that a fourth-century reaction against the sophists, inspired in part by Xenophon's teacher Socrates, left its imprint on Xenophon and other fourth-century historians.<sup>27</sup> While the nature of Xenophon's relationship to Socrates has been debated, that the famous philosopher influenced Xenophon heavily in both his morality and conception of the gods is generally recognized.<sup>28</sup> Xenophon's moral interest comes out in other ways, too, especially in the importance to him of historical moral *exempla*, but here we will focus on how his moral interest shapes his conception of the divine.

The role of the gods in the *Hellenica* lines up rather precisely with Xenophon's moral preoccupation. Divine retribution is the primary way the gods act in human history—one could perhaps even say that it is *the* way the gods act for Xenophon. He makes this principle clear in an important passage: “Now one could mention many other incidents, both among Greeks and barbarians, to prove that the gods do not fail to take heed of the wicked or of those who do unrighteous things” (5.4.1 [LCL, Brownson]). The context of this quote is the narrative of the decline of Sparta, and Xenophon here is commenting on a pattern of divine causation spanning a decade.<sup>29</sup> Most cases of divine retribution are, as in this case of Sparta's fall, of the punishing variety (see also, e.g., 3.2.21–26; 4.4; 7.4.3; 7.5.13). However, the gods also can reward piety and good behavior, as in the case of the Spartan king Agesipolis, whose war efforts succeed because of his piety in heeding oracles and portents (4.7).<sup>30</sup>

27. This is Frances Pownall's central thesis in *Lessons from the Past: The Moral Use of History in Fourth-Century Prose* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2003). Unfortunately, the works of the other historians she considers (Ephorus and Theopompus) are not extant.

28. See Pownall, *Lessons from the Past*, 1–3; Fornara, *Nature of History in Ancient Greece and Rome*, 107; Luce, *Greek Historians*, 105.

29. See John Dillery, *Xenophon and the History of His Times* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 179, 221–36, for a discussion of this passage and its overall importance for Xenophon.

How do the gods act in history for Xenophon? Primarily through ordering normal human events, for the end of rewarding moral behavior and punishing immorality.<sup>31</sup> The death of a certain Lycomedes makes a good example (7.4.3 [LCL, Brownson]):

While Lycomedes was engaged in these negotiations, upon his departure from Athens he met his death by what was quite manifestly a divine interposition. For there were very many ships available and he selected from them the one he wanted and made an agreement with the sailors to land him wherever he should himself direct; and he chose to land at the very spot where the Arcadian exiles chanced to be. He, then, met his death in this way . . .

There is no direct divine intervention here, merely the ordering of events to accomplish the divine purpose. The gods also occasionally use natural phenomena to the same end.<sup>32</sup> The aforementioned Agesipolis is given an earthquake as a portent (4.7.4). Elsewhere a snowstorm protects the righteous from the wicked (2.4.3, 14).<sup>33</sup> Cases of direct divine communication or intervention are less common in Xenophon than in Herodotus, though still present and genuine when they occur. There are a few references to correct pronouncements of oracles (3.2.22; 3.3.3; 4.7.2; 6.4.7; 6.4.30) and seers (2.4.8-18; 3.3.4). Actual miraculous events, however, are rare (e.g., 6.4.5-6),<sup>34</sup> and revelatory dreams are absent altogether.

30. See Pownall, *Lessons from the Past*, 96.

31. In addition to places already cited, there are other scenes where Xenophon likely intends the reader to infer divinity at work but does not state it openly: 1.1.16; 2.4.3; 5.4.17; 6.4.30-32; 7.1.23-32; 7.4.30-32. See Pownall, *Lessons from the Past*, 88-97; Dillery, *Xenophon and the History of His Times*, 173-74.

32. "Xenophon's chief use of natural phenomena seems to be as a kind of reinforcement of the recurrent theme throughout the *Hellenica* that moral offenses eventually result in the destruction of the guilty" (Pownall, *Lessons from the Past*, 95).

33. See *ibid.*, 95-96, for a discussion.

34. This scene reports weapons disappearing and temple doors opening. Xenophon offers a non-supernatural interpretation of the report, but it is pretty obvious that he prefers the divine one. See *ibid.*, 89-90.

Xenophon is especially interested in divine retribution as applied to leaders of states, a point helpfully brought out by John Dillery.<sup>35</sup> Xenophon's historiography has a heavy biographical component to it: for Xenophon, history consists primarily of the deeds done by leaders of states. Given his moral and theological interests, the main evaluation of such figures is on whether they maintain proper piety and respect for the traditional laws of the state.<sup>36</sup> Sparta's decline is thus due to the failure of its leaders in these areas. True to his Greek heritage, for Xenophon the hubristic tendencies of rulers are especially problematic. As Dillery puts it, "the quest for unlawful, absolute power over others is ultimately a self-destructive enterprise. An all-powerful and providential divine sees to it that the impiety and lawlessness of those who seek hegemony will be punished by their own folly."<sup>37</sup>

These biographical, moral, and theological features in Xenophon's history combine to produce a strong sense of the divine ordering of history. This sense of divine order is further emphasized by the characterization of the gods. As Dillery points out, Xenophon portrays the gods in line with an important movement of his time that saw the gods as omniscient, omnipotent, and omnipresent, and as providing order to human life rather than disorder.<sup>38</sup> While these ideas are expressed more clearly in some of Xenophon's other works,<sup>39</sup> the gods' behavior in the *Hellenica* is in line with this conception. The other side of the coin is that, as we have noted, miraculous interventions by the gods are rare in Xenophon—but this is because there is no need for them. Since the gods order normal events sufficiently for their ends, miracles have little place.

35. Dillery, *Xenophon and the History of His Times*, 186–94, 236–54.

36. On this point see also Pownall, *Lessons from the Past*, 105.

37. Dillery, *Xenophon and the History of His Times*, 242.

38. *Ibid.*, 36–38, 182–86.

39. E.g., *Cyr.* 1.6.46; *Mem.* 1.1.19; 1.4; 4.3; *Anab.* 3.2.10 (all highlighted by Dillery; see n. 38).

Three other points related to this sense of divine order are important. First, as in Herodotus the individual personalities of deities matter little to Xenophon. As Pownall puts it, Xenophon “appears not to be concerned with one particular deity (or deities), but his terminology for ‘the divine’ is both abstract and interchangeable.”<sup>40</sup> The gods thus act in accord. Second, fate is not a significant force for Xenophon—here we have a major departure from Herodotus.<sup>41</sup> Xenophon’s gods are too reactive to human moral choices for as unyielding and amoral a power as fate to exert overarching influence. Third, Xenophon’s interest in divine causation results at times in him overlooking or downplaying human causation (though by no means everywhere). This can be seen, for example, in a battle scene where he introduces a divine cause for the outcome (7.5.13), or, for another example, in a scene where he offers both divine and human options for causation but clearly prefers the divine one (6.4).<sup>42</sup> The most significant place this happens is probably concerning the decline of Sparta. Because Xenophon considers Sparta’s decline to be divine retribution for its hubris and impiety, he simply ignores external factors that would explain the decline from a more humanistic point of view.<sup>43</sup> It is this sort of practice that results in modern critics often considering Xenophon a second-rate historian.

Xenophon, then, is like Herodotus in seeing history as guided by the divine, but he differs from Herodotus in emphasizing this guidance as taking place through the ordering of normal human events rather than through divine intrusion into human life.

40. Pownall, *Lessons from the Past*, 88. She provides here a list of the terms used to refer to the gods.

41. There is only a single reference to *moira* in the *Hellenica* (2.4.19); the only occurrence of *chreōn* (7.1.28) has no divine sense to it; *heimarmenē* does not appear at all; *peprōmenon* is used once to describe divine action (6.3.6). References to *tychē* are more common, but it has a divine sense in only a few places (e.g., 4.8.4; 6.4.8). The single occurrence of *pronoia* (7.5.8) has no divine sense.

42. See Pownall, *Lessons from the Past*, 89–93, for discussions of these scenes.

43. Dillery, *Xenophon and the History of His Times*, 193.

Moreover, the moral nature of divine guidance for Xenophon contrasts somewhat with Herodotus's fate-centered conception—though this contrast should not be exaggerated, as we saw that Herodotus also had a notion of divine retribution. Dillery provides us a salient conclusion:

Such a divine, Xenophon's divine, may perhaps be best characterized as 'the motor of history,' a force that does not so much shape history as drive it forward, setting the parameters of growth and decay. As such, Xenophon's view of the divine, while rarely seen in discrete events, certainly constitutes a general system of historical explanation.<sup>44</sup>

### Polybius

The place of the divine in Polybius's *Histories* (second century BCE) is complex and open to differing interpretations. On the one hand, Polybius rejects supernatural occurrences altogether, even surpassing Thucydides in this regard. One looks in vain for any form of divine manifestation or miracle in his work, or for affirmations of oracles, prophecies, or portents.<sup>45</sup> Polybius emphasizes the importance of determining historical causes throughout his work, primarily meaning understanding human motives (see esp. 2.56; 3.6–7, 31–32). As a part of this emphasis, he rejects appeals to the gods or fortune (*tychē*) when human causes can be found, frequently chastising other historians for making such appeals (e.g., 1.63.9; 10.9.2–3; 18.28.2–5; 36.17). No extant ancient historical work displays a greater self-consciousness about historiographical methodology than does the *Histories*, and the determination of human causes is at its heart (chapter six will discuss causation in Polybius further).<sup>46</sup>

44. *Ibid.*, 237. The internal quote is attributed to M. Sordi.

45. These are even mentioned in only a few places: 5.78; 8.28; 12.5.

46. See also Usher, *Historians of Greece and Rome*, 105–13, which includes a discussion of the different kinds of causation Polybius finds.



On the other hand, despite the rejection of appeals to fortune in some places, Polybius provides a significant role for fortune in others, and he occasionally refers to providence (*pronoia*). His frequent references to fortune are notoriously difficult to assess, however, and some interpreters question how much credit Polybius really means to ascribe to divine power by these references. There are certainly places where references to *tychē* seem to mean no more than unexpected happenings.<sup>47</sup> But most interpreters agree that there are many places where Polybius refers to *tychē* in a more meaningful sense, that is, a divine one.<sup>48</sup> It is reasonable to conclude that he sees fortune as a divine force operating both in the overall movement of history and in particular circumstances. The former is seen mainly in the ascension of Rome to dominance, as his following words illustrate (8.2.3-4 [LCL, Paton]; see also 1.4; 4.2.1-4):

For how by the bare reading of events in Sicily or in Spain can we hope to learn and understand either the magnitude of the occurrences or the thing of greatest moment, what means and what form of government Fortune has employed to accomplish the most surprising feat she has performed in our times, that is, to bring all the known parts of the world under one rule and dominion, a thing absolutely without precedent?

The reality of fortune as a divine force in particular circumstances can be seen most clearly in situations of retribution for wicked deeds; references to providence usually occur in the same context.<sup>49</sup> The

47. As noted by Grant, "He uses the term incessantly, to denote everything in his theme that is imponderable, irrational and uncontrollable. In his first three books alone, the word 'unexpected' appears on no less than fifty-one occasions" (*Ancient Historians*, 157).

48. So F. W. Walbank, *Polybius* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 63-65; Burrow, *A History of Histories*, 78-79; Trompf, *Early Christian Historiography*, 27-31.

49. In addition to the example that follows, for another case involving fortune, see 23.10. For a case referring to providence, see 1.84.9-10. For further examples, see Trompf, *Early Christian Historiography*, 30-31. Grant suggests that fortune (chance) for Polybius is another way of referring to providence (*The Ancient Historians*, 158); similarly, Burrow, *A History of Histories*, 78-79.

following is a typical example, regarding the fate of two kings who had acted treacherously toward Ptolemy (15.20.4–8 [LCL, Paton]):

Who can look into this treaty as into a mirror without fancying that he sees reflected in it the image of all impiety towards the gods<sup>50</sup> and all savagery towards men, as well as of the unbounded covetousness of these two kings? But at the same time who among those who reasonably find fault with Fortune for her conduct of affairs, will not be reconciled to her when he learns how she afterwards made them pay the due penalty, and how she exhibited to their successors as a warning for their edification the exemplary chastisement she inflicted on these princes? For even while they were still breaking their faith to each other and tearing to shreds the boy's kingdom she raised up against them the Romans, and very justly and properly visited them with the very evils which they had been contrary to all law designing to bring upon others. For both of these were very soon vanquished in battle, and they were not only prevented from lusting after the property of others but were compelled to submit and to pay tribute and obey the behests of Rome. And, finally, in a very short time Fortune re-established the kingdom of Ptolemy, while as for their dynasties and successors she in one case brought utter destruction upon them and in the other calamities very nearly as grave.

Polybius applies the idea of divine retribution in other circumstances, too, where neither *tychē* nor *pronoia* is applied, as when a certain miscreant meets a nasty end: “He therefore must be pronounced to have suffered the punishment he deserved at the hands of gods and men alike; for having regulated his life by unnatural principles he met likewise with no natural death” (18.54.11 [LCL, Paton]).<sup>51</sup>

The importance of such places in Polybius's work should not be exaggerated: they are exceptional. In the overall span of the *Histories* they occupy a very small portion. This is so much the case that some interpreters consider the references to *tychē* in Polybius to be mere

50. I have corrected Paton's LCL translation here, which has “God.” The Greek is *tous theous*.

51. For other examples, see 31.9; 32.15.12–14; and the references in n. 49.

rhetorical flourishes.<sup>52</sup> Polybius himself provides a principle for when divine causes, including fortune, should be appealed to in history, discussing it at some length (36.17). The following selection covers his main points (36.17.1–4 [LCL, Paton]):

. . . in finding fault with those who ascribe public events and incidents to Fate and Chance, I now wish to state my opinion on this subject as far as it is admissible to do so in a strictly historical work. Now indeed as regards things the causes of which it is impossible or difficult for a mere man to understand, we may perhaps be justified in getting out of the difficulty by setting them down to the action of a god or of chance, I mean such things as exceptionally heavy and continuous rain or snow, or on the other hand the destruction of crops by severe drought or frost, or a persistent outbreak of plague or other similar things of which it is not easy to detect the cause. So in regard to such matters we naturally bow to public opinion, as we cannot make out why they happen, and attempting by prayer and sacrifice to appease the heavenly powers, we send to ask the gods what we must do and say, to set things right and cause the evil that afflicts us to cease. But as for matters the efficient and final cause of which it is possible to discover we should not, I think, put them down to divine action.

We might well sum up Polybius's principle as that divine causes should be inferred only as a last resort, when human causes are not sufficient to explain the situation. One can debate whether or not Polybius consistently applies his own principle throughout his work, but a large number of references must be written off to deny that he sees divine power as acting at times in history.<sup>53</sup> He just wants to be

52. E.g., Brian C. McGing, *Polybius' Histories* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 195–201. McGing considers the reference to *tychē* to be “a recognition of the limits of rational explanation” (200). Burrow finds Polybius's conception of fortune to be incoherent (*A History of Histories*, 78–79). On the other side, it seems to me that Trompf exaggerates the importance of retribution in Polybius, though since retribution is the focus of his whole book such is somewhat understandable (*Early Christian Historiography*, 27–31).

53. My position is similar to those of Grant, *The Ancient Historians*, 144–64; Usher, *Historians of Greece and Rome*, 118–19; Walbank, *Polybius*, 60–65.

very cautious in asserting when this happens. Polybius deplores both impiety and superstition.<sup>54</sup>

F.W. Walbank states a common evaluation of Polybius: “Polybius stands for a return to the aims and methods of Thucydides.”<sup>55</sup> The assertion has plenty of warrant, but with regards to his portrayal of the divine it seems fair to say that Polybius stands closer to Xenophon, or at least somewhere between the two. Like Xenophon, Polybius displays a sense of the divine acting in history primarily in retributive fashion. In one area we might see a distinctive similarity to Herodotus—Polybius’s sense of fortune having brought about Rome’s rise is akin to the role of fate in Herodotus, though Polybius’s fortune does not seem nearly as arbitrary nor as set over against the gods as fate is in Herodotus. But despite these similarities, Polybius stands apart from Herodotus and Xenophon in giving a far smaller role overall to the divine in his work.<sup>56</sup> Much of his *Histories* does read like the work of Thucydides. In comparing Thucydides and Polybius, it is worth noting that, while they are similar in their overall humanistic approach to history, to the extent that they do portray the divine they are opposites. Thucydides allows for divine manifestations in history in the form of portents and perhaps oracles—if only rarely, and perhaps even grudgingly with the latter—but he has no conception of any broad divine guidance at work in his account. Contrarily, Polybius rejects divine manifestations but allows for divine guidance behind the human workings of history. In both authors, admittedly, these are minor currents in the overall stream of history.

54. On impiety, see 4.35 and 5.9–12. In 10.2, he makes it clear that he prefers reason to superstition (the latter is sometimes used by leaders to appeal to the vulgar masses), stating that we should consider “men of sound judgement and mental ability . . . to be the most divine and most beloved by the gods” (10.2.7 [LCL, Paton]). Polybius ends his whole work with a pious prayer for a modest prosperity (39.8.2).

55. Walbank, *Polybius*, 40.

56. See McGing, *Polybius’ Histories*, 52–64, for a discussion of the influence of Herodotus, Thucydides, and Xenophon on Polybius. McGing finds evidence of the influence of all three.