

The *Chrēsmologoi* in Thucydides

Michael Zimm

It is clear to any reader of Thucydides' *History* that the concern with the gods and the supernatural, which is so prevalent in the *Histories* of Herodotus, is strikingly lacking. Whenever Thucydides refers to the supernatural in the narrative proper,¹ he tends to emphasize the misinterpretation of an oracle or its ambiguity.² Thucydides even mentions oracles derisively in the section on the plague and in the so-called 'second introduction.'³ However, this is not to say that Thucydides did not believe in the gods of traditional Greek religion, but rather that, for the most part, he discounted them as forces that directly influence human events.⁴

There has been much scholarly debate on the nature of both Thucydides' personal beliefs and his skepticism concerning oracles, and it is not my intention to deal with this particular topic in this paper.⁵ I would rather like to focus on Thucydides' portrayal of a group of purveyors of oracles, namely, the *chrēsmologoi*.⁶

¹ I would like to thank Jonathan Price, Margalit Finkelberg, Emily Greenwood, David Konstand, Pura Nieta, Benjamin Isaac, and Jeffrey Rusten for their encouragement and suggestions. I am also grateful to the anonymous readers of *SCI* and the editors who read earlier drafts of the paper and lent encouraging words. This paper does not consider the speeches which raise different methodological questions. All translated passages are taken from *The History of the Peloponnesian War*, translated by R. Crawley and revised by D. Lateiner (New York: 2006).

² Thucydides uses several words for oracles and oracular activities: χρῆσθαι (1.123; 2.102; 5.16; 5.32; 1.126; 3.96), χρησμός (2.21; 3.104; 5.26; 5.103), χρηστήριον (1.25; 1.103; 2.54), μαντική (5.103), μαντεύεσθαι (5.18), and μαντεῖον (1.25; 1.28; 2.17; 2.47; 4.118). It should be noted that Thucydides does not use a vocabulary specific for correct oracles and another vocabulary for incorrect oracles. For example, while Thucydides specifically says that the Pythian μαντεῖον turned out to be true on one occasion (2.17), he states that during the plague (2.47) appeals to oracles (μαντεῖοις) and supplications in temples were useless (ἀνωφελῆ).

³ 2.54 and 5.26.3: τοῖς ἀπὸ χρησμῶν τι ἰσχυρισσάμενοις μόνον δὴ τοῦτο ἐχυρῶς ξυμβάν.

⁴ There are five examples in the *History* where Thucydides specifically mentions that Apollo said something (1.25.1; 1.126.4; 1.134.4; 3.92.5; 5.32.1), but even these passages in which he writes 'Apollo said ...' do not necessarily evince Thucydides' belief in the intervention of the gods.

⁵ Both N. Marinatos, 'Thucydides and oracles' *JHS* 101 (1981), 138-140, and K.J. Dover, *The Greeks and their Legacy* (Oxford: 1988), 71-72, argue that Thucydides was not an atheist. S. Oost, 'Thucydides and the irrational: sundry passages' *CPh* 70 (1975), 193-196, thinks that Thucydides seems to have had a varying degree of belief in the supernatural. For the argument that Thucydides was a skeptic concerning the gods and oracles, see M.I. Finley, *Aspects of Antiquity* (Cambridge: 1968), 49, who thinks that gods, oracles, and omens do not play a part in the *History*; A. Powell, 'Thucydides and divination' *BICS* 26 (1979), 47-48, understands 5.26.3 as evidence of Thucydides' possible atheism; and J. de Romilly,

Surprisingly, there has not been much scholarly discourse on Thucydides' perception of the *chrēsmologoi*. N. Marinatos argues that Thucydides and other fifth century writers viewed the *chrēsmologoi* and *manteis*⁷ contemptuously.⁸ Similarly, M.I. Finley states that Thucydides was hostile to them,⁹ and H. Bowden argues that Thucydides presents the *chrēsmologoi* unfavorably.¹⁰ However, in the three passages in which the *chrēsmologoi* are mentioned, Thucydides passes over them quickly without adding any explicitly derogatory comments. Nor is there a specific indication that Thucydides was particularly hostile to the *chrēsmologoi*. This paper argues that while the historian

Thucydides and Athenian Imperialism, translated by Philip Thody (Oxford: 1963), 292, thinks that Thucydides was mainly critical of oracles. Cf. J. Price *Thucydides and Internal War* (Cambridge: 2001), 217, who suggests that references to rituals and religion in the *History* tend to show how it was exploited to serve some political or personal end.

⁶ On the distinction between *chrēsmologoi* and *manteis*, see A. Argyle, 'Χρησμολόγοι and μάντις' *CR* 20 (1970), 139, who thinks that it is difficult to pinpoint the exact difference between the *chrēsmologoi* and *manteis*; H. Bowden, 'Oracles for Sale', in *Herodotus and his World: Essays from a Conference in Memory of George Forrest*, edited by P. Derow and R. Parker (Oxford: 2003), 263, argues that *chrēsmologoi* and *manteis* do not necessarily refer to a 'clearly defined group of people.' S. Hornblower, *A Commentary on Thucydides, vol. 3: Books 5.25-8.109* (Oxford: 2009), ad 8.1.1, is largely in agreement with Bowden. Cf. J. Dillery, 'Chresmologues and Manteis: Independent Diviners and the Problem of Authority,' in *Mantikê: Studies in Ancient Divination*, edited by S.I. Johnston & P. Struck (Leiden: 2005), p. 170, who argues that Thucydides clearly presents *chrēsmologoi* and *manteis* as two separate groups; M. Platnauer, *Aristophanes: Peace* (Oxford: 1964), comments on lines 1046-7: 'a μάντις is one who interprets divine signs: a χρησμολόγος is one who has a store of oracles.' Conceivably, the *chrēsmologoi* may have been regarded with less respect than the *manteis*. This is perhaps part of Aristophanes' joke about Hierocles in *Peace* lines 1046-7, in which he specifically calls Hierocles a *chrēsmologos*. M. Flower, *The Seer in Ancient Greece* (Berkeley: 2008), 62, cleverly points out that 'the joke may be that the Hierocles of real life would never have called himself a *chrēsmologos* ... the distinction between the prestige of the seer and the marginality of the *chrēsmologos* was probably true as a general rule'. Perhaps Aristophanes is humorously stating that Hierocles, far from being a respected soothsayer, is nothing more than an oracle-monger. Also, a fragment from the comic playwright Eupolis refers to Hierocles as 'the best lord of oracle chanters (*chrēsmōidos*)' (F 231, vol. 5, Kassel, R. and C. Austin. *Poetae Comici Graeci*, vol. 5 (Berlin: 1986).

⁷ In the *History*, the *manteis* are mentioned four times: 3.20; 6.69; 7.50; and 8.1. The only *mantis* Thucydides refers to by name is Theaenetus, the son of Tolmides who helped plan the escape with some Athenians and Plataeans from Plataea while it was besieged. Perhaps this Theaenetus was a well-known soothsayer. In the other three passages, Thucydides mentions the *manteis* as a group.

⁸ Marinatos (n. 5 above), 140: '[The *chrēsmologoi* and *manteis* were regarded as] notorious frauds in the fifth century and objects of ridicule by many intellectuals including Thucydides himself.'

⁹ Finley (n. 5 above), 49: '[Thucydides] detested the soothsayers and oracle-mongers who were a plague in war-time Athens. As a historian he recognized their existence in several brief, utterly contemptuous remarks.'

¹⁰ Bowden (n. 6 above), 257: 'Thucydides mentions *chresmologoi* in generally unsympathetic terms.'

certainly did not hold the *chrēsmologoi* in high esteem, the main role they play in his *History* is his use of them, by way of innuendo, as a means for criticizing the temperament and decision making process of the Athenian *dēmos*.

Aristophanes offers a more critical portrayal of the *chrēsmologoi* than that presented by Thucydides.¹¹ The playwright depicts them as a nuisance, and implies that they were regarded by at least some Athenians as opportunists rather than authentic purveyors of oracles.¹² It seems that the *chrēsmologoi* had a ready supply of memorized oracles that were presumably tailored to fit whatever their audience wanted to hear (as indicated by Thucydides himself).¹³ Accordingly, Aristophanes presents the *chrēsmologoi* as religious charlatans and pokes fun at them for their dubious advice in the *Peace*, where the *chrēsmologos* Hierocles shows up and questions the sacrifice to the new goddess Peace.¹⁴ Similarly, in the *Birds*, Aristophanes mocks a *chrēsmologos* who attempts to give Pisthetaerus absurd advice based on a vague oracle.¹⁵ Thucydides, on the other hand, never mentions an individual *chrēsmologos* by name. This suggests that Aristophanes is criticizing not divination or oracles *per se*, but rather religious opportunism and the exploitation of oracles by specific *chrēsmologoi* for personal gain.¹⁶ Moreover, both authors seem to have held different views of oracles. Aristophanes avoids making fun of the Delphic oracle,¹⁷ which suggests that Aristophanes was more deferent to oracles coming from Delphi than to those attributed to Bakis, which often served as oracular sources for the *chrēsmologoi*.¹⁸ Thucydides, in contrast, does not seem to adopt some oracular sources while rejecting others. In the *History*, states and individuals rise and fall as a result of human judgment and error, not as a result of supernatural intervention.

The *chrēsmologoi* are first mentioned in connection with Thucydides' statement that immediately after the mutual declaration of war, both the Peloponnesians and the Athenians were strengthening the tenacity of their respective citizens with oracles promising victory. Shortly before the *chrēsmologoi* first appear, Thucydides remarks that

¹¹ For a treatment of the topic of divination and oracles in Aristophanes, see N. Smith, 'Diviners and Divination in Aristophanic Comedy' *CA* 8 (1989), 140-158. It is clear from Thucydides (2.8 and 2.21) that the *chrēsmologoi* were active in both Athens and many other cities during the war.

¹² Aristophanes' presentation of the *chrēsmologoi* should not necessarily be interpreted as representative of what other fifth century authors thought of the group. On two occasions in Herodotus, we meet individual *chrēsmologoi* who offer accurate oracles (1.62 and 8.96).

¹³ Thucydides 2.21.3 says that the *chrēsmologoi* were chanting *chrēsmous pantoious*.

¹⁴ *Ar. Peace* 1046-7.

¹⁵ *Ar. Birds* 961.

¹⁶ Smith (n. 11 above), 155.

¹⁷ Whereas at Dodona and Delphi one could expect to receive an original oracular response, the *chrēsmologoi* were in the business of constantly altering and adapting their collection of old oracles, which could be quickly sold.

¹⁸ Smith (n. 11 above), 151; V. Ehrenberg, *The People of Aristophanes* (New York: 1962), 260; J. Mikalson, *Athenian Popular Religion* (Chapel Hill: 1983), 41; R. Parker, 'Greek States and Greek Oracles' in *Crux: Essays Presented to G.E.M. de Ste. Croix on His 75th Birthday. History of Political Thought* 6, edited by P.A. Cartledge and F.D. Harvey (London: 1985), 302.

zeal is always at its height at the commencement of an undertaking,¹⁹ and adds that the eagerness of the youth on both sides was fueled by their inexperience (οὐκ ἀκουσίως ὑπὸ ἀπειρίας ἤπτετο τοῦ πολέμου). There is a certain irony in the picture that Thucydides presents. The young men among the Peloponnesians and the Athenians were eagerly anticipating the commencement of hostilities in what would become a long and brutal war, entailing great suffering on both sides. Thucydides then writes that ‘everywhere predictions were being recited and oracles being chanted by such persons as collect them (*chrēsmologoi*), and this not only in contending cities’.²⁰ Significantly, Thucydides says that there were *chrēsmologoi* in many cities that were not involved in the war (ἐν ταῖς ἄλλαις πόλεσιν).²¹ Thucydides notably mentions the *chrēsmologoi* only after war had already been declared, and presents them as possessing a minimal degree of influence among both the Peloponnesians and the Athenians.

The *chrēsmologoi* appear again shortly after the outbreak of the war. Thucydides reports that when the Peloponnesians started to ravage the Athenian land, the Acharnians were particularly upset as they saw their property being destroyed. He adds that oracles of all sorts were recited by the *chrēsmologoi* and that they found eager listeners among both those who supported and opposed the Periclean policy of avoiding a battle outside the city walls.²² This is inferred from the phrase ὦν ἀκροᾶσθαι ὡς ἕκαστος ὄρητο, which suggests that the *chrēsmologoi* sold oracles that suited the sentiments of their listeners on both sides.

The despair in Athens was followed by popular anger with Pericles. Thucydides says: ‘In short, the whole city was in a most excited state; Pericles was the object of general

¹⁹ 2.8.1: ‘And if both sides nourished the boldest hopes and put forth their utmost strength for the war, this was only natural. Zeal is always at its height at the commencement of an undertaking; and on this particular occasion in the Peloponnese and Athens were both full of young men whose inexperience made them eager to take up arms, while the rest of Hellas stood straining with excitement at the conflict of its leading cities’ (Translated by R. Crawley). ὀλίγον τε ἐπεινίου οὐδὲν ἀμφότεροι, ἀλλ’ ἔρρωντο ἐς τὸν πόλεμον οὐκ ἀπεικίως· ἀρχόμενοι γὰρ πάντες ὀξύτερον ἀντιλαμβάνονται, τότε δὲ καὶ νεότης πολλὴ μὲν οὖσα ἐν τῇ Πελοποννήσῳ, πολλὴ δ’ ἐν ταῖς Ἀθήναις οὐκ ἀκουσίως ὑπὸ ἀπειρίας ἤπτετο τοῦ πολέμου, ἢ τε ἄλλη Ἑλλάς ἅπασα μετέωρος ἦν ξυνιουσῶν τῶν πρώτων πόλεων.

²⁰ 2.8.2: καὶ πολλὰ μὲν λόγια ἐλέγετο, πολλὰ δὲ χρησμολόγοι ἦδον ἐν τε τοῖς μέλλουσι πολεμήσειν καὶ ἐν ταῖς ἄλλαις πόλεσιν.

²¹ Dillery (n. 6 above), 213: ‘Thucydides refers with barely veiled scorn to the *chrēsmologues* chanting their prophecies ... on the eve of the conflict.’ It seems to me that Dillery over-interprets this passage: nothing in it suggests Thucydides’ scorn towards the *chrēsmologoi per se*.

²² 2.21.3 χρησμολόγοι τε ἦδον χρησμούς παντοίους, ὦν ἀκροᾶσθαι ὡς ἕκαστος ὄρητο. Cf. T. Rood, *Thucydides: Narrative and Explanation* (Oxford: 1998), 139-140, who suggests that Cleon made use of the *chresmologoi*, based on Aristophanes’ *Knights* (Lines 61, 128-201, 960-972, 997-1089, 1229-1248). Rood’s suggestion is certainly plausible, and while Thucydides does not explicitly tell us whether or not Cleon employed *chrēsmologoi*, it seems to me that, based on this passage, *chrēsmologoi* in Athens could be used to advance a political position. Cf. Dillery (n. 6 above), 213, who rightly points out that this passage makes it clear that there was not one group of *chrēsmologoi* which espoused a particular view.

indignation; his previous counsels were totally forgotten; he was abused for not leading out the army which he commanded, and was made responsible for the whole of the public suffering.²³ The passage vividly presents the emotionally driven hostility of the *dēmos* against the rational policy of Pericles. The *chrēsmologoi* thrived in this sort of environment where they could offer oracles reinforcing the emotional impulse of the *dēmos*. It is noteworthy that Thucydides describes the Athenians as already being enraged before he mentions the *chrēsmologoi*, and, moreover, he does not present them as a driving force behind any decree or decision passed by the *dēmos*. The *chrēsmologoi* are portrayed not as leading the people astray with false oracles, but rather as an indicator of the people's anger and frustration. It seems that Thucydides' inclusion of the *chrēsmologoi* in this passage was intended to reflect the anxiety and stress of the citizens as they watched the Peloponnesians freely destroy their fields. This suggests that Thucydides is using the *chrēsmologoi* in order to criticize the *dēmos*, since the *dēmos* was yielding to emotion and seeking advice from irrational sources.

We meet the *chrēsmologoi* again only in the beginning of Book 8. After the colossal failure of the Athenian expedition to Sicily, Thucydides describes the frustration and fear that spread in Athens upon learning about the catastrophe. He states that the Athenians were angry with 'the orators (*rhētores*), the reciters of oracles (*chrēsmologoi*), soothsayers (*manteis*), and all other diviners of the time (ὅποσοι τι τότε αὐτοὺς θειάσαντες) who had encouraged them to hope that they should conquer Sicily'.²⁴ It is evident from this passage that there were *chrēsmologoi* who had used their stock oracles to urge the Athenians to attack Sicily in 415.

The first sentence of Book 8 casts the contempt of the *dēmos* against the *rhētores*, *chrēsmologoi*, *manteis*, and other diviners. Yet is this statement indicative of Thucydides' own hostility towards the *chrēsmologoi*? While Marinatos thinks that Thucydides is indeed criticizing the *chrēsmologoi* here,²⁵ this is far from certain. A striking feature of this passage is that while it is clear that the Athenians were angry with the *chrēsmologoi*, they do not appear in Book 6, which includes reports of oracles and religious disturbances. S. Hornblower also remarks that the fact that these groups are mentioned in 8.1, makes their omission in Book 6 all the more surprising.²⁶ Surely, one would think that if Thucydides disliked the *chrēsmologoi*, he would have mentioned their role in encouraging the Athenians to invade Sicily in Book 6. Instead, Thucydides, who offers a detailed account of the preparations that preceded the embarkation of the Athenian navy

²³ 2.21: παντί τε τρόπῳ ἀνηρέθιστο ἡ πόλις, καὶ τὸν Περικλέα ἐν ὀργῇ εἶχον, καὶ ὧν παρήνεσε πρότερον ἐμέμνητο οὐδέν, ἀλλ' ἐκάκιζον ὅτι στρατηγὸς ὧν οὐκ ἐπεξάγοι, αἰτίον τε σφίσιν ἐνόμιζον πάντων ὧν ἔπασχον.

²⁴ 8.1: ἐπειδὴ δὲ ἔγνωσαν, χαλεποὶ μὲν ἦσαν τοῖς ξυμπροθυμηθεῖσι τῶν ῥητόρων τὸν ἔκπλου, ὥσπερ οὐκ αὐτοὶ ψηφισάμενοι, ὠργίζοντο δὲ καὶ τοῖς χρησμολόγοις τε καὶ μάντεσι καὶ ὅποσοι τι τότε αὐτοὺς θειάσαντες ἐπήλπισαν ὡς λήψονται Σικελίαν. Hornblower (n. 6 above), *ad* 8.1.1, thinks that the reference to the three groups of diviners is 'mildly disparaging,' but he does not elaborate on the subject. While I agree with this statement, I would add that it is not as critical as some of the other Thucydidean comments on oracles (e.g. 5.26.3).

²⁵ N. Marinatos, *Thucydides and Religion* (Königstein: 1981), 51.

²⁶ Hornblower (n. 6 above), *ad* 8.1.1: 'The analepsis here is remarkable: there was nothing about any of this in the early chs. of bk. 6, where it "belonged" temporally.'

to Sicily in 415,²⁷ focuses on the desecration of the statues of Hermes and the profanation of the Mysteries prior to that expedition and the ensuing popular outrage.²⁸ He does not mention soothsayers or omens as instigators of the panic. This omission implies that, in his view, the *chrēsmologoi* and the *manteis* did not play a major role in causing the uproar over the *Hermai* scandal and the profanation of the Mysteries.

Although the Athenians blamed the *rhētores*, *chrēsmologoi*, *manteis*, and other diviners (*theiasantes*), Thucydides parenthetically adds the phrase ὥσπερ οὐκ αὐτοὶ ψηφισάμενοι. It is difficult to say for certain whether he is stating his own view that the *chrēsmologoi* and the *manteis* encouraged the Athenians to undertake the expedition or whether he simply reports whom the Athenians were blaming at that time. It seems to me that the latter option is more likely since the overall tone of this passage is critical of the Athenian *dēmos*.²⁹ Thucydides is reminding the reader that the Athenian *dēmos* was the political body that had initially voted for the expedition. In other words, the *dēmos*, whose temperament Thucydides criticizes,³⁰ rather than accept responsibility for its actions, since they had voted for the expedition, sought to direct its frustration and despair against the *chrēsmologoi* and the *manteis*. Thus the opening paragraph of Book 8 has the effect of conveying the frustration of the *dēmos* and their desire to hold others responsible for their own decisions. The entire first passage of Book 8 characterizes Thucydides' view of the *dēmos* as exemplified by the last sentence in the paragraph, in which he comments that it was only after a great disaster had befallen Athens that the *dēmos* was prepared to act prudently.³¹

One of the central themes in the *History* is the criticism of the Athenians' reckless mistakes, both political and military.³² The most prominent example is Thucydides' explicit censure of the *dēmos*' mismanagement of the Sicilian expedition.³³ It seems to

²⁷ 6.24-32.

²⁸ 6.27.3: καὶ τὸ πρᾶγμα μειζρόνως ἐλάμβανον· τοῦ τε γὰρ ἔκπλου οἰωνὸς ἐδόκει εἶναι καὶ ἐπὶ ξυνωμοσίᾳ ἅμα νεωτέρων πραγμάτων καὶ δήμου καταλύσεως γεγενηῆσθαι. On the profanation of the Mysteries, see 6.28.2. For an analysis of all mentions of religion and religious affairs in the *History*, see J. Borimir, 'Religion in Thucydides' *TAPA* 118 (1986), 119-47. Cf. A. Powell, 'Religion and the Sicilian Expedition' *Historia* 28 (1979), 15-31, who discusses the role that religion played during the Sicilian expedition. Powell includes sources other than Thucydides (e.g. Philochorus) in his article.

²⁹ The strongest piece of evidence for this view is the phrase ὥσπερ οὐκ αὐτοὶ ψηφισάμενοι (8.1.1), which should certainly be understood as a criticism of the lack of responsibility of the *dēmos*. To my mind, the sudden reference to them in this passage is suggestive that these are the groups to which the Athenians directed their anger, while Thucydides simply reports the popular mood in Athens.

³⁰ This is a familiar literary topos of Aristophanic comedy. Cf. *Acharnians* 630-32, *Knights* 519, and *Ecclesiazusae* 797-98.

³¹ 8.1.4: πάντα τε πρὸς τὸ παραχρῆμα περιδεές, ὅπερ φιλεῖ δῆμος ποιεῖν, ἐτοῖμοι ἦσαν εὐτακτεῖν. The statement implies that it required a disaster for the Athenian *dēmos* to get its affairs in order. This last comment stands out as one of Thucydides' most direct criticisms of the Athenian *dēmos*.

³² S. Hornblower, *A Commentary on Thucydides*, vol. I, Books I-III (Oxford: 1991), ad 1.84.4.

³³ 2.65.11.

me, therefore, that although Thucydides did not present the *chrēsmologoi* as influential in Athens, and although he did not explicitly condemn them, he used them subtly to further criticize the actions of the Athenian *dēmos*.

In conclusion, doubtlessly, the *chresmologoi* enjoyed some influence over the *dēmos*, but Thucydides downplays any salient political clout that the *chresmologoi* may have had. Irrespective of Thucydides' personal belief in the veracity of oracles, in the case of the *chrēsmologoi*, it is clear that he views them as inconsequential. He mentions the *chresmologoi* only at select points when he is shedding light on the psyche of the *dēmos*. The few references to the *chrēsmologoi* in the *History* appear as indirect criticisms of the Athenian *dēmos* itself.

Tel Aviv University