Signifying Names and Other Ominous Accidental Utterances in Classical Historiography

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Accidents happen daily to human beings, but some apparent accidents—especially in anxious situations—could be divine signs. Accidental utterances and actions in antiquity were sometimes denominated as ominous (cle-donomancy, palmike). **Kledon or omen from dictum fortuitum** implies purposive and interested supernatural powers and human efficacy in calling in their aid. To observe and mark a **kledon** persuades oneself of divine favor, god’s goodwill. Odysseus and his family unintentionally meet with, ask for, and receive **kle-dones** in Homer. For example, Penelope interprets Telemachus’ palmic (spasmic omen) sneeze. Odysseus notes and finds satisfaction in the suitors’ vapid but eventually lethal good-will wish for the future of the strong and amusing beggar. Finally, when Odysseus requests an inside **kledon** and an outside **teras**, he receives Zeus’ thunder out of a clear sky and the old millwoman’s prayer that she never grind for the suitors again. The omniscient narrator of the *Odyssey* reports such hypersensitive human conversions of accident to omen in legend, yet they also appear in history and biography. In a Roman household

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2 When Melanthius prays that Telemachus be struck down as surely as Odysseus is dead (Od. 17.251–253), the event, or the audience’s present knowledge, persuades us that merely literary irony, not kledon, is present. The dividing line is sometimes unclear, as Peradotto’s study of tragic irony and unpropitious utterances reveals: J. Peradotto, “Cledonomancy in the *Oresteia*,” *AJP* 90 (1969) 1–21, at 10. E. Wölflin, “Das Wortspiel im Lateini-
example, Aemilius Paullus found an ominous meaning where he wanted one, in the sudden death of Aemilia’s ominously named puppy, Persea (Cic. Div. 1.103). The coincidental omen/kledon foretold that he would meet success against King Perseus. Here we consider several historical public situations.

Ancient historians recognized Greek and Roman interest in omens, however unexpected and varied the ancient beliefs in such divine signs may have been to them and us. The best-known mind of antiquity, Cicero, both endorses and condemns divination of all types. This paper examines presuppositions and surviving examples of a puzzling and poorly understood phenomenon: ancient ominous chance phrasing (especially names) and its consequences. Certain utterances can be, and need to be, accepted and recognized as ominous, then framed and interpreted, so as to have consequences. It seems that the ancients believed that the word, sacralized as foretelling the future, can evoke a desired outcome, that one can convert an accident into a favorable omen and thus bring on the deed. Careful speech and prompt response to a heedless word, especially in critical moments, were essential. This paper argues that the phenomenon of identifying chance words (especially names) as ominous was an occasional arm of diplomacy, and one relevant formulaic phrase in particular, δέχομαι τὸν οἶμον and its variants, often marks its employment.


4 Unguarded speech, such as Peradotto, AJP 90 (1969) 7, 11–14, finds repeatedly in Aeschylus’ Agamemnon, may lead to disastrous consequences. But only one example (1652–1653) includes the antagonistic chorus’s prompt recognition and signifying acceptance of Aegistheus’ unintended
The ancient Greeks cordoned off spaces recognized and organized for such meaningful chance utterances. They dedicated oracles to the verbally ominous at Achaean Pharae, Smyrna, and Lebadeia.\textsuperscript{5} We do not well know the procedures, beyond sharing a dependence on the unexpected utterance or event with a hidden meaning for the consulter, but institutionalizations of cledonomancy are not the present topic.\textsuperscript{6} \textit{Clédonisme sans parole} is another name for accidental ominous wordless spasms and objects. The future Corinthian ruler Aletes receives a Delphic “dirt-ball” oracle. Later, when asking for a bit of bread, a stingy farmer gives him (only) the prophesized clod of dirt.\textsuperscript{7}

The present examples of accidental verbal omens, however, are oracle-free, originally casual or otherwise-intended words and acts in secular settings that men convert into meaningful divine indicators. Greek and Roman interlocutors, with their particular needs, interpret these apparently fortuitous human ejaculations and movements (words, sneezes, twitches, etc.) or events as meaningful. Quick-witted men may assign to signs a meaning and a power far removed from the most obvious or natural view of contemporaries or posterity. Any act, person, thing, and word, especially proper names, may be taboo, or may be a propitious or inauspicious omen.\textsuperscript{8}

Herodotus reports two Spartan commanders (and other

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\textsuperscript{5} Paus. 7.22.2, 9.11.7 (a Sanctuary of Kledones), 9.39.5–14; cf. Dio of Prusa \textit{Os} 32.13 and Xen. Eph. 5.4.8–11 on chance utterances at the oracle of Apis in Egyptian Thebes (a chorus of shouting children reveal the god’s will).


\textsuperscript{7} Duris \textit{FGrHist} 76 F 84 = [Plut.] \textit{Proc.Alex.} 1.48; Paus. 2.4.3; schol. Pind. \textit{Nem.} 7.155; Cic. \textit{Div.} 2.83.

\textsuperscript{8} Frazer’s \textit{Golden Bough III} (1911) devotes three hundred pages to this point.
leaders) who employ unknown, ominous names and words. They shoehorn these fortuitous utterances to fit their strategic manoeuvres. Herodotus’ admirer and emulator, Dionysius the later Halicarnassian writer and emigrant to Rome, records another example in his Roman History, a diplomatic incident at Tarentum. The Romans’ representative converts to his nation’s advantage a difficult situation by a name and an action.

Hellenic

Herodotus reports omens found in the traditions of the Hellenes and the Persian Wars, including accidental verbal ones. He also transmits historically noteworthy rhetorical figures including paronomasia (homonymic and homophonic plays on words, or puns, as skeptics might consider “Dorieus” and “the grove of Argos,” 5.72, 6.80). He includes narratives of tangible objects and visible acts that convey wordless messages of a humanly ominous import. The ironic trope that combines

9 Thucydides eschews paronomastic observations, although he certainly expresses interest in linguistic degeneration in the Corecyraean stasis. The names of Eupompidas, Aelidas (at Heracleia), and Euphemus provide opportunities for comment that the Athenian historian ignored (3.20.2, 3.92–93, 6.81; cf. S. Hornblower, A Commentary on Thucydides II [Oxford 1996] 134–136).


11 Powell’s list of puns is hardly exhaustive: E. Powell, “Puns in Herodotus,” CR 51 (1937) 103–105. Meaningful words and names provide an important category in folk-belief and folk-say. The phenomenon posits that the essence of a person is found in his/her name, that the fit is cosmic, that a true inwardness is revealed by names. Examples are ἀτρόχ for the sting ray and Plato’s comic musings on bonds between word and referent in the Cratylos (e.g. soma/sema); a summary in Jane Snyder, Puns and Poetry in Lucretius De Rerum Natura (Amsterdam 1980) 56–60.

divine knowledge and verbal coincidence is a *kledon*, religiously conceived, a proper name or other word that becomes ominously meaningful in certain identified circumstances.

Several laconic\(^1\) Spartans find, at the right moment, a significance lurking in words. (1) The invading King Cleomenes riposted to the priestess of Athena on the Athenian Acropolis after she told the Dorian to depart at once: “Woman, I am not *Dorieus*, but *Achaios* [i.e., descendant of Argive Heracles].” Herodotus notes: “Not catching [or misusing] the *kledon,*” he was forcibly expelled from the Acropolis. His quick retort attempted to reject, avert, or defuse an omen specified as *kledon*.\(^2\) This play on words may secondarily and cleverly refer to his impressive half-brother on his father’s side, Dorieus, over whom Cleomenes was preferred for the Spartan throne (5.42).

Herodotus explained the choice of name for Cleomenes’ unfortunate enemy Demaratus (6.63–64) as the result of a public Spartan vow friendly to his father Ariston: πανθήμει Σαρτιήται ... ἀρίθν ἐποίησαντο. “Blessed by the people” or “accursed for the people” are equally possible interpretations, both of them probably articulated, depending on prospective or retrospective perspectives.

(2) Again, ca. 491 the same Cleomenes,\(^1\) a man whom Herodotus undervalues, once effectively blocked from arresting defiant Aeginetan “allies” and then further insulted by one of these Aeginetans, asks his interlocutor his name. Once he obtains that potent information, namely *Krios* or “Ram,”\(^2\) he retaliates to perceived humiliation with an ominous and


\(^{2}\) Hdt. 5.72.3–4; similarly Hipparchus vainly tried to avert his dream-omen, 5.56 with Halliday, *Divination* 49.

\(^{1}\) The same ill-remembered Cleomenes experienced another, prior inauspicious verbal coincidence: his “taking” the grove named for the hero Argos disappointingly too soon (for him) fulfills a Delphic prophecy of victory (6.80, as Deborah Boedeker has pointed out to me).

\(^{2}\) Recall the dangerous power of the name for curse or blessing in *Od.* 9.408, 504–505, 528–535.
“snappy” threat: “Krios, you had better coat your horns with bronze [armor] because much trouble is coming your way” (6.50). This is more than a witty anecdote; it announces Spartan awareness of Aeginetan hostility and justifies aggressive response. The ominous-name finder gains divine ground for his policy. God is on his side.

(3) Although *kledon* as such is not specified, another ominous diplomatic utterance surfaces in central Greece in 480. Xerxes, accompanied by Mardonius, laughingly responds to a Spartan herald demanding compensation (at Delphi’s suggestion) for Spartan Leonidas’ death and mutilation at Thermopylae (8.115). “Mardonius here will pay the penalty.” The Spartan herald δεξάμενος τὸ ἰηθὲν, “having welcomed/accepted the response,” effectively rendered it thereby a *kledon*. Ex post facto, the Persians were now trapped. The outcome for Mardonius at

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the battle of Plataea was sealed.\(^{20}\)

(4) Similarly, one can explain the decision to engage in the battle of Mycale in 479 as determined by *kledon* (9.90–91). The Spartan king Leotychidas commanded the Greek fleet anchored near Delos. Three Samian ambassadors were dispatched to importune the Hellenic command for liberation. In their diplomatic parley, one Samian developed various lengthy (πολλά καὶ παντοτικά) East Greek arguments designed to persuade them to lead the Hellenic expeditionary fleet across the Aegean to liberate Ionia. The Spartan admiral, perhaps impatient with the long address (πολλὸς ἦν λασσόμενος) and with its hyperbolic rhetoric about not meeting any Persian resistance, asked, seemingly irrelevantly, the Ionian for his name. An odd interruption, in any view. Herodotus expresses uncertainty about his question’s immediate motive but offers interesting alternative explanations. First, he suggests that the Spartan was looking for diplomatic advantage through divine confirmation: εἴρητο Λεοντυχίδης εἴτε κληδόνος\(^{21}\) εἴνεκεν θέλων πυθέσθαι εἴτε καὶ κατὰ συντυχίαν θεοῦ ποιεύντος.\(^{22}\) “Leo-

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\(^{20}\) Halliday, *Divination* 47. With nearly identical phrasing, Peisistratus accepts a chresmologue’s “oracle” about netting tunny fish (1.63, φῶς δέχεσθαι τὸ ἁρεμθέν). Here the omen is a divinely channeled mantic utterance, not an accidental *kledon*, but again, Peisistratus’ accepting it somehow made it potent and irrevocable (cf. Pritchett, *Greek State* 135).

\(^{21}\) κληδόν, the Homeric word on the kal- stem, when meaning “divinely meaningful verbal coincidence,” appears at *Od.* 18.117 and 20.120, and in Herodotus only here and 5.72.4 (Cleomenes’ “grove of Argos”).

\(^{22}\) Kledon refers to (divine and therefore consequential) verbal omen, and the historian’s alternative, syntychia, to a mere chance coincidence; but συντυχίαν θεοῦ ποιεύντος should mean “god-sent coincidence.” The usual understanding of these alternatives presents a distinction without a difference for the Spartan’s motive—both are theological. Herodotus’ first term, in fact, provides a political and human exploitation of an apparent surprise. Leotychidas manipulates religious sentiment conveniently to promote his political ends. A. Masaracchia, *Erodoto Le Storie* IX (Milan 1978) ad loc., argues that this passage should deter categorization of Herodotean explanations as entirely theological or human (“o solo teonomic o solo antroponomico”). The first historical motivational alternative balances the second, popular and religious, “explanation,” or it provides a historian’s
tichidas asked him his name, whether wishing to know for the sake of a [useful] kledon or whether, even by some coincidence, a god made him do it.” Herodotus’ presentation suggests that the Spartan king was looking for a convenient and public divine endorsement for an already determined military project.  

The alternative, that he was stumbling eastward with the Greek armada but before developing a plan, under divine prodding, does not conform to usual cautious Spartan procedures for crafting international policy-decisions. Having ascertained his interlocutor’s name, Hegesistratos, “Expedition-Leader,” the Spartan immediately truncated the pleader’s typical Ionian verbosity and said δέχομαι τὸν οἰωνόν, “I accept this omen”—i.e., I welcome as a valid omen your divinatory name Hegesistratos. That simple answer of a name stamped a divine approval on the Hellenic advance: I will lead the expeditionary force (ἡγεσίστατο τὸν στρατόν) against the Persians. The Hellenes attack and defeat the Persian forces at Mycale.


R. W. Macan, Herodotus, the Seventh, Eighth, & Ninth Books (London 1908) ad loc., notes, in his usual acerbic way, that the “king was surely acquainted with the name of the orator addressing the Council, before the speaking began.”

The Spartan authorities had responded in rhyme to an earlier Samian embassy (3.46) τὸ μὲν πρῶτα λέγεσθαι ἐπιλεληθέναι, τὸ δὲ ὄστερα οὐ συνίεται, “We’ve forgotten what you said before; we don’t understand what you said afterwards.” The Samians cut talk to one sentence, “This bag needs grain,” but the Spartans retorted that any words were superfluous.

The verb, in contexts involving divine matters, connotes a gracious welcoming and understanding of supernatural intentions, not merely neutral “receiving”: LSJ s.v. δέχομαι.

E. David, “Sparta’s Kosmos of Silence,” in S. Hodkinson and A. Powell (eds.), Sparta. New Perspectives (London 1999) 117–146 (e.g. 119 on silence as a tool of discipline), discusses the topos, prominent in Thucydides, e.g. 1.86 and 2.40.2 (Sthenelaidas and Pericles). See also Hdt. 3.82.2, Thuc. 4.80, 5.68, Xen. Const.Lac. 3.4–5.
Heroic silence: the fierce, austere Achaeans advance into battle in silence while the Trojans and their allies move ahead noisily (*Iliad* 3.2–9; cf. *Hdt.* 7.211, 9.59, or Hollywood’s closed-mouth cowboys and howling Indians). The Spartan code of silence, like their hair and dress protocols, was a tool of discipline to shape the young and to humiliate and exclude the ostracized.\(^{27}\) Thus the taciturn non-act (zero-degree phonation) can be fiercely aggressive (or “passive aggressive,” or just passive silence).\(^{28}\) The classical Laconian word-averse culture prized apophthegms, if words were necessary. Objects and visuals were preferred, when possible, to otiose talk. They approved and remembered the laconically styled Samian sack message and Spartan Amompharetus’ boulder, his big vote by the big pebble for remaining at Plataea (*Hdt.* 3.46, 9.55). To articulate was to endanger a secret—thus their diplomatic codes on the *skytale*, their *Krypteia* or “Secret Service,” and their “silence about silence.”\(^{29}\) Their notoriously extreme scorn for wordiness—Ionian or Athenian rhetoric in particular—was expressed in cutting speech, as with the Samians (3.46) or with commander Pausanias’ wordless show and brief verbal comparison of Spartan and Persian feasts and implements (9.82.2–3). They rate the allegedly non-rhetorical sight and sound as (divinatory) sign superior to organized speeches and especially to the culture of books.

Immerwahr wondered whether Hellenes selected seers, commanders, and ambassadors for their tell-tale, ominous names.\(^{30}\) This seems unlikely for several reasons. “Speaking names” are

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29 David, in Hodkinson/Powell, *Sparta* 117.

common enough in Greek and not least in Herodotus. Harrison rightly sees such wordplay as pre-literary, a popular obsession encouraged by the very meaningfulness of Greek names. While parents might choose names on the basis of fond wishes for their children’s future, Greeks did not entrust their precious lives to commanders for that reason alone. Nevertheless, Hornblower may rightly have identified an aversion of Thucydides to ominous names when he suggests that he was “reacting against Herodotus” and popular fifth-century practice by avoiding the mention of “lucky names.” Thucydides, as part of his silent polemics against Herodotus’ quirky inclusions and popular religion, may distance himself from ominous names that Herodotus’ radar registered as significant—or at least noteworthy to his audiences. The unimpressive Alcidas, the Spartan general delegated as a founder of Heralcleia (3.92–93), may in fact have been chosen precisely for his name and no other reason. The phenomenalist Herodotus “might have made something more of” that apparent coincidence—might have found Spartan policy in the exploitation of myth and religion—but the analyst Thucydides intentionally neglected to explain his odd choice as oikist.

If this is so, one has further confirmation of late fifth century interest in meaningful, ominous names, beyond archaic Homer and the Attic tragedians. What might seem contrived to a historian, in hearing epic or seeing tragic myth, could seem to others a noteworthy verbal fact in recent events. In the Herodotan cases, Herodotus draws attention not to mere

31 Harrison, *Divinity* 263 and n.48.
33 Hornblower, *Commentary* II 135.
humorous appropriateness, but to real historical consequences of events perceived by some as unintended omens.

Roman

Our lacunose record furnishes more Roman narratives of “ominous word” divinatory actions, including diplomacy. That record is richer in examples including unintentional word omens, in part because of the survival of Cicero’s curious and controversial treatise *De divinatione*.

For instance, Valerius and Salvius are names of good omen, and men so auspiciously named (*hominis bono nomine*) were often selected, in Roman civic and military life, to lead sacrifices and to serve as first recruits (*Div. 1.102–104; cf. Artem. *Omen. 3.38*). Romans in political assembly closely attended to the names of the first voter and the choice of the first century, determined by sortition (itself a form of divination) to vote first in the *comitia* and thus to predict the gods’ will (*praerogativa*, Cic. *Mur. 18.38*, cf. *Div. 2.83*). The less expected the event or utterance, the more powerful its potential as an unintended word-omen.

Romans transformed incidental words and acts into divine signs by formal reception. Thus they took precautions at ceremonies so as to hear only words of favorable omen. Great consequences turned on “the right word spoken at the right time” (Liebeschuetz, *Continuity* 26) or vice-versa. Some deemed the very name of Rome (the Greek means “Strength”) prophetic of its power.

On a different level, Xenophon (*Cyn. 7.5*)

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requires owners of hunting dogs to give names to them appropriate to their purpose, like Θυμός, Φύλαξ, Ἀλχή, Ρώμη, Βία, κ.τ.λ.

Such “coincidental” signs may presage an event, a fortuitous consonance, and current preoccupations may then press them into good service, public or private. Indeed, they need to be noticed and accepted, and sometimes even adapted or perverted, before they are deemed able to affect the situation. They certainly need to be acknowledged as kledones in order to be framed as ominous at all, in order to be separated out as more than insignificant chatter or bluster. One can accept,
avert, or reject an ominous sign. “To accept an omen” by formal announcement gave it almost irrevocable force; thus, the verbal acceptance contributes to produce the desired result. Romans, in extant sources, are more attentive to ominous words and consequently must find ways to reject or more often avert them. They have more confidence in the magical efficacity of their uttered rejections and displacements of omens. Phrases like absit omen or procul omen abesto can exorcise dangers.

Roman religion and popular thought discovered reasons to act or not to act that depended on names and chance utterances. The Romans took a similar pleasure but more interest

41 Aeneas successfully accepts omens that he likes (Aen. 5.530–531), but Vergil gives him a choice. The Rutulian augur Tolumnius, however, errs (12.259). Latin technical words for rejecting omens include abnuere, improbare, refutare, exsecrare, abominari omen, as at Livy 6.18.9, 30.25. Halliday, Divination 50; Liebeschuetz, Continuity 24–27. When Cleomenes “failed to use/deal with” the Acropolis priestess’s kledon, his campaign faltered (Hdt. 5.72.4), and this story reports his inability to avert the consequences.

42 Halliday, Divination 46–53. Manipulation of augural, or other more common religious, phenomena is not incompatible with belief—as kledones help us to see. Polybius 6.56.6–15 portrays the Roman élite as convinced believers. Ancient religion was intertwined with magic, convictions that humans can influence divine decisions. Prayers on modern sports playing-fields reflect the same attitudes.


45 E.g., Cic. Div. 2.84 and Plin. HN 15.83 report that Crassus, when headed east for Carrhae, heard a fig-salesman shout cannas [figs] and should have recognized it for cave ne eas and stayed home. The happy Octavian before Actium in Plut. Ant. 65.5 heard a muleteer report the names Etrūros for himself and Nīxos for his ass, Lucky and Victory. Further, Plut. Caes. 42–43, Suet. Aug. 96.2, Plut. Nic. 1.2, Val. Max 1.5.3 fortuito dicto. Plutarch Sert. 1.3 gathers frivolous (to him, anyway) coincidences in names and attributes, such as great one-eyed generals like Hannibal and Sertorius.
than the Greeks in finding meaning in names, driven perhaps by greater belief in cledonomancy. Cicero’s efforts show that irresistible entertainment emerged from signifying names, even in supposedly serious judicial venues. Historical incidents hinge on such names and occasionally show life imitating art (see below on Philonides).

The Roman omen and prodigy Apparat effectively served to promote military morale. The commanders employed auspicia oblativa and impetrita and other omen to arouse ardor that reinforced cohesion, promoted self-fulfilling prophecies, and thus increased military success. External data might confirm the bold in their boldness, relieve the fearful in their fear, so the effective official would bend good and bad unexpected events to his need. All could be useful. The commander interpreted them to his advantage, without entirely disbelieving in their divinity. Frontinus (Strat. 1.12) discusses how to neutralize unexpected divine bad news, de dissolvendo metu quem milites ex ad-


versis conceperint ominibus. Officers should comprehend that they can manipulate even an unfortunate stumble or pratfall, so that it seems a good omen, by quick-witted, encouraging interpretation. He offers ingenious Greek and Roman examples: Epaminondas and Chabrias, Scipio and Caesar.

M. Marcellus, five times consul and augur, closed his litter to avoid receiving omens that interfered with his immediate plans (Cic. Div. 2.77–78). Appius Claudius infamously disregarded the sacred chickens off the coast at Drepanum in 249 B.C. (Div. 1.29, Nat.D. 2.7), and the consul Flaminius disregarded his horse’s collapse, the chickens, and yet other omens, before his disaster at Lake Trasimene in 217. Some Romans chose to believe that their catastrophic losses resulted from willful, gross negligence of divine signs. These commanders failed to convert celestial bad news or redirect it. These manipulative procedures, once expedient because widely believed, had become less frequent by Cicero’s day (Div. 1.77–78). Caesar’s Commentarii mention no omens, auspices, or haruspices—a sign of the pontifex maximus’s cynicism or rationalism and his era’s growing skepticism.

(5) Cicero (Div. 1.103, cf. 2.83–84) provides an important Roman example of the kledon from the heroic past. L. Aemilius Paullus, about to depart for war against King Perseus of Macedonia and the decisive battle at Pydna (168 B.C.), hears that his daughter’s puppy has died, the catellus Persea (Perseus in some texts; Pease ad loc. provides citations). He instantly says, perhaps to her puzzlement: accipio, inquit, mea filia, omen. Plutarch, in his life of Aemilius Paullus, repeats this anecdote. He explicitly depends on Cicero’s account, quoting (or translating) the formula: δέχωμαι τὸν οἰηνόν. The Roman diplomat or magistrate in Hellenistic historiography sometimes imitates the roles of Herodotus’ Spartans.

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48 One consular speaker alleges that auspices can be fabricated and still remain valid: Liv. 10.40.11, with Linderski, PdP 37 (1982) 32 and n.48.
49 Cf. A. S. Pease, Cicerois De Divinatione (Urbana 1920) ad 1.29.
51 Aem. 10.6–8, Rom.Apophth. 197f–198a; cf. Liv. 44.22, 34, Val. Max. 1.5.3.
Men of might representing a powerful state, laconic in word, they were quick to take offense and express anger in a manner both witty and ominous.\textsuperscript{52} A notorious diplomatic insult, the Tarentines’ amusement at momentary Roman expense,\textsuperscript{53} appears cryptically in Polybius 1.6.5 (\textit{ασέλχεων}; cf. App. Samn. 7, Livy \textit{Per.} 12–15). Dionysius’ \textit{Roman Antiquities} 19 provides a longer, tripartite version “revealing” Tarentine democratic and alcoholic turbulence. His account of an unintended omen may relate to his Halicarnassian model’s use of omens. We recall relevant features.\textsuperscript{54}

Tarentum, a powerful commercial city, was notoriously dedicated to pleasure, and to drama in particular.\textsuperscript{55} Tarentine insobriety and luxury (τρυφη) became topics for enemies’ legendary stories about their democratic decadence. E.g., the towns- men had more feast days than days in the year and became drunk at Dionysus’ festival drinking contests. They were drunk every day by agora business time.\textsuperscript{56} Their devotion to theatrical make-believe was usefully reprehensible to Roman ideology.

\textsuperscript{52} Plutarch juxtaposes \textit{Spartan and Roman Apophthegms} (\textit{Mor.} 194–236, after \textit{Kings and Generals}). He seeks parallels between the two nations’ individuals in significant \textit{Lives} (\textit{Lysicrates and Lygades, Lysander and Sulla}).

\textsuperscript{53} Parallel violations of international or divine law lead to woe for the incautious insulters of Rome. The Romans were adept at insulting diplomatic gestures of their own, perhaps most notoriously G. Popilli Laenas’ “line in the sand” drawn around Antiochus IV at Eleusis near Alexandria in 168 B.C., Polyb. 29.27.5. A. Wardman, \textit{Religion and Statecraft among the Romans} (Ithaca 1982), has no comment on events before the Second Punic War.


Romans, in contrast, did not permit a permanent theater to be built until Pompey’s in 55 B.C. Indeed, crude dramas, mimes, and parodies of tragedy flourished in southern Italy at just the time of this diplomatic outrage. The tale of a major Hellenic port city’s low amusements and poor diplomatic conduct, lack of official and unofficial hospitality, in a city allied with Rome’s antagonist Pyrrhus, also helped to justify (for Romans and their Greek apologists) Roman retaliation.

The antecedents of the next ominous word incident, occurring at Tarentum ca. 282 B.C., are obscure. Thurii, hostile to the Tarentines, invited the Romans to intervene on the Italian instep. The Roman contingent and their Thurian allies lost one battle, but the Romans gained various nearby allies who resented Tarentine power and interference. L. Valerius Flaccus (or Cornelius) led ten ships, for no good reason that apologists could invent, beyond the Lacinian Promontory, a limit of Roman action and political sphere in the standing, valid treaty of 302 B.C. The Tarentines had reason to believe their treaty rights had been violated. The Romans needed excuses for incursions.

In the first (improbable) incident, filled with wine at Dionysus’ theatraic festival, the Tarentines attacked a Roman naval fleet that had entered their harbor. The Roman commander’s flagship was defeated and sunk by “drunken” Greeks; five other Roman ships were sunk or captured also (Dion. Hal. 19.4, Dio fr.39.5, Zon. 8.2). This grievance soon led to L. Postumius Megellus’ embassy to Tarentum (282/1), despatched to demand reparations for the diplomatic incident and otherwise to threaten appropriately violent responses. The city magistrates first rebuffed the ambassadors’ desire to address the people (App. Samn. 7). Eventually, the authorities permitted the legates to speak in the theater—the regular venue for both comic drama and civic assembly. The Tarentines, amused [drunk again?] at the Romans’ odd togas with their purple stripe, mocked their solecistic attempts to express themselves in Greek. Oblivious to looming danger, they called the Romans

“barbarians” and expelled them without providing satisfaction for their damages.

A boorish wag named Philonides, nicknamed Κοτόλη, taunted the diplomatically sacrosanct Roman delegate Postumius. He bared his buttocks and then reportedly defecated on the supposedly immune (ἱερᾶς) toga of the diplomat. His antics delight the light-hearted assembled citizens: they laugh and clap as if at an entertainment. The outrageous acts mimic stereotypical behaviors of drunkards in Phlyax dramas. These buffoonish and often obscene dramas mocked heroic pretensions and pompous characters, as Philonides perhaps intended. Philonides is described as a “babbler,” σπερμολόγος, a term known from farce and comedy. The burlesque quality of

58 That is, “Abuse-Lover, nicknamed Little Tanker-Man,” one of several known Tarentine tell-tale names; cf. Wuilleumier, Tarente 175.

59 Was this crude abuse, βωμολογία, a visual pun on the anatomical “behind,” the Roman diplomat’s name? Cf. Latin nates, Greek νότος, and English “posterior.” Bilingual puns were common in antiquity.

60 Granted the intensification of the outrage by the official “protected” nature of the diplomatic embassy, other excremental insults are known in the ancient city. Diogenes the Cynic urinated on interlocutors and spat in their faces (Diog. Laert. 6.46, 56, 32). The soldier Conon and his sons poured piss-pots and urinated on his fellow soldier Ariston’s servants (Dem. 54.4, τὰς ἀμίδας κατεσκεδάσσαν καὶ προσεσώρουν). Old Comedy is full of such pre-emptive and retaliatory actions.

61 Gravissimas ibi iniurias, Val. Max. 2.2.5, who specifies urination—more logical and likely.

62 Christopher Barnes, “Inventing an Insult?” (American Philological Assoc. meeting of 1998), compared Polybius 1.6.5 (σελέξεια) and Appian Samn. 7 on this incident. Appian describes this joker as a comical character fond of hostile insults (ἐνερ γέλαιος καὶ φιλοσκόμμων, 7.2); cf. Theophr. Char. 11.2, the “obnoxious man.” Wuilleumier, Tarente 104, already had reached the verdict describing the incident as an ancient roman: “l’análnistique … s’est plue à … grossir cette scène tragi-comique, en opposant la dignité des Romains à l’orgueil licencieux des Grecs.” Non liquet, in the presence of Roman apologetics for their treaty violation.

63 The name of the genre itself may refer to “talking nonsense,” φλανάρειν (so Hesychius; cf. Bieber, History 129). See e.g. Dem. 18.127, Ath. 85F, for the dismissive, faintly obscene term. Epicharmus of Syracuse(?) mentioned the granivorous, seed-picking jackdaw (Ath. 65B, 398D [PCGr I FF 42, 85])
the reportedly historical acts, however and unfortunately, cannot decide their historicity.

(6) The soiled Roman was dramatically humiliated in the Tarentine theater-assembly. Postumius retorts in two ways to the Assembly’s *hybris* or *contumelia*, the thrice repeated denigrating affront (ὑβρισμένην ἐσθήτα, the Greeks τὴν υβριν ἐπαυνοντών, the Romans ὑβρισθέντες). First, Postumius declared recognition of a wordless unintended omen: “We accept the omen” (δεχόμεθα τὸν οἰονόν, Dion. Hal. 19.5.3). The divination-adept Roman magistrate publicly manipulated Philonides’ name, “Insult-lover,” and/or his secular insult. He rendered the disfavor a convenient, non-negotiable sacred sign favorable to himself. He then stated that the Tarentines were giving something that had not been requested (ὅτι καὶ τὰ μὴ αἰτούμενο δίδοτε ἡμῖν) — an unintentionally ominous indication (by word or act) that foretells (and justifies) Roman retaliation against impiety and unprovoked aggression. Roman polite

before we find it Aristophanes (Av. 232, 579) and Alexis of Thurii (?) in South Italy (Ath. 344c [PCGr II T 12]). Both Rhinthon and Sciras, two of the few known authors of so-called Phylakes, usually South Italian comic skits, are reported in late sources (perhaps more for their works’ content than from biographical data) as Tarentines (PCGr I, Rhinton TT 1–2, Sciras T 1). Dionysius, in the extant portions of his lengthy history of Republican Rome, employs this word only three times, all to describe ill-mannered Tarentines (19.4.2, 5.2, 5.3). This probably reflects a source who shared the anti-hedonistic prejudices against the loose-living, luxury-loving city. The scurrilous word rarely occurs in Hellenic literature of any period (ninety “hits” altogether in the TLG), aside from its respectable and descriptive avian contexts and Christian commentators on Acts 17:18 (a view of Paul). See, however, the comments of Eustathius explaining *Odyssey* 1.233.

64 The patrician L. Postumius Megellus, cos. 305, 294, 291, was a colorful figure. His clansman descendant, Sp. Postumius Albinus, cos. 186, investigated the Bacchanalians, a fact perhaps suggesting that religious interests ran in the family (A. Eckstein per litt.).

65 Cf. a similarly quick divinatory retort of the future Macedonian king Perdiccas (Hdt. 8.137.5): δεχόμεθα, ὃ βασιλεύ, τὰ δίδοτε. The acceptance of the *kledon* clinches his succession. The Latin equivalent for Roman omen-grasping was *accipimus quod datur* (Val. Max. 1.5 ext. 2, the Apolloniates).
words are destined to lead to excremental offense on the foe. Postumius thus translates the Tarentine “Insult-lover’s” excretory gesture of injury that he added to verbal insult: Just as your citizen rebuffs the Romans with an offensive refusal, so you must suffer humiliating military offense from the Romans. That is, shit-insults fall on you. One could always try to force a meaning on another’s casual utterance or act. Men might ex-tort or seek fatal utterances or actions.\footnote{See Halliday, \textit{Divination} 47, 229–230, on the biblical 1 Sam. 14:12.}

Secondly, Postumius responds to his opponents’ laughter, visible endorsement of diplomatic outrage. “Laugh now while you can, because you will weep later,” and he prophesies (ἐπιθεσίσαντες) grim retaliation: “You will wash clean my toga with much of your blood” (Dion. Hal. 19.5.4). They will pay for their excreted wine with tears and blood, not water, a heady collocation of human uses of symbolic liquids.

The Roman Senate, when apprised of the sacrosanct ambassador’s foul abasement by his report and their sight of the stinking cloak, a speaking object (Dion. Hal. 19.6.1, ὑβρισὶ ἄς ἔσαν ὑβρισμένοι), voted at once to declare war (Liv. Per. 12; Dion. Hal. 19.6); the people ratified this decision. The Tarentines voted to ally with Rome’s antagonist Pyrrhus. Meton, a local politician, now danced into a political assembly again summoned in the theater, dressed like a drunken reveller (19.8 ὀσπερ ἐκ σωμασίου, the third incident involving topers) and accompanied by a flute-girl, as in a private \textit{komos}. His rationale for the scene was to gain his countrymen’s amused attention. Having succeeded, he warned the people against alliance with Pyrrhus because that ruler—one way or another—would put a stop to their drinking bouts. He said, in a phrase clearly echoing Postumius’ threat, because the end of festivals was approaching: “Revel while you can” (παίζειν καὶ κομάζειν ἕως ἔξεστι, Plut. \textit{Pyrr}. 13.3–5, cf. Dion. Hal. 19.8). While Meton cautioned his countrymen in a third alcoholic \textit{scène burlesque},\footnote{Wuilleumier, \textit{Tarente} 105, aptly mentions a parallel earlier wise and warning advisor, also named Meton, an Athenian seer of 415 B.C. (Plut. \textit{Nic}. 13). This fact favors suspicions of fabrication.} L. Aemilius Barbula began to devastate their territory. After
Pyrrhus decamped from Italy, the Romans besieged Tarentum and its citadel, and eventually captured them (272 B.C.). Penalties, as prophetically predicted, amounted to “more” than the original compensation demanded: accept a garrison, give hostages, pay tribute, and, finally, lose the Tarentine colony Heracleia and their general South Italian hegemony.68

Conclusions

We have detailed an ancient diplomatic technique, reflected in a rare topos in ancient historiography: the “useful” omen (usually verbal) identified as heaven-sent by an angry or anxious authority figure. A usually Spartan (4) or Roman (2) diplomat, official, or king employs a seemingly chance occurrence that endorses his intention and enables him to pursue his chosen policy. The event opens a new campaign and indeed justifies it. A façade of piety conceals personal anger and community aggression. The standard phrasing and rhythm of Herodotus 9.9169 reappear in the text of Dionysius Ant.Rom. 19.5:70 δέχομαι τὸν οἰονόν, ὥ Σάμιε ξέινε, finds echo in δεξόμεθα [δεξόμεθα Σύλβουργ] τὸν οἰονόν, ὥ σπερμολόγε.71 These

68 Dion. Hal. 19.7–8; Wuilleumier, Tarente 133–141.

69 Comparable Herodotean language in acceptances of ambiguous blessings elsewhere: Peisistratus (1.63), Perdiccas (8.137.5). Relevant Latin examples of the acceptance of verbal omens include Liv. 1.7, 5.55, 9.14.8, 29.27.12; Verg. Aen. 2.178, 190, 5.530, Val. Max. 1.5 (Halliday, Divination 46ff.).

70 As the Augustan author admired his Classical countryman (Thuc. 5), Dionysius’ description of an omen-affected diplomatic incident at Tarentum may intentionally resemble his predecessor’s ominous diplomatic confrontations at Aegina and Delos. A. Momigliano, “The Place of Herodotus in the History of Historiography,” Studies in Historiography (New York 1966) 127–142, observes that Dionysius was the only ancient historian never to criticize Herodotus. Felton, Phoenix 52 (1998) 45–48, discusses an indubitable parallel, previously noted, between the Halicarnassian historians, which Dionysius himself makes explicit. The exiled tyrant Tarquin’s advice to his tyrant son Sextus imitates the tyrant Thrasybulus’ agriculturally coded nonverbal advice to his tyrannical colleague Periander: decapitate noble competitors (Hdt. 5.92z, Dion. Hal. 4.56).

71 The unintendedly ominous signs may differ, in that the Herodotean and Ciceronian examples are nakedly naming omena (nomen atque omen: Plaut.
parallel sequences transcend extemporaneous humor. They embody a religious and diplomatic ploy—a religious formulaic activity practicable in international affairs. The wit is divinatory skill and not just banal “wise-guy” retorting.

To call oionos/kledon or omen on someone is, at the least, to “work a psychological ju-jitsu” (A. Eckstein per litt.). This was a technique of responsive public aggression to foes on Aegina and at Tarentum; at Delos calling kledon among allies preempted possibly divisive public discussion. “Normal” supernatural omens emanate from the gods, ready or not, often at oracular shrines. Although one can prepare oneself to inquire and approach them to receive a response, and even return for a second try (Hdt. 7.141), one cannot conveniently choose the words—as with kledones.

The already divided and disputing Athenians analyzing the “wooden walls” of the Delphic response (an oracle, privileged ominous speech), could “spin” the answer (Hdt. 7.142–143) but not change the fatal words. Interpretation is already a type of human interference, but kledon or other accidental omen recognition offers humans more control. “I accept the surprise omen” means “I turn this accident into an omen in my favor.” Such human attempts occur every day, but historians can only read about successful interventions and then only after the event. Divine-human currents flow both ways (e.g., portents and prayers). Believers might say that the gods admire human ingenuity, that the gods enjoy the human transformation of accidents into omens, making them confirm one’s cause for the omen-caller and his allies. In the examples examined here, from the Odyssey on, quick-witted responses make things happen. The prophet should direct the future, not merely foretell it, Agamemnon complained about Calchas. Ancient leaders took advantage of chance information, acts, or human ex-

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*Pers.* 625), while the Dionysian may be verbal by implication or an “action omen”—or both. The Tarentine example has Postumius twist the interpretation of the insulter’s name or low insult into a favorable omen in order to save Roman pride and to determine the gods’ actions.

Il. 1.108; quoted by Halliday, *Divination* 53.
pressions intended otherwise, to direct the future, to further their interests.\footnote{Professor Arthur Eckstein significantly improved this study, first fleshed out at the Center for Hellenic Studies, Washington, D.C. I thank Professors Kurt Raaflaub and Deborah Boedeker, then the Center’s co-directors, for hospitality, incisive comments, and encouragement. The faults remain my own.}

\textit{October, 2004}

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