agreeables evaporate by being in close contact with beauty and truth. So it was with the Greeks: accepting without question the physical basis of life, they were therefore able to raise and rarefy it. The lyric poet Alcman, by birth a Lydian, left the fragment of a poem lamenting his lost youth. 'Girls,' he says (to translate the lines into bare prose), 'girls with honey-sweet voices which speak of love, my limbs no longer bear me up. Would I were a gull, the sea-dark bird of spring, flying with careless heart over the blossom of the waves.' What makes these lines so essentially Greek, in their passion and restraint—the one being the complement of the other—is the coolness of the imagery, which yet carries its full effect. It is the memory of girls' *voices* which holds for the poet his vanished pleasures: and then, after the first lament, comes the image of the gull, so cool, so remote, so disembodied, yet relevant and revealing. To have this quality of feeling—and it is common in the early Greek poets—is, to borrow an English poet's phrase, to live in eternity's sunrise. The secret of it is irrecoverable today by us, who are so much more civilised than ever the Greeks were. Perhaps we know too much, or too many of the wrong things; perhaps we *have* too much, and consequently get confused in our values; perhaps having discovered more sources of guilt than the Greeks were aware of, we wrap our experiences in so many folds of anxious and half-conscious moralising that they can only with difficulty struggle through. The Greek playwrights have many a song in which the singer prays that love, if it comes, may come benignly and without his destroying fires; but how puzzled they would have been by the theme and treatment of eighty per cent of modern fiction. It would have seemed to them an inordinate fuss about nothing.

'When I wake in the morning,' said D. H. Lawrence, 'and say to myself, "I wish I were rich", I know that my vitality is low.' Lawrence made a number of sensible remarks in the course of his voluminous works, and that is not the least sensible of them. Possibly it might serve as a starting-point for a study of ancient Greece. It is one of the objects of this book to observe this quality, this unimpaired appetite for life, in the Greeks of the ancient Mediterranean world, on the mainland, in the islands, in Sicily and Southern Italy, on the coasts of Anatolia and the Black Sea, and to consider what they achieved by the help of it. Herodotus will be my friendly guide.

CHAPTER 6

Scepticism and Credulity in Herodotus

ONE WAY IN WHICH THE ARTIST DIFFERS FROM THE REST OF US IS that he knows better than we do what to leave out. A sculptor, knowing which bits of stone are irrelevant to his purpose, chips them away. Knowledge of what to leave out makes the difference between a good talker or a successful raconteur and a bore; between a good book and a ragbag of information or gossip. A good book may deal with all sorts of peripheral matters, but the reader perceives, or comes in the end to perceive, that the line they follow is indeed a periphery—the circumference of a circle which, by the nature of things, has a centre.

The Greeks possessed this knowledge in a high degree. We commonly call it a sense of form, which is as good a term as any. It was the sense which led their first philosophers to seek a single principle underlying the bewildering multiplicity of the visible world; it was the cause of their delight in the beautiful shapeliness of mathematics—NO ONE ADMITTED, said the notice over the door of Plato's Academy, WHO HAS NOT STUDIED GEOMETRY. It was one cause, also, and not the least important, of the excellence of their best literature. The best Greek writers did not over-elaborate or fluff; they said what they wanted to say, clearly and directly, and left it at that, assuming that readers would take their point. The assumption would perhaps be a rasher one today than it was then, for modern readers are jaded and need artificial, or artful, stimulus to keep them awake. They too often want what might be called emotional rhetoric, as well as verbal rhetoric: it is not always safe for a modern writer, if he hopes to hold attention, to leave things alone. He is tempted to make mountains out of what for a Greek would have been a molehill, a spiced dish for what would have been a plain Greek loaf. This leads some modern readers to fancy that Greek literature is cold—a great mistake. It has a cool surface, but that is a very different thing. The molten earth has a cool surface too.

The moon is down
And the Pleiades;

It is midnight and the hour has passed;
Yet I sleep alone.

In that lyric of Sappho's the irrelevant bits of stone have been chipped away indeed. A single image suffices: moon-set—hope-set.

Herodotus, as I have already said, had no literary guides to follow, and the scope and contents of his book, containing, as it does, such a mass of miscellaneous information on any subject likely to interest an inquiring mind, would tend to make it formless, at any rate in the hands of a less competent artist. All the more remarkable is the skill with which he has succeeded in subduing this heterogeneous material to the service of his central theme. His sun, so to speak, has sufficient power of attraction to keep his unruly planets in orbit. The opening sentence announces his theme: 'In this book, the result of my inquiries into history, I hope to do two things: to preserve the memory of the past by putting on record the astonishing achievements both of our own and of the Asiatic peoples; secondly, and more particularly, to show how the two races came into conflict.' That sentence, though it stands at the beginning, was certainly not the first to be written; for there can be little doubt as I have said that Herodotus began by intending to amplify the work of the logographers and to produce separate accounts of the various countries which he included in his travels. But suddenly, it seems, perhaps when much was already written, by a flash of inspiration, or simply by that innate Greek sense of form and shapeliness which in Herodotus was as vigorous as in any other Greek writer or artist, he saw his work as an organised whole. The unruly planets began in his mind to circle obediently about their sun.

The scheme of the book is very simple. Herodotus begins with an account of Lydia, the first foreign power to come into direct contact with the Asiatic Greeks; the defeat of Croesus, the last King of Lydia, by Cyrus the Great of Persia brings him on to the road which leads straight to the climax of his story—the triumphant struggle of little and divided Greece against the vast resources of the Persian empire under Darius and Xerxes. The description of the rapid growth of Persian power serves a double

purpose: first historical, as it enables the historian to tell what he knows of the various countries—Egypt, Babylonia, Scythia (portions of southern Russia), North Africa, the more easterly of the Aegean islands—which were invaded or subdued by the successive Persian Kings; and, secondly, dramatic, as by building up stage by stage in the reader's mind a sense of the sheer physical magnitude of this Empire which controlled half the known world, it thereby increases the impact of the climax of the story, which is the successful resistance to it of the tiny country of Greece. This, the 'more particular' theme of the history, the account, namely, of how the two great civilisations of the East and of the West came into conflict, is worked out in a narrative of beautiful clarity and balance, and at the same time flexible enough to admit subsidiary matter of almost infinite variety and degree of interest. Digression, with Herodotus, is not a vice but a virtue: 'I need not apologise for it,' he says, 'it has been my plan throughout this book to put down odd bits of information not directly connected with my main subject.' Any reader will agree that he had no need to apologise; the 'odd bits of information' may not, indeed, be directly connected with Herodotus' main subject, but—and a reader who fails to see this has not been reading Herodotus as he ought to be read—they form an essential part of the self-revelation which lies behind all truly imaginative writing—behind 'books of power' (to repeat De Quincey's distinction) as opposed to 'books of knowledge.' What a man sees is determined not by his eyes only but by the quality of his mind, and Herodotus' mind was a very subtle as well as a very capacious one. Like all great writers, behind and beyond his ostensible theme, he was writing indirectly of himself, and it is that self—warm, humorous, humane; rational and credulous by turns; curious and kindly, daringly speculative, undismayed by the brutality and beastliness of men, and always *on the side of life*—which gives Herodotus' book its other—its personal—unity. Ultimately this is a question of style. Few writers less resemble Herodotus than the seventeenth century Bishop Burnet; but I am reminded of the bishop because of what Charles Lamb once said in connection with him, when he compared his sort of history favourably with that of Gibbon: 'None,' wrote Lamb to his friend Manning, 'of the cursed philosophical Humeian indifference, so cold, and unnatural, and inhuman! None of

the cursed Gibbonian fine writing, so fine and composite!' There is no cursed Gibbonian fine writing in Herodotus either. Herodotus' changes of mood are as subtle as his perceptions of men; with his beautiful bare narrative he can tickle the fancy, inflame the imagination, or touch the heart.

Underlying Herodotus' delight in the kaleidoscope of human life is the characteristic Greek pessimism. Only in Homer, of all Greek writers, is this fundamental pessimism not discernible, though even in him the life of men in the sunlit world gets half its brilliance from the sense of its brevity and the ever-present darkness of death. In Homer's world, full though it was of death, violence and blood, men had no speculative burdens; in it there is an innocence of thought almost childlike. The gods have been almost wholly humanised. Immortal and powerful, they nevertheless act from motives precisely like those which move ourselves, and a Homeric hero, to get or keep a god on his side, had to treat him precisely as he would treat a friend or enemy: he had to pay him the honour that was his due, in word, or in the giving of a gift, or in acceptable sacrifice. Homer's fighting chieftains could, one feels, have got on perfectly well without any gods at all; but, as old tales told them that there were, indeed, such beings, they re-formed them in fancy to suit their own ardent unspeculative lives. The Homeric religion, if it can be called a religion, seems, in its complete divorce from morality, divine justice and a sense of sin, to have sprung, unlike all other religions, from a transitory morning of self-confidence and self-sufficiency, and not at all from the almost universal consciousness of the mysterious and inexplicable powers which, for good or ill, menace or sustain the little life of men.

But the morning passed; we see it passing in the poems of dour old Hesiod; and what I called the characteristic Greek pessimism took its place. The Greeks were a religious people and carried religious observance into the commonest acts of daily life to a degree hardly imaginable by a modern man. Families and states looked for protection to their special and peculiar gods, called by local names and often fragmentations, as it were, of the official Olympian hierarchy. But the Greeks had no established priesthood and no sacred book, and hence no body of religious teaching. Their religious observances tended always to be more in the nature of propitiation than of worship, except perhaps in

the mystery cults of which few details are available to us. Fear of God was universal; of the love of God they knew nothing. The notion of a benevolent and all-powerful deity, the sense found in Judaism and Christianity of the 'everlasting arms', was utterly foreign to Greek thought. Hence their pessimism. Life, for a Greek, was to be enjoyed or endured—if the gods would let him. Orphism, indeed, taught a kind of immortality; but for the Greeks in general death was the end. The recurrent image for death in Greek poetry is the loss of the sunlight—to see the sun no more, to go down into the dark. It is strange that the Greeks with their philosophic passion for first principles did not move more quickly towards monotheism. There is a groping after it in the tragic poet Aeschylus, Herodotus' elder contemporary—'Zeus, power unknown . . . when I weigh all things, I can guess at nothing but Zeus, if the burden of vanity is to be cast off from my soul . . .'—but Aeschylus' one God, even if his guess is right, is still a harsh and malevolent power, forcing men to learn the truth by pain. It was Plato, early in the fourth century, who with his rejection of the sensible world and his pursuit of the ideal—of 'beauty absolute, separate, simple and everlasting, without diminution or increase or change'—who marked the end of the old classical Greece and offered much which could later be absorbed into Christian theology.

In Herodotus there is nothing of all this, though the religious colouring of his mind is, like everything else in him, full of delicate shades. In religious matters he is at once curious and credulous. Everyone, he says, naturally—and rightly—thinks that the beliefs and observances in which he has been brought up are the best. He himself was no exception, though it should be noted that this very way of putting it suggests a broad tolerance and a refusal to claim absolute validity for any one system of belief, even his own. The gods, in Herodotus' view and in that of his time generally, were not all-powerful; like men they were subject to a mysterious something called Fate—the Greek word, *moira*, means 'the dealer-out of portions'—or to the same thing under another name, Necessity. The power of Fate was unsearchable, though a certain pattern in its operations upon human affairs could be seen. It was Fate, not the Gods, which brought retribution, and the crime which more than any other called retribution down was Pride—that self-exaltation which led a

man in the moment of success to 'think more than mortal thoughts'. The idea was deeply characteristic of the Greeks, and sprang, obviously enough, from the insecurity of life in the ancient world, an insecurity more immediate, insistent and universal than any that has until recently menaced the world today, and, at the same time, from the passion which was innate in the Greek character for personal distinction and power. The Greeks knew that they wanted inordinate things—and knew at the same time that such things were dangerous: Fate would see to it that the too prosperous man would one day lose his prosperity. The gods were jealous gods: hence the insistence upon (combined with the very rare practice of) the virtue of 'moderation'—on the necessity for *sophrosyne*, or 'saving thoughts', the kind of thoughts which do not let a man step out of the sphere which is proper to him. If he does, Fate, the Sharer-out, will give him sooner or later what he deserves.

Herodotus' book is full of this sense of Fate, of the watchful and jealous power of this Necessity, which broods like a shadow over the struggles, toils, triumphs and adventures of men and cities. It gives an added depth to the brilliant and varied scene played out on the human stage, linking it with a mystery beyond itself. The whole story of Croesus, one of the most moving and beautiful in the book, is heavy with it—'count no man happy until he is dead.' With a different effect, almost with a touch of implied irony, it is the hinge upon which turns the well-known story of Polycrates of Samos and the ring, his dearest possession, which he proved unable to lose. 'Not God himself,' said the priestess at Delphi, 'can escape Destiny;' and no man, however great, can escape punishment for pride.

Fate, too, is more than the punisher: it is the ultimate power which determines the course of human events; it sets the bounds within which a man can act. A man is free to act, or seems to be free, but the end of his action is ordained. The pattern of life belongs to Fate. 'Now I know,' said the Persian King Cambyses when he was near his miserable end, 'that it is not in human power to avert what is to be.' Yet, with a touch of inconsistency perhaps, we are constantly shown how this same Necessity is prepared to give poor mortals a chance by sending them warnings of coming disaster in the shape of dreams, or portents, or whatever it may be. 'There is nearly always,' Herodotus writes, 'a warning of some

kind when disaster is about to overtake a city or a nation'; and he goes on to relate how, before the island of Chios fell to Histiaeus and the Persians, the people of the island had sent a choir of a hundred young men to Delphi, and that all but two of them had died of the plague, while at almost the same time, in the island's chief town, the roof of a school had fallen in and killed all but one of the hundred and twenty children who were learning their letters there. Both these events, Herodotus adds, were acts of God to forewarn the people of Chios. But what could they have done about it, had they taken the warning? The question comes to mind, but it is an idle one, for we are not dealing here with anything like a systematic or philosophical scheme of belief, but only with an inherited and ancient *sense* of things, with a kind of primitive awe which is the stuff out of which theologies come to be made, with a recognition, instinctive rather than reasoned, of the dependence of men upon a shaping power the nature of which is beyond their understanding. It is one of the charms of Greek literature and of Herodotus in particular that it is the work of men whose religious beliefs have not hardened into dogma: of men with quick minds and quicker senses who do not pretend to understand the incomprehensible: who, filled with awe by the invisible, with delight by the visible, can still turn upon human destiny a speculative and wondering eye.

Retribution and the fear of retribution is a recurring idea in Greek literature. Often the retribution is delayed; but punishment for sin, hobbling on its lame foot after its victim, catches him at last, even in the third or fourth generation. The theme of inherited guilt, of the family curse, is frequent in Greek tragic drama; it is a symbol, no doubt, and a powerful one, of what must in the dawn of things have been the disturbing discovery that no fact or act ever is, or can be, isolated; a deed is a pebble dropped into a pond, and the concentric rings spread wide. Croesus was a good man and a good King, friendly on the whole towards Greece; but he came to grief and was dethroned. Why?—because, Herodotus says, he had to expiate in the fifth generation the crime of his ancestor Gyges, a mere soldier in the royal bodyguard, who, tempted by a woman's treachery, murdered his master and stole the crown to which he had no claim. Gyges had long been dead, but his guilt lived after him. Again, in his account of Egypt, Herodotus relates how he heard from certain Egyptian priests

a different story from the one which Homer told about the abduction of Helen: according to them, when the Greeks landed in the Troad and sent envoys to King Priam to demand the restoration of Helen, they were assured that she was not in Troy at all but had gone to Egypt. Thinking this to be a merely frivolous answer, the Greeks laid siege to the town and ultimately sacked it. But the story was true none the less, and 'I do not hesitate to declare,' Herodotus wrote, 'that the refusal of the Greeks to believe it was inspired by providence, in order that their utter destruction might plainly prove to mankind that sin is always visited by condign punishment at the hands of God. That, at least, is my own belief.'

The word 'sin' in the last sentence needs some comment. 'Sin' has no word in Greek which exactly corresponds to it. Greek has many words of reproach to express the things which they felt a man should not do, but those things were not by any means in every case what we should describe as sinful. Of the seven deadly sins of Christian doctrine—Pride, Envy, Wrath, Sloth, Avarice, Gluttony, Lust—six, in the Greek view, would have been called *hamartiae*—errors, or 'bad shots'—worthy, perhaps, of reproof from a teacher of virtue, but even so mainly because indulgence in them might spoil the proper balance and satisfaction of a man's life. The only one which a Greek would have recognised as 'sinful' in anything like our sense of the word is Pride—and even that must be understood in a somewhat different sense from ours. The Greeks called it *hubris*, and it meant, as I have already suggested, a failure of that proper subordination, a breaking of that due order of things, upon which life in this world is, and must be, founded. The act of presumption may be against other men, or against the gods: in each case it brings certain punishment.

'Revenge and wrong,' wrote Aeschylus (the translation is Shelley's) 'bring forth their kind

> The foul cubs like their parents are;
> Their den is in the guilty mind,
> And conscience feeds them with despair.'

When Pheron was on the throne of Egypt, it so happened that the Nile, one year, rose too high, and the excessive floods, accompanied by gales, did much damage. In sudden rage Pheron seized

a spear and hurled it into the swirling waters—the sacred waters, for all rivers were in part divine. For the act of presumption the Pharaoh lost his sight. Herodotus' book is full of such stories of the perils of pride—pride of wealth, pride of power, pride of success, and, deadliest of all, the pride which leads a man to forget that he is a nothing in the sight of the gods. This is Herodotus' fundamental morality, and it is not ignoble. Incidentally though the Greeks took to most vices (except gluttony) as a duck takes to water, of *accidie*, at any rate, I do not think any Greek before the fourth century would have been capable.

In all this Herodotus was a man of his time, as he also was in his belief in oracles and in the significance of dreams and omens. In a general way, that is: for one can never be sure with Herodotus whether or not, when one is listening to him telling some tale, one is going to catch at the end of it a hint of half-subdued yet mocking laughter. Popular legend comes in for much amused and rational criticism; there is, for instance, his pleasant comment on the supposed origin of the oracle of Zeus at Dodona. The three priestesses—and Herodotus duly records their names—who served the temple told him that two black doves, long ago, flew away from Thebes in Egypt and that one of them alighted at Dodona, the other in Libya. The former, perched on an oak, and speaking with a human voice, told whoever was there to hear that on that spot there should be an oracle of Zeus. The mystic words were understood to be a command from heaven, and were at once obeyed. Similarly the dove which flew to Libya told the Libyans to found the oracle of Zeus Ammon in the Libyan desert. So much for the legend. Herodotus, however, had previously heard from certain Egyptian priests that a party of Phoenician marauders had, in the distant past, carried off two women from the temple of the Theban Zeus; these they sold, one in Libya, the other in Greece, and it was these women who founded the two oracles. Putting the two stories together, Herodotus goes on to suggest that if there is any truth in the Egyptian version, then the woman who was sold in Greece must have been sold to the Thesprotians, in whose territory Dodona lies; later, while she was working as a slave in that part of the country, she built, under an oak which happened to be growing there, a shrine to Zeus, remembering in her exile the god she had served in her native Thebes. Subsequently, when she had

learnt to speak Greek, she established an oracle there. As for the doves, Herodotus adds, 'the story came, I should say, from the fact that the women were foreigners, whose language sounded to the local inhabitants like the twittering of birds; later on the dove spoke with a human voice, because by that time the woman had stopped twittering and learned to speak intelligibly. That at least is how I should explain the obvious impossibility of a dove using the language of men.'

It has always to be remembered that ancient Greek legends and myths, like the legends and myths of all ancient peoples, were not fairy stories. They were believed as historically true, and it is precisely this universal popular acceptance of them as historical fact which throws into relief, for us, the first beginnings of a rational criticism of them. To call Herodotus a rationalist would be untrue and absurd; he shared much too deeply in the general temper of his times. Nevertheless, he asked questions; and, as I have said, one never quite knows what direction his questions will take, and the fact that he can keep us in this uncertainty is not the least interesting aspect of his wide-ranging and many-shaded mind. Does he, or does he not, believe in the significance of dreams? I have suggested that he does; and there are plenty of passages in his book where he gravely tells of some dream whose warning was all too true—the very odd dream, for instance, which Astyages dreamed of his daughter Mandane. Suddenly, however, he will appear to take another look at the whole business, and to smile at his own credulity. In the splendid passage of the seventh Book, recording the conversation between Xerxes and Artabanus before Xerxes had decided upon the invasion of Greece, we are told of the King's ominous dream and how, in doubt and fear, he went to Artabanus, his uncle, for advice upon its meaning. In the course of his reply the old man assured him that dreams do not, as men imagine, come from God. 'I, who am older than you by many years, will tell you what these visions are that float before our eyes in sleep: nearly always these drifting phantoms are the shadows of what we have been thinking about during the day; and during the days before your dream we were, you know, very much occupied with this campaign. Nevertheless it is possible that your dream cannot be explained as I have explained it: perhaps there is, indeed, something divine in it . . .'

Those were two Persians, not two Greeks, talking together; but the thoughts are Herodotus' thoughts. It is true, indeed, that the story goes on to tell how Artabanus, persuaded to sleep that night in the king's bed, himself dreamed a dream of similar import and was thereby convinced of its divine provenance. Nevertheless, the question has been slipped quietly in.

Another instance is Herodotus' comment on a popular belief of the Egyptians, a belief quite consonant with ordinary Greek feeling. Cambyses the Persian king after his conquest of Egypt, committed in that country numerous acts of outrageous cruelty and beastliness, which culminated in his wantonly sticking a dagger into the thigh of the sacred bull, Apis. The wound festered, the bull died, and Cambyses went mad. According to the Egyptians his madness was a divine punishment for his impious act, and, says Herodotus, perhaps it was; 'nevertheless,' he adds, 'it may have been the result of any one of the many maladies which afflict mankind, and there is, in fact, a story that Cambyses suffered from birth from a serious complaint, epilepsy; there would then be nothing strange in the fact that a serious physical malady should have affected his brain.' Again and again we hear Herodotus quietly putting forward the proposition—sometimes with a smile, sometimes with a hint of irony, most often with the sheer pleasure of intelligent curiosity—that there are, indeed, 'more things in heaven and earth . . .'—and especially, perhaps, on earth, as for him at any rate it was the more interesting place of the two. Is it not, he seems to ask, at least possible, in attempting to account for such or such a phenomenon, to leave the gods out of it for once, and to find, perhaps, some cause in human psychology or in the forces of nature? The case of Thessaly, for instance, which was once a vast lake ringed round by mountains, but is now a plain, good for horses, and drained by the River Peneus flowing out through the gorge of Tempe—*was* it Poseidon, Shaker of Earth, who, as men say, split asunder those enclosing hills? Or could it have been an earthquake?

Herodotus would not at all have approved of the remarks of Xenophanes about the gods; he was happy enough in the religion of his race, though he used to the full the opportunities of incidental comment and criticism which a religion like the Greek, lacking as it did any sacred scripture or body of doctrine, rendered available to whoever chose to use them. The nature and accent

of these comments, flickering like summer lightning over a mind fundamentally reverential and steeped in tradition, is one of the things which constitute the incalculable originality of Herodotus' book.

Herodotus has been taken to task for his credulity about oracles, and there is some justice in the charge. It is important, however, to clear away a very common misconception about the nature and function of the Greek oracles, especially of Apollo's oracle at Delphi which was the most generally respected. Contrary to what many people suppose, the least important function of the oracle was to foretell the future, or to exercise any sort of magical or superhuman power of prevision. Its responses were, indeed, given by the God, through the mouth of his Priestess inspired by him—or perhaps, at Delphi, inspired by certain gases which are said to have arisen through a cleft in the mountain, or even by some sort of self-induced frenzy aided by the ancient and numinous associations of the place; and they were usually delivered in archaic, and often ambiguous, terms, couched in hexameter verse, all of which no doubt added something to their apparent weight and solemnity. But—and this is the point—behind the imposing façade erected by a very ancient tradition and kept in being by a continuing sense of religious awe, there was, in fact, a highly competent, and wholly human, organisation. The Delphic oracle acted as a kind of Central Information Bureau for the whole of Greece, and even beyond—for we hear of Asiatic princes, Gyges, for instance, and Alyattes and Croesus, sending gifts to adorn the temple at Delphi and asking Apollo for advice. The organisation seems on the whole to have been most efficient, and information on political and other matters from all parts of the civilised world was carefully collected. Precisely how it was collected we do not know; but there were numerous oracles both in Greece and in Asia Minor (Apollo alone had twenty-two), and it seems pretty certain that the officials who served them were in constant touch with each other. The commonest type of question put to the God was not 'What will happen?' but 'What, in the present circumstances, is the best, or safest, course to take?' To consult the oracle meant not so much to ask for a revelation as to seek advice. No colony, or new settlement, for instance, was ever sent out by the parent city until the oracle had been consulted about the suitability of the proposed site; for the 'oracle-service'—if one may use so irreverent a term—was much more likely to have useful and accurate information about conditions in a distant part of the world, say in the far West or on the Black Sea coast or in North Africa, than any of the people at home who had travelled little, if at all. Information of this kind was, quite obviously, of solid value. The oracle was also asked for its advice on procedure in all sorts of tricky situations, both public and private; and in these cases its answer was not dependent upon a body of carefully collected and perfectly genuine factual knowledge, but upon the general acumen and knowledge of the world of its functionaries. Politically the oracle tended to have a stabilising effect—if anything could be called stable in the Greek world—and its influence was normally used to support the existing order. At Delphi it was under the supervision of a group of distinguished Delphian families, and this fact led, naturally enough, to a certain political bias in favour of the Dorian states, of which Delphi was one. In early centuries this was probably harmless enough, but during the struggle between Athens and Sparta, which occupied the last thirty years of the fifth century, the bias became so marked—Sparta being the leading Dorian state—that by the rest of Greece the oracle's authority was no longer taken seriously and fell into general disrepute. In its religious aspect the influence of the oracle was undoubtedly good: it was believed to give its answers to anyone who came to consult it with a pure heart, and no one was supposed, if he had guilt on his conscience, to get a reply until he had made atonement.

On the whole, then, the oracle was a useful institution, and its service was performed efficiently and intelligently. Naturally it made mistakes; and frequently it was forced to express its judgements darkly and ambiguously, in order that the error, if error there was, might be laid to the interpretation of its answer, not to its own failure in knowledge. There was the well-known response, for instance, which was given to the Athenians when the Persian armies were approaching from the north with Xerxes:

> 'the wooden wall only shall not fail, but help you
> and your children.
> Divine Salamis, you will bring death to women's sons
> When the corn is scattered, or the harvest gathered in.'

What was the wooden wall? The wall of the Acropolis, or the ships of the Athenian navy? fortunately for Athens, Themistocles guessed right, but not before he had overcome strong opposition from other Athenian leaders, even from those who accepted the interpretation that the wooden wall meant the fleet—for whose sons did Apollo mean were to die at Salamis? Was Athens to fight a naval action in the straits, and be beaten? No, said Themistocles; had Apollo meant that, he would surely not have called Salamis 'divine'. And most people, if they have read Herodotus or not, will be familiar with the classic ambiguity of the Delphic oracle's advice to Croesus, who wanted to know—poor man—if it would be wise for him to make war upon Cyrus of Persia. This was indeed a tricky question, for the abilities of Cyrus had not yet by any means been fully proved. 'Fight him,' said the oracle, 'and you will destroy a mighty empire.' So Croesus did so—and destroyed his own.

I have not met with any remarks of Xenophanes about the oracle, so I do not know if he included it in his general scepticism about the Olympian religion. There is no doubt, however, that belief in the value—and divine authority—of its responses was all but universal in the Greek world, at least until the fifth century was drawing toward its close. Herodotus was no exception, and he cannot, I think, be charged with credulity when one considers the very real services which the oracle performed; on the other hand, the charge cannot be wholly suspended, because he, like most of his contemporaries, was prepared to accept its occasional sillinesses as well as its more habitual wisdom. Herodotus *liked* oracles; and he quotes a large number of them in his book, uncritically and with evident pleasure. He doesn't turn a hair at the absurd story of how Croesus tested the veracity of the various oracles before deciding which one to consult upon his major problem—how he sent envoys to each with instructions to inquire what, exactly, he was doing at a particular pre-arranged moment on a particular day. Several of the oracles, Herodotus tells us, including Delphi, answered that Croesus was boiling a tortoise in a bronze cauldron: and, strange to say, they were right. Second-sight of this sort is not, I suppose, inexplicable, granted a little collusion and hanky-panky, with perhaps the passing of a coin or two; but for Herodotus, apparently, it was second-sight indeed.

Greek religion was based not upon doctrine but upon observances and ceremonial hallowed by ancient tradition. In these matters all Greeks, with the exception of a few philosophers and free-thinkers, were traditionalists. Herodotus himself was a traditionalist, but with a difference. He treasured the tradition, but allowed himself at the same time to question it.