EXPLOITING SUPERSTITION: THE POWER OF RELIGION
IN GREEK AND ROMAN POLITICAL AND MILITARY ACTIVITY

Dennis de Visser
3rd-year Classics major
Massey University, New Zealand

Protagoras, in the Platonic dialogue of that name, relates a myth to Sokrates explaining the origin of the democratic ideal (Plat. Prot. 322a-e).¹ In the myth it appears that the race of man, lacking any political skills, was on the brink of self-destruction. Zeus compassionately intervened in order to save mankind: Hermes was sent to impart justice and respect, distributing these political skills not to a few, as artistic skill is distributed, but equally, so that all men can share in the virtue of political wisdom. Zeus further commanded Hermes: καὶ νόμον γε θές παρ’ ἐμοῦ τὸν μὴ δυνάμενον αἰδοῦς καὶ δίκης μετέχειν κτείνειν ὃς νόσων πόλεως (‘lay it down as my law that if anyone is incapable of acquiring his share of these two virtues he shall be put to death as a plague to the city’, Plat. Prot. 322.d).² In addition to the obvious pro-Athenian democratic ideology, Protagoras’ myth serves to illustrate three points that relate to the power of religion in political and military activity in classical antiquity. First, the myth shows religion to be prior to politics in the order of the universe. Secondly, it shows by example that myths can be used to support an argument in debate, in order to justify political or military positions or activity. Thirdly, the myth demonstrates a general belief that divine will can influence politics. In the process of exploring these three points, I will argue that in the Greek and Roman worlds religion influenced political and military activity by exploiting superstition.

¹ I thank Gina Salapata of Massey University for her helpful advice and comments on a previous draft of this paper.
Religion in classical antiquity had an impact over and above its mere formal usage. Any enquiry into the power of religion in classical antiquity must avoid anachronism and be cognizant of several unique features of Greek and Roman religion. Religion in the Greek and Roman world was so deeply embedded in society that it was ‘more of a practice, a manner of behaviour and an internal attitude than a system of beliefs and dogmas’. Additionally, religious power was not peremptory, as there was no overt religious hierarchical power-structure or doctrinal ideology that could force authority over political or military decisions. In Athens religious offices were not stepping-stones towards a political career and religious authority was diffuse and non-centralised. In Rome priesthood was likewise not necessarily a political platform and religious authority was similarly shared, at least until the time of Augustus when religious offices became associated with the emperor. Religious practice then was manifest in all private, social and political activities, but religion held no absolute power.

Finley observes that ‘religion was a factor in providing legitimacy to the [city-state] as a whole’ but, surprisingly, he concludes that there ‘is neither documentary evidence, however, nor reason to think that policy making was ever determined or deflected by reference to divine will or divine precept’. In other words, Finley dismisses the power of religion in politics as a mere formality. While this seems consistent with the diffuse and non-centralised nature of religious authority in classical antiquity, the power of religion may have lain not in policy making but policy breaking. Finley neglects the power of superstitious anxiety intrinsic to an embedded religion. Religious action or conformity may be underpinned by a belief system based on superstition, that is, an irrational, religious awe that determines ritualistic or inspired behaviour to please the gods. Consequently, religious power relies on the ability to influence political or military action as a result of this superstitious anxiety or fear of the wrath of the gods.

---

3 J. P. Vernant (tr. J. Lloyd), *Myth and Society in Ancient Greece* (Brighton 1979) 88.
An explicit illustration of the wrath of the gods is found in Protagoras’ myth described above. Such fear of the gods, or superstitious anxiety, provoked ritualistic behaviours to avoid unfavourable divine interventions. It may in fact be argued that fear was the prime motivator for religious conformity in classical antiquity.\(^8\) Whether one’s belief system was a literal faith in the gods, a metaphorical means of making sense of the natural forces, or a motivation to avoid *miasma* (‘pollution’), religious participation aimed at appeasing the gods to promote personal or community well-being.\(^9\) Fear of the gods can be directly equated with political conduct in mythological narratives. When Odysseus arrived at the land of the uncivilised Kyklopes, he wondered whether the Kyklopes were: ύβρισσατε τε καὶ ἄγριοι οὐδὲ δίκαιοι, / ἤ ἐφιλόξεινοι, καὶ σφιν νόος ἐστὶ θεοῦδης (‘savage and violent, and without justice, or hospitable to strangers and with minds that are godly’, Hom. *Od.* 9.175f.).\(^10\) In this passage Homer locates civilisation within a religious frame and implies, much as does Pythagoras’ myth, that religion is prior to politics. Additionally, we find that Homer’s gods, though often distracted by their own affairs, were believed to observe mortals’ conduct, both proper and violent, not only from afar but also directly in mortal guise, and that appeal to this belief could serve effectively as both chastisement and warning to promote appropriate civil conduct (*Od.* 17.483-87). In *Works and Day*, Hesiod also warns of: εἰσιν ἐπὶ χθονὶ πουλυβοτείρῃ / ἄθανατοι Ζηνὸς φύλακες θνητῶν ἀνθρώπων / οἱ ρα φυλάσσουσιν τε δίκας καὶ σχέτλα ἔργα (‘watchers-over-men, immortal, [who] roam the fertile earth of Zeus . . . and keep a watch over lawsuits and on crimes’, *Op.* 252-55).\(^11\) Herodotus tells us that injustices receive divine vengeance (2.120.5). Even the plague in Athens at the time of the Peloponnesian War was considered to be a punishment for acts of pollution and for the failure to observe divine oracles.\(^12\) Naturally, determining a belief system from a narrow catalogue of extant literary sources is problematic and consequently the extent of divine fear or religious prescriptions as a belief system or motivator in civic behaviour in classical

---

\(^8\) Cf. R. Garland, *Religion and the Greeks* (London 2005) 6. Note that this differs to the Judaic religion, where a moral code associated with a reward in the afterlife is the prime motivator for religious participation. According to T. Harrison, *Divinity and History: The Religion of Herodotus* (Oxford 2000) 103, Herodotus and the characters he portrays believe that certain actions will inevitably receive retribution from the gods.


\(^10\) The text of Homer’s *Odyssey* is that of A. T. Murray and G. E. Dimoch (tr.), *Homer: The Odyssey* 1-2 (Harvard 1995). The translation of Homer’s *Odyssey* is that of R. Lattimore (tr.), *The Odyssey of Homer* (New York 1965).

\(^11\) The text of Hesiod is that of H. G. Evelyn-White (tr.), *The Homeric Hymns and Homerica* (Cambridge, Mass. 1914). The translation of Hesiod is that of D. Wender (tr.), *Hesiod and Theognis* (Auckland 1976) 59-86.

antiquity is contentious. As we will see, though, deliberate attempts were made to generate superstitious anxiety by drawing on divine endorsement to influence political and military power or decision making. Superstition, or the fear of the potential wrath of the gods, was at least thought to guide piety and observation of religious scruples. The extent of the superstition was an indicator of the power of the religion.

One way in which religion could sanction political and military actions was the exploitation of mythological models. Grant, for example, observes that from the earliest civilisations onward combat myths represented the conflict of civilisation against barbarism. Combat myths were used as illustrations in political propaganda, the most elaborate of which is the depiction of the battle of gods against giants on the Altar of Zeus at Pergamon. Not only does the Pergamon Altar commemorate a god-assisted Greek victory over the Gauls, but it also serves to justify the war by associating Greeks with justice and the Gauls with barbarism. Isokrates also gives mythological reasons, albeit a century after the Persian invasion, to justify Athenian revenge in the Persian war. As much as mythological models can serve as illustrations of divine sanction or precedent to justify or defend certain political or military actions, these models may not necessarily illustrate the extent of the persuasive power of religion in Greek and Roman culture. Formal acknowledgement of the gods, even with propagandistic undertones, does not after all necessarily equate with the power of persuasion. Stronger evidence is needed to illustrate the power of myth in political and military action.

According to Livy, the Roman king Numa held the view that national religion and mythology had a dampening effect on the people; similarly, the chief priest Publius Mucius Scaevola (130-115 BC) reconstructed myths to keep the Roman populace quiet and obedient. Myths were flexible enough to admit various versions or to allow various interpretations to illustrate different themes; consequently, the true measure of the power of mythological models, at least as recognised by Scaevola, lies in the extent to which traditional models could be altered for political purposes. Evidence of such deliberate manipulation of myths exists: both Solon and Peisistratos, for example, were accused of fabricating politically favourable passages and inserting

---

15 M. Grant, Roman Myths (London 1971) 57.
17 Grant [15] 144, 36 respectively; see also Grant [15] 34, who asserts that Euhemerus of Messene ‘stimulated new ideas and interpretations of mythology which could . . . be employed subversively’.
them in the *Iliad*. Vergil’s propagandistic *Aeneid* builds on the following revelation of Homer in order to provide mythological justification for the political claims of Augustus as a descendant of Aeneas: νῦν δὲ δὴ Αἷνείαο βη Τρώαςσιν ἀνάξει / καὶ παῖδον παῖδες, τοί κεν μετόποσθε γένωνται (‘now the might of Aineias shall be lord over the Trojans, and his sons’ sons, and those who are born of their seed hereafter’, Hom. *Il.* 20.307f.). Vergil’s example demonstrates that political propaganda could take the form of fabricated genealogies in order to claim divine descent or even outright divinity. Julius Caesar and his adoptive son Augustus both claimed direct decent from Venus and, though their cult as deities developed posthumously, divine lineage promoted political status. Mythological models, then, can illustrate exemplary divine behaviour in political and military action as well as offer divine endorsement in political propaganda. The manipulation or fabrication of mythological themes demonstrates most clearly, however, a contemporary belief in the power of religion, acting on superstition, to sway the popular vote or influence military activity.

Whereas the aforementioned examples of the use of mythological models for political propaganda serve to illustrate that religion was believed to have some persuasive power in political ventures, these examples do not recount the resultant change in behaviour. Time of war, according to Holladay and Goodman, provides the ‘acid-test’ for positive evidence of the power of religion on political and military behaviour. Holladay and Goodman offer examples from antiquity that illustrate the observance of religious rituals in wartime and specifically assert that the seeking of divine favouritism over the enemy was a military tactic. This, however, does not necessarily illustrate that religion held power over military activity; it may simply indicate that religion played a formal part in all spheres of life, including warfare. Some absolute religious power may be evident in the Greek world where *manteis* (‘religious experts’) were required to supervise sacrifices that preceded military decisions. Although such sacrifices ostensibly took place at a time when it was impossible to avoid battle, without knowing whether the *mantis* was state appointed or attached to the army itself, it is impossible to conclude that *manteis* did not hold authority over war-related decisions. A more prominent measure of the power of religion in ancient warfare may be found in the existence of superstition and the

---

18 Grant [15] 68.
19 The text of Homer’s *Iliad* is that of D. B. Monro and T. W. Allen (edd.), *Homeri Opera* 1-2 (Oxford 1920). The translation of Homer’s *Iliad* is that of R. Lattimore (tr.) *The Iliad of Homer* (Chicago 1951) 412.
means of abating superstitious anxiety. A general sense of superstition among soldiers is conveyed in Onasander:

Προνοεῖσθω δὲ τῆς τῶν νεκρῶν κηδείας, μήτε καυρὸν μὴ ὁρᾷν μήτε τόπον μήτε φόβον προοφασίζομενος, ἀν τε τοιχῇ νικών, ἀν τε ἠπτόμενος ὀσία μὲν γὰρ καὶ ἡ πρὸς τούς ἀποιχομένους εὐσέβεια, ἀναγκαία δὲ καὶ ἡ πρὸς τούς ζῶντας ἀπόδειξις.

(Onasander, Strategikos 36)

The general should make provision for the burial of the dead and should not make a pretext for delay either circumstance, or time, or place, or fear, whether he happens to have been victorious or defeated. This is both a holy act of piety towards the dead and an essential demonstration for the living.22

The provision of religious observation, especially concerning burial rites, was considered an important factor in maintaining loyalty from the ranks. Additionally, superstitious anxiety is evident in the observances of religious scruples such as the cessation of military activity on holy days. Although such measures may potentially illustrate mere formal religious practice, when the observation of religious scruples was tactically detrimental a more direct measure of superstition is evident.23 Consequently, given that different poleis had different religious calendars, superstition could be exploited by attacking an enemy engaged in religious festivals.24 Like the Greeks, the Romans also observed strict religious scruples in order to ensure divine approval for their military action, though it appears that the failure to do so did not necessarily lead to blame if the war failed. Terentius Varro, for example, was not accused of taboo infringement after the defeat at Cannae, despite initiating battle on 2 August 216 BC, a dies postriduans when warfare was forbidden.25 Religious incentives could also deter or promote warfare. In 432 BC, for example, Sparta demanded Athens evict the Alkmeneid Perikles to ‘drive out the curse of the goddess’ as a last ditch effort to avert Peloponnesian War; Athens responded with similar religious-based demands.26 Philip of Macedon, claiming to champion Apollo, justified his invasion of Greece by blaming the Phokians for plundering the treasures at Delphi.27 While religious incentives may not overtly claim divine will, attempts to justify warfare by claiming religious authority are a subtle means to incite

superstitious anxiety. Although a holy war was not a guaranteed success, the careful observance of religious scruples, especially in the performance of rituals before and after war, demonstrates that divine approval was an important factor in warfare. Again, it is the exploitation of superstition that demonstrates the power of religion in warfare.

The power of religion in military and political spheres is also attested in the observance of omens, portents and oracles. Because belief in divine intervention, especially in warfare, was integral to ancient religion, it is difficult to determine when the seeking of divine will or guidance through omens and oracles is part of formal religious practice, as den Boer argues, and when such religious behaviour demonstrates an inherent religious power. Abundant examples of the role of the Delphic oracle in political arbitration, warfare and colonisation are found in Herodotus, Thucydides, Livy and Plutarch (though some oracles were probably composed retrospectively). The oracle of Apollo at Delphi was presumably consulted regarding political dilemmas because the Greeks attributed divine priority to their laws, which they believed were received originally from Apollo. According to Price, the power of Delphi was not based on intellectual or rational belief but rooted in the structure of Greek society. The power of Delphi is evident in the attempts to manipulate oracular responses, such as the bribing attempt made by the Alkmaeonidae (Hdt. 5.90f.), which still resonated two hundred years later in the Peloponnesian War. The Roman Sibylline Books were also consulted regarding political and military activities when superstitious fear was at its peak, such as during the Hannibalic War. The power of the Sibylline Books during this time of general religious anxiety is testified by the subsequent compliance with the oracle that demanded the rather unusual and extreme practice of human sacrifice. The interpretation of omens also demonstrates a general superstition, which was prominently exemplified by Nikias’

---

29 W. den Boer, ‘Aspects of Religion in Classical Greece’, HSPh 77 (1973) 18. Herodotus claims that there is a story that the Delphic oracle proposed the Spartan mixed-government system to Lycurgus (1.65).
31 den Boer [29] 19.
32 Price [30] 153. Harrison [8] 116 describes Herodotus’ religious beliefs, especially in divine retribution, as an engrained habit of worldly understanding rather than an intellectual or consciously refined philosophy, thereby not only illustrating the embedded nature of Greek religion but also highlighting that religious fears are prior to intellect.
actions during the battle of Syracuse and their devastating results.\textsuperscript{34} Likewise, the mutilation of the Athenian Herms prior to the Sicilian expedition caused a general superstitious uproar, which was perhaps deliberately incited by saboteurs.\textsuperscript{35} It appears, however, that exploitation of omens became more prevalent in the Roman Republic, where omens and portents held great religious importance\textsuperscript{36} and politically minded magistrates were responsible for taking the auspices.

Superstition did have its limits. For example, Alexander the Great, inspired by Herakles and deified in art, if not in person, failed to impress the Macedonians, who would prostrate themselves ‘before gods, but not before any man’.\textsuperscript{37} Herodotus was perplexed by the gullibility of the archaic Athenians in their reaction to the return from exile of the tyrant Peisistratos, who was accompanied by a woman dressed as Athena. Although the story offers a great example of religious propaganda used to influence political decisions, Herodotus’ response makes it clear that such an attempt would not hold sway in his own time.\textsuperscript{38} It is also interesting that the Athenians, whose religion specifically revolved around \textit{Athene Polias}, nevertheless considered the gold leaf of the statue of Athena on the Acropolis as a potential fund for the Peloponnesian War.\textsuperscript{39} The influence of superstitious anxiety upon political decision making declined dramatically with the increase in the democratic ideal in Athens.\textsuperscript{40} It seems that liberation of political thought had a direct impact on the religious traditions associated with it, though, as we have seen, this did not prevent some attempts to exploit the power of religion.

Religious practice in political and military action in classical antiquity, then, is well testified in the ancient sources. When discussing the power of religion, however, we need to remember that in the Greek and Roman world religion was intrinsic to all spheres of life, including the political and military. The power of religion is most clearly seen in various attempts to secure divine will or to exploit religious ideology, which presuppose an underlying superstitious disposition and a belief that fear of the gods can sometimes force a break in normal policy making. It seems that Protagoras’ myth demonstrates religious formality as an accepted means to political argument as well as a deeply rooted superstitious tradition that could affect political and military activity.

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{35} Powell [34] 22f.
\textsuperscript{36} Holladay and Goodman [5] 162.
\textsuperscript{40} Garland [4 (1990)] 76.
\end{flushright}