CHRESMOLOGUES AND MANTEIS: INDEPENDENT DIVINERS AND THE PROBLEM OF AUTHORITY

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Toward the beginning of Book 7 of his *History*, in the narrative of the events leading up to Xerxes’ decision to invade Greece, Herodotus recounts an important episode. In addition to his hot-headed cousin Mardonius, there were a number of non-Persian hangers-on at the court of Xerxes who were pushing for invasion: messengers from the Aleuadai of Thessaly, the Pisistratids, and a man the Pisistratids had brought with them, “Onomacritus, an Athenian man, a *chrêsmologos* and an arranger (*diathetês*) of the oracles of Musaeus, having made up their quarrel with him.” The detail about an earlier quarrel between Onomacritus and the sons of Pisistratus prompts Herodotus to digress:

For Onomacritus was driven out of Athens by Hipparchus the son of Pisistratus, having been caught by Lasus of Hermione in the act of introducing into the work of Musaeus an oracle that the islands lying off Lemnos would disappear under the sea (7.6.3).

Herodotus tells us that Hipparchus took this action in spite of the fact that earlier Onomacritus had been a close associate. But later, having come to Susa with the Pisistratids, whenever he came into the king’s presence, his patrons would make solemn testimonials about him, and he would recite a selection from his oracles: if there were prophecies portending disaster for Xerxes, these he left out, uttering instead the ones that seemed to promise success.

I will examine this passage in detail later, but there are two problems I want to take up here that will help define issues that will form the subject of this paper. First, the relationship between Onomacritus and the Pisistratids is remarkable for the many turns it seems to take: he is first in favor with them, then, despite his closeness, is exiled by Hipparchus, only to be brought back into the Pisistratid orbit again later while the tyrants are resident in Persia. Whatever the reason the Pisistratids drove the chresmologue out of Athens was clearly not in effect later in Susa, but we have to assume that there was a serious breach between Onomacritus and the tyrants in order to have a reconciliation later. But it may also be that the Pisistratids would not
have exiled Onomacritus if they did not have to, implying that external agency—popular dissatisfaction?—with the oracle-monger forced their hand. This in turn suggests another possibility, namely that the discovery of Onomacritus’ fraud was a public one, in a setting that the Pisistratids could not control. In any case, the revelation by Lasus of Onomacritus’ interpolation seems to require some sort of performance of the oracle in question, for how else could the chresmologue be caught “red-handed”?

Clearly the relationship between Onomacritus and the Pisistratids was complex. But however we try to reconstruct it, the episode of his exposure suggests that his authority was tied to his patrons. One axis of inquiry that this paper will follow will be precisely the issue of how the independent diviner—be he chresmologue, *mantis*, or some other figure—stood in relation to the community he served, or, to put it another way, how his authority was defined. Another axis will concern a related topic: how do the activities of the independent diviner relate to the problem of oral and written culture. Although the crime of Onomacritus is often referred to by moderns as “forgery”, in fact Lasus of Hermione is spoken of as catching him “in the act” of interpolating an oracle, that is, a context where the prophecies of Musaeus were being recited. The issue of the authority of the independent religious expert is deeply implicated in the broader one of early Greek notions regarding the probative power of the written word.

These two axes, the authority of the diviner and his relation to the oral vs. literate divide, will be charted here against a review of the *chrêsmologos* and *mantis* over time. It so happens that the Onomacritus episode in Herodotus presents in brief the main periods for the independent diviner: the world of myth/legend (Musaeus), the archaic period (Onomacritus), and the classical period (Herodotus’ reception of the story). I will follow these rough divisions in my discussion. I do not aim at a comprehensive presentation of *manteis* and chresmologues. Rather, what I do here is trace the main developments in the function of independent divination by looking at important, representative figures. But first, a word on terminology.

I. *Mantis, Chrêsmologos, Prophêtês. Dependent and Independent Divination*

Difficulties attend the interpretation of both agent nouns in Greek with which we are here concerned—*mantis* and *chrêsmologos*. Despite