

This paper examines the function(s) of Herodotos' and Thoukydides' promissory (not declaratory) **oaths**. Comparing the many appearances of oaths in two fifth-century historians, we find that such oaths find mention in both private and public (civic negotiation and international treaty) contexts, and in both sincere and apparently duplicitous exchanges. Both historians sometimes suggest praise or blame for parties in their examples, although their criteria differ. Oath rises to historiographical prominence for the apparent high hopes and unwise trust inspired by them. The brief life enjoyed by most of them arises from their being more often honored in the breach than the observance (to paraphrase Hamlet). The historians rarely report or quickly leave successful agreements; they concentrate on the **problematics** of oath. Oath, like prayer, often constitutes an **aggressive**, manipulative Hellenic practice. Scholars have explored oath as a fundamental Greek institution (Hirzel 1902, Gernet 1949, Plescia 1970; cf. Bengtson *Staatsverträge* II² 1975 for treaties, s.v. ὄρκος). They examine its ideology, procedures, and formal and informal uses in Homeric Epic, Aristophanic comedy, Attic oratory, and other genres both fictional and non-fictional (e.g., Karavites 1992, Sommerstein & Fletcher, Gagarin, *Horkos* 2007). The online Nottingham Oath Project supplies raw and imperfect data by author, genre, date, swearer, etc.

Herodotos includes about forty oaths of **three** types: the ethnography of exotic non-Hellenic oath habits, SOP Hellenic diplomacy (fundamentally Homeric oath "cutting" procedures; cf. the Hellenic Oath, 7.132), and dramatic and deceptive oaths. Herodotos' characters expect divine endorsement and enforcement of sacred oath-acts. We examine extended examples such as those sworn by Etearchos, the Persian Amasis, and the **Spartans** Ariston, Glaukos (4. 154, 4.201, 6.62, 6.86). Herodotos interests himself in complex moral and diplomatic equivocation and casuistry. **Thoukydides** spotlights oaths as symptom of **systems collapse**, e.g., dueling oaths at Plataiai and Spartan false oaths in the Thraceward region (Hornblower 1996 ad 4.85-8, and 2007). Thoukydides provides four times the references to oaths that Herodotos offers (but not four times the oaths). Many treaty oaths appear *verbatim* in contexts of the self-defeating **Spartan**, Athenian, and Persian covenants of books 5 and 8. Here, numerous signatories, places of display, and even trivial details for oath sacrifices embellish short-lived diplomatic protocols. We examine featured ephemeral agreements of the Plataians, stasis-wracked Kerkyreans, **Brasidas**, and the Spartan and Athenian truces and 'alliances' (2-3, 4.66-129, 5.18-80). Sacred promises veer into the muddier waters of merely prudential secular pacts--with "let-out" clauses (Bolmarcich 2007).

The historiographical survey and comparison show that oaths in these historians signify first (unsurprisingly) a situation of distance and distrust between parties with some motives to cooperate. Second historians record attempts to negotiate bonds that desperately and insufficiently bridge that divide. The fragile negotiations mark an expedient hiatus in conflicts, but the sworn agreements rarely produce permanent personal or diplomatic resolutions. Oaths are indispensable but always undependable.