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The Oracle and Cult of Ares in Asia Minor

The cult of Ares is attested in Asia Minor from the fifth-century B.C. to the late-Imperial period. Most strongly entrenched in the South-central and Southwest, Ares' worship is epigraphically attested at 29 separate sites and he appears on more than seventy coins in the region. Two Late Imperial dedications recently found in the *chora* of the ancient city of Side record thank offerings made to Ares as an oracular deity. These Sidean dedications should be associated with an oracle of Ares mentioned by Herodotos (7.75-76) in his catalogue of Xerxes' invasion force and other elements of the dedications strongly link them to other peculiarly Anatolian aspects of Ares' cult in Southwest Asia Minor.

While the inscribed blocks from Side likely served as bases for dedicatory statues, the texts point to a less pedestrian phenomenon. Ares was not an oracular deity among the Greeks, nor did the Romans ascribe such powers to Mars. These dedications would be inscrutably perplexing were it not for the account of Herodotos. In the catalogue of Xerxes' army there is a *lacuna* in the text. When Herodotos resumes, he is describing the equipment of a people in South-Southwestern Asia Minor and ends his description, "In the land of these men is an oracle of Ares." The name of the people in question has vanished in the *lacuna*, but several lines of evidence from Herodotos (3.90) and Strabo (13.4.15 and 13.7.4) suggest that the missing people hailed from the southern hinterland, known in later times as Pisidia and Lykaonia. Ares held unusual prestige in this area, with coins and inscriptions attesting temples, shrines, statues, and dedications from over twenty regional centers in Pisidia and Lykaonia alone.

Two other considerations further reinforce this picture of a peculiarly Anatolian Ares. 1) The names found in the dedications from Side contain strong non-Greek, native Anatolian elements. 2) The restoration [*to eikonio*]n of one text should be accepted, for such decorative elements are typical of Anatolian religious practice in general and attested for the cult of Ares in Southern Asia Minor in particular. A circular gilded plaque from the Lykian community of Myangla bears a bust of an armored warrior identified by punched inscription as Ares. This inscribed medallion and another found with it are distinctively Anatolian *skeue* - plaques decorating the statues of gods or hung around necks of priests.

Herodotos' testimony indicates that the roots of Ares' worship in Southern Asia Minor pre-date the Roman period by centuries. Epic tradition, too, associates Ares with the area north of Lykia and Pamphylia. Homer (*Il.* 6.203) has Ares kill Bellerophon's son Isander in the land of the "glorious Solymoi," traditionally identified with the area later known as Pisidia. Other sources make these Solymoi the very sons of Ares (*Etymologicum Magnum*. s.v. Solymoi). Pisidian Termessos worshipped a Zeus Solymeus, who appears as a armed and armoured warrior on its coins, while in Karia Zeus was assimilated to the great indigenous warrior figure Chrysaor. The association of Ares with such an indigenous hero or deity may go some way toward explaining the relative "popularity" of Ares in this region.