IMPOSSIBLE KNOWLEDGE? MYTHICAL SEERS IN THE *ILIAD*

An Etruscan mirror dated to the late fourth century B.C. draws our attention to the hazards involved in attempting to align Homer's seers too closely with an historical model. The subject of the scene depicted on the mirror is a seer hunched over an altar with a liver in his left hand, his right gesturing towards it, and a look of concentration on his face; he is performing extispicy. The consultation of entrails for signs from the gods is the chief role of the seer in historical Greek sources, of Tisamenus in Herodotus' *Histories*, Silanus in Xenophon's *Anabasis*, or of the seers depicted on twenty-two vases from the late Archaic and early Classical periods.[1] The seer on the Etruscan mirror is sandwiched between a pair of wings above and a rock below as if to spell out visually his role as intermediary between the divine, on the one hand, and the terrestrial, on the other.[2] To the right, the sculptor has named the figure as Calchas, the first seer to be represented in Greek literature, and arguably the most famous.

Figure 1. Vatican, Museo Gregoriano Etrusco 12240. After Gerhard, E. (1884-97), *Etruskische Spiegel*, Vol. III (Berlin: G. Reimer) Pl. 223.

[1] Flower (2008: 26); see ch. 6 especially for seers in warfare.
[2] Sannibale, M. (2003-2007).

The seer's name and the act depicted on the mirror sit uncomfortably together. Although the mirror is the product of a different time and culture, the choice of name must surely refer to the Homeric character. The sculptor has made his Calchas act in a manner which is most likely to be associated with seers by his audience. Extispicy, however, is not what we find Calchas, or, ostensibly, any other seer in Homer performing. We cannot attribute this with certainty to the late arrival of extispicy in Greece; in the *Iliad,* Priam calls seers *thuoskooi*, "inspectors of sacrifice", and in the *Odyssey*, Leodes is the *thuoskoos* in attendance to the suitors.[3] The combination of Calchas and extispicy on the Etruscan mirror alerts the modern viewer to the possibility of a disconnect between seers as they are presented in Homer and the real seers of the ancient world. In the course of this paper, I resist attempts to explain the behaviour of Calchas along historical and cultural lines that may not always be the most fruitful for enlightening our understanding of epic poetry, which, after all, features talking horses, petrification, monsters, and anthropomorphic gods; Homer has a habit of stretching the familiar beyond the bounds of reality.

We find Calchas first of all at the very beginning of the *Iliad*.[4] By setting up the conditions for the quarrel between Achilles and Agamemnon, Calchas plays an important part in setting the events of the poem in motion. To summarise the context: Agamemnon has scorned Apollo's priest (1.8-42), Apollo has inflicted a plague upon the Greeks (1.43-52), and Achilles has summoned an assembly, asking for "a seer, a

[3] *Il.* 24.221; *Od.* 21.145, 22.318, 22.320. Herodotus (*Hist.* 2.57) thought that sacrificial divination entered Greece from Egypt. See Parker (1996) and Flower (2008: 25). West (1997: 46) and Collins (2002: 18) regard the *thuoskoos* as an interpreter of incense smoke, but neither explains this view. For the etymology, see Chaintraine (1968-80: 448): "prêtre qui examine les sacrifices".

[4] *Il.* 1.69-120. Calchas is mentioned by Achilles at 1.384-385. His interpretation of an omen at Aulis is recounted by Odysseus at 2.299-332. The final mention of Calchas is when Poseidon appears in his guise to rally the Aiantes at 13.43-75.

priest, or an interpreter of dreams" to explain the cause of Apollo's anger (1.53-67).[5] Calchas responds to the call. The poet is clear on his credentials; he is "by far the best of the bird interpreters", οἰωνοπόλων ὄχ' ἄριστος (1.69). He "knew the present, the future and the past", ὃς ᾔδη τά τ' ἐόντα τά τ' ἐσσόμενα πρό τ' ἐόντα (1.70), and he "guided the Greek ships to Troy through the seercraft (μαντοσύνη) which Apollo gave him" (1.71-72). Calchas does just what is asked of him; he informs the Greeks that Apollo is not, as suspected by Achilles, dissatisfied with their prayers or sacrifices (1.93), but is angry at the treatment of his priest, Chryses (1.94-95). Moreover, the god will not end the plague until the girl has been returned without ransom, and a hecatomb taken to her father (1.97-100).

Scholars' views on the seer's conduct here are split between those who think that Calchas is doing something quite extraordinary, and those who think he is not. Neither approach is entirely satisfactory. At issue is the basis of the seer's insight. In the following book, when Odysseus reminds the Greeks of the prediction Calchas delivered at Aulis, the omen and the seer's decoding of its symbolic parts are described in detail (2.308-329), but in book one the seer knows the mind of Apollo clearly. This is not deduced from any omen. Historical seers would not dare to explain the causes of divine behaviour in this manner; they tell their enquirers what they should do. How do we explain the seer who not only knows how a god feels, but knows without needing any visible clues?

One approach is to look, not to later Greek evidence, but earlier in time to the Hittites.[6] In the *Plague Prayers of Mursilis II*, Hittite texts which predate the *Iliad* by some six or seven hundred years, a king is desperate to know why his city is ravaged

[5] All translations are my own, unless otherwise indicated.
[6] Hittite civilisation, which flourished in the second millennium BC, was centred on the region of Anatolia and included territory later inhabited by Greeks. The influence of its culture, including on divination and mythology, can be detected in later traditions. See esp. West (1997).

by plague.[7] The king seeks to discover the reason for the plague from a dream, an oracle, an inspired man, or priests performing incubation. The scenario looks familiar: Achilles also wants to discover *why* a god has sent a plague, and proposes alternative means of divination.[8] Has the *Iliad* inherited elements from an original Hittite source, and could Calchas be one of these inherited elements? Högemann and Oettinger certainly think so and develop an elaborate theory on this basis.[9]

Homer introduces Calchas initially as *oionopolos*, "bird interpreter" (1.69), but the seer is not interpreting birds in the episode we are examining, at least not on the face of it. The interpretation of birds is a practice which appears to be of Eastern origin and, as evinced by a fragmentary inscription from Ephesus had a history in Asia Minor, the region associated with Homer.[10] When Achilles encourages Calchas to speak up, he says that Calchas reveals *theopropria* when he prays to Apollo (1.86-87):

> οὐ μὰ γὰρ Ἀπόλλωνα Διῒ φίλον, ᾧ τε σὺ Κάλχαν
> εὐχόμενος Δαναοῖσι θεοπροπίας ἀναφαίνεις

This is the crucial clue to the Hittite roots of Calchas, according to Högemann and Oettinger (2008: 18), who claim that Achilles is referring to the seer's prayer to Apollo "for an affirmative answer through the birds." Following this reasoning, a process by which the birds are consulted is reconstructed as follows: Calchas poses a series of questions, asking, for instance, if the anger of Apollo is caused by the omission of sacrifices.[11] Adhering to a fixed set of rules, an affirmative or negative response is indicated by the nature, usually the direction, of the birds' flight.[12] Calchas would go on asking his questions until he eventually arrived at an affirmative answer. The

[7] *CTH* 378.II A = *KUB* 14.8 rev. 41'-44'.
[8] West (1997: 47-48).
[9] Högemann and Oettinger (2008). Cf. Louden (2010: passim) who discusses parallels between scenes involving seers in the *Odyssey* and scenes in the Hebrew Bible.
[10] On *LSAM* 30 see Dillon (1996).
[11] Högemann and Oettinger (2008: 19).
[12] See Beal (2002) on Hittite bird oracles.

seer's initial reluctance to speak at Achilles' behest indicates that he already knows why Apollo is angry when he appears in the poem (1.76-83). We are to suppose that he has undergone this consultation of the birds 'offstage', because the poet, due to dramatic constraints, does not wish to bore the audience with every detail of a lengthy procedure.

This interpretation has a very weak foundation. It rests largely on the word εὐχόμενος (1.87) uttered by Achilles. Surely the latter is speaking in general terms; it is natural for him to suppose that a seer would pray to the god of his art. He is the obvious god for Achilles to swear by in offering Calchas protection. We may also look to Helenus, a Trojan seer, who later explains the intentions of Apollo and Athena to Hector (7.44-52). This seer is, like Calchas, first introduced in the poem as "by far the best of the bird interpreters" (6.73). When he describes the gods' plans to Hector, the poet makes it clear that he somehow overheard their conversation: "I have heard the voice of the ever-living gods", ὅπ' ἄκουσα θεῶν αἰειγενετάων (7.53). The birds are not involved in this process.

Elsewhere, we do in fact see how birds are interpreted in Homer. It is not by following the Hittite question-answer method. Halitherses in the *Odyssey* sees two birds attacking each other and immediately interprets the omen on the basis of a discussion which has just taken place concerning Odysseus' whereabouts and the behaviour of the suitors (*Od.* 2.157-193). The omen and the interpretation are spontaneous. Theoclymenus and Helen in the *Odyssey* (15.525-34, 17.150-60; 15.160-77) and Polydamas in the *Iliad* (12.195-229) all interpret bird omens in this way. Even when Zeus sends an eagle in response to a request from Priam in the *Iliad*, the scene bears little relation to the Hittite practice as we know it (24.308-21). The evidence is not firm enough to treat Calchas as the exception.

Calchas' explanation of *why* Apollo is angry is also said to be a Hittite element in his portrayal, but in the Homeric context, asking this type of question of a seer is not strange at all.[13] In the *Odyssey*, Teiresias informs Odysseus that he "will not escape the attention of the Earthshaker" (11.101-102). He adds that Poseidon is angry (χωόμενος) because Odysseus blinded his son, Polyphemus (11.103). Teiresias is not questioning the birds in order to discover the cause of Poseidon's wrath; his opening words to Odysseus show that he is prophesying on the spot (11.92-96). He says, "What has brought you [...] to visit the dead in this joyless place [...]? Step back [...] so that I can drink the blood and prophesy the truth to you." It is no surprise that characters conscious of the divine involvement in their world aspire to know the motives of their gods. This is not an option open to the real world seers of Greece as it is to those of poetry.

If Calchas is not to be explained as a remnant of the Hittite world, perhaps he can be understood in terms of the Greek. The Calchas episode has been described by Suárez de la Torre (2009: 163) as an oracular consultation. Oracles were evidently known to Homer; Delphi and Dodona are both referred to in the Iliad and in the Odyssey.[14] Why then might the poet transfer their role to a seer? Calchas is consulted through a desire to avert plague, a typical motive for visiting an oracle.[15] Then again, according to Plutarch, Athens was advised to consult the seer, Epimenides, by the Oracle of Delphi over its affliction by plague; plague was not exclusively an oracular concern.[16] Achilles phrases his reason for consulting Calchas "with alternative explanations for Apollo's anger, usual in the oracular questions and responses" argues Suárez de la Torre (2009: 163). However, as Parker (2005: 119)

[13] Högemann, and Oettinger (2008: 25).
[14] Apollo's temple at Pytho is mentioned at *Il.* 9.405, while Agamemnon visits Pytho to consult the oracle at *Od.* 79-81. Dodona is the site of Zeus' interpreters at *Il.* 16.235 and Odysseus is said to have gone to Dodona to learn the will of Zeus from the oak at *Od.* 14.327-330.
[15] See Parker (1983: 271-6) and Stoneman (2011: 225).
[16] *Plutarch, The Greek Questions*, 293e-f.

maintains, the same sort of questions which could be put to an oracle could also be put to the test by seers. In the *Anabasis*, we find Xenophon doing precisely this. In one incident (5.6.28), Xenophon is forced to explain why he sacrificed: to see "whether it would be better to […] or to […] ",

> καὶ νῦν ἐθυόμην περὶ αὐτοῦ τούτου, εἰ ἄμεινον εἴη ἄρχεσθαι λέγειν εἰς ὑμᾶς καὶ πράττειν περὶ τούτων ἢ παντάπασι μηδὲ ἅπτεσθαι τοῦ πράγματος.

A seer could determine the better of two options just like an oracle, but I doubt this is what Calchas is asked to do. Achilles wants to know if Apollo faults the Achaeans' prayers *and* sacrifices, εὐχωλῆς ἐπιμέμφεται ἠδ' ἑκατόμβης (1.65); these are not alternatives. He also wants to know if Apollo, accepting "the savour of sheep and unblemished goats, will drive away shameful destruction" (1.66-67). Achilles wants the seer to explain the god's anger and the best course of action. This is a step beyond an oracular consultation.

There is, nevertheless, an indication that Calchas shares in an oracle's proximity to the gods. The god is not speaking through Calchas in the way that Apollo speaks through the Pythia, but Achilles' request for him to reveal *theopropie/theopropion* (1.86-88) suggests that Calchas has access to divine knowledge. In Herodotus, this terminology is used in relation to consultations of the Oracle of Delphi; the messengers reporting the god's oracle are *theopropoi* and what they report is the *theopropion.*[17] Elsewhere in the *Iliad*, Nestor suspects that Achilles has *theopropie* in his heart and links this closely to Achilles' receipt of news from Zeus by means of his divine mother, Thetis (11.794).[18] The term *theopropie* implies that the news has a divine origin.[19] How does Calchas acquire it? It seems unlikely that he is to be viewed as a *chresmologos*, "collector of oracles", a term not used by Homer; Achilles wants

[17] For instance, *Hist.* 7.141 and 1.68.
[18] Cf. 16.50 and 16.36-7.
[19] For the etymology of *theopropos*, see Chantraine (1968-80: 429): "qui fait connaître le dieu, la pensée divine".

precise information about an on-going event, not for the reciting of an oracle preserved for utterance at the appropriate juncture.

A solution to the source of Calchas' divine knowledge is offered by Michael Flower, who questions the dichotomy between inspired divination and technical divination, discussed by Plato and later, Cicero.[20] Flower (2008: 88) argues that Calchas is operating by "special intuitive insight" when he is able to explain the mind of Apollo. This is a third kind of divination, one not considered by the ancient philosophers. But, rather like the imagined offstage performance of Hittite procedures, this explanation is touching on the documentary fallacy, that is, the determination to find historical or cultural explanations for aspects of a text which a poet has simply invented.[21] Homer does not reveal how Calchas acquired his knowledge of Apollo's will and we need not create a special form of divination as the answer to a problem which does not really exist. As Stockinger (1959: 16) argued "ob durch Beobachtung des Vogelflugs oder sonstwie, sagt uns der Dichter nicht – und man soll auch nicht vergeblich danach forschen": the poet does not tell us and we should not look for it in vain.

If the attempts to find in Calchas some remarkable ability are flawed, this begs the question: is there any greater justification in the opposing view that Calchas does nothing very special at all, apart from state the obvious? Agamemnon's shaming of Chryses, quite visibly a priest of Apollo (1.14-15), is a public event; the whole army begs him to grant the old man's request (1.22-23). Shortly after Agamemnon refuses to accede to these demands, the plague begins. Trampedach (2008: 209) argues that any noble could have given Calchas' diagnosis and that the solution is "only too self-evident". This line is taken even further by Latacz (1998: 96 and 2000: 57) and Taplin (1992: 54) who suggest that Achilles and Calchas are acting in collusion.

[20] Cf. Plato, *Phaedrus* 244 and Cicero, *De Divinatione.*
[21] On the documentary fallacy see Waldock (1951: 11-24).

Achilles' appeal for an interpreter, Calchas' convenient volunteering, and his request for protection, are an elaborate ruse, designed to make Agamemnon, the only one unable to appreciate the consequences of his actions, return Chryse to her father. This imagination of a series of events lying outside the text marks yet another encroachment on the documentary fallacy. The events may seem obvious in the way the narrative presents them to the audience, but not necessarily obvious to the characters involved. When Achilles recounts the events to Thetis (1.365-412) he fails to mention this scheme. In fact, with the swift pace of the opening scenes, it is also very easy for the audience to miss this too.

Seers in Homer do not just state the obvious; they are doing something special but it is not behaving like Hittites, taking the place of oracles, or operating by some special form of divination unnoticed by the ancient philosophers. Homer's seers are acting like the gods. In the *Odyssey*, Proteus is consulted by Menelaus (4.460-569). The latter asks him which god is hindering his journey, and how he can make his way home. The god answers and goes on to tell Menelaus how he is fated to die. The pattern is repeated by Teiresias, a seer, when he is consulted by Odysseus (11.91-149).[22] Also in the *Odyssey*, *thesphata* are spoken by the goddess, Circe, as by the seers, Melampus and Telemus.[23] The latter prophesies Odysseus' arrival to Polyphemus in a manner which closely parallels Hermes' prophecy to Circe.[24] In the *Iliad*, Polyidos tells his son his choice is death at Troy or death of old age at home, the same choice predicted by Thetis for Achilles.[25] How the seers are able to do these things is unexplained; it is less important than the effect of their doing so.

[22] On Teiresias see Ugolini (1995).
[23] *Od.* 12.155, 11.297, and 9.507. Cf. Chantraine (1968-80: 433): "annoncé par les dieux, fixé par les dieux".
[24] *Od.* 9.507-12 and 10.330-33.
[25] *Il.* 13.663-72 and 9.410-15.

It is not only proximity to the gods which distinguishes the Homeric seer, but also proximity to the poet, a point touched on by Trampedach (2008: 224). Calchas knows the present, the future, and the past. The attribution of the very same line by Hesiod to the Muses, and his attribution to the poet of the ability to sing of past and future, implies a close correspondence between the work of bard and seer.[26] In the case of Calchas, this is quite apparent. The poet asks the Muse to sing of the anger of Achilles. Achilles asks the seer to speak of the anger of Apollo. The role of the seer and the role of the poet are not that far apart. As the poet describes how the events unfold to his audience, the seer describes them to the unknowing characters. We need not look for elaborate explanations based on historical evidence or the documentary fallacy to explain Calchas' place in the poem. He, like the other seers, is a construct designed to achieve a particular effect. His words and acts are shaped, not by historical limitations, but by the needs and imagination of the poet.

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[26] Hes. *Th.* 38 and 32.

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