



## THE RING OF GYGES

In *The Genealogy of Morals*, Nietzsche argues that “the mind of early man was preoccupied to such an extent with price-making . . . that in a certain sense this may be said to have constituted his thinking.”<sup>1</sup> A fundamental change in price-making constitutes a fundamental change in thinking. The development of money was such a change. Although minting was not a great technological innovation, money informed a powerful revolution in economic and verbal media.<sup>2</sup> The genealogy of the money form is the study of a new logic that is the money of the mind. In this chapter, we shall study the “constitutional” relationship between the origin of money and the origin of philosophy itself.

To the Greeks the exact place and time of the introduction of coinage was uncertain. Their genetic explanations of coinage do not depend, however, on exactitude of chronological and geographic data. They focus instead on hypothetical or mythical periods during which they suppose money to have originated. Wishing to discuss the effects of coinage and the relationship between money and the mind, the ancient Greeks chose many different birth places, times, and events.<sup>3</sup> Their quarrel about the origin of coinage, however, is a de-

1. Friedrich Nietzsche, “Zur Genealogie der Moral,” in *Werke in drei Bänden* (Munich, 1955), 2: 811; trans. F. Golffing, *The Birth of Tragedy and the Genealogy of Morals* (New York, 1956), p. 202.

2. Coined money was not a technological breakthrough, but rather the culmination of several developments (Babylonian credit, metal-stamping, etc.). Cf. other important inventions during this period, such as the alphabet and the calendar.

3. In his *Onomasticon*, Julius Pollux refers to the following statement of Colophon: “Perhaps some would think it ambitious to investigate this question, whether coins were first issued by Pheidon of Argos or by the Cymaen Demodice, wife of the Phrygian Midas, who was the daughter of Agamemnon, king of Cyme, or by the Athenians, Erichthonius and Lycus, or by the Lydians, as Xenophon asserts, or by the Naxians, according to the view of Agloasthenes” (*Onom.* 9.83). Ephorus and the Parian Chronicle both agree that the first man to mint coins was Pheidon of Argos.

bate not about antiquarian data but rather about the ideological significance of money.

Herodotus argued that coinage was born in Lydia during the reign of Gyges or his son.<sup>4</sup> (Modern research has shown that Herodotus was probably correct.)<sup>5</sup> The assumption of Lydia as the birthplace of coinage shaped much ancient thought. Whether or not Gyges or his descendant was in fact the first man to mint coins, he was associated in the minds of the Greeks with minting. Like Midas, his neighbor who turned all things into gold with a touch, Gyges turned all things into gold by his ability to purchase them with gold minted into coins.

As coinage was associated with the Lydians, so too was political tyranny, "a phenomenon no less important in the history of culture than in the development of the Greek state."<sup>6</sup> The very word *tyrannos* is Lydian in origin.<sup>7</sup> Many Greeks believed that Gyges was the first tyrant, and often associated him with tyranny; he was the archetypal

4. Herodotus 1.94. Quotations from Herodotus are adapted from the Loeb edition (*Herodotus*, trans. A. D. Godley, 4 vols. (London, 1931-38) or, less often, from *The Histories of Herodotus*, trans. H. Cary (New York, 1904).

5. Very little is known about Lydia. The evidence is almost all archeological. (See G. M. A. Hanfmann in *Bulletins of the American Schools of Oriental Research* [1961-66].) "For literature we have no evidence at all, since the stone inscriptions which we have written in the Lydian language do not date earlier than the fifth century, and the poet Alcman, writing at the end of the seventh century B.C., left Sardis. Literature was not highly regarded at the Lydian court" (John Griffiths Pedley, *Sardis in the Age of Croesus* [Norman, Okla., 1968], p. 113; cf. John Griffiths Pedley, *Ancient Literary Sources on Sardis* [Cambridge, Mass., 1972]). The standard but outdated history of Lydia is that of F. A. Radet, *La Lydie et le monde grec au temps des Mermnades* (Paris, 1893). Most modern scholars agree that coinage began in Lydia (see William J. Young, "The Fabulous Gold of the Pactolus Valley," *Boston Museum Bulletin* 70, no. 359 [1972], p. 7).

Authorities on ancient China claim that coins circulated there as early as the twentieth century B.C., but there is no archeological evidence of coinage in China before the seventh century B.C. Coinage in India developed during the first half of the sixth century B.C. (Cf. R. A. G. Carson, *Coins of the World* [New York, 1962], pp. 499, 537; and Lien-sheng Yang, *Money and Credit in China* [Cambridge, Mass., 1952].)

6. Werner Jaeger, *Paidea*, trans. Gilbert Highet, 3 vols. (Oxford, 1945), 1: 223. Scholars of Greek history agree that there occurred in the sixth century a revolution in the ways of thinking about nature. Jean-Pierre Vernant (*Mythe et pensée chez les Grecs* [Paris, 1966], pp. 296-97, 307-8, 311) argues that this revolution was related to the development of money. Jaeger allies the revolution to tyranny, "an intermediate stage between the rule of the nobility and the rule of the people" (Jaeger, *Paidea*, vol. 1, p. 223).

7. On the word *tyrant*, see Roberto Gusmani, *Lydisches Wörterbuch* (Heidelberg, 1964); and Radet, who tries to show the relationships between *tyrannos*, *Tyra* (the name of a Lydian village where Gyges tried to rule), *Tyrrhēnos* (a great hero), and *Tiera* (the Lydian word for "strong fort"). Radet suggests that Greek grammarians believed that the word did not enter Greek vocabulary until Gyges' seizure of power in Lydia.

tyrant as he was the archetypal minter.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, the frequent association of tyranny and minting with one man suggests that they may be mutually reinforcing and interdependent.<sup>9</sup>

It is not easy for us, who have used coinage for some twenty-five hundred years, to imagine the impression it made on the minds of those who first used it in their city-states. The introduction of money to Greece has few useful analogies.<sup>10</sup> Tales of Gyges associate him with founding a tyranny in Lydia and with a power of being able to transform visibles into invisibles and invisibles into visibles. This power, as we shall see, is associated with new economic and political forms that shattered the previous world and its culture.<sup>11</sup> The story of Gyges, however hypothetical or mythical, is a great explanation of the genesis of a political, economic, and verbal semiology.

Many men pretend to dislike money and tyranny. Golden tyranny, though, may be the correspondent or foundation of much that we pretend to love. The myth of Gyges helps to reveal the origin of modern thought and to call that thought into question. As with the study of other apparently historical origins (those of sin, language,

8. See C. Müller, *Fragmenta Historicorum Graecorum*, 5 vols. (Paris, 1841-70), 3:72, Euphoriion of Chalcis, frag. 1; quoted by Radet, *Lydie*, p. 146.

9. The relationship between coinage and tyranny has been studied by Peter N. Ure (*The Origin of Tyranny* [New York, 1962]), who argues that the rise of tyrants is directly related to the rise of coinage (cf. Radet, *Lydie*, p. 163). He offers many examples, including Peisistratus (Athens), Polycrates (Samos), Gyges (Lydia), Midas (Phrygia), Pheidon (Argos), and Cypselus (Corinth). "Coinage," he insists, "is the most epoch-making revolution in the whole history of commerce" (p. 1). Those states in which money was not introduced (Sparta and Thessaly, for example) did not develop tyrannies (pp. 22 ff.). Victor Ehrenberg (*From Solon to Socrates* [London, 1968], p. 24) disagrees with Ure, arguing that it is a "mistake to attribute the social upheavals of the later seventh century to the introduction of coinage." Ehrenberg is probably correct that the largest commercial effects of the introduction of coinage were not felt until the fifth century. In this chapter, however, we are interested in the relation between the rise of coinage and the rise of certain forms of thought, and the ways in which the Greeks thought about this relation. (Ehrenberg merely says that "the parallelism of minds and the exchange of ideas were equalled on the material side" [*From Solon to Socrates*, p. 108].)

10. A visitor to a state in which coins circulated might have experienced surprise similar to that of Marco Polo when he visited the city of Cambaluc (China), where paper money circulated. Polo was fascinated by (and his European contemporaries incredulous about) the printing and circulation of such monies. The mystified Polo even argued that the Emperor had a power like that of a "perfect alchemist" (Marco Polo, *The Description of the World*, trans. A. C. Moule and Paul Pelliot [London, 1938], pp. 237-40).

11. On the shattering of the archaic Greek culture, see Chapter 2, "Esthetics and Economics."

inequality, and morality, for example), the study of the origin of money becomes also the study of forms of human activity.

## TALES OF GYGES

### Herodotus

The tale of the rise to power of the archetypal minter and tyrant plays an important role in the thought of Herodotus and of Plato. By interpreting their versions of the tale we can begin to understand an economic and cultural revolution that corresponds to the origin of money and of philosophy.<sup>12</sup>

In Book 1 of his *Histories*, Herodotus relates the tale of Gyges' taking the royal power from Candaules in gold-rich Lydia. Gyges does not actively seek the kingdom, but is rather a pawn, first of the king and then of the queen. During the first part of the story, Gyges obeys the orders of King Candaules, whose need to have a witness to the beauty of his queen is the occasion of the plot. Candaules tries to persuade Gyges (his courtly confidant) of the queen's beauty: "Candaules fell in love with his own wife, so much that he supposed her to be by far the fairest woman in the world; and being thus persuaded of this, he raved of her beauty (*eidōs*) to Gyges" (Hdt. 1.8). In this tale of erotic intrigue the master seems able to define the value of himself and his possessions only by the esteem of his slaves. Moreover, Candaules does not believe that the verbal testimony he gives to Gyges is sufficient for Gyges to appraise his "property," and he seeks to provide ocular proof. Candaules insists that Gyges become a voyeur and spy on his wife naked in the bedroom: "I think, Gyges, that you do not believe what I tell you of the beauty (*eidōs*) of my wife; men trust their ears less than their eyes" (Hdt. 1.8). Candaules contrasts spoken words with things seen. He seems to agree with Heraclitus that "eyes

12. Ancient writers about Gyges include Xanthos, Anacreon, Plutarch, Cicero, Archilochus, and Horace (cf. Pedley, *Sources on Sardis*). Modern writers include Hans Sachs, Montaigne, La Fontaine, Rousseau, Saint Jerome, Friedrich Hebbel, Quevedo y Villegas, Théophile Gautier, Addison, Beaumont and Fletcher, Hugo von Hofmannstahl, and Gide. Modern critics include Ernst Bickel (*Ilbergs Jahrbücher* [Berlin, 1921], 47: 5.336 ff. ), who presents a short history of works of literature about Gyges; Karl Reinhardt ("Gyges und Sein Ring," in *Vermächtnis der Antike* [Göttingen, 1966]), who presents an interpretation of the Platonic and Herodotean versions; and Kirby Flower Smith ("The Tale of Gyges and the King of Lydia," *American Journal of Philology* 23, no. 3 [1902]).

are more accurate witnesses than ears."<sup>13</sup> A man's word is not sufficient testimony—one must see.

The act of seeing articulates Herodotus's plot, in which making something perfectly believable means making it visible or removing its clothing. The Lydians, significantly, had very strict taboos against nakedness.<sup>14</sup> Gyges is therefore frightened at Candaules' suggestion that he break the law: "Master! What a pestilent command is this that you lay upon me . . . that I should see her who is my mistress naked! With the stripping off of her tunic a woman is stripped of all the honour/shame (*aidōs*) due to her" (Hdt. 1.8). The sight of the queen's beauty (*eidōs*) by anyone other than the king would be a violation of the queen's honor (*aidōs*, almost a homonym of *eidōs*).<sup>15</sup> Gyges tries to remind the king that "men long ago made wise rules for our learning, and one of these is, that we, and none other, should see what is our own" (Hdt. 1.8). The queen is the property not of just any man, but of the king. Gyges is being asked by the spokesman of political power to violate not just any law, but law itself. He senses danger for himself (and, perhaps, for the insecure, enamoured king) and begs that the king not force him to break the ancient commandment: "I fully believe that your queen is the fairest of all women; ask not lawless (*anomōn*) acts of me, I entreat you" (Hdt. 1.8). Gyges' appeal to *nomos* fails. The master Candaules himself plans to introduce his servant to the queen's chamber:

I will so contrive the whole business that she shall never know that you have seen her. I will bring you into the chamber (*oikēma*) where she and I lie and set you behind the open door; and after I have entered, my wife too will come to the bed. There is a chair set near the entrance of the room; on this will she lay each part of her raiment as she takes it off, and you will be able to gaze upon her at your leisure. Then, when she

13. Heraclitus, frag. 12, in H. Diels, *Fragmente der Vorsokratiker*, 5th ed. (Berlin, 1934). The opposition between sound and sight is related to that between oral and witnessed contracts (which, as we shall see, was an important one in the sixth and fifth centuries B.C.). In the *Essai sur les origines des langues* ([Paris, 1970], p. 503), Jean-Jacques Rousseau approves the Horatian judgment, saying "on parle aux yeux bien mieux qu'aux oreilles." Rousseau fears, however, that invisibles (e.g., words heard) have a more powerful effect on the human heart than visibles (e.g., things seen). Rousseau, who considers the power of Gyges in another work (see n. 44), suggests that one's interest is very much excited by words (e.g., those which Candaules speaks to Gyges or those which Herodotus writes to us) but that exact testimony requires a witness or seer.

14. Among the Lydians it is held a great shame to be seen naked. Cf. Thucydides (1.6.5-6); Plato (*Rep.* 457a-b); and Seth Benardete (*Herodotean Inquiries* [The Hague, 1969], pp. 11-14) on the tale of Gyges.

15. Benardete (*ibid.*, p. 12) remarks that "*aidōs* occurs nowhere else in Herodotus."

goes from the chair to the bed, turning her back upon you, do you look to it that she does not see you going out through the doorway. (Hdt. 1.9)

That night Candaules' plan is put into effect. Gyges sees the naked queen and so violates her *aidōs*.

If the plan of Candaules to make Gyges invisible to the queen had been successful, then Gyges would have had for one night a power (in relation to Candaules' queen) like that of the Platonic Gyges (who, by virtue of his ring, could see without being seen). Unfortunately for the outlaw king, the plan fails: the queen sees Gyges as he slips out of the room. (The thoughts of the queen on seeing Gyges may have been the subject of ancient plays.<sup>16</sup> Herodotus, however, does not concern himself with the queen's thoughts, but concentrates on the bare structure of the plot.) The queen does not let it be known that she has perceived Gyges. In the morning, however, she assures herself of those of her household (*oiketeia*, Hdt. 1.11) who are faithful, and calls the unsuspecting Gyges to her. The queen demands that either the violator (Gyges) or he who enabled such violation to take place (Candaules) be killed: "You must either kill Candaules and take me for your own and the throne of Lydia, or yourself be killed now without more ado. . . . That will prevent you from seeing (*idēs*) what you should not see" (Hdt. 1.11). Only one seer of her naked beauty (*eidōs*) and shame (*aidōs*) can live, and that person must be king. The threatened Gyges chooses to kill Candaules, thus ceasing to be the pawn of the king and becoming that of the queen. Now the queen plots to render Gyges invisible to the king, so that he can commit the unlawful murder at the same place (the chamber or *oikēma*) where Gyges saw the naked queen: "You shall come at him from the same place whence he made you see me naked" (Hdt. 1.11). As Gyges wished to be lawful when the king commanded him to spy on the queen, so he again wishes to be lawful when the queen commands him to kill the king. He commits the murder, however, because "he could not get free or by any means escape but either he or Candaules must die" (Hdt. 1.12).

Gyges' murder of Candaules, his marriage to the queen, and his seizure of power mark a change in the *nomos* of the ruling *oikos*: an "economic" revolution. Gyges' power as tyrant is different from that of Candaules. Gyges' violation of the queen's shame and knowledge

16. The thoughts of the espied queen may be the subject of a play of the fourth or third century B.C. In this play, the queen first fears for the life of the king when she spies a strange man in the bedroom. Later she guesses the truth. She waits until morning and then orders Gyges to kill her husband (whom she calls *tyrannos*). See D. L. Page, *A Chapter in the History of Greek Tragedy* (Cambridge, 1951), p. 3.

of her beauty depends on sight alone. He will not seek confirmation of her beauty from others (as did the insecure Candaules) but, servant become master, will rule as a tyrant, making even himself invisible.

Herodotus's account of Gyges' rise to power emphasizes reversals of visibility and invisibility. One reason for this emphasis is the Lydian prohibition of nakedness—an extreme form of being visible. Neither a ruler nor his queen may be seen. The emperor must be clothed. A tyrant maintains power by using this *nomos* against being seen to punish enemies who "see," and by ensuring that he himself be invisible when it is prudent to be so. Gyges, for example, uses the law against seeing the ruler in order to trap one of his former enemies, Lixos, who presents a potential threat to Gyges' new regime. According to Xanthos, Gyges commanded Lixos never to look at him, swearing to bury Lixos in the same spot if he did see him.<sup>17</sup> Gyges the servant killed king Candaules in the same place where he had seen the naked queen; Gyges the king now wishes to kill an enemy who has seen him. In order to do this legally, Gyges contrives a meeting with Lixos in a bad part of town, where Lixos would not expect the king to go. Here the king is, so to speak, naked or perfectly visible. Gyges surprises Lixos, who, unable to avert his eyes, commits the capital offense of seeing the king.

One of the foils to Gyges in Herodotus' *Histories* is Deioeces the Mede, who became invisible to his subjects by establishing one of the first great bureaucracies in Western civilization. Indeed, Deioeces was as successful at being invisible as the neighboring Lydian ruler. The development of a bureaucracy supposes two fundamental social conditions: the development of forms of symbolization, such as money and writing, and the relative invisibility of the ruler. Max Weber argues that money, the invention of which Herodotus discusses in book 1, is the basis of any bureaucracy.<sup>18</sup> In Herodotus's description

17. Page (*Greek Tragedy*, pp. 18–19) summarizes the version of Xanthos: "Gyges was sent to fetch the King's bride, a lady named Toudo. On the way home he fell in love with her himself, violently but in vain. The virtuous princess complained to her bridegroom the King, who swore that he would execute Gyges tomorrow. So during the night, Gyges, warned by an amorous maidservant, murdered the King." The version of Xanthos is reported by Nicolas of Damascus (Müller, *F.H.G.*, vol. 3, frag. 49, pt. 2, pp. 383–86).

18. The relationship between money and bureaucracy (suggested by Radet) has been studied by Max Weber, who writes that "the development of the money economy, in so far as a pecuniary compensation of the officials is concerned, is a presupposition of bureaucracy" (Max Weber, *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft* [Tubingen, 1922], pt. 3, ch. 6; ed. and trans. H. H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills in *From Max Weber* [New York, 1958], p. 204). "Even though the full development of a money economy is not an indispensable precondition for bureaucratization, bureaucracy as a permanent structure is knit to the

of the politics of the Medes, an "invisible hand" (with which money has often been associated) plays a major role.

According to Herodotus, Deioces began his political career as an ordinary judge. By seeming to judge well, he made himself respected among the Medes. When he refused to judge any longer, the people, who had become dependent on his judgments, begged him to be king. Once king, Deioces wished to conceal his unjust motives from the people, and accordingly he built the seven-walled city of Ecbatana. The walls were concentric circles, the innermost of which was made of gold, the medium of exchange (Hdt. 1.98). Inside this wall Deioces lived and reigned.

From within his golden walls Deioces set what Herodotus considers to be precedents in the history of politics: "And when all was built, it was Deioces first who established the rule that no one should come into the presence of the king, but all should be dealt with by the means of messengers; that the king should be seen by no man" (Hdt. 1.99). Deioces established himself as the source of the law, in the same relation to his subjects as money (misunderstood as measure) is to commodities. One interpreter writes: "As the unjust source of all justice, Deioces could not be seen; he was the measure of without being himself measurable by right and wrong."<sup>19</sup> Herodotus explains the attempt to rise above ordinary men: "He was careful to hedge himself with all this state in order that the men of his own age (who had been bred up with him and were as nobly born as he and his equals in manly excellence), instead of seeing him and being thereby vexed and haply moved to plot against him, might by reason of not seeing him deem him to be changed from what he had been (or to be different from themselves)" (Hdt. 1.99). This invisible being (an ancient Wizard of Oz) introduced written communications to protect his position. "When he had established himself in the tyranny, he was very severe in the distribution of justice. And the parties contending were obliged to send him their cases in writing, and he having come to a decision on the cases so laid before him, sent them back again" (Hdt. 1.100). Not only did Deioces thus make himself invisible to others, but he also made others visible to him: "If he received information that any man had injured another, he would presently send for him, and punish him in proportion to his offence; and for this

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one presupposition of a constant income for maintaining it" (p. 208). Though Weber mentions certain exceptions to this general rule (Egypt is one), the bureaucracies of the Eastern satraps (such as those of Croesus and Deioces) are among his most important examples (p. 205).

19. Benardete, *Herodotean Inquiries*, p. 25.



purpose he had spies and eavesdroppers in every part of his dominions" (Hdt. 1.100).

The employment of money and writing enabled Deioces to establish both bureaucracy and tyranny. The concentric walls of Ecbatana were "ring-walls," which served to distinguish the invisible, private realm of the house (*oikos*) or household (*oikia*) from the visible, public realm of the polis.<sup>20</sup> The dislocating effects of the new media of exchange—writing and money—helped him to found the kind of government the Greeks most feared. Aristotle says that the true tyrant has spies (or political Peeping Toms), as powerful as Gyges (the voyeur), who make others visible to him, and that he makes himself invisible. Deioces, like Gyges, was a true tyrant.

According to Herodotus's *Histories*, the descendants of Gyges must pay for his crime.<sup>21</sup> The oracle declares that "the Heraclidae should have vengeance on Gyges' posterity in the fifth generation" (Hdt. 1.13). Herodotus tells how Croesus, the fifth descendant of Gyges, is conquered by Cyrus, the fifth descendant of Deioces (Hdt. 1.80 ff.).<sup>22</sup>

20. Hannah Arendt (*The Human Condition* [Chicago, 1958], esp. pp. 63–64) argues that "the law of the city-state [which distinguishes the visible from the invisible] was quite literally a ring-wall." Following the Hegelian Fustel de Coulanges (*The Ancient City* [New York, 1956]; cf. R. B. Onians, *The Origins of European Thought* [Cambridge, 1954], p. 444, n. 1), Arendt notes that words such as *polis*, *urbs*, town, and *Zaun* express the notion of a circle. Cf. Heraclitus, frag. 44: "The people should fight for the law (*nomos*) as for a wall."

21. They must pay as surely as Alberich (in Richard Wagner's *Der Ring des Nibelungen*) must pay for forging into a ring the gold that he stole from the Rhinemaidens. The slavish Alberich, like Herodotus's Gyges, has to forswear Candaules-like love in order to win golden mastery. The Lydian tyrant Gyges (whose source of power was the gold of the Pactolus River) and the Athenian tyrant Peisistratus (whose source of power was gold mined by slave labor) may have inspired Wagner's *Das Rheingold*. The latter deals with both the gold of the Rhine River (a principal source of wealth in medieval Germany, according to Marc Bloch's "The Problem of Gold in the Middle Ages," in *Land and Work in Medieval Europe* [Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1967], pp. 186 ff.) and the tyrannical enslavement of the Nibelung people. George Bernard Shaw (*The Perfect Wagnerite*, in *Selected Prose*, ed. Diarmuid Russell [London, 1953]), discussing the "sociological aspect of The Ring [of the Nibelung Cycle]" (p. 207), notes that "Fafnir in the real world becomes a capitalist; but Fafnir in [Wagner's] allegory is a mere hoarder" (p. 289).

22. What is known about Croesus and Cyrus supports the notion that there is more than historical reason for Herodotus to pit them against each other in book 1. The ancients told a story about Croesus ("the Midas of Lydia") and Pittacus, in which Pittacus accepts Croesus's invitation to come to Lydia: "You bid me come to Lydia in order to see your prosperity; but without seeing it I can well believe that the son of Alyattes is the most opulent of kings. There will be no advantage to me in a journey to Sardis, for I am not in want of money, and my possessions are sufficient for my friends as well as myself. Nevertheless, I will come, to be entertained by you and to make your































































































