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### Thucydides And Myth: A Complex Relation To Past And Present

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## CHAPTER 15

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# THUCYDIDES AND MYTH

### *A Complex Relation to Past and Present*

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ROSARIA VIGNOLO MUNSON

THUCYDIDES' no-fiction contract with his readers is the strictest among prose writers down to his times (cf. Morgan 2011, 559). He intends his history to be a "possession for ever" for those who want to know the past and deliberate about the future. But in order for a report of world events to be useful, it needs to be vetted for accuracy (*to saphes*) and must exclude the *muthōdes*—that is to say, the mythical and fabulistic in a broad sense (1.22.2–4).<sup>1</sup> Thucydides will narrate a war that occurred during his own lifetime, for the painstaking research of which he can count on himself as a participant and on the interrogation of others who witnessed both events and speeches (1.22.1–2).

Thucydides, however, paves the way for his statement of this methodological program with a survey starting from a remote past, accessible through poetic traditions that represent the most disheartening repository of whatever is distorted, unverified, exceedingly magnified, embroidered, or merely entertaining—in a word, *muthōdes*. One of the reasons for undertaking this survey is no doubt to demonstrate that it cannot be done in a satisfactory way (1.13; 20.1; 21.1) and to discredit previous attempts. But the formal manner in which Thucydides attaches the excursus to his initial statement of purpose gives a better clue: he needs to de-provincialize his war. The conflict between the Athenians and the Peloponnesians was the greatest in history, he announces (1.1). This claim should be taken seriously, in spite of the fact that people always claim that the war they personally experienced was greatest, at least until they forget, at which point they revert to the celebration of past deeds (1.21.2). Thucydides' "Archaeology"—as we conventionally call it<sup>2</sup>—intends to demonstrate that in fact things were smaller in the past: from rude and brutish beginnings, societies grow to be more prosperous and

<sup>1</sup> For the meaning of the term see Flory (1985); Saïd (2011, 78).

<sup>2</sup> 1.1–19. On this section, see especially Gomme (1945, 91–157); Hammond (1952); Romilly (1956, 240–98); Connor (1984, 20–32); Rusten (2006); Luraghi (2000); Nicolai (2001); Hornblower (1991, 7–56); Foster (2010, 8–43).

complicated. Their greater resources and power also produce greater wars, and specifically the latest and greatest is the one Thucydides is about to describe.

But the argument is not as superficial as all that. Thucydides' main rivals here are Homer and Herodotus, the poet who immortalized the most paradigmatic ancient war in the imaginary of the Greeks, and the researcher whose narrative of the Persian Wars ranged over an unparalleled extension of time and space. Thucydides competes with both by inserting his own subject matter into a comparably broad heroic and world-historical context. His attempt does not completely succeed—references to *barbaroi* and descriptions of ethnographic particulars tend to remain rather local, just as the claim at 1.2 that the Peloponnesian War affected “most men both Greek and non-Greek” is somewhat unconvincing. But as he tries, he is also teaching the admirers of his two predecessors a lesson on how to deal with legendary material, if one must. In this section of the Archaeology, therefore, the remote past is the object not of narrative but of argumentation, marked by the vocabulary of hearsay, opinion, and proof (Romilly 1956, 242). Here are just the first two examples in this passage of the type of metanarrative that Thucydides usually avoids in his subsequent account of the war:

It is evident (φαίνεται) that in ancient times the land that is now called Hellas was not inhabited by settled populations. (1.2.1)  
 Not least also the following demonstrates to me (δηλοῖ δέ μοι) the weakness of the ancients. . . . (1.3.1)

In tracing the evolution of the Greek world during the heroic age, Thucydides uses the poetic tradition and combines it with material (or “archaeological”) observation and reasoning. He seems deliberately to avoid describing his own activity by means of typical Herodotean terms such as ἀκοή (“hearsay”) ὄψις (“eyewitness”), and γνώμη (“opinion,” “interpretation”), not to mention ἱστορίη (“research”), yet his form of discourse is here exceptionally close to the one Herodotus favors throughout his work. At the same time, and in spite of avowals of uncertainty about the possibility of accuracy in this sphere, Thucydides posits a much greater continuity between the heroic age and historical times than Herodotus does (Luraghi 2000, 234; Munson 2012, 197). This attitude is partly a consequence of Thucydides' general disregard of transcendence (including the divine apparatus of epic sagas, which he of course eliminates); but it also represents an extension of the basic principle that at any time or any place human nature remains the same (1.22.4). The idea that human beings have always responded to their environment with economic and political motives similar to those of his contemporaries—love of gain, prestige, and fear being permanent causes of action (see 1.76.2; 1.23.6)—allows Thucydides to derive by analogy a plausible (εἰκός) reconstruction of the past by interpreting whatever evidence is available through his knowledge of the forces that shape the present.

The method is circular because the reconstruction of the remote past is in turn designed to anticipate the historical patterns operative in the narrative present. Thus, on the basis of some unspecified ἀκοή (1.4.1), the reign of the mythical Minos of Crete,

who “as it is likely” (ὡς εἰκός) fought piracy to protect his revenues, is reshaped on the model of the Athenian thalassocracy;<sup>3</sup> but at the same time Minos is also presented as the earliest historical precedent of how power is inherently connected with ships and money, how the stronger will submit to the weaker, and how the resulting arrangement, if ably managed, will serve the economic interests of both ruler and ruled (1.8.2–4). Agamemnon is a somewhat less successful paradigm of naval empire (Zali 2011, 22–25): he must have enjoyed the command of the sea to be able to lead the first common Greek enterprise (reconstruction of the past; 1.3.1 and 4; 1.9.1–4), but the Trojan War also implicitly demonstrates (1.11–12.1) how hegemonic powers can overextend themselves and eventually revert to chaos and ruin (foreshadowing of the future).

Since one of Thucydides’ aims in the *Archaeology* is evidently to introduce themes that will recur in the rest of the work, one has to wonder why Thucydides’ *speakers* hardly ever bring the heroic age to bear either in order to prove generalizations about the workings of history or for the purpose of supporting specific claims. Thucydides reports that the inhabitants of Scione say that their city was originally settled by Achaeans stranded on their way back from Troy (4.120.1), and that the Corcyreans boast of their connection with the Homeric Phaeacians—no doubt for the purpose of devaluing the role of their historical motherland, Corinth (1.25.4; Hornblower 1996, 63). He shows the political nature of this type of popular mythmaking when he cites a case that originated in the recent and easily documentable past: after the death of Brasidas, Amphipolis declared the Spartan general as its *oikist*, obliterating all monuments of the Athenian Hagnon having founded the city (5.11.1; cf. 4.102.3). But these are exceptions: Thucydides’ speeches do not contain explicit references to the heroic age.<sup>4</sup> In Herodotus, where the opposite is the case (see Hdt. 1.1–5, 5.94, 7.150; 7.159; 7.161.3; 9.116; Grethlein 2010, 158–86; Zali 2011, 5–8), an especially allusive episode concerns a quarrel that broke out between Tegeans and Athenians over the honor of occupying a privileged position in the Panhellenic army that is about to confront the Persians at Plataea (Hdt. 9.25–26). In their contest of words, which in the economy of Herodotus’ text foreshadows the hegemonic struggles among the Greeks that will flare up more destructively after the Persian Wars, the two sides enumerate their respective benefactions to Greece through the ages (cf. Munson 2001, 219–20). The Tegeans recall that it was one of their own who challenged and defeated in a duel Hyllus the son of Heracles, thereby delaying the return of the Heraclids to the Peloponnese for one hundred years (Hdt. 9.25). The Athenians, before magnifying their historical victory at Marathon, boast of how they provided refuge to the exiled Heraclids, buried the dead in the war of the Seven against Thebes, defeated the Amazons who invaded Attica, and distinguished themselves in the expedition to Troy

<sup>3</sup> On the meaning of ἀκοή, see Hornblower (1991, 22). Thucydides’ unique use of the expression ὦν ἀκοῆ ἴσμεν in this passage combines Herodotean vocabulary to form a non-Herodotean expression; this suggests an allusion to (and disagreement with) Herodotus’ account of Minos at 1.171 and 3.122; see Hornblower (1991, 19–20). On Minos in Herodotus and Thucydides in the light of current mythological traditions, see Irwin (2007); Munson (2012, 201–12).

<sup>4</sup> At 5.105 the Athenians allude, albeit skeptically, to divine rather than heroic myth in support of their “might is right” historical rule.

(Hdt. 9.26). It is hard to know whether ancient Greek negotiators ever really talked in these terms when they needed to get things done, but in the sphere of epideictic rhetoric, at least, the Athenian catalogue of deeds starting from the heroic age conforms to a model reflected by highly conventional fourth-century funeral orations such as those of Lysias and Demosthenes, or the imitation of the genre in Plato's *Menexenus* (Loraux 1986, 60–76; Grethlein 2010, 105–25).

In Thucydides, by contrast, Pericles' Funeral Oration omits the catalogue of past deeds altogether, but begins with a preamble that makes clear that his *epitaphios* will not entirely follow the usual format (2.35–36.2). Pericles' brief allusion to the Athenian myth of autochthony, another usual theme of funeral orations, resembles the allusion in the narrator's own voice in the Archaeology to the extent that it takes all the myth out of it.<sup>5</sup> Pericles privileges contemporary accomplishments: today's Athenians "do not need the praise of Homer or of anyone else who will give momentary pleasure with verses, but whose interpretation of facts will be destroyed by truth" (οὐδὲν προσδεόμενοι οὔτε Ὀμήρου ἐπαινέτου οὔτε ὅστις ἔπεισι μὲν τὸ αὐτίκα τέρπει, τῶν δ' ἔργων τὴν ὑπόνοιαν ἢ ἀλήθεια βλάψει, 2.41.4). Similarly, the Athenian envoys at Sparta justify their right to empire on the basis of their accomplishments in the Persian War and the circumstances that followed, but they decline to rehearse ancient events, evidence for which comes from hearsay of words rather than from the listeners' eyewitness (παλαιὰ . . . ὧν ἀκοαὶ μᾶλλον λόγων μάρτυρες ἢ ὄψις τῶν ἀκουσομένων, 1.73.1). The Athenians at Melos and Euphemus at Camarina both suggest in different ways that the mention of past deeds is a common practice but that, under the circumstances, it would be out of place (5.89; 6.83.2; Zali 2011, 19). Thucydides, in other words, consistently draws attention to the fact that he will neither let his speakers borrow his own pragmatic reconstruction nor allow them to include the heroic past in their arguments in the traditional way.

The frequent use of the device of *praeteritio* by Thucydides' speakers throws into higher relief the polemical nature of Thucydides' own confrontation with stories that "have won their way into the mythical" (ἐπὶ τὸ μυθῶδες ἐκνευικηκότα, 1.21.1). In the first ten chapters of the Archaeology (1.2–11) we find about twenty negations designed to rectify erroneous ideas about the heroic age.<sup>6</sup> Hypothetical sentences (e.g., 1.10.2; 11.2) have a similar function. Homer—for the likes of whom fifth-century Athens has no use

<sup>5</sup> See Pelling (2009, especially 476–78). Pericles simply says that "the same people have always occupied this land, and each generation has kept it free until this day through their excellence" (2.36.1). Thucydides in the Archaeology refers to autochthony only as the result of a disadvantage: Attica was always inhabited by Athenians because the infertility of the land did not encourage settlers from abroad (1.2.4). But there was a wealth of mythical narratives involving Erechtheus/Erychthonius about Athenians being "sons of their soil," with the implication of racial superiority over other groups of Greeks. See especially Loraux (1986, 148–50, 193, 277–78).

<sup>6</sup> See also 2.29.3, designed to deny the notion that Teres (father of Sitalces, who was king of the Odrysian Thracians in 431 BCE) was a descendant of the brutal mythical Thracian king Tereus (who married the Athenian princess Procne and defiled her sister Philomela: Aeschylus, *Suppliants* 60–68; cf. Ovid, *Metamorphoses*. 6.424–84). Hornblower (1991, 287) suggests that Thucydides is here correcting Hellanicus, but a connection between Teres and Tereus may have been made more generally by the Athenian public at the time of Athenian involvement with the Odrysian ruling family.

(2.41.4)—is nevertheless indispensable for the Trojan War (1.10.3), on whose occurrence per se no Greek author ever cast any doubt. Homer has value especially as an “involuntary” source, as when he unwittingly shows that the Greeks used to have no common name (1.3.3) or that there was a time when piracy used to be an acceptable activity (1.5.2; cf. Romilly 1956, 246). Yet, being a performer and a poet, he may be ranked among those who lack integrity or practical sense.<sup>7</sup>

In Thucydides’ opinion (μοι δοκεῖ), for example, Agamemnon gathered the armament for the Trojan War “not so much (οὐ τοσοῦτον) because Helen’s suitors were bound by oaths to her father Tyndareus, but because he (Agamemnon) was superior in power” (1.9.1). It is interesting to note that Thucydides, unlike Herodotus and many others among his own contemporaries, neither disputes nor discusses the role of Helen as a cause of the war. (Could he have believed that a woman’s abduction was the “truest reason” for the first Panhellenic expedition in history?<sup>8</sup>) He does not, either, entirely deny the importance of the suitors’ oath.<sup>9</sup> But his “not so much x but y” form of discourse minimizes the idealistic motive in favor of a more pragmatic, and less heroic, explanation.

To corroborate his point, Thucydides valorizes a non-Homeric tradition, defined as “what those Peloponnesians say who have received in memory from their ancestors the most reliable information” (λέγουσι δὲ καὶ οἱ τὰ σαφέστατα Πελοποννησίων μνήμη παρὰ τῶν πρότερον δεδεγμένοι, 1.9.2). Here the cautionary force of λέγουσι is blunted by the relative credibility (σαφές, which is the opposite of the *muthōdes*, 1.22.4) of the purely genealogical (and therefore romance-free) account of how the Pelopids wrested from the Perseids the dominion over the Peloponnese and adjacent islands. But the proof-value of what Thucydides is ready to trust is limited,<sup>10</sup> and any further inference on his part is just that, an inference: it is because Agamemnon inherited his power that, again “in my opinion” (μοι δοκεῖ, at 1.9.3), he was able to make the expedition, “relying not on good will as much as on fear” (οὐ χάριτι τὸ πλεόν ἢ φόβῳ, 1.9.3). This partially demythologized version based on negation better fits the causal model by which Thucydides interprets history throughout his work: power, and especially naval power, is the basis of all great enterprises, from Minos of Crete (1.8) to fifth-century Athens, and the fear that power inspires is a fundamental motive for action.

<sup>7</sup> 1.21.1. Herodotus more forgivingly attributes Homer’s inaccuracies to the special requirements of the epic genre (2.116).

<sup>8</sup> On women in Thucydides, see Hornblower’s amusing note at 1.6.3, the passage where Thucydides discusses Greek change of dress: “This is a rare excursus into ‘social history.’ Hdt. (V 88) had described a change in the dress of Athenian women (from ‘Doric’ to ‘Ionic’) . . . Th. on the other hand seems to be concerned only with men, that is from ‘Ionic’ to ‘Doric’ (. . .). Thucydides is not necessarily contradicting Hdt., since they are concerned with different sexes; but it is characteristic of Hdt. that on this issue he shows interest in women and characteristic of Thucydides that he does not, even in a chapter which in other respects ranges widely for him” (Hornblower 1991, 25–26). Thucydides’ general disregard for the historical role of women, of course, greatly narrows the available mythical repertoire. I am grateful to Edith Foster for this insight.

<sup>9</sup> On the significance of oaths in Thucydides, see Lateiner (2012).

<sup>10</sup> Cf. note 14.

Thucydides' negations and his speakers' exclusions of heroic age material that all their listeners would have shared go hand in hand with his open mistrust of common beliefs. One of the most conspicuous features of the *History* is its insistence on the unreliability of ordinary people. Both narrator and speakers maintain several times that "the Athenians"—that is to say, the sovereign assembly—are prone to making impulsive decisions, change their minds overnight, or commit serious errors of policy that lead to disastrous results or, if not, it is only because of sheer luck (see especially 2.65). This sort of popular instability is the result of the ebb and flow of collective emotions such as public anger, private grief, fear, exaltation, pity or, in general, passion (ὄργή),<sup>11</sup> but it also has an intellectual aspect: people tend to hold mistaken ideas both about (more or less) far-away places and about the (more or less remote) past. In the chapters of the Archaeology that detail his painstaking method of research, Thucydides observes that "men accept from one another traditions (ἄκοάς) of past events, even traditions that are local to their own country, without putting them to the test of fire (ἀβανίστως)" (1.20.1). Even relatively recent episodes of Greek history become distorted, including, among other things, the role of Athens' so-called tyrannicides, who did not actually kill the tyrant, as most people think, but his younger brother (1.20.2). In Book 6, Thucydides exceptionally chooses to expand on the misconceptions concerning this particular event, specifying that Harmodius and Aristogiton did not liberate Athens from an already oppressive regime, but made the tyranny harsher, and did not do what they did for ideological or political reasons, but on account of an amorous incident (ἐρωτικὴν συντυχίαν, 6.54.1). He does so for a special reason: the resilience of the tyranny after the action of the tyrannicides was discussed as an alarming precedent in the streets of Athens at the time of the mutilation of the Herms on the eve of the expedition to Sicily, that is to say, in the "present" of Thucydides' narrative. This was one case when the incorrect memory of the demos (πιστάμενος . . . ἀκοῆ, 6.53.3; μμνησκόμενος ὅσα ἀκοῆ ἤπιστατο, 6.60.1) actually affected political action. The Athenians' misunderstanding of history (an intellectual shortcoming) came together with their emotional fragility ("passion": see αὐτῶν ὀργιζομένων, 6.60.2), leading them to exaggerate the import of a distracting affair in the present and, as a result, to handicap an enterprise (already ill planned) in the imminent future.<sup>12</sup> Here and throughout his work the aim of Thucydides' corrections is not to improve the knowledge of a broad and diverse audience of fellow Greeks (which is arguably what Herodotus is trying to do). He rather speaks *about* the masses (τὸ πλῆθος), not to them. He represents their ignorance to a restricted readership that he hopes will benefit from what the past can teach.

But there are chinks in the armor of Thucydides' criticism of popular or poetic myth, both at the intellectual and at the emotional levels. After reproaching the Athenians

<sup>11</sup> ὄργή denotes the public's momentary anger, e.g., at 1.140.1, 2.11.4, 2.60.1.

<sup>12</sup> On the multiple thematic connections between Thucydides' Harmodius and Aristogiton references and their surrounding narrative, see Hornblower (2008, 433–53) and Meyer (2008), with extensive bibliographies. See also Rawlings (1981, 110–11, 257–58). The documentary evidence for the popular perception of the tyrannicides has been discussed most recently by Ferrario (2014, 18–25).

for making the expedition to Sicily “most of them being inexperienced about its size or the number of its populations, both Greek and non-Greek” (6.1.1), he inserts an ethnographical survey in which he reports without irony the *poetic* traditions that Cyclopes and Laestrygonians are the mythical ancestors of the earliest native inhabitants (6.2.1); in the same section, he is also not reluctant to derive the Elymians of Eryx and Egesta from Trojan refugees (6.2.3).<sup>13</sup> Mostly, however, Thucydides’ occasional deference to tradition (if we can call it that) has to do with empathy. Thucydides’ war is “great” for many reasons, including the unprecedented resources it mobilized, but also, notably, on account of the great *pathēmata* that accompanied it (1.23.1–3). I have argued elsewhere that in the face of the tremendous sufferings so suddenly and inexplicably brought about by the war and the plague, Thucydides’ resistance to widespread mythical thinking in response to oracles and signs gives way to a humbler approach (cf. Munson 2015). In the area of mythical *narratives*, let us consider especially the following passage, where Thucydides explains the acute feeling of separation and loss experienced by the Athenians when they had to move from their farms and seek protection in the city in the imminence of the first Peloponnesian invasion of Attica (2.14.2–15):

It was painful for them to move, because they had always been used to live in the country. From the most ancient times (ἀπὸ τοῦ πάνυ ἀρχαίου) this was true of the Athenians more than any other people. For under Cecrops and the early kings until Theseus, Attica had always been inhabited in separate towns, each with its own town hall and magistrates; when there was no danger, they did not go to the king for deliberations but governed themselves and took counsel on their own. Some of them even made war against the king, as the Eleusinians with Eumolpus against Erechtheus. But when the kingship passed on to Theseus, who was both intelligent and powerful, he reordered the region by eliminating, among other things, the counsel chambers and offices of the various towns. Consolidating them into the city we have now, with a single council house and town hall, he “synoecized” all the citizens. And although they each administered their property as before, Theseus compelled them to have only one polis, which became great, once all were counted as its citizens; as such it was bequeathed by Theseus to posterity (μιά πόλει ταύτη χρῆσθαι, ἢ ἀπάντων ἤδη ξυντελούντων ἐς αὐτὴν μεγάλη γενομένη παρεδόθη ὑπὸ Θησέως τοῖς ἔπειτα).

Thucydides goes on to recall that a city festival celebrated “even to this day” (ἔτι καὶ νῦν) testifies to the synoecism as a landmark event in Athenian history; he provides evidence (τεκμήριον) that previously Athens had been a more compact urban center, somewhat secondary to the inhabitants of greater Attica, by noting the current location of the city’s most ancient sanctuaries (ἱερὰ ἀρχαῖα) and the spring from which, since ancient times, it is believed (ἔτι ἀπὸ τοῦ ἀρχαίου . . . νομίζεται), the Athenians draw water before weddings and other rituals (2.15.3–5). His method here is similar to his use

<sup>13</sup> On the cluster of Homeric references in Thucydides’ Sicilian (and Corcyrean) narratives, see Mackie (1996). On other references to myths of ancient descent, see Fragoulaki (2013, 55).



of visible signs of material culture in support of limited points in the Archaeology.<sup>14</sup> But the Theseus tradition in the passage quoted from 2.14.2–15)—this he reports in a distinctly different way than he does the *akoai* about his two other paradigmatic heroic figures, Minos and Agamemnon.<sup>15</sup> Here we find no cautionary markers, skeptical disclaimers, discussion of proofs, or indication that “ancient events are impossible to ascertain on account of the lapse of time” (τὰ ἔτι παλαιότερα σαφῶς μὲν εὔρεϊν διὰ χρόνου πλῆθος ἀδύνατα, 1.1.3). The reason is that the importance of this story has not so much to do with historical truth as with the way in which it reflects the Athenians’ collective emotions and the meaning Thucydides attributes to their displacement in 431.

The somewhat fabulistic introduction of Theseus as a wise and powerful leader (γενόμενος μετὰ τοῦ ξυνητοῦ καὶ δυνατός) who put Athens on its way to greatness also connects the heroic age to the more recent past and to the present of the narrative by recalling Thucydides’ praise of Themistocles and his political successor Pericles.<sup>16</sup> The evacuation of Attica at the time of the second Persian War, which Thucydides recalls precisely in this narrative (2.16.1), had been promoted by Themistocles. Now, at the beginning of the Peloponnesian War, the Athenians were physically moving again, troubled and depressed for having to abandon their property and their old way of life in the country demes (2.16.1–2). Somewhat like Themistocles and Pericles, Theseus had forced (ἠνάγκασε, 2.15.2) the Athenians to leave behind a part of themselves. He acted against public inclination but for the public good, so as to bequeath to posterity a united city that proceeded to become great (μιᾶ πόλει . . . ἢ ἀπάντων . . . μεγάλη γενομένη παρεδόθη). The memory of Theseus would not indeed have been out of place in Pericles’ Funeral Oration, but Thucydides reserves it for himself, as a metaphor for the tension between consequential leadership and popular sentiment in a narrative of suffering, in which “greatness” is a profoundly ambivalent goal. This represents, perhaps, his most complete surrender to *to muthōdes*.

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<sup>14</sup> For example, at 1.8.1 where the ancient Carian tombs found at Delos can only serve as evidence that Carians originally lived there, and not for the more important point that Minos expelled Carian pirates from the islands.

<sup>15</sup> Thucydides (like Herodotus) establishes no connection between Theseus and Minos. See note 3, end.

<sup>16</sup> Thucydides praises Themistocles for his innate ξύνησις and δύναμις (1.138.3) and he calls Pericles λέγειν καὶ πράσσειν δυνατώτατος (1.139.4), adding that the city “became greatest under his leadership” (ἐγένετο ἐπ’ ἐκείνου μεγίστη, 2.65.5). ξύνησις is implicitly attributed to Pericles in both passages, and especially at 1.140.1 (in Pericles’ own speech) and 2.34.6. See Gomme (1956, 49); Hornblower (1991, 124–25).

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