Thucydides, Pericles, and Periclean Imperialism

In this book, Edith Foster compares Thucydides’ descriptions of the Peloponnesian War in books one and two of the History with the arguments about warfare and war materials offered by the Athenian statesman Pericles in those same books. Thucydides’ narratives emphasize the passions that motivate aggressive warfare and show that it is frequently unproductive or counterproductive. By contrast, Pericles’ speeches demonstrate that he shared with many other figures in the History a mistaken confidence in the power, glory, and reliability of warfare and the instruments of force.

Foster analyses Thucydides’ presentation of the events that led up to the war, and his presentation of Pericles’ character in book one, before studying the evidence from Pericles’ speeches. The contrast between the historian and his subject shows that Pericles does not speak for Thucydides, and that Thucydides should not be associated with Pericles’ intransigent imperialism. On the contrary, books one and two of the History lead the reader to an analytical view of the complicated history, character, and effect of a man who was entirely dedicated to Athens’ imperial potential.

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For My Father
# Contents

Acknowledgments

List of Abbreviations

Introduction

1 War Materials and Their Glory in the Archaeology
   - The Rich Soil Paradox
   - Minos
   - Athens and Sparta
   - Agamemnon and Troy
   - Materials and the Reader
   - The Modern World
   - The Spartans, the Athenians, and the Persian Wars
   - The Peloponnesian War

2 Arms and Passion: Corinth and Corcyra at War
   - Epidamnus, Corinth, and Corcyra
   - The First Battle between Corinth and Corcyra
   - Corinth and Corcyra at Athens
   - 'Biggest in its Multitude of Ships' (νεῶν πλήθει μεγίστη):
     - The Naval Battle between Corinth and Corcyra
   - The Battle: Navies Deployed
   - Blindness and Death in the Waters of Acheron

3 The Athenian Acme in Book One of Thucydides: The Spartan
   - War Congress and the Pentekontaetia
   - The Corinthians Correct Athens and Sparta
   - The Athenian Response
   - Archidamus’ Argument against Going to War
   - Sthenelaidas Argues for War
   - The Athenian Acme and the Pentekontaetia
## Contents

**Themistoclean Walls** 97

**Tribute** 105

**Athens on Campaign** 110

**4 Pericles in History**

- **Pericles before the Speeches** 119
- **Pericles and the Curse on the Alcmaeonids** 127
- **Themistocles’ Foundation** 129
- **Thucydides and the Periclean Age** 131
- **The Corinthians on the Weakness of Athens’ Purchased Strength** 135
- **Pericles’ First Speech** 138

**5 Pericles and Athens: Pericles’ Speech in Indirect Discourse in Narrative Context** 151

- **The Theban Attack on Plataea** 152
- ‘Both Sides Were Thinking Big’ (olynomial te ἐπενόουν οὐδὲν ἀμφότεροι): **The Preparations for War** 157
- **Archidamus Addresses the Peloponnesian Captains** 159
- ‘And in This Way He Encouraged Them with Money’ (χρήμασι μὲν οὖν οὕτως ἐθάρσυνεν αὐτούς): **Pericles’ Speech in Indirect Discourse** 162
- **Thucydides on Attica and Athens** 174

**6 Thucydides and Pericles’ Final Speeches** 183

- **Pericles and Thucydides on the Reality of the Athenian Empire** 185
- **Unnameable Acquisitions** 190
- **Athenian Glory and Imperial Acquisition** 198
- **Self-Sufficiency through Materialism** 202
- **Thucydides’ Plague Narrative on Self-Sufficiency and Materialism** 204
- **Pericles in Thucydides** 210
- **Conclusion** 218

**Bibliography** 221

**General Index** 231

**Index Locorum** 241
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