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978-1-107-64424-3 - Primitive Athens as Described by Thucydides

Jane Ellen Harrison

Excerpt

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INTRODUCTORY.

THE traveller who visits Athens for the first time will naturally, if he be a classical scholar, devote himself at the outset to the realization of the city of Perikles. His task will here be beset by no serious difficulties. The Acropolis, as Perikles left it, is, both from literary and monumental evidence, adequately known to us. Archaeological investigation has now but little to add to the familiar picture, and that little in matters of quite subordinate detail. The Parthenon, the Propylaea, the temple of Nike Apteros, the Erechtheion (this last probably planned, though certainly not executed by Perikles) still remain to us; their ground-plans and their restorations are for the most part architectural certainties. Moreover, even outside the Acropolis, the situation and limits of the city of Perikles are fairly well ascertained. The Acropolis itself was, we know, a fortified sanctuary within a larger walled city. This city lay, as the oracle in Herodotus¹ said, 'wheel-shaped' about the axle of the sacred hill. Portions of this outside wall have come to light here and there, and the foundations of the great Dipylon Gate are clearly made out, and are marked in every guide-book. Inside the circuit of these walls, in the inner Kerameikos, whose boundary-stone still remains, lay the agora. Outside is still to be seen, with its street of tombs, the ancient cemetery.

Should the sympathies of the scholar extend to Roman times, he has still, for the making of his mental picture, all the help imagination needs. Through the twisted streets of modern Athens the beautiful Tower of the Winds is his constant land-mark; Hadrian, with his Olympieion, with his triumphal Arch, with his Library, confronts him at every turn; when he goes to the great

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Stadion to see 'Olympian' games or a revived 'Antigone,' when he looks down from the Acropolis into the vast Odeion, Herodes Atticus cannot well be forgotten. Moreover, if he really cares to know what Athens was in Roman days, the scholar can leave behind him his Murray and his Baedeker and take for his only guide the contemporary of Hadrian, Pausanias.

But returning, as he inevitably will, again and again to the Acropolis, the scholar will gradually become conscious, if dimly, of another and an earlier Athens. On his plan of the Acropolis he will find marked certain fragments of very early masonry, which, he is told, are 'Pelasgian.' As he passes to the south of the Parthenon he comes upon deep-sunk pits railed in, and within them he can see traces of these 'Pelasgian' walls and other masonry about which his guide-book is not over-explicit. To the south of the Propylaea, to his considerable satisfaction, he comes on a solid piece of this 'Pelasgian' wall, still above ground. East of the Erechtheion he will see a rock-hewn stair-way which once, he learns, led down from the palace of the ancient prehistoric kings, the 'strong house of Erechtheus.' South of the Erechtheion he can make out with some effort the ground plan of an early temple; he is told that there exist bases of columns belonging to a yet earlier structure, and these he probably fails to find.

With all his efforts he can frame but a hazy picture of this earlier Acropolis, this citadel before the Persian wars. Probably he might drop the whole question as of merely antiquarian interest—a matter to be noted rather than realized—but that his next experience brings sudden revelation. Skilfully sunk out of sight—to avoid interfering with his realization of Periklean Athens—is the small Acropolis Museum. Entering it, he finds himself in a moment actually within that other and earlier Athens dimly discerned, and instantly he knows it, not as a world of ground-plans and fragmentary Pelasgic fortifications, but as a kingdom of art and of humanity vivid with colour and beauty.

As he passes in eager excitement through the ante-rooms he will glance, as he goes, at the great blue lion and the bull, at the tangle of rampant many-coloured snakes, at the long-winged birds with their prey still in beak and talon; he will pause to smile back at the three kindly 'Bluebeards,' he will be glad when he sees that the familiar Calf-Carrier has found his feet and

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his name, he will note the long rows of solemn votive terra-cottas, and, at last, he will stand in the presence of those Maiden-images, who, amid all that coloured architectural splendour, were consecrate to the worship of the Maiden. The Persian harried them, Perikles left them to lie beneath his feet, yet their antique loveliness is untouched and still sovran. They are alive, waiting still, in hushed, intent expectancy—but not for us. We go out from their presence as from a sanctuary, and henceforth every stone of the Pelasgian fortress where they dwelt is, for us, sacred.

But if he leave that museum aglow with a new enthusiasm, determined to know what is to be known of that antique world, the scholar will assuredly be met on the threshold of his enquiry by difficulties and disillusionment. By difficulties, because the information he seeks is scattered through a mass of foreign periodical literature, German and Greek; by disillusionment, because to the simple questions he wants to ask he can get no clear, straightforward answer. He wants to know what was the nature and extent of the ancient city, did it spread beyond the Acropolis, if so in what direction and how far? what were the primitive sanctuaries inside the Pelasgic walls, what, if any, lay outside and where? Where was the ancient city well (Kallirrhoe), where the agora, where that primitive orchestra on which, before the great theatre was built, dramatic contests took place? Straightway he finds himself plunged into a very cauldron of controversy. The ancient agora is placed by some to the north, by others to the south, by others again to the west. The question of its position is inextricably bound up, he finds to his surprise, with the question as to where lay the Enneakrounos, a fountain with which hitherto he has had no excessive familiarity; the mere mention of the Enneakrounos brings either a heated discussion or, worse, a chilling silence.

This atmosphere of controversy, electric with personal prejudice, exhilarating as it is to the professed archaeologist, plunges the scholar in a profound dejection. His concern is not *jurare in verba magistri*—he wants to know not *who* but *what* is right. Two questions only he asks. First, and perhaps to him unduly foremost, What, as to the primitive city, is the literary testimony of the ancients themselves, and preferably the testimony not of

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scholiasts and second-hand lexicographers, but of classical writers who knew and lived in Athens, of Thucydides, of Pausanias? Second, To that literary testimony, what of monumental evidence has been added by excavation?

It is to answer these two questions that the following pages are written. It is the present writer's conviction that controversy as to the main outlines of the picture, though perhaps at the outset inevitable, is, with the material now accessible, an anachronism; that the facts stand out plain and clear and that between the literary and monumental evidence there is no discrepancy. The plan adopted will therefore be to state as simply as may be what seems the ascertained truth about the ancient city, and to state that truth unencumbered by controversy. Then, and not till then, it may be profitable to mention other current opinions, and to examine briefly what seem to be the errors in method which have led to their acceptance.

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CHAPTER I.

THE ANCIENT CITY, ITS CHARACTER AND LIMITS.

By a rare good fortune we have from Thucydides himself an account of the nature and extent of the city of Athens in the time of the kingship. This account is not indeed as explicit in detail as we could wish, but in general outline it is clear and vivid. To the scholar the remembrance of this account comes as a ray of light in his darkness. If he cannot find his way in the mazes of archaeological controversy, it is at least his business to read Thucydides and his hope to understand him.

The account of primitive Athens is incidental. Thucydides is telling how, during the Peloponnesian War, when the enemy was mustering on the Isthmus and attack on Attica seemed imminent, Perikles advised the Athenians to desert their country homes and take refuge in the city. The Athenians were convinced by his arguments. They sent their sheep and cattle to Euboea and the islands; they pulled down even the wood-work of their houses, and themselves, with their wives, their children, and all their moveable property, migrated to Athens. But, says Thucydides¹, this 'fitting' went hard with them; and why? Because 'they had always, most of them, been used to a country life.'

This habit of 'living in the fields,' this country life was, Thucydides goes on to explain, no affair of yesterday; it had been so from the earliest times. All through the days of the kingship from Kekrops to Theseus the people had lived scattered about in small communities—'village communities' we expect to hear him say, for he is insisting on the habit of country life; but, though he knows the word 'village' (*κώμη*) and employs it in discussing

¹ Thucyd. ii. 14 *χαλεπῶς δὲ αὐτοῖς, διὰ τὸ ἀεὶ εἰωθῆναι τοὺς πολλοὺς ἐν τοῖς ἀγροῖς διατῆσθαι, ἣ ἀνάστασις ἐγίγνετο.*

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Laconia elsewhere¹, he does not use it here. He says the inhabitants of Athens lived ‘in towns’ (*κατὰ πόλεις*), or, as it would be safer to translate it, ‘in burghs.’

It is necessary at the outset to understand clearly what the word *polis* here means. We use the word ‘town’ in contradistinction to country, but from the account of Thucydides it is clear that people could live in a *polis* and yet lead a country life. Our word *city* is still less appropriate; ‘city’ to us means a very large town, a place where people live crowded together. A *polis*, as Thucydides here uses the word, was a community of people living on and immediately about a fortified hill or citadel—a citadel-community. The life lived in such a community was essentially a country life. A *polis* was a citadel, only that our word ‘citadel’ is over-weighted with military association.

Athens then, in the days of Kekrops and the other kings down to Theseus, was one among many other citadel-communities or burghs. Like the other scattered burghs, like Aphidna, like Thoricus, like Eleusis, it had its own local government, its own council-house, its own magistrates. So independent were these citadel-communities that, Thucydides tells us, on one occasion Eleusis under Eumolpos actually made war on Athens under Erechtheus.

So things went on till the reign of Theseus and his famous Synoikismos, the Dwelling-together or Unification. Theseus, Thucydides says, was a man of ideas and of the force of character necessary to carry them out. He substituted the one for the many; he put an end to the little local councils and council-houses and centralized the government of Attica in Athens. Where the government is, thither naturally population will flock. People began to gather into Athens, and for a certain percentage of the population town-life became fashionable. Then, and not till then, did the city become ‘great,’ and that ‘great’ city Theseus handed down to posterity. ‘And from that time down to the present day the Athenians celebrate to the Goddess at the public expense a festival called the Dwelling-together².’

One unified city and one goddess, *the goddess* who needs no

¹ Thucyd. i. 5, 10.

² Thucyd. ii. 15 και ξυνοικια εξ εκείνου Ἀθηναῖοι ἔτι και νῦν τῇ θεῷ ἑορτὴν δημοτελῆ ποιῶσι.

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name. Their unity and their greatness the Athenians are not likely to forget, but will they remember the time before the union, when Athens was but Kekropia, but one among the many scattered citadel-communities? Will they remember how small was their own beginning, how limited their burgh, how impossible—for that is the immediate point—that it should have contained in its narrow circuit a large town population? Thucydides clearly is afraid they will *not*. There was much to prevent accurate realization. The walls of Themistocles, when Thucydides wrote, enclosed a *polis* that was not very much smaller than the modern town; the walls of the earlier community, the old small burgh, were in part ruined. It was necessary therefore, if the historian would make clear his point, namely, the smallness of the ancient burgh and its inadequacy for town-life, that he should define its limits. This straightway he proceeds to do. Our whole discussion will centre round his definition and description, and at the outset the passage must be given in full. Immediately after his notice of the festival of the ‘Dwelling-together,’ celebrated to ‘the Goddess,’ Thucydides¹ writes as follows:

‘Before this, what is now the citadel was the city, together with what is below it towards about south. The evidence is this. The sanctuaries are in the citadel itself, those of other deities as well² (as the Goddess). And those that are outside are placed towards this part of the city more (than elsewhere). Such are the sanctuary of Zeus Olympios, and the Pythion, and the sanctuary of Ge, and that of Dionysos-in-the-Marshes (to whom is celebrated the more ancient Dionysiac Festival on the 12th day in the month Anthesterion, as is also the custom down to the present day with the Ionian descendants of the Athenians); and other ancient sanctuaries also are placed here. And the spring which is now called Nine-Spouts,

¹ Thucyd. ii. 15 τὸ δὲ πρὸ τούτου ἡ ἀκρόπολις ἡ νῦν οὖσα πόλις ἦν καὶ τὸ ὑπ’ αὐτῆν πρὸς νότον μάλιστα τετραμμένον· τεκμήριον δέ. τὰ γὰρ ἱερὰ ἐν αὐτῇ τῇ ἀκροπόλει καὶ ἄλλων θεῶν ἐστὶ, καὶ τὰ ἔξω πρὸς τοῦτο τὸ μέρος τῆς πόλεως μᾶλλον ἴδρται, τό τε τοῦ Διὸς τοῦ Ὀλυμπίου καὶ τὸ Πύθιον καὶ τὸ τῆς Γῆς καὶ τὸ ἐν Λίμναις Διονύσου (ᾧ τὰ ἀρχαιότερα Διονύσια τῇ δωδεκάτῃ ποιεῖται ἐν μηνὶ Ἀνθεστηριῶνι) ὥσπερ καὶ οἱ ἄπ’ Ἀθηναίων Ἴωνες ἐτι καὶ νῦν νομίζουσιν, ἴδρται δὲ καὶ ἄλλα ἱερὰ ταύτῃ ἀρχαία. καὶ τῇ κρήνῃ τῇ νῦν μὲν τῶν τυράννων οὕτω σκευασάντων Ἐννεακρούνην καλουμένην, τὸ δὲ πάλαι φανερώων τῶν πηγῶν οὐσῶν Καλλιβρόχῃ ὠνομασμένη—ἐκείνη τε ἐγγὺς οὖση τὰ πλείστου ἀξία ἐχρῶντο, καὶ νῦν ἐτι ἀπὸ τοῦ ἀρχαίου πρὸς τε γαμικῶν καὶ ἐς ἄλλα τῶν ἱερῶν νομίζεται τῷ ὕδατι χρῆσθαι. καλεῖται δὲ διὰ τὴν παλαιὰν ταύτῃ κατοικησιν καὶ ἡ ἀκρόπολις μέχρι τοῦδε ἐτι ὑπ’ Ἀθηναίων πόλις.

² I keep the ms. reading; see Critical Note.

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from the form given it by the despots, but which formerly, when the sources were open, was named Fair-Fount—this spring (I say), being near, they used for the most important purposes, and even now it is still the custom derived from the ancient (habit) to use the water before weddings and for other sacred purposes. Because of the ancient settlement here, the citadel (as well as the present city) is still to this day called by the Athenians the City.'

In spite of certain obscurities, which are mainly due to a characteristically Thucydidean over-condensation of style, the main purport of the argument is clear. Thucydides, it will be remembered, wants to prove that the city before Theseus was, because of its small size, incapable of holding a large town population. This small size not being evident to the contemporaries of Thucydides, he proceeds to define the limits of the ancient city. He makes a statement and supports it by fourfold evidence.

The statement that he makes is that *the ancient city comprised the present citadel together with what is below it towards about south*. The fourfold evidence is as follows:

1. The sanctuaries are in the citadel itself, those of other deities as well as the Goddess.
2. Those ancient sanctuaries that are outside are placed towards this part of the present city more than elsewhere. Four instances of such outside shrines are adduced.
3. There is a spring near at hand used from of old for the most important purposes, and still so used on sacred occasions.
4. The citadel, as well as the present city, was still in the time of Thucydides called the 'city.'

We begin with the statement as to the limits of the city. Not till we clearly understand exactly what Thucydides states, how much and how little, can we properly weigh the fourfold evidence he offers in support of his statement.

'Before this what is now the citadel was the city, together with what is below it towards about south. The city before Theseus was the citadel or acropolis of the days of Thucydides, *plus* something else. The citadel or acropolis needed then, and needs now, no further definition. By it is clearly meant not the whole hill to the base, but the plateau on the summit enclosed by the walls of Themistocles and Kimon together with the fortification outworks

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on the west slope still extant in the days of Thucydides. But the second and secondary part of the statement is less clearly defined. The words neither give nor suggest, to us at least, any circumscribing line; only a direction, and that vague enough, 'towards about south.' It is a point at which the scholar naturally asks, whether archaeology has anything to say?

But before that question is asked and answered, it should be noted that from the shape of the sentence alone something may be inferred. That the present citadel is coextensive with the old city is the main contention. We feel that Thucydides might have stopped there and yet made his point, namely, the smallness of that ancient city. But Thucydides is a careful man, he remembers that the two were not quite coextensive. To the old city must be reckoned an additional portion below the citadel (τὸ ὑπ' ἀντήν), a portion that, as will later be seen, his readers might be peculiarly apt to forget; so he adds it to his statement. But, by the way it is hung on, we should naturally figure that portion as 'not only subordinate to the acropolis, but in some way closely incorporated with it. In relation to the acropolis, this additional area, to justify the arrangement of the words of Thucydides, should be a part neither large nor independent.'

Thus much can be gathered from the text; it is time to see what additional evidence is brought by archaeology.

Thucydides was, according to his lights, scrupulously exact. It happens, however, that in the nature of things he could not, as regards the limits of the ancient city, be strictly precise. The necessary monuments were by his time hidden deep below the ground. His first and main statement, that one portion of the old city was coextensive with the citadel of his day, is not quite true. This upper portion of the old burgh was a good deal smaller; all the better for his argument, had he known it! Thanks to systematic excavation we know more about the limits of the old city than Thucydides himself, and it happens curiously enough that this more exact and very recent knowledge, while it leads us to convict Thucydides of a real and unavoidable inexactness, gives us also the reason for his caution. It explains

¹ See Dr A. W. Verrall, *The Site of Primitive Athens. Thucydides* II. 15 and recent explorations, *Class. Rev.* June 1900, p. 274. In the discussion of the actual text, I have throughout followed Dr Verrall.

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to us why, appended to his statement about the city and the citadel, he is careful to put in the somewhat vague *addendum*, 'together with what is below it towards about south.'

To us to-day the top of the Acropolis appears as a smooth plateau sloping gently westwards towards the Propylaea, and this plateau is surrounded by fortification walls, whose clean, straight lines show them to be artificial. Very similar in all essentials was the appearance presented by the hill to the contemporaries of Thucydides, but such was not the ancient Acropolis. What manner of thing the primitive hill was has been shown by the excavations carried on by the Greek Government from 1885–1889. The excavators, save when they were prevented by the foundations of buildings, have everywhere dug down to the living rock, every handful of the *débris* exposed has been carefully examined, and nothing more now remains for discovery.

When the traveller first reaches Athens he is so impressed by the unexpected height and dominant situation of Lycabettus, that he wonders why it plays so small a part in classical record. Plato¹ seems to have felt that it was hard for Lycabettus to be left out. In his description of primitive Athens he says, 'in old days the hill of the Acropolis extended to the Eridanus and Ilissus, and included the Pnyx on one side and Lycabettus as a boundary on the opposite side of the hill,' and there is a certain rough geological justice about Plato's description. All these hills are spurs of that last offshoot of Pentelicus, known in modern times as Turkouvouni. Yet to the wise Athena, Lycabettus was but building material; she was carrying the hill through the air to fortify her Acropolis, when she met the crow² who told her that the disobedient sisters had opened the chest, and then and there she dropped Lycabettus and left it...to the crows.

A moment's reflection will show why the Acropolis was chosen and Lycabettus left. Lycabettus is a good hill to climb and see a sunset from. It has not level space enough for a settlement. The Acropolis has the two *desiderata* of an ancient burgh, space on which to settle, and easy defensibility.

The Acropolis, as in neolithic days the first settlers found it,

¹ Plat. *Kritias* 112.

² Antigonos, *Hist. Mirab.* 12.