

PLUTARCH'S THEMISTOCLES: THE SERPENT OF HELLAS*

Abstract: In Plutarch's *Themistocles*, the general and expatriate is thrice referenced using snake imagery. This article argues that Plutarch deliberately uses snake motifs at loaded points in the narrative to express the transformations of the general's image in Athenian social memory, and to direct his reader towards a certain interpretation of the general's legacy. In the centuries between the Persian Wars and the composition of Plutarch's *Lives*, Themistocles had been variously represented in Athenian memory as both a patriot and a traitor, often with reference to serpentine imagery that may have been initially propagated by the general himself. An analysis of other snake references—as well as characterisations of Themistocles—in Plutarch's works reveals that such symbolism was both structurally consistent and *à propos* in the context of understanding the past as a lesson for contemporary imperial Roman politics.

Keywords: Plutarch, Themistocles, Salamis, memory, medism, snakes

1. Introduction

It is no secret to scholars that Themistocles' reputation became firmly cemented in Athenian lore due to his pivotal role as commander of the Greek fleet at the battle of Salamis in 480 BC, where the Athenians scored an overwhelming victory. The victory at Salamis was, if we are to believe Plutarch's quotation of Simonides (*Them.* 15.4), 'the most brilliant and famous victory that had ever been accomplished by sea by Greeks or barbarians' (τὴν καλὴν ἐκείνην καὶ περιβόητον ἀράμενοι νίκη, ἧς οὐθ' Ἑλλησιν οὔτε βαρβάρους ἐνάλιον ἔργον εἴργασται λαμπρότερον).¹ In Plutarch's *Themistocles*, the Athenian general and expatriate is thrice associated with serpents at pivotal moments in the narrative: at *Them.* 10.1, with relation to the defence of Salamis; at *Them.* 26.2, in a dream after his flight to Aegae; and at *Them.* 29.1, upon his meeting with the Great King of Persia.² Plutarch is known for his generous—and often superfluous—use of moralistic and symbolic imagery,³ but here, I will argue, the imagery of the snake used to portray Themistocles in his *Life* is a vestige of

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¹ For the epigram's authenticity, see Pelling (2007) 147 n. 10.

² All translations of ancient sources are my own.

³ E.g., Duff (1999).

Plutarch's experimentation with presenting his protagonist as the production of a complex and inconsistent memory cycle.⁴ The author deliberately characterises Themistocles in terms related to snakes and serpents (*δράκων* or *ὄφις*) as a function of the important resonances of the symbol in both Athenian and Persian history. The snake imagery became associated with Themistocles' greatest victory at Salamis in 480 BC and may have been propagated by Themistocles himself; it later became a constitutive part of the development of his memory in Athenian thought. In highlighting this imagery at key points in the narrative, Plutarch illustrates the development of the reception of Themistocles' life, particularly from Athenian narratives that present him as 'saviour of Greece' during the Persian Wars. However, in each instance in which Plutarch has recourse to snake imagery, Themistocles' *Nachleben* as a mediser is ever present.

2. The Memory Cycle of Themistocles

That Salamis was a tipping point in the wars seems to have been a popular perception: Podlecki has even argued that in the immediate aftermath of the war, a 'propaganda battle' ensued among the Athenians as to which encounter—Marathon in 490 BC or Salamis in 480 BC—should be considered the more important.⁵ The historical memory of the battle of Salamis evolved throughout the fifth and fourth centuries BC from a fundamentally Panhellenic event to a more 'narrowly contextualized understanding of the encounter' that placed Athens—and Themistocles—at its forefront.⁶ But there were

⁴ For a study of the 'intellectual and moral qualities' of Plutarch's Themistocles, see Martin (1961).

⁵ Podlecki (1966) 13–15. The *Persae*, produced in 472 BC, was unabashed about heaping the credit for the victory at Salamis on Themistocles' naval policy; here, Marathon is hardly mentioned. Zahrnt (2013) 143–4. For a recent overview of the various interpretations of the *Persae*, see Morgan (2016) 147–50. Steinbock (2013) 53, following Thomas (1989) 223–6, rejects the idea that Salamis took precedence over Marathon as emblematic of the Persian Wars. In fact, neither battle held precedence over the other, and each was used in turn by historians, playwrights, and orators when it was best suited to their immediate devices. Themistocles had served as *choregos* for the production of Phrynichus' *Phoenissae* in 476 BC (Plut. *Them.* 5.4), which, together with Aeschylus' *Persae*, may have been used, according to Hall (1989) 64–7, 'as showpieces designed to rehabilitate Themistocles' and to save him from impending ostracism.

⁶ Graninger (2010) 315–16. Even if the rivalry between the victors at Marathon and Salamis was not explicitly addressed in the fifth century BC, Plutarch adopts an interpretative stance by setting up that background for the reader in *Them.* 3.3–4; here we find a Themistocles so absorbed in surpassing the memory of Miltiades' feats at Marathon that he cannot sleep. So it was that he 'considered Marathon only the beginning of greater contests, and for these he anointed himself as the champion over all of Greece'

competing traditions about Themistocles' legacy, particularly in the period during the Pentekontaetia and over the course of the Peloponnesian Wars. The period directly after his ostracism was predictably volatile, as a shrine to Artemis Aristoboulē—built by Themistocles after the war—was abandoned and destroyed.⁷ Immediately after the Persian Wars, Timocreon of Rhodes famously lambasted Themistocles as a mediser;⁸ in the later fifth century he oscillated between 'great democratic hero' and a figure of insignificance.⁹ Later, in the Roman period, the Persian Wars were revived as a persistent theme to represent the eastern policy of the empire, an initiative popularised by Augustus and perpetuated by emperors into at least the third century AD.¹⁰

The narrative of Greek success against Persia was alive and well in Greek historical memory on both sides of the Aegean by Plutarch's day. Plutarch took particular interest in the Persian Wars and its heroes, knowing that the conflict served as a defining moment in Greek historical consciousness. The greatness of Themistocles' achievement is emphasised in Plutarch through the memorialisation of relics from the Wars that can be felt 'even now' (*Them.* 8.3; 10.6; 32.3); Plutarch himself is complicit in ensuring the continuity of the narrative of the event and its greatest hero.¹¹ However, the Persian Wars were also subject to new—and potentially subversive—interpretations in contemporary Roman political circumstances. In the parabolic trajectory of his protagonist, Plutarch may have seen the opportunity to exploit the character of Themistocles both as a creative manipulation of the previous tradition and as an example of the vicissitudes of empire and its leaders in his current Roman context.¹²

(Θεμιστοκλῆς δὲ ἀρχὴν μειζόνων ἀγώνων, ἐφ' οὓς αὐτὸν ὑπὲρ τῆς ὅλης Ἑλλάδος ἠλείφε). Lenardon (1978) 42–3 conjectures that Themistocles is very likely to have fought at Marathon, a tradition which was 'hopelessly obscured or, in the view of the scholarly opposition, became the product of imaginary and hypothetical invention' because of antiquity's veritable obsession with his rise to power in the decade after Marathon.

⁷ McKechnie (2015) 138.

⁸ Podlecki (1975) 47–54; Stehle (1994); McMullin (2001).

⁹ By 424 BC, Aristophanes in his *Knights* seems to have been willing to use Themistocles' image to contrast the 'present period of diminished horizons and smaller men like Cleon' with 'the days of the great democrats of the past', like Themistocles and Pericles. See Podlecki (1975) 59. But less than a decade later, in 417 BC, Eupolis staged the comic play *Demoi*, in which he conspicuously extracted Themistocles from the shades of great Athenian generals brought back from the dead; remaining are only Miltiades, Aristides, Solon, and Pericles. See Braun (2000) 192–3.

¹⁰ Spawforth (1994) 237–43.

¹¹ Pelling (2007) 151.

¹² See Spawforth (1994) 245–6 for the suggestion that Plutarch in particular understood the political capital of the Persian Wars theme for Greeks under Roman rule.

3. Introducing Themistocles the Snake: Plut. *Them.* 10.1

Plutarch's first use of snake imagery in his *Themistocles* comes on the heels of Themistocles' plan to convince the Athenians of divine approval for a Greek naval defence off the island of Salamis (Plut. *Them.* 10.1):

σημείον μὲν λαμβάνων τὸ τοῦ δράκοντος, ὃς ἀφανῆς ἐκείναις ταῖς ἡμέραις ἐκ τοῦ σηκοῦ δοκεῖ γενέσθαι· καὶ τὰς καθ' ἡμέραν αὐτῷ προτιθεμένας ἀπαρχὰς εὐρίσκοντες ἀψαύστους οἱ ἱερεῖς, ἐξήγγελλον εἰς τοὺς πολλούς, τοῦ Θεμιστοκλέους λόγον διδόντος, ὡς ἀπολέλοιπε τὴν πόλιν ἢ θεὸς ὑφηγουμένη πρὸς τὴν θάλατταν αὐτοῖς.

He understood as a sign the behaviour of the serpent, which is thought to have disappeared from its enclosure [on the Acropolis] in recent days: and when the priests discovered that the daily sacrifices offered to it were left untouched, they announced to the multitude—Themistocles gave them the story—that the goddess had left the city and was instructing them towards the sea.

Without attributing the story to Themistocles, Herodotus in the fifth century had indicated that the priestess on the Acropolis relayed the sign of the snake's absence to the Athenians;¹³ any who had remained in the city were now that much more eager (*προθυμότερον*, Hdt. 8.41.3) to evacuate.¹⁴ The sacred snake was known to have guarded the temple of Athena Polias on the Acropolis at Athens (Ar. *Lys.* 758–9); the close interconnection between the snake and the goddess is indicated in the texts of Herodotus and Plutarch, who, despite their differences, both confirm that the absence of the snake implied the absence of the goddess as well.¹⁵ Themistocles, by promoting the idea that the absence of

¹³ He adds the extra note that this occasion was the first known in which the snake had refused to eat its offering. Bowie (2007) 132–3 implies that Plutarch is recording a later tradition that rationalised the story 'as a trick stage-managed by Themistocles'. Herodotus gives no indication that the Athenians had any reason to question the urgency of the portent.

¹⁴ Herodotus seems to imply two evacuation decisions: one after the oracle in 481 BC and another after the battle of Thermopylae. Holladay (1987) 186–7 argues that the placement of the evacuation directly after the fall of Thermopylae is the result of 'patriotic myth-making', an apologia for Athens' apparent lack of confidence in the defence of Thermopylae and Artemisium.

¹⁵ Gourmelen (2005) 345. Marincola (2012) 100–7 notes the similarities between Plutarch and Herodotus in their accounts of the interactions between Aristides and Themistocles at the battle of Salamis, but shows that the biographer subtly changed the historiographer's account to align with his desired characterisation of Aristides (for more on Aristides and

the snake was equivalent to the absence of the goddess Athena, was able to convince the Athenians to take refuge with him on Salamis.¹⁶ Like his interpretation of the oracle of the 'wooden wall' given at Delphi, Themistocles' manipulation of this sign of the sacred snake presages in Plutarch's *Life* a wiliness that is more underhanded than the portrayal of the general in Herodotus.¹⁷

From an early period, the island of Salamis and its inhabitants were directly connected in Athenian ideology with the sacred snake cult on the Acropolis.¹⁸ Following the victory at Salamis, that ideology was rejuvenated

Themistocles, see below). We know that Herodotus' *Histories* was particularly impactful on Plutarch's *Life of Themistocles*. He is cited seventeen times (three of which are explicit citations) in the *Themistocles* alone, and Schettino (2014) 419 attributes at least fifty Plutarchan passages to Herodotus. Therefore, we should not discount the memory as seen in Herodotus as an important element in Plutarch's characterisation of Persian War heroes; no less important are Plutarch's adaptations of that memory.

¹⁶ Snakes were very important to Athenian religious identity, being connected to the iconography associated with Erechtheus/Erichthonius, a chthonic semi-divine entity who was the offspring of Athena and Hephaestus and later became known as the legendary founder and one of the primordial kings of the *polis* of Athens. A popular story about Erechtheus indicated that, to protect him in his youth, Athena placed the child in a chest filled with snakes, which was given to the daughters of Cecrops. The daughters, Pandrosus, Aglaurus, and Herse, were instructed not to open the box. When the girls opened the box, they were scared by the sight of the snakes, and threw themselves from the Acropolis (Eur. *Ion* 21–4; 271–4). The story served as the mythical *aitia* of the Arrhephoria festival. A good summary of the sources and previous scholarship on the Arrhephoria can be found at Robertson (1983); the fullest description of the ritual activities is at Paus. 1.27.3. According to Parker (1987) 195–6, the myth also served as an aetiological basis for the presence of the sacred snake of Athena that lived on the Acropolis.

¹⁷ Stadter (2014a) 87; on Plutarch's manipulation of Herodotean narrative in the *Themistocles*, see also Pelling (2007). Similarly, Graninger (2010) 309 has argued that chapter 10 of the *Themistocles* is well-sourced, except for 10.8–9, which, he argues, takes its literary cue from Thucydides' description of the departure of the Sicilian expedition, the very point at which Athens becomes the 'new Persia', a tyrant city rather than a champion for Greek liberty. For a brilliant exposition of this argument, see Rood (1999) and Rood (1998) 256 n. 92, who already recognised that at least a few events of the Peloponnesian Wars were retrojected to the time of the Persian Wars in the *Themistocles*. Schettino (2014) 419 points out that, like Herodotus, Thucydides is an important source for Plutarch, particularly for the period between the Persian and Peloponnesian Wars. Thucydides, too, seems to have pinpointed Salamis as the 'great hinge in Athens' development into master of a naval empire'. But, just as with Herodotus' multidimensional account of Themistocles, Thucydides recognises that the rise of Athens, for which Themistocles is held responsible, also becomes its downfall during the Peloponnesian War. An eloquent case for this idea is made in Euben (1986).

¹⁸ The Salaminians were also intricately bound with the mythological *aitia* associated with the Erichthonius legend so popular at Athens. They maintained priestesses of a combined cult of Aglaurus and Pandrosus (*Agora* I 3244, 10–11); there is sufficient evidence

and highlighted, to connect the island to the great Athenian victory there in 480 BC. Indeed, it appears that snake imagery became the representative motif of Athenian success—and its adoption was almost instantaneous. Pausanias (1.36.1) mentions the celebratory trophy of Themistocles on Salamis, and gives further important details:

καὶ Κυχρέως ἐστὶν ἱερόν. ναυμαχούντων δὲ Ἀθηναίων πρὸς Μήδους
δράκοντα ἐν ταῖς ναυσὶ λέγεται φανῆναι· τοῦτον ὁ θεὸς ἔχρησεν Ἀθηναίους
Κυχρέα εἶναι τὸν ἥρωα.

There is a shrine to Cychreus here. It is said that when the Athenians fought the naval battle against the Medes, a serpent appeared among their ships: the god prophesied to the Athenians that the hero was Cychreus.

Ogden speculates that the tale was attached to a sanctuary that was founded shortly after the Greek victory at Salamis; consequently, the sanctuary probably originated at that time and may have been founded by Themistocles. The story would draw a direct correlation between the snake missing from the Acropolis and the one that appeared to the Athenians during the battle of Salamis.¹⁹ Themistocles is presented here in ch. 10 and the surrounding chapters on the Persian Wars as a saviour of Greece (*Them.* 4.4; 7.3; 13.2).²⁰ But we also see a character whose manipulative political acumen may present a

to assume that the cult is associated simultaneously with the constitution of the Salaminioi as an Attic *genos* and the initiation of the Arrhephoria festival, sometime in the early sixth century BC. On this, see Frame (2009) 467–75 and L’homme-Wéry (2000) 348, who argues that their participation in this cult confirmed the Salaminians as Athenian. See also the detailed discussion of Parker (1996) 308–16.

¹⁹ Ogden (2013) 268–9. As a result of the victory at Salamis, Cychreus later received honours as a hero at Athens. See L’homme-Wéry (2000) 339. In art, too, Salamis’ serpentine resonances and its association with Athenian greatness became the subject for works of great import. I refer here to the ‘Pella Hydria’, carefully studied in Neils (2013). She suggests (610) that the hydria, discovered in the Hellenistic agora in the Macedonian capital of Pella, may have contained the cremation remains of Euripides, who hailed from Salamis.

²⁰ Duff (2010) 53. While Herodotus does not single out Themistocles in so many words, he proclaims the Athenians the saviours of all of Greece (7.139.5) directly before his introduction of Themistocles’ clever plan to mount a defence against the Persians (7.143–4), while Thucydides introduces him as the most famous Athenian of his time (1.138.6). But the historiographical picture is not entirely rosy: Blösel (2001) 189, 194–5 has shown that Herodotus’ anecdotes about Themistocles, ‘for which he had to undertake considerable alterations to his source material’, are interwoven with criticism about Athenian behaviour as *hegemōn* of the Delian League. After the brilliant victory at Salamis, Themistocles’ character in Herodotus becomes cloudier, and he ‘suddenly breaks the bonds which connect him to his hometown of Athens and to Greece’.

danger to the Greek enterprise; Plutarch's elaboration of the historiographical tradition makes that clear.

4. At the Crossroads: Snakes in Aeolia

As Frost has noted, the Athenians were notorious for being as quick to forgive their leaders as they were to condemn them.²¹ Almost as quickly as his star rose, Themistocles fell from grace in the face of political opposition. The precipitous rise of Themistocles has presaged a fall in Plutarch: he has achieved his desire to be first 'from the very beginning' (ἐξ ἀρχῆς τοῦ πρωτεύειν ἐφιέμενος, *Them.* 3.1), but, as a result, the citizens of Athens were welcoming of accusations about Themistocles owing to their jealousy of his greatness (ἤδη δὲ καὶ τῶν πολιτῶν διὰ τὸ φθονεῖν ἠδέως τὰς διαβολὰς προσιεμένων, *Them.* 22.1). The Athenians, suspicious of Themistocles' proximity to the known mediser and Spartan general Pausanias, charged him with collusion; his ostracism from Athens followed shortly thereafter, in 472 BC (Diod. 11.55.1; Plut. *Them.* 22.3).²² Themistocles took his exile in Argos. During his stay there, he was formally indicted in Athens, probably on charges of εἰσαγγελία.²³ Themistocles was forewarned that Athenian and Spartan men were en route to capture him to stand trial (Thuc. 1.136.1); Diodorus (11.56.2) has the envoys revile him as 'a traitor and destroyer of all Greece' (προδότην καὶ λυμεῶνα τῆς ὅλης Ἑλλάδος). His imminent capture caused Themistocles to flee to Corcyra, but he was forced to flee from there too, as inhabitants of the island were afraid to harbour a criminal and instigate war. The details of his journey thereafter are garbled in the historians; some say he went to Sicily, others to Pydna, before he finally arrived in Asia Minor.²⁴

Themistocles' short tenure in Asia Minor serves as a geographical and figurative midpoint between his victory at Salamis and his ultimate residence at the Persian court. It is significant that Plutarch's second—and middle—reference to snake imagery locates Themistocles himself at a liminal point

²¹ Frost (1980) 10.

²² Based on a group of ostraca discovered on the north slope of the Acropolis, Lenardon (1978) 45–9 argues that Themistocles may have been a candidate for ostracism already in the late 480s, before his famous victory at Salamis. The recent study by Sickinger (2017) 444–53 of new ostraca from the Athenian Agora corroborates this notion. Lenardon (1959) 35 places the ostracism in 471/0, though he links hostility to Themistocles to events in the early 470s, including his Spartan-esque *aristeia* and his embassy to the Spartans concerning the building of the Long Walls.

²³ Lenardon (1978) 118–20.

²⁴ See the discussion in Lenardon (1978) 126–38, and Keaveney (2003) 7–38.

between Athens and Persia.²⁵ Plutarch (*Them.* 26.1) relates a widely publicised effort to capture Themistocles, goaded by the Great King's offer of 200 Talents for his head; this circumstance led Themistocles to flee yet again to Aegae, where he knew only his host, Nicogenes (ὕπὸ πάντων ἀγνοούμενος πλὴν τοῦ ξένου Νικογένους).²⁶ After a dinner and a sacrifice, the pedagogue of Nicogenes' sons became rapturous and announced to Themistocles that he would receive counsel about his next steps during the night. Indeed, Themistocles dreamt on that evening (*Them.* 26.2–3):

καὶ μετὰ ταῦτα κοιμηθεὶς ὁ Θεμιστοκλῆς ὄναρ ἔδοξεν ἰδεῖν δράκοντα κατὰ τῆς γαστρὸς αὐτοῦ περιελιπτόμενον καὶ προσανέρποντα τῷ τραχήλῳ· γενόμενον δ' αἰτόν, ὡς ἤψατο τοῦ προσώπου, περιβαλόντα τὰς πτέρυγας ἐξᾶραι καὶ κομίζειν πολλὴν ὁδόν, εἶτα χρυσοῦ τινὸς κηρυκείου φανέντος, ἐπὶ τούτου στήσαι βεβαίως αὐτὸν ἀμηχάνου δείματος καὶ παραχῆς ἀπαλλαγέντα.

And after this, while Themistocles was falling asleep, he had a dream where he saw a snake winding itself around his stomach and creeping up to his throat: then, as soon as it touched his face, it became an eagle, and surrounding him with its wings it lifted him up and carried him a long distance, where soon a golden herald's wand appeared, on which it set him down securely, thereby releasing him from difficult fears and terror.

It is well known that the eagle with wings outspread on a staff was the symbol of the Persian king (Xen. *Cyr.* 7.1.4; *Anab.* 1.10.12); thus, a snake transforming into an eagle would evoke a transformation from an Athenian symbol to a patently Persian one.

Dodson has noted that, in antiquity, dreams are often recognised as a form of divination, and thus, in many cases, they serve as a means of fortune-telling.²⁷ In Plutarch specifically, dreams are set in 'anxiety contexts' where a decisive action must be chosen;²⁸ the same dreams can also perform the tasks

²⁵ Themistocles appears to have conceived of himself as a man at the crossroads between East and West. Two of his daughters were named Asia and Hellas; the former name is unattested before the fourth century. See Braun (2000) 199.

²⁶ Nicogenes only appears in the testimony of Plutarch; Diodorus (11.56.4–5) notes that Themistocles stayed with Lysitheides, who had supposedly entertained the whole of Xerxes' army. See Frost (1980) 212.

²⁷ Dodson (2009) 13–18.

²⁸ Brenk (1975) 343.

of foreshadowing and fulfilment.²⁹ Pelling has suggested that Themistocles' dream in 26.2–3 is meant to allude to another interaction with a *paedagogus*, Sicinnus, to whom Themistocles entrusts a deceitful message to Xerxes about an impending Greek flight before the battle of Salamis, meant to disrupt the Great King's preparations and dispositions before the encounter. Here, too, Themistocles saw a sign (Plut. *Them.* 12.1), this time an owl (a very Athenian symbol), encouraging him to do battle with the Persians. Therefore, Pelling suggests, this encounter with the divine in 26.2–3 is meant to point up the contrast between Themistocles' relationship with the Persians during the Wars and his exile and flight to Persia afterwards.³⁰ In this case, Themistocles' dream is a perfect intermediary element to foreshadow his future as a mediser.

The image of a contest between a snake and an eagle appears in some ancient cultures as a metaphor for the struggle between the forces of good and evil.³¹ In Persian thought, the eagle was representative of Ahuramazda, while the snake symbolised his opposite, Ahriman, the manifestation of evil.³² The Greeks, too, viewed these two animals as fundamentally opposite, perceiving a 'deep and definitive difference' between them which predestined antagonistic fights.³³ We first see a portentous referral to the pair in the *Iliad* (12.195–258).³⁴ The Homeric reference is enthusiastically adopted in Roman literary contexts, where the triumph of the eagle over the snake comes to represent the imperial prowess of Rome (Cic. *Div.* 1.06; Virg. *Aen.* 11.751–6; Plin. *HN* 10.4.17).³⁵

²⁹ For instance, Fournel (2016) has shown that Caesar's dream before he crosses the Rubicon (Plut. *Caes.* 32.8–9) serves as a 'double fulfilment', both of Caesar's successes as a military commander and of his eventual downfall by presaging the hubris that will cause his assassination. Therefore, in Plutarch, dreams perform a dual function of alluding 'to the current situation of the dreamer and to anticipations of his future' (213).

³⁰ Pelling (2010) 322–3.

³¹ de Beaucorps (1989) 58.

³² Wittkower (1939) 297.

³³ Rodríguez Pérez (2010) 2. The most detailed treatise of the snake-eagle combination in Greco-Roman thought can be found in Wittkower (1939), esp. 307–12.

³⁴ At the beginning of the passage the Trojans are weighing options for storming a wall that had been erected around the Achaean ships, when suddenly they see an eagle, with a snake in its talons, flying to the left (an ominous sign). The snake fights the eagle wildly and forces the bird to release it into the middle of the Trojan horde. Polydamas, who here acts as a seer, interprets the portent negatively, warning Hector that a storming of the Achaean fortifications will bring heavy losses to the Trojan side, who have now been literarily associated with the snake. Hector ignores the advice and visits misfortune upon his troops. See Trampedach (2008) 215–18. Another interesting Homeric connection between the serpent and the bird comes via Tiresias, whom Athena gifted with prophetic abilities. She then caused a serpent to lick his ears, which allowed him to understand the language of birds. See Knipe (1967) 359.

³⁵ Aeschylus, too, seems to have been fond of the snake-eagle imagery. In the *Choephoroi* (246–61), Orestes describes himself and his sister Electra as chicks orphaned when their

Fundamental to this ‘intermediate’ snake imagery of Themistocles as a traitor is the blurring of lines between Greeks and ‘barbarians’. The liminal nature of the Greek mediser was broached at the end of the fifth century, most conspicuously in Euripides’ *Ion*. We have already seen that, after Salamis, Themistocles’ victory in 480 BC carried mythological and religious connotations of snakes on Salamis and in Athens; the birth of Erichthonius is a key component to this ideology. In the *Ion*, the protagonist is made to represent a reincarnation of Erichthonius,³⁶ whose story was significantly tied to the mythical king Cecrops. When Ion orders a banquet to be delivered at Delphi, he hangs tapestries for the roof and the sides of the tent,³⁷ the ‘work of barbarians’, depicting ‘well-oared ships, in opposition to the Greek ships’ (εὐηρέτους ναῦς ἀντίας Ἑλληνίσιν, *Ion* 1160) and hybrid beasts of many kinds. The latter, presumably a reference to the battle of Salamis,³⁸ precedes in the next lines a description of the entrance of the banquet tent, which is painted with an illustration of Cecrops and his daughters encircled by the twirling coils of snakes. This type of tent was common in Athenian rituals and festivals,³⁹ although in *Ion* it takes on a distinctively Persian resonance. Plutarch (*Per.* 13.9–11) and Pausanias (1.20.4) both mention that the Odeion at Athens was built by Pericles in imitation of the tent of Xerxes,⁴⁰ although Vitruvius (5.9.1) attributes its construction—said to have been completed with spoils from the Persians ships defeated at Salamis—to Themistocles.⁴¹ Further, Zacharia notes that the art of embroidery was imported from the Ancient Near East, and that several motifs in the *Ion*, like the lion-hunting scene (depicted in 1162)

eagle father Agamemnon was killed by their snake mother, Clytemnestra. In vengeance for the death of their daughter Iphigenia, Clytemnestra has committed a transgression against kindred blood, for which she knows she will ultimately be punished. But when his mother suffers nightmares in which she seems to have given birth to a serpent (τεκεῖν δράκοντ’ ἔδοξεν, ὡς αὐτῇ λέγει, 527), Orestes is quick to identify himself with Clytemnestra’s snaky nature, accepting that he must become a snake (ἐκδρακοντωθεῖς, 549) if he is to avenge the death of his father and sister. See O’Neill (1998) 220–1. Here, transformations into snake figures are explicitly associated with the betrayal of one’s own family—and retribution for those wrongs.

³⁶ Martin (2018) 20–2, echoed by Gibert (2020) 49–51.

³⁷ Gibert (2020) 294.

³⁸ So Immerwahr (1972) 293.

³⁹ Martin (2018) 430–1. Because of its common use in these Athenian rituals, Martin rejects the idea that the tent is necessarily meant to be evocative of a Persian tent.

⁴⁰ For interpretations of the Odeion, see Shear (2016) 197–228 (who defends the tradition that the Odeion was built in imitation of Xerxes’ tent, 215–23); Miller (1997) 218–42 (who finds (236) that the Odeion was more likely to be imitative of royal Apadana architecture); and Morgan (2016) 152–4. Hdt 9.82.1 notes that Xerxes’ tent, used by Mardonius at the Battle of Plataea, was adorned with tapestries.

⁴¹ See Shear (2016) 205–6 on Vitruvius’ confusion here.

and the half-man half-beast creatures (depicted in 1161) on the tapestry are typical of Eastern traditions.⁴² We may even suggest that the covered wagon, 'fenced all around and encircled with tent covers' (ὕπὸ σκηναῖς κύκλω περιπεφραγμένας, *Them.* 26.4) with which Themistocles takes his leave from Aegae following his 'liminal' dream is a tribute to the traditional Persian tent, evoked also by Euripides in his *Ion*.

Gourmelen argues that the tapestry offered by the barbarians in the *Ion* is representative of the Hellenic idea whereby the Greeks—as 'civilised' man—must physically hunt down the 'barbarian' animal; he explains the hybrid nature of Cecrops in the next lines by recourse to the rationality behind Athenian adherence to an autochthonous myth.⁴³ Goff, too, has argued that the tapestry is representative of the importance of conflict to the production of Athenian self-identification;⁴⁴ thus, the Persian themes within the tapestry may evoke the importance of Athenian encounters with barbarians to the development of the collective *psyche*. Further (and most importantly for our argument), Euripides seems to imply that that boundary was first delineated at the battle of Salamis. The snake imagery had first become associated with Themistocles' greatest victory; here we see that it later became a constitutive part of the development of his memory in Athenian thought. But further on (in history and in Plutarch's *Life*), snake imagery also became a signpost of Themistocles' medism, a function of his self-created legacy working against him. In his use of a morphing snake-eagle imagery to represent Themistocles' impending medism, Plutarch has carefully constructed his second allusion to Themistocles using themes that mirror a similarly intermediate stage in the development of his character's reputation in Athenian cultural memory.

5. The Final Act: The Serpent of Hellas

Perhaps the most famous instance of snake imagery in Plutarch's *Themistocles* comes during the meeting of the famous Athenian *nauarch* with the Great King of Persia, Artaxerxes II.⁴⁵ In ch. 26, the insinuation is made that Themistocles will transform from the saviour of the Athenians to a modus of the Athenians'

⁴² Zacharia (2003) 34. The former is typical of Achaemenid artistic traditions, particularly on the reliefs of the Apadana staircases at Persepolis, whereas the latter is famous in both Greece and the Near East, most famously in the lamassu creatures that would flank the doorways of Assyrian palaces.

⁴³ Gourmelen (2005) 38–9.

⁴⁴ Goff (1988).

⁴⁵ Plutarch (*Them.* 27.1) notes the chronological controversy here regarding whether Themistocles had his conference with Xerxes or his son Artaxerxes, following the death of the former. See Frost (1980) 213–15.

greatest fear, represented by the Persian eagle. It is in the encounter with the newly crowned Persian king Artaxerxes where Plutarch completes Themistocles' transformation. In 27.2–5, when Themistocles approaches the chiliarch Artabanus for an audience with the king, the latter points up the differences between the Greeks and the Persians, calling the Greeks admirers of freedom (ἐλευθερίαν) and equality (ἰσότητα), whereas for the Persians the most important thing is to honour the king (τιμᾶν βασιλέα) through obeisance (*Them.* 27.3). Thus, the initial reaction of the chiliarch is to draw a distinct line between the customs of Themistocles and those of the Persians, but Plutarch has Themistocles not only agree to perform *proskynesis*, but to entice others to do so (*Them.* 27.4). That the snaky Athenian saviour has now become a snaky traitor to the Athenian cause is confirmed by Plutarch's anecdote that Artaxerxes privately congratulated himself on successfully receiving Themistocles into his court, whereby he prayed to Ahriman—the Persian manifestation of the snake with all of its connotations of evil—to always give his enemies such wills 'as to drive their best men away from them' (ὅπως ἐλαύνωσι τοὺς ἀρίστους ἐξ ἑαυτῶν, *Them.* 28.4). Artaxerxes now has a dream (apposite to Themistocles' own dream in 26.2–3), whereupon he joyfully wakes in the middle of the night to proclaim three times (28.4): 'I have Themistocles, the Athenian!' (ἔχω Θεμιστοκλέα τὸν Ἀθηναῖον).⁴⁶

Upon his final approach to the king, Themistocles is angrily addressed by the Persian chiliarch Roxanes as the 'changeable serpent of Hellas' (ὄφις Ὑλλην ὁ ποικίλος, *Them.* 29.1): Themistocles' status as a mediser seems to have been confirmed using the same imagery that Themistocles himself used to advertise his great victory over Persia at Salamis.⁴⁷ Themistocles is now allowed an audience with the Great King, after having requested one year to master the Persian language before their meeting (*Them.* 29.3; also reported in *Thuc.* 1.137.4). Despite the chiliarch's comment, Themistocles' reception by Artaxerxes is overwhelmingly positive; he allows Themistocles to speak in a prototypically Athenian fashion, even becoming an object of hatred for the Persian onlookers for his ability to speak freely (παρρησία, 29.3) to their perceived detriment.⁴⁸ Themistocles is thereupon functionally absorbed into the Persian court, even taking part in the king's hunting activities and establishing a relationship with the queen-mother (*Them.* 29.4). Through his training in the Persian language and his close association with the Persian king, Plutarch's Themistocles has now fully transformed into a *Persian*, a fulfilment

⁴⁶ Noted by Pelling (2010) 323.

⁴⁷ Lenardon (1959) 44 argues that the meeting with Xerxes (or Artaxerxes, in the case of Plutarch) is a later fabrication. Regardless of the origin of the story, it is still representative of the development of his afterlife in cultural thought and is thus important for understanding antiquity's vision of the Athenian hero at Salamis.

⁴⁸ Almagor (2017) 144.

of the foreshadowing of his own dream in chapter 26;⁴⁹ the return of the snake imagery (through the epithet applied to him by a Persian courtier) serves to confirm and conclude that transition.⁵⁰ Plutarch notes that after the battle of Salamis, Themistocles had proposed the destruction of Xerxes' Hellenic bridge in order to trap Asia in Europe (τὴν Ἀσίαν ἐν τῇ Εὐρώπῃ λάβωμεν, 16.1); now, Artaxerxes has been able to capture Europe in Asia.⁵¹

Frost sees chs 26–9 as part of the same unit forming the high point of the Themistocles romance and describing his tenure at the court of the Great King. The sections mirror and bracket one another: we are informed that the Great King put a price of 200 talents on Themistocles' head (26.1), which the King gives to Themistocles for offering himself up (29.2); Themistocles receives omens from Nicogenes' pedagogue (26.2–3), which are repeated to the King (28.3); there is discussion about the practice of *proskynesis* (27.3) before Themistocles actually performs it before the King (28.1);⁵² Themistocles is carted away in a wagon resembling a traditional Persian tent with tapestries (26.4) and then describes his desire to learn the Persian language in terms related to multi-coloured coverings (ποικίλοις στρώμασιν, 29.3), similar terminology as was applied to the Greek-barbarian liminality observed in Euripides' *Ion*.⁵³ Duff notes that, in *Them.* 10, Plutarch gathers (out of chronological order) several events that illuminate the cunning nature of Themistocles, the culmination of which is the victory at Salamis. That same cleverness backfires on him in chs 26–9, where civil strife and envy—both of which he has directly inspired—have introduced harm into the city and its politics, leading to his exile and tenure at the Persian court.⁵⁴ The chiasmic arrangement of the snake imagery in chs 26 and 29 is used to represent the tensions inherent in the character of Themistocles: just as Athens' greatness

⁴⁹ Notably, in Aesch. *Pers.* 82 the Persian king Xerxes is described as having a piercing stare like that of a serpent (δράκοντος).

⁵⁰ Therefore, I must respectfully disagree with the conclusion of Mayer (1997) 302 that Plutarch represents Themistocles' acquisition of Persian as a way to make the Persian king more Greek, as a way to sneakily convince the Persians to incorporate Greek *mores* and customs. For Mayer, Plutarch's Themistocles is unquestionably a Greek culture hero, unaffected by the possibility of medism.

⁵¹ Almagor (2017) 146. Similarly, in Aeschylus' *Persae* (181–99), Atossa had dreamt of two sisters of the same race (κασιγνήτα γένους ταύτου, 185–6), one living in Hellas and the other in the land of the barbarians, prefigured as yoked together by Xerxes. That bond between Greece and Persia—and Themistocles as its representative—may have been solidified by the man himself, who is said to have named his two daughters Asia and Hellas. See Braun (2000) 199.

⁵² Frost (1980) 209–10.

⁵³ On Themistocles' desire to learn the Persian language and its connection to similes using the language of tapestries, see Gera (2007), esp. 451.

⁵⁴ Duff (2010) 53–4, 56–8.

began with a Themistoclean idea, so its downfall was caused by a Themistoclean idea.

6. Plutarch's Themistocles: Snakes, Structure, and Memory

What is the purpose of Plutarch's tripartite emphasis on snakes in his *Themistocles*? To seek answers, we must contextualise both the image (of the snake) and the character (of Themistocles) elsewhere in Plutarch's works. Snakes appear in several other *Lives* in Plutarch's oeuvre. Perhaps most famously, Alexander the Great is said to have been sired by a serpent; his mother Olympias supposedly kept company with many 'great tamed serpents' (ὄφεις μεγάλους χειροθήεις, *Alex.* 2.6). Although this motif as associated with Alexander may not have been an invention of the Roman era, Ogden argues that Plutarch's highlighting of it may be a vestige of Octavian/Augustus' recollection of the motif as a legitimating precedent for himself.⁵⁵ Yet another striking instance of snakes in Plutarch's *Lives* comes to us in the *Crassus*. Here, when the future gladiator Spartacus is first brought to Rome to be sold, he is seen sleeping with a snake wrapped around his face (δράκοντα κοιμωμένῳ περιπεπλεγμένον φανῆναι περὶ τὸ πρόσωπον, 8.3), an omen which is interpreted as a symbol of his future power and success.⁵⁶ Therefore, Plutarch often uses snake imagery to presage the birth/rise of a great man (e.g., Spartacus, Alexander, Themistocles). This pattern accords with Plutarch's Roman milieu, as snake omens of the Roman period are often associated with the future good fortune of men. However, the Spartacus scene should also remind us of the dream of Themistocles in *Them.* 26.2–3, where the protagonist also sees a snake coil around his body. But unlike the case of Spartacus, when the snake touches the face of Themistocles, it transforms itself from a serpent to an eagle, from a portent of fortune and power to a symbol of the Persian king. As we have already seen, the snake-eagle pattern is a particularly Roman

⁵⁵ Ogden (2009) 41 and *passim*. He suggests that this same serpent-siring myth may have been connected to another great man of history, Scipio Africanus (as divulged in Liv. 26.19.7–8); the story may have been invented to connect Scipio and Augustus, although Ogden argues that Alexander's myth likely pre-dated the Augustan age.

⁵⁶ This portent is consistent with other examples from the Roman imperial period; Gill (2017) 21–2 has noted that the symbol of a snake coiling itself around the face of a man appears twice in the *Historia Augusta* as an omen for the future emperorship of both Septimius Severus (SHA *Sev.* 1.10) and Maximinus Thrax (SHA *Max.* 30.1). He argues that the similarities between the omens in Plutarch and those in the *Historia Augusta* suggest direct reception; thus the Plutarchan evocation of such symbolism should be—and was—read as an omen of future power. Similarly, in the *Cleomenes* (39), a serpent is seen wrapping itself around the head of the crucified Cleomenes, which for Plutarch indicates the past heroism of the man.

evocation of the transference of imperial power; in Themistocles' case, he has been swallowed up by the dominance of Persia over Athens.

But a snake omen in Plutarch that appears towards the end of a *Life* tends rather to indicate a fall from grace. We have seen such in Themistocles, but another famous instance occurs in the *Antony*. Following their combined loss at the battle of Actium in 31 BC, Antony and his Egyptian mistress Cleopatra planned their own demise among their friends, which they called 'the Society of Partners in Death' (*ἤν συναποθανομένων ἐκάλουν*, *Ant.* 71.3). After testing several noxious poisons, Cleopatra found that the only effective one originated from the bite of an asp (*τὸ δῆγμα τῆς ἀσπίδος*, *Ant.* 71.5), and Plutarch repeats the common story that Cleopatra died by the bite of a snake (*Ant.* 86). Although ultimately Plutarch has Antony die by the sword, his death is precipitated by his misperception that Cleopatra had already fulfilled her suicidal promise (*Ant.* 76.3). Thus, the snake motif is used at the end of a *Life* to represent the fall of a man, but particularly those who go East or who have adopted foreign elements into their persona (e.g., Antony, Themistocles). Significantly, it is only in the *Themistocles* that the snake motif is used to represent *both* instances (a rise and a fall) at the beginning and the end of the work, as Plutarch has determined that his protagonist's fate—and his memory in Athenian thought—can only be represented by the evocation of the full gamut of the possibilities of serpentine symbolism. Masterfully, these dual purposes are also encompassed in the triadic patterning of the snake imagery in the *Themistocles*, which adopts both Roman and Classical Greek references. Most notably, in Book 2 of the *Aeneid*, the snake motif is used as an interpretative framework for the destruction of Troy. Here, the fall of Troy (the concealment and deception associated with the Trojan horse and the destruction of the city itself) *and* its hope for salvation and rebirth are presented by recurring serpentine imagery;⁵⁷ Plutarch uses similar transformative categories in his triadic patterning of Themistoclean snake imagery in this *Life*. One may easily wonder whether this choice was also informed by Plutarch's intimate knowledge of the Serpent Column at Delphi (where he famously served as a priest)—this signal monument to the Greek victory in the Persian Wars supported a gilded tripod set on three bronze serpent heads.⁵⁸ Ultimately, the snake motif serves multiple

⁵⁷ Knox (1950).

⁵⁸ For a comprehensive history of the Serpent Column, see Stephenson (2016). West (https://chs.harvard.edu/CHS/article/display/5422.william-custis-west-iii-greek-public-monuments-of-the-persian-wars-iii-panhellenic-monuments-of-the-persian-wars-in-general#noteref_n.6) suggests that the dedication on the Serpent Column may have been the source for Plutarch's claim that thirty-one *poleis* participated in the war against the Persians (*Them.* 20.3). Additionally, he argues that the monument represented not only the victory at Plataea but also that at Salamis, since several of the city-states named in the dedicatory

uses for Plutarch: it is associated with Themistocles in Athenian memory, but it also coordinates with structural signposts used elsewhere in the *Lives*, many of which carried resonances in a Roman context.

Finally, the dichotomy between the characterisation of Themistocles in this *Life* and that of his political rival in Plutarch's *Aristides* reveals the political potency of the snake symbol. In his *Themistocles* and *Aristides*, the two men exhibit similar trajectories: entry into public life through participation in an important battle (Marathon: *Them.* 3.1–2 and *Arist.* 2.3–4); participation in the people's assembly (*Them.* 3.1; *Arist.* 3.1); and their eventual ostracism due to envy of the people (*Them.* 22.3; *Arist.* 7.2). But Themistocles' ostentation—for example, his construction of a shrine near his own home to Artemis Aristoboulē (*Them.* 22.2), but also his control over Athenian finances (*Arist.* 4.2) and his own, sumptuous personal wealth—is juxtaposed with the poverty (*Arist.* 25.3), merciful nature (*Arist.* 25.7), and conservatism of Aristides (*Them.* 3.2). Their deaths, too, are quite distinct: Themistocles commits suicide (*Them.* 31.3–5), whereas Aristides dies peacefully and penniless, with the admiration of his fellow citizens (*Arist.* 26.1). Plutarch's differentiation of the two men (articulated well at *Arist.* 2.1–2 and *Them.* 3.2) serves as a fundamental judgement on their individual morality in the context of Athenian public life, Aristides a lover of a democratic form of government (*Arist.* 22.1; changed from 2.1 where he was in favour of an aristocratic form of rule) and Themistocles a potential tyrant figure.⁵⁹ Unlike his rival Aristides, the snake imagery used to describe Themistocles presents a man who is destined for greatness—perhaps because of his impetuosity—but also to fall into disgrace, a theme familiar from tragedy.⁶⁰ To be contrasted with the tomb of Aristides at Phalerum, which was constructed at public expense (*Arist.* 27.1), the two tombs of Themistocles—one in Piraeus and one in Magnesia on the Meander—represent most fully the duplicity of Themistocles' character in Athenian memory;⁶¹ he is initially a saviour, the consummate Athenian, but ultimately, he is a traitor.

For Plutarch, the Persian Wars were best represented with notions of concord and unity, of adherence to the concerns of the whole.⁶² Aristides and Themistocles—both Persian War heroes with very different fates—thus

inscription did not fight at Plataea. On the potential cosmic symbolisms of the three serpent heads (with reference to both Plataea and Salamis), see Stephenson (2016) 46–8.

⁵⁹ For references throughout Plutarch's works to the detestable nature of the tyrant, see Aalders (1982) 34 n. 118.

⁶⁰ Duff (2010) 47, 54.

⁶¹ Schmitt Pantell (2014) 99–113.

⁶² Marincola (2012) 110–11.

become a reading of Plutarchan opposites:⁶³ the *Aristides* is protreptic,⁶⁴ while the *Themistocles* is admonitory, the latter signalled as such by the progressive deterioration of a consistent serpentine symbol throughout the biography. Just as for the Greeks in the fifth century, Plutarch had witnessed Roman fear of the Persians transform into something more ambiguous, with the Roman empire at its greatest extent under Trajan. In Plutarch's Roman world, Themistocles becomes a warning about the hazards of imperial overreach—and the fickleness of some of the men who lead that charge.⁶⁵ With the use of ophidian imagery in this *Life*, Plutarch has reacted to and revised Athenian historiographic and dramatic traditions and incorporated them into a structured narrative that also reflects a Roman understanding of one of the most important men involved in the 'Great Event' of the fifth century BC.

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⁶³ According to Stadter (2014b) 25: '... beyond the specific problems faced by the protagonist to the larger categories—demagogy and tyranny, political envy and ambition, etc.—and the virtues his heroes demonstrated or lacked in dealing with them.'

⁶⁴ The conclusion of Pelling (1995) 220 = (2002) 248. Oudot-Lutz (1997) 34–5 notes that, for Plutarch, Aristides is also the perfect representative of how a Greek official should act in the context of Roman imperial rule. She argues: 'Une telle identification entre Aristide et le peuple athénien souligne davantage encore l'écart qui separate l'image de' Aristide et celle de Thémistocle. Aristide est la figure emblématique de l'Athènes de l'époque de Plutarque; Thémistocle rappelle en revanche une Athènes que Plutarque, dans une certaine mesure, ne comprend plus.'

⁶⁵ So Payen (2014) 237: 'As an antiquarian, Plutarch is no mere collector, an indifferent onlooker, or dilettante. For him, the past derives its meaning from being confronted with contemporary Imperial Rome.' The fragility of the Roman enterprise—and its susceptibility to failure under a bad ruler—is remarked upon, for instance, at *Quom. adul.* 56E (Antony's bad behaviour almost led to the loss of traditional Roman culture), and with Nero, whom Plutarch accuses of coming close to overturning the Roman empire (*παραφροσύνης ἀνατρέψαι τὴν Ῥωμαίων ἡγεμονίαν*, *Ant.* 87.4).

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