

## IGNORANCE IS BLISS? GEOGRAPHICAL KNOWLEDGE IN HERODOTUS AND THUCYDIDES\*

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*Abstract.* This article explores the value attached to geographical knowledge, firstly in the work of Herodotus and then in comparison with a key Thucydidean episode. Having established the desirability of knowledge at least for the historian himself, it considers Herodotean episodes in which the geographical knowledge of characters within the narrative is limited, or even deliberately distorted, not always to their disadvantage. It then places against this backdrop Thucydides' puzzling account of Athenian ignorance in advance of their ill-fated expedition to Sicily. It proposes that Thucydides exaggerates the Athenians' lack of geographical knowledge in order to characterise them as tragically overtaken by an irrational desire for the fatal expedition.

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A great deal has been written about geographical knowledge in Herodotus' *Histories*, whether his own, or that of his characters.<sup>1</sup> The quest to locate Herodotus against former and contemporary intellectual milieux inevitably encourages a focus on what was *known* about the world and how it was presented. The Foucauldian connection between power and knowledge has lent a status and value to geographical knowledge, which is not only perpetuated in the study of historical texts, but also embedded in the texts themselves. I shall therefore first explore how geographical knowledge is established as a desideratum for both the historian and players within historical narratives.

Less attention has been paid to the theme of geographical ignorance, the occasions on which the historian confesses to *not* knowing the nature and layout of the world,<sup>2</sup> or when he presents characters who lose their way or are

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The translations of Herodotus and Thucydides are mine; those of Plutarch are adapted from Perrin's Loeb.

<sup>1</sup> See Romm (1998); Harrison (2007); Bakker–de Jong–van Wees (2002); Rood (2012a); Clarke (2018). Less attention has been directed at the geographical knowledge displayed in Thucydides' account of the Peloponnesian war, but see Rood (2012b) for a notable exception.

<sup>2</sup> I focus here on self-confessed geographical ignorance, as opposed to the many geographical errors found in ancient historical texts. Note, for example, egregious

mistaken about the location of people and places and the configuration of geographical space. Furthermore, to the phenomenon of ignorance, we should add deception, whereby geographical information is deliberately withheld or falsified, or at best presented in a potentially misleading or ambiguous way. The prevalence of ignorance is a natural corollary of the desirability of knowledge and its association with power, as disparities in knowledge characterise the relationships between different historians, between historians and narrative characters, and between different characters within historical texts.

The value placed on geographical knowledge is, however, contestable and the associated benefits are by no means guaranteed or uncomplicated. Unlike for the historian, for characters within historical narratives, knowledge often brings no greater success than does geographical ignorance; ignorance may even seem paradoxically more desirable than knowledge in enabling decisions to be made and action to be undertaken. A notable case in point is the widespread ignorance by the Athenians in advance of their ill-fated expedition to Sicily in 415 BC, as related by Thucydides. Here it will be argued that Thucydides exaggerates the Athenians' lack of geographical knowledge in order to characterise them as tragically overtaken by an irrational desire for the fatal expedition, in a way which seems at first subtly distinct from the arrogant failures of their forerunners in tyranny, Herodotus' Persians. Ultimately, however, Athenian culpability for their easy seduction by desire for an ill-informed adventure will remain in play as one of many causal strands for Athens' disastrous expedition explored by Thucydides.

### **(a) The Historian and Geographical Knowledge: Seeing, Sources, and Story-telling<sup>3</sup>**

Herodotus' explicit and protracted creation of a historiographical persona offers the opportunity to explore the nature of geographical knowledge or ignorance and to assess the value placed on the former. In fact, a striking feature of Herodotus' work is the frequency with which he confesses to a lack of knowledge, in contrast to Thucydides' rarer admissions of geographical uncertainty.<sup>4</sup> The *topos* 'I'm not sure' or 'I don't know' applied to geographical

underestimations of the breadth of the Asia Minor peninsula: Hdt. 1.72, Str. 12.2.7, Quint. Curt. 3.1.13, with thanks to Peter Thonemann for this point.

<sup>3</sup> On the authority attached to different forms of evidence, see Marincola (1997) 63–127.

<sup>4</sup> Rood (2012b) 149 notes Thucydides' use of *legetai* and *legontai* to indicate his own cognitive uncertainty, particularly concerning the fringes of the Greek world.

knowledge fits within a wider context of Herodotean professions of ignorance.<sup>5</sup> It is predictable that such expressions occur predominantly in descriptions of the most inaccessible parts of the world.<sup>6</sup> When Herodotus links his ignorance of the springs of the River Borysthenes to that of the springs of the Nile (4.53), this is a clear consequence of remoteness of location and, indeed, all of Herodotus' expressions of uncertainty concerning geographical information relate to the peripheral regions, far from the Mediterranean basin.<sup>7</sup>

That the limits of the historian's geographical knowledge lie towards the outer edges of the earth is notoriously manifested through Herodotus' professed ignorance concerning Egypt and the sources and habits of the Nile. As he concedes, he is not able to find out the nature of the Nile from the priests or from anyone else, nor 'get any information from any of the Egyptians about this (*πὲρι οὐδενὸς οὐδὲν οἶός τε ἐγενόμην παραλαβεῖν*), when I asked them what capacity the Nile has to be the opposite in nature to all other rivers' (2.19.3). But geographical ignorance or uncertainty plagues other extremities besides the South.<sup>8</sup> A revealing passage concerns the parallel lack of knowledge of the western part of the known world (3.115.1–2):

These now are the most remote lands in Asia and Libya. But concerning the most remote lands in Europe towards the West, I cannot speak with steadfast accuracy (*ἔχω μὲν οὐκ ἀτρεκέως λέγειν*); for I do not accept (*οὔτε γὰρ ἔγωγε ἐνδέκομαι*) that there is a river called by barbarians Eridanus flowing out into the northern sea, where our amber is said to come from, so the story goes (*λόγος ἐστί*), nor do I have any knowledge of (*οὔτε ... οἶδα*) the Tin Islands, from where our tin comes. The very name Eridanus implicates itself (*αὐτὸ κατηγορεῖ*) as not a barbarian but a Greek name, made up by some poet (*ὑπὸ ποιητέω δέ τινος ποιηθέν*);

<sup>5</sup> See de Jong (2013) 260–1, asserting that Herodotus' lack of complete knowledge is a consequence of the absence of the Muses from his work.

<sup>6</sup> See 2.23 (ignorance over river Ocean); 4.16 (lack of knowledge over what lies to the North of the Hyperboreans): 'As for the land which this narrative has already embarked upon relating, no one knows with steadfast accuracy (*οὐδεὶς οἶδε ἀτρεκέως*) what lies to the North of it; for I can find out from no one who claims to have been an eyewitness (*αὐτόπτεω*).'<sup>7</sup> As de Jong (2013) 261 has observed, this passage may be read as an admission of even Herodotus' limitations: 'He is not always omnipresent, either: there are moments where he reaches the "borders" of his story'.

<sup>7</sup> Frequently, distance combines with terrain to foster ignorance: at 2.31 the land beyond the Nile is not known because of the desert; at 2.34 the springs of the Nile are not known for the same reason; at 3.98 the Indians are the furthest east to be known about because beyond them lies desert; at 4.185 Herodotus cannot name any peoples beyond a key ridge, beyond which is desert.

<sup>8</sup> Luraghi (2001) 152–5 contrasts the opportunities for knowledge-acquisition in Egypt favourably with Scythia, since the former at least has a strong tradition of record-keeping.

nor, in spite of all my efforts over this, have I been able to hear from someone who has seen it (τοῦτο δὲ οὐδενὸς αὐτόπτεω γενομένου δύναιαι ἀκούσαι) that there is a sea beyond Europe.

Here Herodotus contrasts his relative certainty about other edges of the earth with the vagueness of what it is possible to discover about the far West, expressing his openly confessed geographical ignorance in multiple ways. He ‘cannot say for certain’, ‘doesn’t accept’, ‘doesn’t know’, and ‘hasn’t been able to hear from an eye-witness’. The different expressions capture the complexity of how geographical knowledge is acquired. The explanatory ‘for’ (γάρ) introduces the notion of *personal judgement* on the part of the historian and his rejection of the idea that there is a river Eridanus flowing into the northern sea. The fact that Herodotus’ suspicions over the *name* of the river, which, through the legal image of self-implication (αὐτὸ κατηγορεῖ) betrays itself as a Greek poetic invention,<sup>9</sup> extend to scepticism over the existence of the river itself, reinforces the point that stories and literature associated with the far West are at the heart of his lack of certainty. His much discussed preference for autopsy or at least vicarious autopsy,<sup>10</sup> expressed in the regret that this has been impossible to achieve in relation to the sea beyond Europe, adds a final layer to the explanation as to why he simply cannot provide an accurate account of the far West. The prevalence of stories and absence of autopsy combine to yield ignorance or at least uncertainty.<sup>11</sup>

The theme of ignorance generated by lack of autopsy and exacerbated by the fictive world of literary invention runs through the early books of Herodotus’ work. Literary tradition is a clear source of confusion in relation to the encircling Ocean (2.23). In this passage we see a direct tension between the poetic geography created by the ‘invention’ of the name Ocean by Homer or one of his predecessors and Herodotus’ own knowledge of the real world. The fact that Herodotus does not know of an Ocean river means that the poetic geography in which it exists needs no refutation. The logic here is slippery. Although ‘I do not know that *x*’ is not logically equivalent to ‘I know that not *x*’, here and elsewhere the two are elided. If a piece of geographical information lies outside his repertoire, then it may be presumed false or non-existent, indicating an implicit assumption that Herodotus is, although not geographically omniscient, at least significantly superior in his knowledge.

<sup>9</sup> See Hes. *Theog.* 338.

<sup>10</sup> Dewald (1987) 156–7, on Herodotus the eye-witness investigator, for whom *opsis* is the basis for knowledge (2.29; 2.99); also Marincola (1997) 67.

<sup>11</sup> Herodotus’ lack of knowledge about the Tin islands must stem from similar reasons, although *someone* must be less ignorant if their tin actually comes from there. Fehling (1994) 4, observes that Herodotus avoids telling miraculous stories in his own name but also that he ‘never directly quotes information from very far-away countries’.

Similar formulae are applied to the northern extremities at the start of Book 5 (5.9.2), where Herodotus discusses the land beyond the river Ister (Danube). His own assertion that this region is empty and boundless uses the relatively confident expression *φαίνεται εὐόυσα* ('is observed by the senses to be'). However, 'no one can tell with steadfast accuracy' (*οὐδεὶς ἔχει φράσαι τὸ ἀτρικέες*) which men live there. Again, widespread geographical ignorance serves to highlight Herodotus' own superior geographical knowledge. The fact that he 'can find out about only the so-called Sigynnae living beyond the Ister' hints at universal uncertainty. The implication is that any further remaining knowledge would be in Herodotus' possession. Furthermore, Herodotus seeks also to shed the muted glow of inference, even if not the glaring light of autopsy or eye-witness testimony, on remote areas of the world through his application of reason, *gnomē*, analogy, and comparison, which bring 'what cannot be seen—to *aphanes*' into mental view.<sup>12</sup>

Knowing things for certain (*ἀτρικέως*) on the basis of one's own autopsy and sense of reasoned analogy or through eye-witness or other written accounts is clearly key.<sup>13</sup> Anything less than this constitutes uncertainty or even ignorance, and this is something to which even Herodotus is susceptible, as illustrated above. But this deficit of knowledge simultaneously enables Herodotus to assert his superiority over other writers and thinkers, and his capacity to know everything that *can* be known.

Herodotus' relative command of geographical knowledge is reflected in his unrivalled grip on what can be known and the confinement of his ignorance to the margins of the earth, where autopsy is mostly impossible and the quality of other information doubtful.<sup>14</sup> His superior knowledge, drawing on these strengths together with his capacity for intelligent reasoning or *gnomē*, is manifested in his capacity to shed light on the frequent ignorance and misunderstandings of others.<sup>15</sup> One example lies in his demonstration of the extent of Egypt, which is undertaken because 'the Ionians have got the wrong

<sup>12</sup> Corcella (2013). As Chris Pelling reminds me, the broader Presocratic principle of *ὄψις ἀδήλων τὰ φαινόμενα* ('things which are visible offer a glimpse of those which cannot be seen': Anaxagoras, 59 B 21 DK) seems to be in play here, applied at a geographical rather than a cosmological level.

<sup>13</sup> See Luraghi (2001) 142–3, for the preference for autopsy and *gnomē* over the accounts of others. As Rood (2012b) 150–1 notes, the same is also routinely assumed for Thucydides, but the fragmentary remains of 'sources' for geographical information make it hard to judge how closely Thucydides followed them.

<sup>14</sup> Although see Fehling (1994) 10, warning against the assumption that Herodotus' caution concerning marginal regions means he can be taken at face-value when dealing with less remote parts of the earth.

<sup>15</sup> On the combination of different forms of knowledge, expressed in a language of proof, which would resound with the contemporary audience in a world of science and medicine, see Thomas (2013).

idea (*οὐκ εὖ φρονέουσι*) about Egypt' (2.16.1), believing that it relates only to the Nile Delta. As Bakker notes, Herodotus' account here is given ostensibly not for the purposes of pure scientific enquiry, but to correct a misconception and replace ignorance with correct knowledge.<sup>16</sup> This example clearly relates to ignorance outside the main narrative, and Herodotus' capacity to identify and correct it enhances his authority through a display of superior knowledge.

### **(b) Geographical Knowledge: a Universal Desideratum?**

Herodotus exemplifies, and partially creates, the expectation that the historian will strive to possess all relevant geographical knowledge, and that, where knowledge is limited, his combination of autopsy, oral and written sources, and intelligent reasoning will place him in a position of desirable epistemological superiority.

It is worth establishing, rather than assuming, that geographical knowledge is always as uncomplicatedly positive for characters in historical narratives as for historians themselves. Geographical mistakes, misunderstandings, or downright ignorance are attributed by Herodotus to characters within the narrative, and are relevant to the progress of that narrative, or to the characterisation of individuals. In spite of the superficial similarity, the knowledge or ignorance under discussion here is different from that of the historian himself or of other geographical 'experts' outside the text. Here, ignorance is generated not by inescapable external factors such as remoteness or inaccessibility, but more commonly by factors such as fear or miscomprehension, even in regions which are not geographically marginal. As Rood has noted in relation to Thucydides, geographical description can offer the medium through which the nature and motivation of characters are expressed.<sup>17</sup>

When, following their defeat at Salamis, the Persian admirals sail at Xerxes' command towards the Hellespont to guard the bridges and secure his escape-route, in their anxiety they mistake for ships certain small headlands, jutting out from the mainland around Sounion, and at first flee in terror (8.107.2). Geographical ignorance and fear are intertwined only a few chapters later, this time on both Greek and Persian sides. After Xerxes' ignominious retreat to Asia, the Ionians appeal to the Greeks to come and free them from tyrannical rule. But the Greeks refuse to take the envoys back as far as Ionia (8.132.3):

<sup>16</sup> Bakker (2002) 10. See below for a similar strategy of correction in Thucydides' text.

<sup>17</sup> Rood (2012b) 153.

The Greeks took them as far as Delos, and even that far only with reluctance, for everything that lay beyond was a source of dread for the Greeks because of their ignorance of those parts (οὔτε τῶν χώρων ἐοῦσι ἐμπείροισι), and they thought that everywhere was full of armed men. They supposed also that Samos was just as far away from them as the Pillars of Heracles. And so it came to pass that the barbarians were too disheartened to dare to sail farther west than Samos, and at the same time the Greeks dared to go at the Chians' request no further east than Delos. Thus fear guarded the middle ground between them (οὔτω δέος τὸ μέσον ἐφύλασσε σφέων).

The notion that fear on both sides was bred through geographical ignorance seems a remarkable suggestion given the mobile and interconnected world of the ancient Mediterranean. It seems hard to credit that the sea-going Greeks could be so ignorant of relative distances around the Mediterranean basin, but the scale of misinformation might be more generally emblematic of the chaotic and panicked thinking at this point in the narrative.<sup>18</sup> The comparison between the distance from mainland Greece to Samos and that to the Pillars of Heracles not only exaggerates the problem,<sup>19</sup> but it also casts the gaze in a whole new direction, admittedly not a random direction, since the iconic Pillars of Heracles neatly evoke the world of bold exploration into the unknown.

The above examples are characterised primarily by failure to know or to interpret correctly the physical shape of the world around, whether in terms of individual features of the landscape or of geographical layout. But a good proportion of geographically wayward thinking in the narrative results from the misinterpretation of oracles and portents, frequently in connection with islands. In the extensive digression on the history and geography of Libya (4.145–205), there is a recurring theme of colonisation going awry due to a lack of clarity of what constitutes an island. The Therans colonise the island of Plataea *off* Libya, perhaps assuming that it is close enough to where they are meant to be, but the venture goes badly. Their fortunes improve when they settle in the beautiful location of Aziris *opposite* the island, where they spend six

<sup>18</sup> But see above, n. 2 for widespread geographical error. Furthermore, distances across open water are notoriously harder to judge than those along coast-lines. Nevertheless, we shall note later the implausible ignorance of the Athenians concerning Sicily, where Thucydides may be using geographical ignorance or knowledge to express other narrative themes.

<sup>19</sup> I owe to Tim Rood the suggestion that the hyperbole here results from a tension between the literal spatial and conceptual distances, with the symbolic remoteness of the Pillars of Heracles being reframed as though a literal comparison of distances were being undertaken.

years (4.157) before being led by the Libyans to their final destination of Cyrene. A clearer definition of insularity would have helped Arcesilaus, who refused to go to Cyrene because he thought it was the sea-girt (*ἀμφίρρυτον*) land of the oracle about his death (4.164.3). The Theran colonists of Cyrene could have told him otherwise – Cyrene was definitely a part of the mainland, as witnessed by their own false assumptions. The language of the oracle needed no twisting.<sup>20</sup>

Given the poor track record of the Therans as geographical guides for colonial expeditions, it seems curious that, when Dorieus of Sparta leads a colonising expedition to Libya, he does so not only with none of the usual preparations conducted, including a consultation at Delphi, but worse still with Therans as his guides (5.42.2). With lack of preparation, absence of Delphic guidance, and notoriously poor assistants, it is not surprising that Dorieus' Spartan migration fulfils the propensity of colonising expeditions to Libya to end up in the wrong place. The group colonised the most beautiful part of Libya by the river Cinyps, only to be driven back to the Peloponnese after two years, and then redirected by Delphi to Heraclea in Sicily instead.<sup>21</sup>

Herodotus' text is rich in examples where the geographical ignorance of characters within a historical narrative proves problematic, and episodes of ignorance continue to characterise the broader sweep of history. Alexander the Great was notorious among ancient historians for having so spectacularly misunderstood geography that he thought he was in the upper Nile Valley when in fact he was East of the Indus.<sup>22</sup> The way-finding difficulties of Alexander offer a reminder that it is in the context of imperial campaigns that geographical knowledge seems particularly desirable. We may recall that the edges of the earth as focalised through Herodotus himself are particularly vulnerable to ignorance. When, however, the focalisation changes to that of the great imperialists in his narrative, the Persians, geographical uncertainty and ignorance shift in turn to new locations, and the parallels or divergences with the figure of the knowledgeable or ignorant historian come into sharper

<sup>20</sup> Another geographical oracular confusion comes at 1.167, where the Phocaeans found Hyele. Herodotus notes that the oracle had meant them to establish (*κτίσαι*) a hero, Cynus, rather than the island of Cynus. A similar case is to be found at 6.80, where Cleomenes does capture an Argos, but it is not the Argos he intended: following a Delphic oracle, he thought he would capture the city of Argos, but instead burnt down a grove sacred to the hero Argos, where Argives had taken refuge. The geographical content of dreams could also be misunderstood. Cambyses' dream, which tells him that he will die in Ecbatana, but fails to specify which city of this name, leads him to make the wrong assumption that the dream refers to Ecbatana in Syria rather than that in Media (3.64.4).

<sup>21</sup> As Chris Burnand points out to me, such a story was of clear benefit to Delphi, enabling it to claim a unique ability to direct such expeditions correctly.

<sup>22</sup> Arr. *Anab.* 6.1.2–3 and Str. 15.1.25. I owe this point to Peter Thonemann.



focus.<sup>23</sup> We will need to consider whether autopsy constitutes the golden standard for characters in the text, just as for the historian himself, and, if it is impossible to achieve, then what can stand as its substitute.

The character of Darius stands out in Herodotus' narrative for his diligent geographical fact-finding expeditions, and for the high value placed on geographical knowledge.<sup>24</sup> On being urged by Atossa to engage in a military campaign against Greece, Darius' first instinct is to send Persian scouts with Democedes, the court doctor,<sup>25</sup> to find out about the land, and to bring back the benefit of their autopsy—'having learned and seen' (μαθόντες καὶ ἰδόντες)—so that he can go against Greece 'fully informed' (3.134.6: ἐξεπιστάμενος). Knowledge, gained through direct or vicarious autopsy, lies at the heart of well-planned imperial bids, or as Demont notes, 'the king's desire to know is linked to his desire to conquer'.<sup>26</sup> Exactly what such a fact-finding mission entails is outlined in detail (3.136.1):

Coming down to Phoenicia and within it the city of Sidon, they immediately loaded up two triremes and together with these a great galley filled with all kinds of good things. When they had prepared everything, they set sail towards Greece, and keeping close by, they surveyed and mapped (ἐθηεῦντο καὶ ἀπεγράφοντο) its coastal areas, until, having viewed (θεησάμενοι) the majority of it, including the notable parts, they came to Taras in Italy.

The verb 'to view' (θεάομαι) is particularly associated with Darius, as well as with the Herodotean narrator, and the investigative activities of both figures are of considerable interest for our theme of geographical knowledge and ignorance.<sup>27</sup> Darius, like Herodotus, is reliant on the autopsy of others, but understands the importance of finding out the lie of the land. Looking and

<sup>23</sup> See Pelling (2016a) 327 n. 28, for the link between geographical manipulation and imperial powers, the former being used to explain and justify the projects of the latter.

<sup>24</sup> Purves (2006) 9 sees Darius as a king 'obsessed with accounting, surveying, and reshaping as a means of mastering the landscape around him'.

<sup>25</sup> On the delegation of fact-finding by kings and rulers to 'scouts', see Demont (2009) 183–4. See also Christ (1994) 180.

<sup>26</sup> Demont (2009) 185.

<sup>27</sup> For the parallel, but distinctive, research enterprises of Herodotus and of kings in his narrative, see Christ (1994). Demont (2009) explores in depth the way in which the activities of other enquirers in Herodotus' *Histories*, particularly those of kings, reflect on the historian's enquiries in turn. See also Irwin (2014); and Clarke (2018) 65–6.

committing to record—these are the tools in trade for both the historian and the well-organised aspiring imperialist.<sup>28</sup>

Darius' wish to replace ignorance with knowledge in an imperial context applies not only to the West but also to the East. Identified by Herodotus as the discoverer of most of Asia, Darius is keen to know where exactly the Indus enters the sea, an enquiry which gives rise to a well-planned, well-executed expedition, this time across Asia (4.44).<sup>29</sup> As in the case of the westward-bound expedition, this one too is outlined in detail (4.44.1–2):

Darius, wanting to know (*βουλόμενος εἰδέναι*) where this river Indus flows out into the sea, sent ships manned by Scylax, a man from Caryanda, and others whom he trusted to tell the truth (*τοῖσι ἐπίστευε τὴν ἀληθείην ἐρέειν*); these setting out from the city of Caspatyrus and the Pactyic country, sailed down the river toward the East and the sunrise until they came to the sea; and sailing across the sea towards the West, they came in the thirtieth month to that place from which the Egyptian king sent the Phoenicians mentioned above to circumnavigate Libya.

The importance of trustworthy witnesses recalls Herodotus' own attempts to ensure adequate substitution for his own autopsy in the form of eye-witness accounts, but Darius goes further in insisting that those eye-witnesses be reliable. This offers a subtle modification to Herodotus' consistent presentation of himself as possessing superior knowledge to those in the narrative, without diminishing Christ's point that Herodotus' critique of the process of investigation and research endorses the historian's higher status.<sup>30</sup> In fact, Herodotus' superiority on the spectrum of geographical knowledge and ignorance is reinforced by his observation of the point of geographical contact between the two kingly fact-finding missions. The voyage of the Phoenicians, sent by King Necos of Egypt to prove the circumnavigability of Libya (4.42), overlaps precisely with the route of Darius' sailors on a different mission. Only the historian has the overview to connect two pathways that cross in different time periods.

<sup>28</sup> Grethlein (2013) 193 notes that *theasthai* is used also of Xerxes, but goes on to highlight the contrast in information-acquisition between different rulers. See Grethlein (2009) for parallels between Herodotus and Xerxes, which reveal Herodotus' superior historical skills.

<sup>29</sup> West (2012) observes Herodotus' wish to prove the circumnavigability of southern Asia.

<sup>30</sup> Christ (1994) 199–200. West (2012) 165 notes Herodotus' disturbing confidence in correcting the geography of others.

### (c) Fact-finding Failures and the Devaluing of Geographical Knowledge

The example of Darius and the Indus ‘illustrates the way in which Greek geographical horizons might be enlarged by the need of the Achaemenid administration to collect information about the peoples under Persian rule’.<sup>31</sup> Such careful attention to detail was, however, not *de rigueur* for all aspiring imperialists, so that lack of accurate geographical knowledge, failure to search for τὸ ἀτρεκές, is a recurring theme.

Darius’ forerunner, Cambyses, at first prefigures his careful planning in his Egyptian and Aethiopian campaigns. He is assisted by Phanes the Halicarnassian, a man with a ‘precise knowledge of all things Egyptian’ (ἐπιστάμενόν τε τὰ περὶ Αἴγυπτον ἀτρεκέστατα) from his time at the court of Amasis, who advises Cambyses on his march and ‘how to cross the waterless region’ (3.4.3: ὅκως τὴν ἀνυδρον διεκπεράῃ). As Herodotus relates, Cambyses follows the good advice to seek assistance from the Arabian king in maintaining a water supply while crossing the desert.<sup>32</sup> After the positive outcome of his battle against Psamtik III at Pelusium, he is encouraged to strike further afield to the South and again undertakes appropriate preparation, employing scouts to find out ‘whether there was any truth in the story of the Table of the Sun amongst these Aethiopians and to spy out everything else in addition’ (3.17.2).<sup>33</sup> The formula looks familiar from Darius, including the desire to draw on precise information and to find out the truth.

However, the Fish-Eaters’ scouts ‘having seen everything’ (θεησόμενοι again) bring back, together with marvellous tales of Aethiopian lifestyle and longevity, a sharp rebuff from the Aethiopian king, who had turned the knowledge-acquisition tables on the Fish-Eaters, interrogated them about the Persians (3.22), and immediately got the measure of Cambyses’ imperial ambitions.<sup>34</sup> At this point, the stories of Darius and Cambyses diverge. Whereas Darius benefited from the truthful knowledge gained from reconnaissance missions, Cambyses is overtaken by rage not enlightenment, and

<sup>31</sup> West (2012) 165.

<sup>32</sup> Hdt. 3.9. Whether this was by transporting water to Cambyses in camel skins, or, less plausibly, by constructing a system of canals and a reservoir, it is clear that significant planning was involved.

<sup>33</sup> For a thought-provoking account of the Ethiopian *logos*, see Irwin (2014); Demont (2009) 184–7, 197–200. Demont suggests (187) that the enquiry concerning the Table of the Sun strays from the demands of pre-conquest reconnaissance and blends into Herodotus’ own historical enquiry, like the scene with Darius at the Bosphorus at 4.85–7. See also Christ (1994) 180–2.

<sup>34</sup> On this reversal and the complexity of enquiries by different constituencies of different subjects in this scene, see Irwin (2014) 28–9.

immediately sets out against the Aethiopians, making no preparations for food-supply nor giving any indication that 'he was about to make a campaign to the ends of the earth (*ἐς τὰ ἔσχατα γῆς*)'. This lack of reconnaissance and preparation results in dreadful hardship for Cambyses' men, eating grass to stay alive, until the landscape turns to desert, taking the geographically ignorant Persians by surprise, and the troops are forced to turn back when they resort to cannibalism (3.25.7). Meanwhile, a group that was sent against the Ammonians, having reached the city of Oasis, vanished never to be seen again. According to the Ammonians, the Persian assailants were buried by a sand-storm about halfway between Oasis and the Ammonians. Again, geographical ignorance leads the Persians to incur hazards, this time fatally. The differing fates of Cambyses' campaigns reinforce the critical part played by relevant geographical information.

Other campaigns, however, particularly those directed against the Scythians, suggest that geographical knowledge should be seen as a more complex and nuanced currency, attracting a fluctuating, rather than fixed and uncontested, value. As Purves has observed, Darius' keenness on seeking geographical knowledge seems thwarted by the vast, amorphous terrain of Scythia.<sup>35</sup> Competition over geographical knowledge applies to characters in the text no less than to the historian himself. The Scythians, close allies of the land, know the area so much better than the Persians that they reach the Ister way ahead of them to advise the Ionians to desert the Persians (4.136.2):

And as the Persian army was for the most part infantry and did not know the paths (*τὰς ὁδοὺς οὐκ ἐπισταμένους*), which were not properly cut back,<sup>36</sup> while the Scythians were horsemen and knew the short cuts (*τὰ σύντομα τῆς ὁδοῦ ἐπισταμένους*), they went wide of each other, and the Scythians reached the bridge long before the Persians.

The direct contrast between Persian ignorance and Scythian knowledge is emphasised by the close verbal patterning (*οὐκ ἐπισταμένους ... ἐπισταμένους*), and echoes Herodotus' own endorsement of Scythian wisdom earlier in the same book, specifically in the context of Persian campaigning.<sup>37</sup> It seems clear here that geographical knowledge is a highly prized commodity for both Darius and his intended imperial subjects. Ironically, however, the natural advantage gained by the Scythians through their knowledge of the land proves

<sup>35</sup> Purves (2006).

<sup>36</sup> The mention of cutting paths makes one wonder what 'disrupting routes' through their territory meant (4.140).

<sup>37</sup> At 4.46.2, Herodotus selects Anacharsis and the Scythians as the only wise people around the Pontic region.

worthless, since the Ionians decide to reject the Scythian advice, backed by Miltiades, and instead follow the exhortation of Histiaeus of Miletus to remain loyal to Persia.

From here, the Scythians lose their knowledge-advantage. Once the Ionians under Histiaeus have deceived them into believing that they are following Scythian advice and deserting Persia (4.149), the relative weakness of the Scythians is manifested in their being on the back-foot geographically as well. Having previously exploited the Persians' geographical ignorance, the Scythians now start to lose the way themselves. Their efforts to find the Persians are hampered by their 'completely missing the way by which the Persians had escaped' (*ἡμάρτανον πάσης τῆς ἐκείνων διεξόδου*) (4.140.1). This was, according to Herodotus, the Scythians' fault, since they had deliberately destroyed the landscape and blocked the wells. They could otherwise easily have found the Persians. The own-goal scored by the Scythians is made explicit by Herodotus. 'That part of their plan which they had thought the best was the cause of their losing the way' (*νῦν δὲ τὰ σφί ἐδόκεε ἄριστα βεβουλεῦσθαι, κατὰ ταῦτα ἐσφάλησαν*) (4.140.2). The Scythian assumption that the Persians will relate to the landscape exactly as they themselves do, and search for pasturage and water for their animals, proves mistaken; instead the Persians wisely stick to what they know rather than testing new territory, and by keeping to their former tracks they successfully reach the Ister, even if with difficulty (4.140.3). If losing their fleeing assailants once was bad enough, the Scythians' humiliation is reinforced by Herodotus' note that they tried again to track them down 'and for a second time missed the Persians' (4.142: *καὶ τὸ δεύτερον ἡμάρτον τῶν Περσέων*). Here geographical sabotage turns back on the perpetrators and transforms the Scythians' superior knowledge into relative ignorance, with the result that they are outclassed on their own home-territory by the route-finding prowess of the Persian invaders. Herodotus' own claim concerning the Scythians 'that they have contrived that no one who attacks them can escape, and no one can catch them if they do not want to be found' (4.46.3) is confounded by this episode, an indication of how utterly the customary strengths of the Scythians have been undermined.

The battle over the epistemological high-ground, initially occupied by the Scythians and then appropriated by the Persians, seems at first to challenge the characterisation of this remote land and its inhabitants as resistant to definition, enumeration, and knowledge.<sup>38</sup> Scythia becomes the battle-ground on which geographical knowledge is a major determining factor and thereby carries considerable value. The ultimate irony is that the competition for geographical knowledge is carried out in the context of an ignominious retreat. Darius the careful fact-finder fails to succeed in his imperial mission; and, even

<sup>38</sup> Purves (2006).

though the Scythians evade conquest, this is not attributable to their geographically superior knowledge, which they themselves throw away by destroying the important route-finding landmarks, but simply due to the desperation of the Persians to escape. In fact, the only external ruler able to subdue this part of the world is Sesostris of Egypt, whose embarkation on imperial campaigns with haphazard knowledge and no meticulous fact-finding may result in some changes of plan,<sup>39</sup> but nevertheless does not seem to stand in the way of significant successes. Not least of these is over the Scythians, whom Darius could not conquer, as he is uncomfortably reminded by the high priest of Hephaistos at Memphis who forbids him on these grounds from placing a statue of himself in front of those erected by Sesostris.<sup>40</sup> Episodes in the land of Scythia encourage a re-evaluation of geographical knowledge. The foolish abandonment of their local advantage puts the Scythians at risk of Persian subordination, reinforcing the value to be placed on geographical knowledge. However, the Persians are unable to make imperial capital out of their temporary advantage, suggesting that a greater knowledge of the land is by no means a guarantee of success in terms of conquest. Paradoxically, it is Sesostris with his lack of reconnaissance and preparation who enjoys greater success at subduing this indefinable part of the world. Scythia serves to complicate the link between geographical knowledge and imperial success.<sup>41</sup>

#### **(d) Geographical Deception**

The coexistence of different levels of geographical knowledge and the potential for these disparities to be exploited by characters in the narrative raises the question of geographical deception as opposed to mere ignorance. As will be explored, the deliberate misrepresentation of geography is a significant factor in the development of plot lines, whether as a literary device or reflecting the reality of epistemological manoeuvring at a political and military level.

The difficulties of the Therans in finding the correct part of Libya in which to settle have already been observed. Coming only two chapters after the Persian retreat from Scythia, in which the Scythians move from a position of

<sup>39</sup> As, for example, in his expedition to subdue all the inhabitants of the Red Sea coast, which is abandoned when the sea becomes too shallow to navigate (2.102.2), with the result that Sesostris turns his attention to the land-conquest of Libya and to Europe.

<sup>40</sup> Sesostris is a close forerunner of Darius, not least in his habit of setting up pillars to mark out in visible and permanent monumental form his conquests in all directions: 2.102.4–5: pillars in Libya; 2.103.1: Scythians and Thracians; 4.87.1: Darius' white stone pillars at Mandrocles' bridge over the Bosphorus. See West (1992) for doubt cast on the accuracy of Herodotus' account of Sesostris' Scythian campaign.

<sup>41</sup> See Irwin (2014) 27–42, for an analysis of the complex relationship between imperial quest and ethnographic enquiry at another edge of the earth, Ethiopia.

geographical knowledge to one of weakness, the route-finding difficulties of the Therans at the opposite pole of Herodotus' world are resonantly juxtaposed. Furthermore, the final chapter of the northwards-facing narrative contains an interesting critique of geographical epistemology by Megabyzus, left in charge of the Hellespontine area by Xerxes. With the Persians riding high on their success in negotiating the land of the Scythians more successfully than do its own inhabitants, Megabyzus makes disparaging comments about the (lack of) geographical wisdom of the people of Calchedon. 'The Calchedonians must have been blind, because otherwise they would not have chosen the worse site for their city [by contrast with Byzantium], when they could have had the better one' (4.144).

With this scathing criticism ringing in our ears, we move to another set of migrations and foundation stories, culminating in that of Cyrene by the Therans. It is noteworthy that the difficulty of the Therans in interpreting clues which should lead them to the correct location for their new settlement is not merely a matter of misinterpretation of oracles. After mistakenly settling first on the island of Plataea, and then for a further six years opposite the island (4.157), they are uprooted by the Libyans, promising them a better deal, and finally led to Cyrene. What looks like a simple piece of helpful guiding turns out to involve an element of geographical deception, since the settlers are carefully taken through the best place of all (Irasa) at night so that they will not see it. Libyan calculations of distance are applied to ensure the geographical ignorance of the Therans, which represents an interesting counterpart to Darius' calculations made in pursuit of his own geographical knowledge. As in the case of the Scythians and Persians, the key here is *relative* ignorance and knowledge in a competitive situation. Having the upper hand, or knowing the land better, is key, echoing within the world of the narrative Herodotus' own authorial claims to geographical superiority over rival views.

In the case of Irasa, a desirable place is deliberately concealed from potential rivals. A more common scenario, however, is when locations are artificially 'talked up' to entice individuals and groups to aspire to inhabit them or to consider them attractive. When the Ionians are faced with the threat of Persian expansion, Bias of Priene's ultimately unsuccessful proposal that they should emigrate to Sardinia, 'the largest island of all' (1.170.2: *νήσων τε ἀπασέων μεγίστην*), rests on an exaggerated presentation of the intended destination,<sup>42</sup> part of a wider pattern of false geographical description with a

<sup>42</sup> Sicily is in fact larger than Sardinia, although the difference was not so great that it could have been easily known. See Geus (2013) for the proposition that the exaggerated dimensions can be innocently explained by the prevalence of measuring by coastline rather than by area. Hornblower and Pelling (2017) *ad* 6.2.1 note the echoing of Bias' claim by Histiaeus at 5.106.6 and 6.2.1. For the island of Sardinia as emblematic of escapist thoughts, a 'land of Cockayne', see Ceccarelli (1996).

view to misleading enticement that will be explored further below in Thucydides.

This pattern, like so many others, starts early in Herodotus' narrative with Croesus of Lydia. Sandanis warns against Croesus' incursion against Persia, a rare advocacy of geographical realism in a work replete with overstatement and misrepresentation. Sandanis advises Croesus that, in attacking Persia, he risks gaining a rocky, wineless, figless land, while losing control over one that is far superior, since the Persians would never let go once they saw the richness of Lydia (1.71.2–3). Herodotus endorses the view that, before they conquered the Lydians the Persians 'had nothing luxurious or fine' (1.71.4), but Sandanis cannot deter Croesus from his overestimation of Persia and the campaign goes ahead. The Persians themselves are, however, no less prone to use and succumb to the lure of geographical enticement. Mardonius' encouragement of Xerxes to invade Europe is based partly on renown but also because 'Europe was a very fine land (*περικαλλῆς εἴη χώρα*) and bore every sort of cultivated tree, and was supreme in excellence' (7.5.3).

In a more fully developed example, Aristagoras of Miletus illustrates how the misleading 'over-selling' of locations might serve as a form of currency in gaining support for his own plan and projects and negotiating between the different powers operating in the eastern Mediterranean. When the Naxian élite, in exile, come to Aristagoras seeking help for their restoration, Aristagoras persuades the Persian Artaphernes to assist largely on the promise that, in so doing, Artaphernes will win possession of not only Naxos itself, but also its dependent islands in the Cyclades, which will act as stepping-stones across to the prize of Euboea. The islands in question are heavily 'talked up' in order to make the proposition attractive to Artaphernes. Naxos is described as 'an island that is not great in size, but otherwise beautiful and fertile' (5.31.1). The description of this island as 'close to Ionia' (5.31.1: *ἀγχού Ἰωνίης*) involves a significant stretching of the truth. Aristagoras' geography is clearly manipulated to serve the rhetorical purpose of persuading Artaphernes. The claim that Euboea, the ultimate goal, is a great and wealthy island, and 'very easy to take' (5.31.3: *κάρτα εὐπετέι αἰρεθῆναι*),<sup>43</sup> may contain some elements of truth, but Aristagoras' confident assertion that only one hundred ships would be needed for all these conquests is clearly not believed even by Artaphernes, who organises two hundred instead. The paired themes of playing up attractiveness and playing down the difficulty of acquisition are strongly, although not exclusively, associated with Aristagoras. Needless to say, the Persian force, once gathered and dispatched, fails to achieve its first goal of Naxos and Aristagoras' confidence is belied.

<sup>43</sup> See Pelling (2007) 180 and 189 for the theme of ease in Aristagoras' attempts at persuasion, by contrast with the reality encapsulated in Herodotus' own geographical corrective (195) and in the narrative itself.



The next time Aristagoras uses the rhetorical *topos* of geographical deception, it is in an appeal *against* the Persians not *to* them. Aristagoras appeals to Cleomenes of Sparta to intervene in support of the Ionians against Persian aggression by presenting an enhanced vision of the lands they could gain in the process of defeating Persia (5.49.5–7):<sup>44</sup>

‘The lands where they live lie next to each other, as I shall show: next to the Ionians are the Lydians, who inhabit a good land and are rich in silver.’ (He said this, pointing to the depiction of the earth which he had brought engraved on the tablet.) ‘Next to the Lydians’, said Aristagoras, ‘you see the Phrygians to the East, the richest in flocks and in the fruits of the earth of all men known to me. Next to them are the Cappadocians, whom we call Syrians, and their neighbours are the Cilicians, whose land reaches to the sea over there, in which the island of Cyprus here lies. They pay an annual tribute to the king of five hundred talents. Next to the Cilicians are the Armenians, another people rich in flocks, and after the Armenians, the Matieni, who inhabit this country here. Adjoining these you see the Cissian land, in which, on the Choaspes, lies Susa where the great king lives and where the treasuries of his possessions are located. Take that city, and you need not fear to challenge Zeus for riches.’

As it transpires, Aristagoras’ exaggerated vision of the blessings of Asia becomes rhetorically irrelevant when it is overtaken by the harsh reality of the distances involved. Cleomenes quizzes Aristagoras further, before making any commitment, and asks him how many days’ journey it was from the Ionian sea to the king. Here, Aristagoras’ deceptions are made explicit at the same moment as, in apparent contradiction, his honest transparency proves his downfall and the possibility of Spartan support is lost (5.50.2):

In other respects, Aristagoras had been clever and fooled the Spartan well, but here he tripped up (τὰλλα ἐὼν σοφὸς καὶ διαβάλλων ἐκεῖνον εὖ ἐν τούτῳ ἐσφάλῃ). If he wanted to take the Spartans away into Asia he should never have revealed the true situation, but he did tell it, and said that it was a three-months’ journey inland.<sup>45</sup>

<sup>44</sup> Extensively discussed by Branscome (2010), repeated nearly verbatim as Branscome (2013) 105–49.

<sup>45</sup> Pelling (2007) 190–1, observes that the reluctance of the Spartans to go far inland might imply that they are more maritime than generally thought. But pure distance from home is more relevant here than the nature of the terrain.

West notes the lack of conventions concerning cartographic scaling in this period,<sup>46</sup> which almost enables Aristagoras to mislead Cleomenes into underestimating the distance from Sparta to Susa.<sup>47</sup> Only when the savvy Spartan insists on knowing the distances being represented, does the deception fail, illustrating the value of accurate geographical information in averting a catastrophic intervention. In fact, Aristagoras at no point makes false claims about the size of Asia, simply leaving the reality of ‘are situated next to (ἔχονται)’ conveniently unsaid. The fact that concealing knowledge may be rhetorically effective in (almost) persuading an audience to take bad decisions does not diminish the value of accurate information in itself. In any case, Aristagoras’ deception concerns the benefits on offer, not the distances involved.

Herodotus himself confirms the aspect of Asia which turns out to be the unspoken faulty plank in Aristagoras’ rhetoric, namely its massive scale. On this occasion, the competitive geographical one-upmanship, which we noted between Herodotus and other intellectuals, is extended to include a character in the narrative, since the conversation between Aristagoras and Cleomenes acts as the catalyst for Herodotus’ own lengthy description of the Persian Royal Road, mapped out in terms of distances, guard-stations, and rivers.<sup>48</sup> Herodotus’ independent account of the geography of Asia acts as guarantor that Aristagoras was speaking the truth when he claimed that the journey from the sea to Susa was three months. Herodotus, however, can go one better than Aristagoras in terms of geographical accuracy.<sup>49</sup> In competitive spirit, the historian outdoes the account which he has put into the mouth of the character in his narrative, and notes that the journey would more accurately be measured to include the journey from Ephesus to Sardis, adding an extra three days (5.54).<sup>50</sup> Although this is small change in the context of a three-month expedition, it suggests an interesting interaction between author and character, representing two different layers of geographical expertise and two

<sup>46</sup> For cartographic space as elastic, see Arist. *Clouds* 215–16, where Strepsiades proposes increasing the distance between Sparta and Athens on the map: ‘How close it is. Take great care to move it far away from us.’ As Dover (1970) *ad loc.* notes, ‘Strepsiades thinks of a map as a magical means of bringing places nearer together or further apart’.

<sup>47</sup> West (2012) 165.

<sup>48</sup> Hdt. 5.52–3. The Asian road route is re-evoked at 8.98–9.

<sup>49</sup> Branscome (2010) and (2013) 105–49 explore Aristagoras as a negative foil to Herodotus, who persistently betters the former’s information on Persian geography. See also Rood (2012a) 133 on the competing and complementary viewpoints offered by Herodotus and Aristagoras.

<sup>50</sup> Hornblower (2013) *ad* 5.54, for the ongoing competition for accurate knowledge of the route. Hornblower notes a third-century AD papyrus (*P. Oxy.* LXV 4455) querying Herodotus’ results.

different viewpoints—one internal and one external to the narrative—a pattern reminiscent of the parallel geographical enterprises of Darius and Herodotus.<sup>51</sup>

Both geographically deceptive and geographically honest, Aristagoras follows the pattern of the Scythians, having at first the upper hand and then tripping up, and indeed the same verb for that slip is used of both (4.140.2: ἐσφάλησαν of the Scythians; 5.50.2: ἐσφάλη of Aristagoras). Whereas the Scythians fail at the epistemological level, losing their knowledge-advantage over the Persians, Aristagoras fails because of a misjudgement over when to tell the truth and when not, when to inform others accurately and when to maintain their ignorance. But both trip themselves up through their over-clever manipulation of geographical knowledge. The irony of Aristagoras' name, 'Best Speaker', which might at first seem appropriate for one so adept at rhetorical misrepresentation and which certainly proved successful in fooling the Athenians,<sup>52</sup> here becomes apparent.

### (e) The Inescapability of Ignorance? Twisting the Tragic *Topos*

The fluctuating and malleable value of geographical knowledge is manifest in Herodotus' *Histories*, a text rich in both explicit and implicit examples concerning both the historian and his characters. But a poignant comparison offers itself in the text of Thucydides, and in particular the episode of the Athenian expedition, which set off to Sicily in 415 BC. Here, problems of geographical ignorance and geographical deception come together to create a tragic narrative.<sup>53</sup>

A great deal has been written about Thucydides' puzzling claim that 'most of the Athenians were unaware of the extent of the island and of the number of its Greek and barbarian inhabitants' (6.1.1).<sup>54</sup> As Powell notes, Thucydides

<sup>51</sup> Note also the competitive depiction of rivers, which Aristagoras presents as eminently crossable, a picture belied by the experience of characters in Herodotus' narrative, for whom river-crossings are often difficult. See Rood (2012a) 133 on 'the narrator's alternative account of space', which seems designed to counter 'the character's over-optimistic view'.

<sup>52</sup> For the significance of the name, see Pelling (2007) 180. See 5.97.2 for Aristagoras' greater success in 'deceiving' thirty thousand Athenians than a single Spartan (the verb used of both audiences here is διαβάλλειν).

<sup>53</sup> I use the term 'tragic' loosely here, but see Pelling (2016b) for fuller discussion of the way 'in which a literary production can add suggestiveness by evoking a different genre' (114–15). The bibliography on Thucydides as tragic writer is huge, but Macleod (1983) remains one of the most insightful contributions.

<sup>54</sup> Hornblower (2008) *ad* 6.1.1 suggests translating ἄπειροι as 'unacquainted with' in order to reflect the lack of direct experience as opposed to lack of actual knowledge, of which plenty was available through popular media.

himself suggests at 3.86.4 that one of the purposes of an earlier Athenian expedition to Sicily in the 420s BC was precisely to explore the land with a view to later conquest;<sup>55</sup> that is, to conduct the same kind of fact-finding reconnaissance mission discussed above in relation to Darius, which sits oddly alongside a picture of Athenian ignorance. This was backed up in 425 BC with another forty Athenian ships (4.2.2) and it seems clear that Athens harboured ambitions in the western Mediterranean which would use Sicily as a stepping stone to Carthage.

Plutarch's *Alcibiades* suggests that the Athenian *demos* was far from unified in its ignorance over the Sicilian expedition. Many were fascinated by the size and shape of the new land they might acquire. 'There were many who sat in the palaestras and seating areas tracing out in the sand the shape of the island [sc. Sicily] and the position of Libya and Carthage' (Plut. *Alc.* 17.3). Not everyone wished to remain in ignorance, and nor indeed does Thucydides claim that, importantly stating that 'most of the Athenians were unaware of the extent of the island' (6.1.1). What the Athenians were united over was their desire for the expedition to take place. Throughout ch. 17 of *Alcibiades* Plutarch stresses Alcibiades' view of Sicily as a mere stepping-stone to greater conquests, constantly casting the Athenian eye further afield.<sup>56</sup> 'Alcibiades was dreaming of Carthage and Libya, and, after winning these, of at once encompassing Italy and the Peloponnese' (17.3). That Carthage was a place of significant interest to Athens in the mid-420s BC is attested in Aristophanes' *Knights*, produced in 424 BC, the year after the extra forty ships had been sent to Sicily (Thuc. 4.2.2). The group of triremes referred to in the second chorus as 'gossiping' that they are opposed to Hyperbolus' plan to send one hundred of them to Carthage (1303) can be seen as alluding to the most extreme and irresponsible limit of Athenian imperial ambition.<sup>57</sup>

The apparent contradiction between active interest in westwards expansion and significant geographical ignorance on the part of the Athenians provokes the question as to whether Thucydides is deliberately exaggerating

<sup>55</sup> Powell (1988) 184, on Laches' expedition of 427 BC. Kagan (1991) 165 also notes the implausibility of Athenian ignorance of Sicily, given their recent dealings in the area. See also Golden (2015) 204.

<sup>56</sup> Plut. *Alc.* 17.2: 'Such were his hopes that he regarded Sicily as a mere beginning, and not, like the rest, as an end of the expedition'.

<sup>57</sup> Anderson (2003) offers an interesting discussion of this passage. See Rood (2017) 34 for Thucydides' view of the expedition against Carthage as another manifestation of Alcibiades' excessive ambition. Irwin (2014) 63–8 suggests that narrative parallels between Cambyses' Ethiopian campaign in Herodotus and Athens' ambitions beyond Sicily to Carthage at another edge of the earth encourage us to read a warning message in Thucydides for Athens' imperial ventures.

popular ignorance for historiographical effect.<sup>58</sup> Perhaps Thucydides uses the transition of the narrative to a new theatre of events to evoke a competitive display of geographical knowledge on the part of the historian,<sup>59</sup> correcting false information or replacing ignorance with knowledge in a self-consciously, even intertextually, ‘Herodotean’ way.<sup>60</sup>

Alternatively, despite both the Athenian *demos* and Thucydides himself knowing plenty in reality about Sicily, Thucydides’ emphasis here on ignorance can be seen as highlighting the undefined and unlimited nature of Athenian passion, or *eros*, for the grand expedition.<sup>61</sup> While Pericles’ model of defensive imperialism at the start of the Peloponnesian War had entailed his urging the Athenians in the Funeral Oration to ‘gaze at their city’s greatness every day and become her lovers (*erastai*)’ (2.43.1), by the time of the Sicilian expedition, the Athenians are turning their erotic or imperialistic gaze toward Sicily and are turning their backs on Athens, now transformed from a lover whose geography (as well as topography and monuments) they know very well to one whose geography they do not know well at all.

For Plutarch the catalyst for this redirected love affair was Alcibiades: ‘The man who at last fanned this desire of theirs into flame (*τὸν ἔρωτα τοῦτον ἀναφλέξας*) ... was Alcibiades’ (17.2), albeit this presupposes an innate Athenian lust for imperial expansion.<sup>62</sup> Hornblower stresses the language of sexual desire at 6.24.2, where ‘their passionate desire for the voyage (*τὸ μὲν ἐπιθυμοῦν τοῦ πλοῦ*), followed by another strong verb of desire when ‘they were more eager than ever’ (*πολὺ δὲ μᾶλλον ὄρμηγντο*), combines with the language of *ἔρωσ* and *πόθος* to powerful effect. While the use of *ἔρωσ ἐνέπεσε* at 6.24.3 (*καὶ ἔρωσ*

<sup>58</sup> Note the suggestion of Greenwood (2006) 52 that Thucydides’ claim concerning Athenian ignorance is designed to facilitate a contrast with his own superior insight. Thucydides (2.65), however, hints that lack of knowledge was not the core problem, since the expedition failed not because of insufficient reconnaissance, but because the troops were insufficiently supported.

<sup>59</sup> On this see Rood (2012b) 141. Also Hornblower (2008) *ad* 6.1.2, interpreting Thucydides’ subsequent description of Sicily as an indication of its unusual status in the narrative as a ‘new territory’, noting that no such geographical details are offered for other venues, such as Melos.

<sup>60</sup> The much-cited argument of Smith (2004), esp. 46, that Thucydides reinforces, rather than correcting, Athenian ignorance to allow the reader to share their epistemological state seems to me without strong foundation. A close parallel for Thucydides’ introduction of a lengthy digression as a corrective to Athenian ignorance is to be found at 6.54, where he relates the story of Harmodius and Aristogeiton in response to the Athenians ‘saying nothing accurate concerning their own tyrants and history’ (*περὶ τῶν σφετέρων τυράννων οὐδὲ περὶ τοῦ γενομένου ἀκριβὲς οὐδὲν λέγοντας*). In both cases, Athenian knowledge and judgement are about to lead to a fall.

<sup>61</sup> Nichols (2015) 121.

<sup>62</sup> See Christ (1994) 171 on Thuc. 6.13.1 and imperialism driven by lust.

ἐνέπεσε τοῖς πᾶσιν ὁμοίως ἐκπλεῦσαι: ‘a passionate desire to sail fell upon them all alike’) is, according to Hornblower, a widespread poetic expression, the description of the young as ‘yearning to see with their own eyes the marvels of a distant land’ (πόθῳ ὄψεως καὶ θεωρίας) evokes a more specifically Pindaric context of the Argonauts displaying *pothos* both for the *Argo* and for the voyage ahead of them.<sup>63</sup>

This epic and mythical resonance lends an air of unreality to the episode, which is in keeping with Thucydides’ presentation of an implausible lack of concern for relevant and up-to-date knowledge on the part of some Athenians. This expedition evokes the great voyages of the heroic age, with the attendant poignant irony that we all know how it will end. Rood has observed the ‘Odyssean mapping’ of Thucydides’ depiction of the Strait of Messina, which creates a sense of Sicily’s remoteness that will be reinforced by speakers in the narrative, and picks up Thucydides’ own earlier evocation of a mythical Sicily.<sup>64</sup> The appeal of the mythological past and the excitement it engenders drive the Athenians to disregard the harsh reality. In their passionate, ill-considered, ill-prepared desire to dive into the unknown, the eagerness of the *demos* for the grand expedition overrides their need to research and remember the difficulties and dangers.<sup>65</sup> But it is worth noting that, in addition to an Athenian predisposition to find the expedition attractive, the familiar ingredient of misleading enticement is also present. The Segestans are able to deceive the Athenian envoys, sent to verify the extent of available resources ahead of the expedition, with the result that the envoys report back to the assembly ‘things which were enticing and untrue’ (6.8.2: τὰ τε ἄλλα ἐπαγωγὰ καὶ οὐκ ἀληθῆ).<sup>66</sup> Furthermore, the Athenians themselves should perhaps have heeded the Odyssean parallels a little more closely, recalling that Odysseus’ encounter with the most ancient inhabitants of Sicily, the Cyclopes, was hardly without cost.<sup>67</sup> As will be explored below, Thucydides’ presentation of the

<sup>63</sup> Hornblower (2008) *ad* 6.24.2–3, citing P. *Pyth.* 4.184. Also Hornblower (2004) 334.

<sup>64</sup> Rood (2012b) 154–5. I owe to Chris Pelling the idea that the *Odyssey* promotes a model characterised by leaping into the unknown, paradoxically making ignorance central to this model of epic heroism. See Thuc. 6.2.1 for the identification of eastern Sicily as the home of the Cyclopes right at the start of his narrative of the Sicilian expedition, with Irwin (2014) 58.

<sup>65</sup> Powell (1988) 185 for Athenian ‘wishful thinking’; Kagan (1991) 164.

<sup>66</sup> The remote other-worldliness of the Athenians’ goal recalls Cambyses’ Ethiopian campaign as well as Homer’s *Odyssey*. See Irwin (2014) 58–60.

<sup>67</sup> A similar sense of foreboding is found in Thucydides’ reference to the Phaeacians as the ancestors of the Corcyraeans (1.25.4), who will soon ally themselves with the Athenians. If the clever and resourceful Athenians are indeed analogous to Odysseus, then the Corcyraeans should hope that they fare better in their dealings with the Athenians than their Homeric predecessors fared in their dealings with Odysseus (*Od.* 13.148–87).

Athenians as enticed by and caught up in the world of mythical adventure, which he has in a Herodotean-style gesture declared to be beyond the limits of his own knowledge,<sup>68</sup> opens up the possibility of resorting to precisely the religious and mythic tropes of explanation which he appears at first to eschew.<sup>69</sup>

The characterisation of the Athenians as almost blissful in their ignorance, positively keen to disregard or actively forget whatever relevant reconnaissance they may have conducted in the past lends weight to Greenwood's proposition that the Sicilian expedition rests on a subtly different vision from that of the Athenians as progressive but experienced players, as sketched out by the Corinthians in their speech at Sparta in Book 1 (1.71.3):<sup>70</sup>

For a city in a period of calm, unchanging customs are best (*ἡσυχάζουσα μὲν πόλει τὰ ἀκίνητα νόμιμα ἄριστα*), but where there is constant pressure on many fronts, a great deal of innovation is needed. On this basis, through their great experience (*ἀπὸ τῆς πολυπειρίας*), the Athenians have gone further on the path to innovation than you have.

Athens' reliance here on knowledge in the form of experience as the basis of its bold ventures is questioned at the start of Book 6, where *ἡ πολυπειρία* is replaced by their being *ἄπειροι*, recalling Hornblower's reading as not 'ignorant', but 'lacking experience'. Furthermore, the chronological relationship between Athenian innovation, experience, and knowledge is developed by Alcibiades later in Book 6 as one in which challenging new experiences are the basis of knowledge-gain, rather than new ventures being facilitated by knowledge acquired through prior experience (6.18.6–7):

<sup>68</sup> Thuc. 6.2.1 on the Sicilian land of the Cyclopes and Laestrygonians 'I cannot say what race they are from, or they came from or where they went; and must leave my readers to what the poets have said of them and to what each individual may generally find out concerning them.'

<sup>69</sup> Cornford (1907), esp. ch. XIII, 'The Tragic Passions', argues persuasively for a Thucydidean narrative that was in fact much more driven by religious and superstitious motifs than that of Herodotus, attributing to teleological approaches to history the assumption of a more rational Thucydides following after a superstitious forerunner.

<sup>70</sup> Greenwood (2006) 49. As Greenwood notes at 52, Thucydides' own comments endorse this view of Athens (and Sparta) being well-prepared and experienced at the start of the Peloponnesian War (1.18.3: *εὖ παρεσκευάσαντο τὰ πολέμια καὶ ἐμπειρότεροι ἐγένοντο*). The preparedness of Athens for any actions it undertakes is also stressed by Pericles in his Funeral Oration: at 2.40.2 he claims that 'instead of looking on rational discussion as an impediment to action, we think that the real impediment is for learning not to have taken place through discussion before we embark on what we need to do'.

The city, if it is in a state of calm (ἐὰν μὲν ἡσυχάζῃ), will wear itself out ... and its knowledge of everything will become old (πάντων τὴν ἐπιστήμην ἐγγηράσασθαι), but if it keeps taking on new struggles, it will acquire more experience (προσλήψεσθαι τε τὴν ἐμπειρίαν). All in all, I recognise that a city, which is not inherently inactive, will most rapidly destroy itself by suddenly switching to inactivity.

For a city like Athens, which is not naturally ‘in a state of calm’, bold new ventures into untested territory are the way to keep its ideas and knowledge-base fresh. Alcibiades’ logic here clearly chimes with Thucydides’ own presentation of the young Athenians in Book 6 as full of desire to explore beyond their own experience and the collective experience of the city.

In many respects the Corinthian picture of the Athenians at 1.70.2–5 as always innovating, quick to form resolutions and carry them out, willing to take risks against their better judgement, always abroad, and believing that the further they go the more they will achieve, sits well with the Athenians as depicted in Book 6. But the Corinthian character sketch of the Athenians in 1.71.3 does not quite perfectly match their thinking and behaviour by the time of the Sicilian expedition. The world of Periclean *pronoia* and good planning no longer pertains.<sup>71</sup> As Greenwood notes, Athenian inexperience was a prerequisite for the Sicilian expedition. Had they shared Thucydides’ knowledge, they would never have embarked upon it.<sup>72</sup> Although there are reminiscences here of Herodotus’ historiographical stance of superior geographical knowledge over players within his narrative, one interesting difference is that, while Herodotus’ characters frequently seek to replace ignorance with knowledge, Thucydides’ Athenians seem to enjoy the freedom to act that their blissful ignorance or deliberate forgetting of the truth affords. The figure of Alcibiades encapsulates the possibility that acting with ill-informed vision might for some players and audiences actually be preferable to acting with precise geographical knowledge, transcending dry detail and Nicias’ caution with an almost Alexander-like *pothos* for the exciting unknown and further exemplifying the idea that geographical knowledge might not always offer the uncomplicated benefit that we assume.<sup>73</sup>

Whereas the rhetoric aimed by Aristagoras of Miletus at Herodotus’ Spartans (5.49–51) is focused on telescoping geographical space downwards in order to minimise risks, dangers, and distances, the adventurous Athenians are

<sup>71</sup> Note also the apparently random success for Athens in the episode at Pylos and Sphacteria where, somehow, Cleon’s ‘mad’ (μανιώδης) promise to bring back the Spartan prisoners within twenty days is fulfilled, the most unexpected (παρὰ γνώμην τε δὴ μάλιστα) event in the war as far as the Greeks were concerned (Thuc. 4.39.3–40.1).

<sup>72</sup> Greenwood (2006) 52.

<sup>73</sup> With very topical relevance for British political life at the time of writing.



appealed to by a stretching of distance so as to create a sense of excitement and exoticism, much more like Aristagoras' appeal to the Persian Artaphernes (5.31).<sup>74</sup> Thucydides' description of the departure of the Athenians focuses not only on the scale of the forces, but also on the scale of the distance, claiming at 6.31.6 that the expedition was undertaking 'the greatest voyage from home up to this point'. The desire of the young 'to see with their own eyes the marvels of a distant land' (6.24.3) was to be amply fulfilled. Fear of the unknown, deriving from geographical ignorance or more accurately 'inexperience' (οὐτε τῶν χώρων ἐοῦσι ἐμπείροισι) which Herodotus claims resulted in a no-man's land between Samos and Delos (8.132.3, discussed above), is replaced by an appetite for the unknown, deriving from precisely the same ignorance and inexperience. The exaggerated geographical distance could equally well be turned to the opposite rhetorical effect. Nicias' attempts to apply a cautionary note stresses the risks in sailing 'far from our own land' (6.21.2) and 'to another land entirely'. From the opposite viewpoint but to the same effect, Hermocrates and Athenagoras use the theme of Athens' distance from Sicily in their quite different persuasive speeches to the Syracusans. At 6.33.5, Hermocrates notes that 'few great expeditions, Greek or barbarian, have gone far from home and been successful', implicitly stretching out the distance between Athens and Sicily to be equivalent to the vast gap between Susa and Athens. In fact, although Hermocrates and Athenagoras offer opposing arguments, with the former urging the Syracusans to take the reports of the Athenian expedition with the greatest seriousness and to pre-empt the Athenian attack on Sicily by intercepting them off the coast of Italy, and the latter laughing off the idea that Athens would come so far with a sizeable expedition, nevertheless both employ the rhetoric of exaggerated geographical distance.

Hermocrates' allusion to the Persian expeditions against Greece draws into sharper focus some parallels already observed. The lustful passion of the Athenian *demos* for the Sicilian campaign strongly evokes the language of passionate desire which Herodotus uses of the Persians in his narrative of their successive expeditions.<sup>75</sup> The superior geographical knowledge of the author, and indeed of some players in the narrative, again echoes similar epistemological hierarchies in the text of Herodotus. A further parallel is the theme of the subverted epic *nostos*, which characterises both Herodotus'

<sup>74</sup> Golden (2015) 204–7.

<sup>75</sup> See Clarke (2018) 228–37; Rood (1999) 154 for the language of ἐπιθυμία applied in warning terms by Nicias to the Athenians of their ambitions, and more generally for echoes of Herodotus' Persian imperialists in Thucydides' Athenians in relation to Sicily. Again, Cornford (1907) had anticipated many of these more recent studies in his chapter on 'Eros Tyrannus', observing, for example, strong parallels between Nicias and Artabanus, Alcibiades and Mardonius (201).

Persian expedition and Thucydides' presentation of the Athenian retreat from Sicily. The epic grandeur, which buoys up the launch of both expeditions, translates catastrophically into a dismal homecoming.<sup>76</sup> Thucydides' exceptionally detailed account of the Athenians in retreat across Sicily, with roads, rivers, towns, and ridges individually named to draw the reader into the scene, enhances the sympathy felt for the defeated.<sup>77</sup> The constant wrong-footing of the Athenians by the native Syracusans is reminiscent of the intended wrong-footing of the retreating Persians under Darius by the Scythians, which is in reality undermined by the Scythians' proving to be worse way-finders than the Persians. Where the Scythians fail, the Syracusans succeed in using their superior geographical knowledge and turning it against the ignorance of their pursuers. The scenario in Herodotus which more closely matches that of the Athenians in flight from Syracuse is the flight of Xerxes and his men across the Aegean in an anti-epic *nostos* to Asia, beset by every deprivation.<sup>78</sup> The Athenians with their passion for adventure, their wishful thinking which makes them prone to deceptive geographical manipulation and resistant to the truth, resemble Xerxes more closely than Darius, the archetypal reconnaissance man.

Analysis of the text of Herodotus already undermines the assumption that geographical knowledge is power, or that it always and uncomplicatedly brings the benefits we might expect. The successes of Darius and of Cambyses in the first instances may be put down to careful fact-finding and the latter's failures to the South of Egypt are causally connected to the abandonment of knowledge in favour of ignorant passion. The Scythians, however, are more successfully defeated by Sesostris with his poorly researched and chaotic campaign than by Darius' Persians to whom they had lost their knowledge-advantage. Aristagoras in turn knows too much and makes the mistake of sharing this knowledge with prospective allies for whom ignorance would have proved more persuasive. Here, the rhetorical appeal of implausible exaggeration over truth prefigures some of the themes in Thucydides' narrative of the Sicilian expedition.

In this light, the puzzlement among scholars as to why the Athenians are described as unacquainted with Sicily seems unwarranted, based perhaps on an elevated expectation of rationality in the Thucydidean narrative, while in fact Thucydides employs a wide range of causal strands to explain Athenian failure, including such 'irrational' devices as tragic archetypes. The decision to

<sup>76</sup> See Rood (2017) for the effects of Thucydides' echoes of the Persian defeat at Athenian hands in the context of Athens' own demise.

<sup>77</sup> See Golden (2015) 207; also Rood (2012b) 146 for the replacement here of the present tense by a proliferation of imperfect forms, which he sees designed to maintain the temporal perspective of the characters.

<sup>78</sup> Clarke (2018) 63–4.

accept a daring venture, albeit on the basis of imperfect knowledge, places the Athenians within a well-established if ill-omened tradition.<sup>79</sup> In any case, as noted above, not everyone shared this lack of concern over information; some Athenians *did* display a fascination with the prospect of the new land they might acquire. The multi-vocality of democratic knowledge, with its differing levels and quality of information, might have compromised the capacity for informed decision-making.<sup>80</sup> The appetite of the people at large for an exciting expedition overrode their need to know what it involved. As Greenwood observes, the Athenian *demos* looked to the future with hope and desire rather than with foresight and hindsight: ‘The Sicilian expedition is a geographical, spatial example of their temporal, historical short-sightedness’.<sup>81</sup> But this seems not so much a function of the dispersed and cacophonous democracy as a consequence of a quite different aspect of Athenian politics in the late fifth-century, namely its much-discussed resemblance to a despotic tyranny. Comparison with Herodotus suggests not a contrast in the appetite for geographical knowledge between Persian despots and the Athenian *demos*, but rather a close alignment between the two, with fact-finding inclinations on the part of both ultimately overwhelmed by the greater force of ill-informed and blissfully ignorant passion, whether this be expressed as *thumos* or *eros*.<sup>82</sup>

To a degree, this simply describes yet another manifestation of the tyrannical nature of Athenian democracy, already growing so like Persia, its recent adversary. The final and grandest Persian bid for empire, that of Xerxes, with his propensity to believe distorted geographical knowledge in order to satisfy his lust for expansion, appears to prefigure a tragic plotline that applies to the Athenians as well.<sup>83</sup> The theme of *hybris* punished, which has been so fully explored in relation to Herodotus’ Persians,<sup>84</sup> may also be implied in Thucydides if Athens can be seen as culpable for informed but overweening

<sup>79</sup> Note, however, the contrast between urgent situations (Pagondas’ Boeotians attacking the Athenians with no time for fact-finding) and more leisurely situations (like the Sicilian expedition), in which, according to Pagondas, forethought (*τὸ προμηθές*) is feasible and desirable (4.92.2).

<sup>80</sup> On the limits and possibilities for knowledge and ignorance within the Athenian democracy, see Ober (2008), referring to the Sicilian expedition at 120. See also Smith (2004), who notes Thucydides’ stress on the multiplicity of voices offering accounts of Sicily, which render impossible reliably informed decision-making by the *demos*.

<sup>81</sup> Greenwood (2006) 51.

<sup>82</sup> See Thuc. 6.15.4 for the popular view of Alcibiades as ‘desirous of tyranny’ (*ὡς τυραννίδος ἐπιθυμοῦντι*), the epitome of the Persian despot.

<sup>83</sup> Raaflaub (2002a) highlights some thought-provoking parallels between the expedition against Sicily and that undertaken by Xerxes against Greece.

<sup>84</sup> Immerwahr (1964) 44, 293; Romm (1998) 80, 84–5; Gianotti (1996) 161, 164; Clarke (2018) 293–7.

confidence, reinforced by the juxtaposition of the brutal Melian episode with the catastrophically over-optimistic expedition to Sicily and its superlative defeat.<sup>85</sup> But here too, there are suggestive differences. The deceptive Persian re-scaling of expeditions to minimise the risks and difficulties is reversed in the case of Athens, so that a relatively small distance is expanded in the rhetoric and minds of the listeners. The tragedy of Athens' failure on an expedition which is far smaller and, perhaps, less ambitious is thus enhanced.

More tantalisingly still, Athens' wilful and reckless failure to become properly informed about the island they were attempting to conquer, at least in Thucydides' presentation, may be interpreted as something other than despotic *hybris* derived from excessive success. One explanation for Thucydides' insistence on the ignorance of the Athenians, in spite of evidence to the contrary, is that he seeks to question their full culpability for their disastrous actions. It is noteworthy that the same verb (*πίπτω*) and its compounds are used at key moments in Thucydides' narrative in relation to disasters which plummet out of thin air. At 2.48.2, Thucydides describes how the plague suddenly 'fell upon' the city of Athens (*ἐς δὲ τὴν Ἀθηναίων πόλιν ἑξαπιναίως ἐσέπεσε*);<sup>86</sup> at 3.82.2, many terrible events 'fell upon' the Greek cities through internal strife (*ἐπέπεσε πολλὰ καὶ χαλεπὰ κατὰ στάσιν ταῖς πόλεσι*); and here, at 6.24.3, a passionate desire to set sail 'fell upon' them [sc. the Athenians] all likewise (*ἔρως ἐνέπεσε τοῖς πᾶσιν ὁμοίως*). The three episodes are linked in a chain not only through this specific verbal echo. The actual plague of 2.48.2 becomes the metaphorical pathology of the state in the description of *stasis* at 3.82–4. And in a striking juxtaposition, Thucydides' rounding off the civil strife in Corcyra as a display of their 'passions' (*ὄργαι*) at 3.85.1 is followed in the very next chapter by his foreshadowing, through reference to the reconnaissance mission of 427 BC, of the Sicilian expedition, in which yet again a terrible event realised through passion (*ἔρως*) will strike from above (3.86.4). This sequence of verbal and thematic repetitions encourages the reader to interpret Athenian disinterest in gaining the relevant geographical knowledge not only as a manifestation of its status as a 'tyrant *polis*' that aligns it with despotic states such as Persia.<sup>87</sup> It suggests also that there might be something more

<sup>85</sup> Nichols (2015) 121. Rood (2012b) 153–4 links Melos and Sicily as both subject to an imperialistic definition of islands.

<sup>86</sup> The verb is repeated in the same chapter (2.48.3: *εἴ ποτε καὶ αὐθις ἐπιπέσοι*). See Rood (2012b) 159 for parallels between the defeat and suffering of the Athenians following the Sicilian expedition and their sufferings from the plague. For Rood, the destructive force of the plague 'reveals how much is lost in the totalizing perspective of Pericles' rhetoric of space'. Cornford (1907) 229 sees *eros* and other such 'tragic passions' as 'invading daemons' retaining the military metaphor of Thucydides.

<sup>87</sup> For this notion, see Raaflaub (1979). See Irwin (2014) 68–70, for parallels between the *orgē* of a tyrannical ruler such as Cambyses and the behaviour of the *tyrannos polis*. The

inescapable about the forces which govern Athens, constantly leading them into disaster. Thucydides' studied refusal to acknowledge a divine machinery directing the affairs of man seems here to be in tension with the implications of his narrative.

Cornford's use of the language of disease to describe the state of Athens overcome by *eros*, describing Nicias' advice as falling on deaf ears 'for the thought of the city was sick and it was vain to call for a physician',<sup>88</sup> hints at a continuation of the metaphor of the pathology of the state beyond Corcyra's *stasis* and on into the third instance of 'incursion' by a hostile force, which the Athenians simply cannot resist. However much common ground may exist between the intellectual backdrop and political thinking of Herodotus and Thucydides,<sup>89</sup> the theme of geographical ignorance in this Thucydidean context is suggestive of a different formulation of tragic history: not one dominated by the *hybris* of individual despots, whose vanity projects encourage the distortion of geographical truth, but rather one of a *demos* which, alongside its own structural weakness, is repeatedly struck by catastrophes beyond its control. Thucydides exaggerates the lack of proper geographical fact-finding in order to propose that the Athenians' minds had already been taken over by the *eros* for adventure, which could attack just as did natural phenomena, such as the plague, and man-made ones such as *stasis*, offering a particularly Thucydidean twist to a Herodotean tragic *topos*.

Other motifs, however, make it difficult to resolve the question of culpability and whether the Athenians are really any less responsible for their fall than Herodotus' Persians had been. However much the Athenians may be in the grip of something beyond their control, divinely driven urges offer little exculpation to the characters of tragedy, and ignorance constitutes no defence. The frequent use of tragic passions by the gods as agents of punishment implies that the affliction of the Athenians by *eros* must be in response to some transgression or omission, whether or not they were aware of it.

One last twist reinforces the refusal of Thucydides' ignorant Athenians to succumb to a single explanatory framework. If we return to Plutarch's depiction of Alcibiades' debauched and luxurious lifestyle, yet another possibility opens up in terms of causal strands (*Alc.* 16.1–2):

He had a golden shield made for himself, bearing no ancestral motif, but Eros armed with a thunderbolt (*Ἔρωτα κεραυνοφόρον*). The distinguished men of the city looked on all these things with loathing

association of the tyrannical power with *eros* is found in Plat. *Rep.* 573, discussed by Cornford (1907) 207–8. As Cornford notes at 209, 'the association of Eros with "tyranny" gives a fresh meaning to Thucydides' references to Athens as the tyrant city'.

<sup>88</sup> Cornford (1907) 205.

<sup>89</sup> Raaflaub (2002b); Clarke (2018) 311–12, 315.

and anger, and feared his contemptuous spirit and disregard for law. They thought such behaviour as his tyrannical and beyond normal parameters.

Far from being swooped down on, with or without justification, by an ineluctable force which overrides the rational wish to become properly informed in advance of such a major undertaking as the expedition to Sicily, on this reading the Athenians are seduced by a leader who knowingly and deliberately adopts as his motif the enticing, but dangerous and destructive, force of *Eros*, actively inviting its tyranny right into the heart of the tyrant-*polis* itself.

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