

Inference & Expectation in Thuc. 5.6-10
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Thucydides' portrayal of the "Second Battle of Amphipolis" (422 BC) distinctly focuses on the perspectives and agency of Cleon and Brasidas. Focalization and intratextual references reveal how much the two generals know about each other, how other individuals characterize them, and how this episode compares with the "First Battle of Amphipolis" (424 BC) or the Athenian success at Pylos (425 BC). This paper will discuss how Thuc. 5.6–10 attributes numerous inferences and expectations to both Brasidas and Cleon as a vital means of revealing their contrasting demeanor and military competency.

Much in this episode is affected, for example, by the striking claims that Thucydides attributes to Cleon's own soldiers regarding their general and his opponent. The soldiers state, in effect, that they fear both Cleon's ineptitude and Brasidas' expertise; and they maintain further that Cleon is cowardly while Brasidas is daring. These comments appear in the second chapter of this five-chapter episode; they appear early and they residually affect the reader's attitude toward Brasidas and Cleon to the extent that even a rather neutral description of one or the other bears ill for Cleon and speaks well of Brasidas. What's more, when Cleon attempts to appease these dissatisfied soldiers, he actually leads them into Brasidas' trap.

Each attribution of motive exposes Cleon's naiveté, while underscoring Brasidas' careful tactics; and such is generally consistent with earlier depictions of these two men. But the effect here cannot simply be to further undermine Cleon by asserting his personal responsibility for this Athenian loss, or to further praise Brasidas for saving Amphipolis and winning over the Amphipolitans to the Spartan cause. Indeed, not only do both men die in this conflict, but Thucydides explicitly attributes the ensuing peace to the very absence of both. Rather, more important than the individuals themselves is the effectiveness of their judgment; and more profound echoes of this portrayal of Athenian carelessness and Spartan caution exist in other episodes, such as the Sicilian expedition (415–413 BC), or even the Battle of Aegispotami (405 BC; though not reached in Thucydides' account). In other words, while the warmongering attitudes of both Cleon and Brasidas may have been anomalous at the end of the Archidamian War, critical Athenian mistakes in judgment (like Cleon's) and cautious, yet aggressive maneuvering (like Brasidas') do resurface.