

Thucydides “Mythbuster” and the Athenian Empire

It is well known that, unlike Herodotus, Thucydides avoids explanations of events which involve the divine and typically focuses on contemporary events, in accord with his emphasis on being able to verify the accuracy of his account from witnesses. Where he does use material that we would distinguish as mythical, rather than historical, he typically reworks it so that it resembles a historical, or at least historically plausible account: 1.9; cf. 2.29.3; 4.24.5, 6.2.1. This tendency has particular importance for two stories in the *Archaeology* which are mythical, not only in the traditional sense, but also in the sense of being stories that especially dear to the Athenians of the empire. The myth of Theseus and the Minotaur was central to the collective Athenian self-image, because it could be told in such a way as to portray Theseus, the representative of the Athenians, as the liberator of the Greek world from oppression: by killing the Minotaur, he ended the cruel and tyrannical control of king Minos over Athens and the Aegean. This ancient story is in many ways the model for many stories of later origin about Athens that are continually retold in funeral speeches and other sources, in which Athenians demonstrate their power in the service of doing good and help liberate others from oppression. Thucydides mentions both Minos (1.8.2-3) and Theseus (2.15.2) but separates them from one another, and while Theseus gets credit for the synoikism of Athens and for a mix of intelligence and power, Minos is made a historical king and head of a colonizing sea-power who expelled evil-doers. In Athenian imperial rhetoric about Athens, Athenians feature both as colonizers and as doughty fighters against evil-doers (e.g. *E. Supp.* 575), but Thucydides gives these attributes instead to their traditional oppressor Minos.

This reworking of Athenian stories is even more marked in another Thucydidean version of a popular Athenian belief. It was commonly believed that the Athenians, unlike the Spartans

and others, were autochthonous, having always inhabited the same land. As with the Theseus myth, this myth has a strongly ideological significance in the empire: the innate virtue and justice of Athenians is such that they never had to drive anyone out of their land to take possession of it (e.g. Lys. 2.17-18). Thucydides does not disagree with the autochthonous nature of Athens, noting (1.2.5-6) that in early times, Attica uniquely did not change its inhabitants (cf. 2.36.1.) However, for him, the reason has nothing to do with morality and everything to do with the poor soil in Attica that was unattractive to anyone else, and again he removes every bit of the strong moral overlay of the early Athenian historical narratives which can be found in funeral speeches and tragedy.

Thus this paper will argue that Thucydides' accounts of these two early stories are deliberately skeptical retellings of the Athenian tradition about Athens, in line with his avowed concern to educate men whom he considers woefully ignorant of the truth (e.g. 1.20.1-2). Thucydides' contempt for the kinds of irrational behavior that he considers "typical" of the demos (2.65.4; 8.1.1, 4; cf. 8.97.3) is notable: such statements may suggest that he is equally contemptuous of what one might assume is mainstream democratic opinion, and therefore mainstream conceptions about the Athenian empire. If so, such tendencies have implications for the history as a whole, and especially for the troubling treatment of the Athenian empire in his speeches. If Thucydides came to his work with the aim of questioning the beliefs of what he saw as a complacent Athenian people, fed by the flattering images of Athens in the "official" images of Athens set forth in word and picture all over the city, then the images in the speeches of Athens as tyrant, or of the fear and self-interest that some of his speakers claim are the motivations for the retention of the empire, may be interpreted through his "mythbusting" agenda.

Bibliography

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