

Panhellenic Plataea: Plataea as a Symbol of Greek Unity and Freedom in Thucydides

This paper analyzes the portrayal of Plataea's downfall in the second and third books of Thucydides' history and proposes that Plataea, as the site of the Greek victory over Persia, serves as a symbol of freedom, which marks the degradation that the Peloponnesian War brings to the poleis of Greece after its destruction.

Thucydides' history has been thoroughly studied, and much ink has been spilled on the role of Plataea in the early books of the work. Marc Cogan (1981), E. Badian (1993), and Mark Munn (2002), among others, have written on this topic, and Plataea in the context of Athens' freedom has been studied by Mary P. Nichols (2015), but Thucydides' use of Plataea as a symbol, particularly within the narrative of the third book, has not received the same amount of focus. I shall make the argument for Plataea as a panhellenic symbol within Thucydides' narrative, and how its destruction heralds the turning point for Greece in this war.

In Thucydides' narrative, Plataea occupies a position as a symbol of unity for the Greeks. Drawn together to fend off the Persians in the Greco-Persian War – albeit not without squabbling over rank, as described by Herodotus – the Greeks won a resounding victory over their foe at Plataea (Hdt. 9.26, 9.28-31). In the moment of victory, the Greeks had more or less come together, especially Athens and Sparta, and Plataea therefore gained this panhellenic status, which pervades Thucydides' account. The origin of the Peloponnesian War's outbreak, Plataea quickly becomes a point of contention (Thuc. 2.2). When Sparta marches to besiege Plataea, the Plataeans attempt to dissuade them by reminding the Spartans of the polis' protected status, put into place by their own former king. Thucydides employs the voice of the Plataeans to raise the matter of the polis' symbolic status of Greek freedom. This point is acknowledged by Sparta, but

then rebutted with the ultimatum that in order to maintain her protected status, Plataea must either join them or be neutral (Thuc. 2.71-72). Plataea is unable to do either, as an ally of Athens.

The surrender of Plataea to Sparta in book three brings forth the symbolism of this polis once more as the Plataeans protest the so-called trial that Sparta brings against them. In the speech given, they once again mention their past fighting for the good of Greece and beg Sparta to levy fair judgement and not to favor Thebes (Thuc. 3.52-59; Hornblower 1991, 445).

However, Sparta does not regard these pleas and carries out the destruction of Plataea, vainly attempting to take over the symbol of panhellenic freedom for her own purposes (Thuc. 3.68). Plataea, as a symbol of freedom, now belongs to Sparta and her quest to supposedly liberate Greece from the Athenians. However, the resulting destruction of Plataea makes Sparta's claim ring hollow – they destroyed the panhellenic symbol.

In addition, the placement of the destruction of Plataea, between Mytilene and Corcyra, also adds to its symbolic status. The Athenians' change of heart concerning Mytilene shows the "good of the state" argument utilized in a harsh but arguably just way, not condemning an entire population but only those deemed guilty (Thuc. 3.48). Whereas at Plataea, that argument is employed in a perverted way against a surrendered polis. After the destruction of Plataea, Thucydides' symbol of freedom, the *stasis* of Corcyra follows – and it is here that Thucydides expounds on the destructive nature such *stasis* has across Greece, dividing poleis and families (Thuc. 3.81-82). With the symbol of Greek freedom destroyed, Greece is laid wide open to such widespread internal division.

Ultimately, this paper attempts to demonstrate the symbolic nature of Plataea within Thucydides' narrative, focusing on its role in books two and three of the history. I propose that

Plataea serves as a symbol of Greek unity and freedom, and that its destruction foreshadows disaster across Greece.

Works Cited

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