

J. C. Geissmann

The Occasion of Perikles' Epitaphios in 431/0 BCE (Thuc. 2.14-21)

Let us assume that Perikles gave the *epitaphios* of 431/0 and that at least some of his words and ideas formed the basis for Thucydides' reconstruction. Why would Perikles give *this* speech to *this* audience on *this* occasion? Scholars have rightly considered the speech an expression of ideals rather than a realistic portrait, and they stress the terrible, perhaps permanent, damage caused by the plague, against which piety and altruism were useless. But emphasis on the grim sequel has entailed a mostly literary or thematic explanation of the *preceding* context: 'this is the last occasion on which [the epitaphios] could have been delivered, since it portrays the Athens of the 430s at the height of its wealth, power and confidence' (Rusten, *Book II*, 19). True enough, but a close reading of Thucydides shows that the tenor of Perikles' address was specifically occasioned by the recent sufferings of the Athenian audience.

Perikles had persuaded the country people of Attica to take refuge in the city, leaving their farms to be raided by Archidamos: while each Peloponnesian incursion lasted, those citizens were cut off from their ancestral homes, graves, and shrines: refugees in their own territory. 'After they underwent unification (*xynôikisthêsan*),' Thucydides writes (2.16.1 Lattimore), 'most of them nevertheless, not only in antiquity but in later times up to this war, following custom, lived and dwelt in the countryside with their entire households and did not find it easy to move their homes (*ou rhaidiôs tas metanastaseis epoionto*).' Thucydides' language makes clear that his brief retelling of Theseus' unification (*synoikismos*) of Attica (2.15.1&endash;2) is not a digression but a timely reminder, for the Athenians took pride in their (supposedly unique) social stability and cohesion, a happy result of their long peaceable residence on the same land (1.2.5), and this cherished tradition was now being violated. In precivilized Hellas, *metanastaseis* were a frequent necessity, as small, vulnerable communities were evicted by neighbors who outnumbered them (1.2.1); these ancient people were apparently not nomads, for whom migration would have been part of their natural economy, but they decamped readily (*rhaidiôs*) when forced to it. Much worse for the Athenians who accepted Perikles' defensive strategy, for they had to uproot a long-stable way of life.

'When they arrived in Athens, a few had houses or places of shelter with some of their friends or relatives, but most occupied the uninhabited parts of the city and the sanctuaries and the shrines of heroes, except for the acropolis, the Eleusinion, and any other place firmly closed up' (2.17.1). We must imagine, then, some thousands of people squatting in plots of ground normally unused or off-limits, with the attendant problems of water and sanitation. When the news came in that Archidamos had occupied Acharnai (2.21.1&endash;2), the young men in particular were infuriated by Perikles' refusal to lead them out against the invader (2.21.3) and blamed him for all their hardships (*aition te sphin enomizon pantôn hôn epaschon*). Now state funerals for the war dead took place in winter (2.34.1), when the Peloponnesians had gone home; but we do not know how many farmhouses remained habitable: the owners had removed the woodwork (furniture, door-frames, &c. 2.14.1) and would not be eager to reinstall it if the invaders were coming back. So it seems likely that many, if not most, of the displaced people were

living in their squatters' huts when the funeral rites came round in 431/0, and these internal refugees will have constituted a significant portion of Perikles' audience.

To my knowledge, Marc Cogan (*The Human Thing* 41) is alone among scholars in seeing the *epitaphios* as Perikles' response to the ordeal of the displaced Athenians, which, unlike the battle deaths, was felt to be unnatural and demoralizing. In this context, his praise of the country families (2.36.1) is more than patriotic boilerplate: it implies respect to those who have been deprived of their homes in service to Athens. Similarly, the tribute to Athenians' traditional tolerance of their neighbors' quirks (2.37.2) sounds like an indirect appeal to make the best of crowded conditions. Even before the plague, this harsh experience will have affected the people's morale and capacity for political judgment. Hence Perikles' call to take pride in the city's greatness and revere those who have given their lives to maintain it.