Classical Quarterly **46** (i) 103-113 (1996) *Printed in Great Britain*

HOMER AND THUCYDIDES: CORCYRA AND SICILY

This article is concerned with reminiscences of Homer in Thucydides' *History*. The principal aim is to raise questions as to what extent Thucydides' account of the Sicilian venture is a conscious response to some Homeric journey narratives. Such questions are worth asking because Thucydides refers to the (mythical/Odyssean) Cyclopes and Laestrygonians at the beginning of his story (6.2). It will be argued that this reference is intended not solely for the sake of mythical history, but to broaden the context in which Athenian actions can be seen. As well as this direct mythical allusion there are other Homeric reminiscences, including topographical features, that help to convey the notion that the expedition to Sicily is a kind of heroic quest into the unknown that goes disastrously wrong. It is a venture of epic proportions with heroic aspirations, but one whose consequences have a grim and immediate reality. In the light of these Homeric associations, it is argued that the expedition to Sicily is to be seen both in its recent historical context (the Persians) and in its mythological (Homeric) context.[1] The Athenians not only fail to learn the lessons of their most glorious military moments, but they also make the mistake of treading on the same disastrous path as Homer's Odysseus.

But before turning to a discussion of the Sicilian expedition itself, and to specific Homeric narratives, a brief comment on some references to Corcyra in earlier books of the *History*. These references are relevant to the following discussion because Corcyra, like Sicily, is given a mythical history in Thucydides, one which has a direct bearing on some of the wartime narratives. Moreover, the island functions as a base for the Athenians on their voyage to Sicily (6.32 and 6.42), in which context the references to its mythical past are very significant. Homeric language and allusion play their part in the initial description of the dispute with Corinth over Epidamnus (1.24ff.).[2] In this account the hostility between Corinth and Corcyra is linked to the latter's estimation of her own financial and military resources (1.25.3-4). Corcyra considers herself to have formidable military resources, greater even than Corinth. Her self-confidence in her naval power is then linked to a further claim that the island was formerly occupied by the Phaeacians, whose 'renown (κλέος) was in their ships' (1.25.4). Such a claim is obviously meant to enhance their status as a sea power: seamanship, as it were, is in their blood, and is part of their mythical history. Thus the Corcyreans can argue for a share of the κλέος earned by their mythical ancestors the Phaeacians, and add it to their own.[3]

[1] On references to the Persians in the context of the Sicilian campaign, cf. 6.33.5-6; 6.76.3-4; 6.82-3 (cf. 1.72ff.); 7.21.3. W. R. Connor, *Thucydides* (Princeton, 1984), pp. 158-68, refers to the 'mythic pattern' of the expedition, especially the notion of the *nostos* that goes disastrously wrong. The Melian dialogue is an important part of this pattern.

[2] Indeed the Corcyra episode (1.24-55) has a 'Homeric' opening (Ἐπίδαμνός ἐστι πόλις 1.24.1): for a discussion of the relevance of such an opening, see S. Hornblower, *A Commentary on Thucydides Volume I, Books I-III* (Oxford, 1991), *ad* 1.24.1 (with further references). Hornblower's point that 'Thucydides' own personal education ... surely included a grounding in the great epic poems' is a fundamental one that finds considerable support in this article.

[3] The poetic κλέος clearly reinforces the Homeric connection. On the equation Corcyra/Scheria see J. G. Howie, 'The Phaeacians in the *Odyssey*: Fable and Territorial Claim', *Shadow* 6 (1989), 25ff.

The equation of Corcyra with Homeric Scheria may have been widely held in antiquity, but this does not entirely explain the part it plays in the text. The reference is a significant one because it points us in the direction of Homer and encourages us, consciously or unconsciously, to make comparisons between Homer's Phaeacians and Thucydides' Corcyreans. Folktale references like this are few and far between in the *History*, and their inclusion, as we shall see, tends to be directly linked to the narrative. Homer's Phaeacians are characterized by their seamanship (*Φαίηκες ναυσικλυτοὶ*, *Od.* 7.39), their conveyance of stranded wayfarers (esp. *Od.* 7.315ff.), and the idealized 'earthly paradise' in which they live.[4] They are lovers of peace and even move home to avoid the violent excesses of the Cyclopes (*Od.* 6.1ff.). Theirs is a kind of model society, a final temptation for Odysseus on his long journey home.

The theme of conveying stranded foreigners finds its way into the *History* too. In an excursus that also deals with the fate of the Spartan Pausanias (1.128–38), Thucydides describes the Corcyrean part in conveying the fugitive 'hero' Themistocles to the mainland. His account tells of Themistocles' flight from Argos to Corcyra to avoid arrest on charges of treasonable dealings with Persia (1.135–6). The Corcyreans, who are anxious to avoid making enemies both of Athens and Sparta, take him to the mainland opposite. He then gets succour from Admetus, king of the Molossi, before heading for Ionia and the king of Persia. The whole excursus on the fates of Pausanias and Themistocles (1.128–38) has some special features to it, and has been the subject of scholarly debate as to whether earlier written sources may have influenced its composition.[5] Westlake comes to the conclusion (p. 106), on the basis of linguistic factors, that if Thucydides did borrow from a written predecessor it was almost certainly written in Ionic. It is not my intention to add to the debate other than to suggest simply that the Corcyra/Scheria parallel (1.25.4) should quite naturally be extended to embrace the conveyance of Themistocles and Odysseus. The Thucydidean Themistocles is a very 'Odyssean' figure, a notably wily and clever character, both in his Athenian political career (cf. 1.89.3–93.2),[6] and in his flight from the law. Above all he is a shrewd survivor and adventurer, a solitary wayfarer whose travels take him far and wide. In the light of all this it would seem reasonable to include Homer's *Odyssey* as a poetic influence on the composition of the excursus, quite apart from any historical 'sources' that Thucydides may have used.

The equation of Corcyra with Homer's Scheria is also alluded to in the early part of Thucydides' discussion of the *stasis* on the island. We learn that the former prisoners of the Corinthians brought charges against Peithias, the leader of the democratic party (3.70.3). After he was acquitted Peithias brought counter-charges against five of his opponents that they regularly cut poles for vines in precincts sacred to Zeus and Alcinous (3.70.4). The reference to Alcinous, the Homeric king of the Phaeacians, confirms 1.25.4 (*κατὰ τὴν Φαιάκων προενοίκησιν... κλέος ἐχόντων τὰ περὶ τὰς ναῦς*), and precedes some very nasty happenings on the island. The five men are condemned but eventually join with their allies and kill their accuser and sixty others. The civil strife at Corcyra which follows these actions ends with the virtual

[4] See J. B. Hainsworth's introduction to *Odyssey* 6 in Heubeck, West, Hainsworth, *A Commentary on Homer's Odyssey Volume I, Books I–VIII* (Oxford, 1988), pp. 289–92.

[5] See H. D. Westlake, 'Thucydides on Pausanias and Themistocles—A Written Source?', *CQ* 27 (1977), 95–110.

[6] Cf. Hornblower (above, n. 2) on 90.3 (*Θεμιστοκλέους γνώμη*): 'what follows is a thoroughly Herodotean story, although the type of the "trickster" hero goes back further still, to the Homeric Odysseus'. In the Odyssean context it is worth noting that he plays his trick on the Spartans when he is in *their* territory, rather like Odysseus in Polyphemus' cave. Another latter-day Odysseus figure in the *History* is Alcibiades (on whom see below).

annihilation of the oligarchs (4.48.5). Thucydides' description of the fighting (3.69ff.) is one of the more graphic accounts of violence in the *History*. One aspect of this is the complete breakdown in traditional *mores*, an element of which is that men murdered their creditors to avoid paying their debt, or took the opportunity to kill their personal enemies. Moreover we learn that fathers killed sons, and that people were dragged from temples or killed at the very altars (3.81). The crucial point (3.82–3) is that the *stasis* at Corcyra is used by Thucydides to exemplify the tendency towards factionalism that the war aggravates.[7] The violent division into opposing camps, oligarchs and democrats, is followed throughout the Greek world with terrible consequences (3.82). This use of Corcyra as an *exemplum* of social disintegration is especially significant in a Homeric context because it is a complete reversal of the Odyssean Scheria where the emphasis is on peace, beauty and harmony (not to say piety).[8] As Alcinous says to Odysseus (*Od.* 7.309–10), reckless anger is no good thing, and moderation is always a better option (ἀμείνω δ' αἴσιμα πάντα). The tragic intensity of events at Corcyra is heightened by a consciousness of what the island once was.[9]

Homeric reminiscences therefore are an important part of Thucydides' treatment of Corcyra. His technique is to allude to Homer early in the account, and then explore parallels and contrasts which enhance his various narratives. Essentially the same technique is at work in the Sicilian books 6 and 7. We shall examine in a moment the fact that Thucydides opens his account with a statement of the Athenian ignorance of Sicily (6.1.1). We might have expected him to pursue the point, and expand on it, but rather he turns to a lengthy discussion of the history of the island (6.2–5).[10] The account commences with a reference to the mythical figures who are said to have inhabited the island, the Cyclopes and Laestrygonians (6.2):

παλαίτατοι μὲν λέγονται ἐν μέρει τινὶ τῆς χώρας Κύκλωπες καὶ Λαιστρυγόνες οἰκῆσαι, ὧν ἐγὼ οὔτε γένος ἔχω εἰπεῖν οὔτε ὁπόθεν ἐσῆλθον ἢ ὅποι ἀπεχώρησαν.

Thucydides does not pursue the reference but says that he is content with what 'the poets' say. Homer is not named, nor need he be, for a (Greek) reader will always have thought of Odysseus' encounter with the Cyclopes and Laestrygonians in *Od.* 9 and 10.[11] As in the *Archaeology* (1.3), and in the hostilities between Corcyra and Corinth

[7] See Hornblower's note (above, n. 2) to 3.82–3.

[8] For Phaeacian piety, see 6.291 (Athena); 7.35 etc. (Poseidon); 7.136–8 (Hermes); 7.186–206 (their relationship with the gods).

[9] A point not lost on Ullrich and Gomme; see A. W. Gomme, *A Historical Commentary on Thucydides Vol. II, Books II–III* (Oxford, 1979), *ad* 3.82.1.

[10] One that has not been entirely well received. M. I. Finley, in *Thucydides. History of The Peloponnesian War*, trans. R. Warner (Harmondsworth, 1986), calls it an 'odd digression', that Thucydides could not 'resist the opportunity to parade a bit of learning about the distant past' (pp. 18–19); cf. Dover, in Gomme, Andrewes, Dover, *A Historical Commentary on Thucydides Vol. IV* (Oxford, 1978), 'it is to be presumed that he is either giving the result of personal research in Sicily or reproducing material from a little known written source' (p. 198). The digression, apart from anything else, takes us back through the ages to a (mythical) time when similar things happened in a similar way. In this sense it does not function entirely as a digression.

[11] Cf. Hornblower (above n. 2). Homer is not the only poet to deal with this theme (even if he is the pre-eminent one), and it is not my intention to deny the importance of the general cultural tradition. Euripides, for instance, sets the *Cyclops*, the date of which is uncertain, near Mount Etna. It is clear that by the fifth century B.C. Sicily was perceived to be the home for Homer's cannibals, including Scylla and Charybdis (cf. Hecataeus 1 F82 [Jacoby] and Thuc. 4.24); see Dover's note on Trinakria (*ad* 6.2.2). Therefore this aspect, as in the case of Corcyra/Scheria, is *not* a Thucydidean innovation.

(1.25.4), Thucydides begins his new theme in Book 6 with a reference to a Homeric narrative that has some bearing on his forthcoming description.[12] It is a matter of no small significance therefore that *as the description commences* there is a specific textual reference to other texts which deal with Laestrygonians and Cyclopes. Depending on the importance that one gives to the reference, it amounts to a self-conscious recognition that the Athenian débâcle has its mythical parallel in the adventures of Odysseus. Cyclopes and Laestrygonians are invoked at the start of the account, not solely as part of a mythical history of the island, but because they 'consume' a force of earlier heroic adventurers in Sicily. Thucydides sets contemporary events in a mythical context, thereby broadening the scope of the folly on which the Athenians embark. The sudden shift in the focus of the narrative to the mythical history of the island (6.2) helps to reveal the fact that the Athenians depart on their mission ignorant, both of the island, and of the lessons of the past.

Before examining some of the Homeric reminiscences in the Sicilian venture it is necessary to examine briefly two specific journey narratives from the epic poems themselves, both of which may have directly influenced the Thucydidean account. These are Priam's journey to Achilles (*Il.* 24) and Odysseus' encounters with the Cyclopes and Laestrygonians (*Od.* 9 and 10). Both narratives contain some prominent threshold imagery that finds its way into Thucydides. Priam must venture down from the citadel, across the plain, through the Greek army, to Achilles himself.[13] His task in doing so is to try to ransom the body of his son Hector by supplicating Achilles. One aspect of this is the attention paid in *Il.* 24 to the prominent entrance-ways through which Priam must pass.[14] He and the herald Idaeus must find their way through two sets of gates, the first is to the general Greek fortification (24.443ff.), the second the huge door to Achilles' encampment (24.448ff.).[15] Hermes, as the guide of the old man, has a crucial role in getting him across both thresholds (24.440ff., 457ff.). The huge doorways symbolize danger and death for the travelling hero. By venturing through them Priam's fate is completely in the hands of others who have the power to kill him at any moment. Thus passing through the gates represents a heroic task of great proportions. The extent of Achilles' ferocity, his *menis*, gives Priam's

[12] H. Münch, *Studien zu den Excursen des Thukydides* (Heidelberg, 1935), pp. 42ff.; 49ff.

[13] For Priam's palace on the heights of Troy, see 6.317 and 6.512; for Achilles' camp at one end of the army, see 8.222–6 (= 11.5–9). The point about all of this is that Achilles and Priam are as distant from one another, physically speaking, as it is possible to be in the context of the siege of Troy. Suffering and grief in common, however, help to draw the two together.

[14] The portal often symbolizes a taboo against entering a foreign environment. To cross over the threshold is to unite oneself with a new and possibly very dangerous world (see A. Van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage* [London, 1977; orig. publ. 1909], pp. 19–20; V. W. Turner, 'Betwixt and Between: The Liminal Period in *Rites de Passage*', in *The Forest of Symbols* [Cornell, 1967], pp. 93–111). Hades of course is often characterized by its powerful gates (cf. *Il.* 5.397; 8.367; 9.312; 13.415; 23.71ff.). For full details of ancient sources, see H. Usener, *Kleine Schriften* (Osnabrück, 1965), Vol. iv, pp. 226–8.

[15] They must of course go out of their own gates too, although this is not described. On the subject of huge gates and doors it is worthwhile to draw attention to the eagle that comes as a positive omen for Priam (24.315ff.). This eagle is not only 'dark' (*μόρφνον ... περκνὸν*, 316, appropriately for a journey through darkness), but is also noticeably large. Its wing span on either side is as huge as a rich man's door with strongly fitted door-bars (24.317–19). This goes some way to conveying the greatness of the bird as the messenger of Zeus, and also the emphatic nature of the omen. That it should be likened to a door of a high-roofed chamber with huge bars has particular resonances with the later part of the book, where Achilles' door is given similar features. On this topic, see most recently E. Katz Anhalt, *CQ* 45 (1995), 280–95.

supplicatory journey an otherworldly air, like a journey into the labyrinth, or into the belly of a whale, or to the Underworld itself.[16]

Likewise in the *Odyssey* there is considerable attention paid to the dangers of the threshold. When the Ithacans enter into Polyphemus' cave their first concern is with all of the food that is lying there (9.216ff.). Odysseus, who displays considerable avarice in the episode, will not let the men simply take the food away, but wants gifts as well. When Polyphemus returns (9.233ff.) they become entombed in the darkness of the earth. There is great stress laid on the enormous size and weight of the rock that Polyphemus uses as a door (9.240–43). Similarly, the threshold itself has a crucial part to play in the description (*θύρηφιν* 238; *θυρεὸν* 240; *θύρῃσιν* 243).[17] As with Achilles' door (*Il.* 24.453ff.), the vastness of Polyphemus' 'door' says a lot about the power, strength and potential violence of the inhabitant. No ordinary mortal could open such a door and then pass through it. By venturing across Polyphemus' threshold as he does, Odysseus' fate (like that of Priam at Achilles' threshold) is in another's hands.[18] Like their later encounter in the Laestrygonian harbour (see below), going through the entrance in the landscape can be deceptively simple and straightforward.[19] The consequence of this intrusion is that some of them become food themselves for the huge and cannibalistic appetite of Polyphemus (9.287ff.). The others, including Odysseus himself, are able to avoid death and to re-emerge into the light (9.437ff.).

We see similar kinds of imagery in the encounter of Odysseus and his men with the Laestrygonians.[20] On arrival at the Laestrygonian city Odysseus still has his full complement of ships. The fleet is described as coming to the high city of Lamos (10.81). The place has some strange aspects to it including the fact that the paths of night and day are close (10.82ff.). The harbour is glorious (*κλυτὸν*, 10.87) and always calm inside, since it has high cliffs on both sides and two projecting promontories.[21] The harbour itself has a narrow mouth (*στόμα*, 10.90), through which they sail and then station all their ships (10.91ff.). Odysseus, however, who seems to have learnt a thing or two from his sojourn with Polyphemus, alone keeps his ship outside of the harbour (*αὐτὰρ ἐγὼν οἷος*, 10.95–6). With similar caution, Odysseus sends his men ahead to find out what kind of people inhabit the place (10.100ff.), but one of them is eaten and the others flee back to their ship. This causes a great hue and cry, whereupon the gigantic Laestrygonians set upon the ships in the harbour killing all the men in the fleet (10.118ff.). They spear them like fish and then take them away to eat (10.124). Odysseus' ship alone survives the encounter (10.131–2), whereas his men are 'consumed' in the huge harbour. As in the Polyphemus episode, the descriptive

[16] Some refer to Priam's journey as a symbolic 'catabasis', although my own view is that it simply shares certain motifs with the 'catabatic' journey. Both journeys essentially deal with the confrontation with death. See F. Robert, *Homère* (Paris, 1950), pp. 200–204; C. H. Whitman, *Homer and the Heroic Tradition* (Cambridge, MA, 1958), pp. 217ff.; M. N. Nagler, *Spontaneity and Tradition* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1974), pp. 184ff.; Raymond J. Clark, *Catabasis. Vergil and the Wisdom Tradition* (Amsterdam, 1979), p. 136, n. 45; M. M. Willcock, *A Companion to the Iliad* (Chicago and London, 1976), pp. 269–70; M. Mueller, *The Iliad* (London, 1984), p. 74; P. Wathelet, 'Priam aux Enfers ou le retour du corps d'Hector', *LEC* 56 (1988), 321–35.

[17] Cf. *Od.* 9.312–14, 336–43, 417–19.

[18] Polyphemus could presumably have eaten Odysseus whenever he wanted (9.369ff.). One aspect of Odysseus' *metis* is not to *kill* Polyphemus, because this would mean that they would all perish in the cave (9.299ff.).

[19] As it is with many dangerous 'labyrinthine' journeys: 'facilis descensus Auerno... /sed reuocare gradum superasque euadere ad auras, / hoc opus, hic labor est' (*Aen.* 6.126–9).

[20] See D. Frame, *The Myth of Return in Early Greek Epic* (New Haven and London, 1978), pp. 57ff.

[21] On Homeric harbours, see W. Nestle, 'Odysseelandschaften' in *Griechische Studien* (Stuttgart, 1948), pp. 38–9.

aspects of the landscape help to inform the circumstances and the fates of the Greek sailors. The characteristic cleverness and forethought of Odysseus provide him in both cases with an avenue of escape.[22]

In the Sicilian books of Thucydides (6 and 7) we find a kind of inverted Homeric pattern; for whereas Priam is successful in his mission, and Odysseus at least survives, the Sicilian expedition is described as an unqualified disaster. The Athenians cannot fulfil their heroic aspirations. One aspect of this attempted heroism of the Athenian venture is cited at the beginning of the account: they did not really know what they were getting themselves into in Sicily (6.1.1). This, Thucydides tells us, is true both of the geographical extent of the island, and of its inhabitants.[23] Thucydides makes the point, upon which he elaborates later, that they were undertaking another war scarcely less significant than that they were already conducting against the Peloponnesians. Rather than pursuing this point, which has some very important implications to it (especially in view of 2.65.11, where other reasons for the military disaster in Sicily are given), the narrative digresses to give a mythological and historical survey of the island (6.2–5).[24] The stress on Athenian ignorance of Sicily at the beginning of the account should be seen not only in a raw historical context (there being some doubt as to whether it is entirely true), but also in the context of the traditional heroic journey. By going out on a journey without a clear sense of what they are doing, or what they may expect, the Athenians embark on a quest of 'heroic' proportions. In Homeric terms they confront the darkness of the unknown, and Thucydides is keen to stress the point at the outset. In keeping with this it is clear that what characterizes the expedition is not just its size (6.31.6), but the great expanse of sea which they must cross (6.30.2; 6.34.4; cf. the sea as a natural boundary at 6.13.1). Thucydides judges the expedition as the longest such sea-voyage conducted from Athens (*μέγιστος ἤδη διάπλους ἀπὸ τῆς οἰκείας* 6.31.6). The emphasis is therefore on some of the 'heroic' elements: the acquisitive drive of the Athenians,[25] the length of the journey, and all the unknowns at the other end. Their desires and ambitions blind them to the real nature of their quest.

Likewise, the description of the departure of the fleet from Athens seems to evoke the Homeric journey into the wild. In keeping with the dangers and the distances involved, the mood of the departure of the fleet is poignant and sombre. Thucydides dwells upon the number of people who see the fleet off, their complex and conflicting emotions of hope, pride, fear and lamentation (6.30). Their great fear is that the perilous nature of the long journey on which the fleet embarks may mean that they may never see their loved ones again. This fear is tempered somewhat by the impressive size of the expedition. In the Homeric context it is worth considering the

[22] It is worth bearing in mind how many of the dangers that Odysseus and his men face involve eating or being eaten. Apart from the Cyclopes and Laestrygonians, one thinks of the Lotus-eaters (9.82ff.), Scylla and Charybdis (12.222ff.), and the Cattle of the Sun (12.260ff.). Likewise, the vast stretch of sea which Odysseus crosses (*λαῖτμα*, gulf, abyss) is itself a kind of chasm (cf. *λαιμός*, throat) which may consume him at any time. In Odysseus' absence, of course, the suitors eat up the livelihood of his house, which has its own fatal consequences.

[23] Dover (above, n. 10), *ad* 6.1.2, points out that Ephorus' estimate for the circumnavigation of Sicily was five days not the eight days of Thucydides. The variation in the two figures may be the result of different methods of calculation, but there is no doubt that Thucydides seeks initially to stress the extent of (or even exaggerate?) the task that Athens embarks upon.

[24] On 2.65.11 and the narrative of Book 6, see Connor (above, n. 1), p. 158, n. 2.

[25] On the Athenian desire for money and acquisitions, see especially 6.1; 6.6; 6.8; 6.15; 6.24; 6.31; 6.46; 6.90. Odysseus' desire to acquire gifts (*Od.* 9.224ff., 267ff.) is a principal reason for the trouble that they find themselves in with Polyphemus, and it would also seem to be a cause of friction between Odysseus and his companions.

parallel with the departure of Priam and Idaeus to Achilles' camp (*Il.* 24.327–8).[26] Inevitably Priam's expedition is at night, and is characterized by the solo nature of the quest, unlike the grandeur and splendour of the Athenian departure. The Trojan loved ones follow him down from the citadel in a state of great grief as if he went to his death (*φίλοι δ' ἅμα πάντες ἕποντο / πόλλ' ὀλοφυρόμενοι ὡς εἰ θάνατόνδε κίοντα* 24.327–8).[27] This is in keeping with the general sense of fear and anxiety that greets Priam's original decision to go on his quest (24.201–16; cf. 22.412ff.).[28] But whereas there are some general similarities in the mood at Priam's departure, and that of the Athenians, the omens for the two journeys could scarcely be more different. In Priam's case he seeks a message from Zeus which will at least give some indication of the divine will (24.308–13). The request for an omen, which often characterizes the journey into the wild, is in part an attempt to mollify Hecuba's fears for Priam's safety (24.287–98).[29] It was she who suggested that Priam seek an omen for the journey (*αἴτει δ' οἰωνόν*, 24.292). The omen then appears in the most positive of ways, a very large and very dark eagle flying on the right (24.314–19, above, n. 15). This brings pleasure to all those who see it (24.320–21). Thus Priam receives a positive omen, and this prepares for the success of the mission. In contrast to this the omens for the Athenian voyage are much more threatening, with the mutilation of the Hermae the night before departure (6.27–9).[30] This is perceived both as a danger to the democracy and as a (bad) omen for the departure of the expedition (*τοῦ ... ἔκπλου οἰωνὸς ἐδόκει εἶναι* 6.27.3). The Athenian concern is appropriate enough in a Homeric context because Hermes is the heroic guide through danger and darkness, the god who, as it happens, conveys Priam safely to Achilles and back.

The actual voyage of the fleet to Sicily is not an especially prominent aspect of Thucydides' narrative. There is an arrangement in place that the Athenians meet their allies at Corcyra (6.30). Upon leaving Piraeus they race each other as far as Aegina (6.32), and then make their way to Corcyra (6.32 and 6.42).[31] The whole vast force (details of which are listed) then make the crossing to Sicily (6.43–4). They reach land

[26] One speculative aspect worth considering is the element of descent that is indicated in the two accounts (cf. Priam and Idaeus, *κατὰ ἄστυ*, 24.327; *πόλιος κατέβαν*, 24.329; the Athenians, *ἐς τὸν Πειραιᾶ καταβάντες*, 6.30).

[27] Cf. Alcestis, who describes herself *ὡς θανουμένη*, *Alcestis* 191. The only other heroes in the *Iliad* who go *θάνατόνδε* are Patroclus (16.693) and Hector (22.297), both of whom, unlike Priam, are actually killed in the course of the poem.

[28] Cf. *Il.* 10.37ff. where Menelaus comes upon Agamemnon, and states that anyone who went through immortal night (*νύκτα δι' ἀμβροσίην*, 41; cf. 24.363) into the enemy zone would be very bold-hearted. The venture of Diomedes and Odysseus through the night into the enemy camp (the 'Doloneia') is an Iliadic precedent for the journey on which Priam embarks.

[29] On rites of separation, including Spartan sacrifice, see Van Gennep (above n. 14), esp. pp. 19–20. The Athenians sing hymns and pour libations prior to their departure (6.32) which are referred to again at 7.75.7. Nicias, of course, is prone to vacillation out of an interest in omens; see the eclipse at 7.50.4; cf. the thunder at 7.79. On this and related subjects, see A. Powell, 'Religion and the Sicilian expedition', *Historia* 28 (1979), 15–31; Borimir Jordan, 'Religion in Thucydides', *TAPhA* 116 (1986), 119–47, esp. 144–6.

[30] See R. Osborne, 'The erection and mutilation of the Hermai', *PCPhS* 31 (1985), 41–73. The herm features as a boundary marker to the Underworld in Apulian iconography, and Dr Olga Palagia (University of Athens) has argued to me that it has a similar function in Hellenistic funerary iconography.

[31] The race to Aegina seems to function as a rather playful and pleasant start to a journey which turns into a military disaster. Connor (above n. 1), p. 175, n. 43, compares the race with that in Herodotus 7.44, in which Xerxes watches a rowing contest at Abydus on the Hellespont (and hence near to Troy). The reference reminds us that Herodotus' treatment of the Persian invasion of Greece with its own Homeric reminiscences is never very far from Thucydides' Sicilian account.

at Iapygia and Tarentum in South Italy before sailing down the coast of Italy to Rhegium (6.44). Their Sicilian operations commence from Rhegium (6.50ff.) and include a voyage through the Straits of Messina along the north coast of Sicily (6.62). In the light of what eventually happens to the expedition, the initial voyage to Sicily is all rather uneventful, the calm before the storm. But when we bear in mind that some of these locations are linked within the *History* to the folktale world of the *Odyssey*, the voyage takes on a rather more ominous aspect. Keeping this Odyssean context in mind we may note that the Athenians travel to Corcyra (= Scheria, 1.25.4; 3.70.4) which is their first base. Their next base is Rhegium which is linked earlier in the text to Homer's Charybdis (4.24.4):

ἔστι δὲ ὁ πορθμὸς ἡ μεταξὺ Ῥηγίου θάλασσα καὶ Μεσσήνης, ᾗπερ βραχύτατον Σικελία τῆς ἠπείρου ἀπέχει· καὶ ἔστιν ἡ Χάρυβδις κληθεῖσα τοῦτο, ᾗ Ὀδυσσεὺς λέγεται διαπλεῦσαι.

Thucydides goes on to say that the Straits are dangerous for ships because of the narrowness of the place and the particular features of the currents there. The reference to Odysseus and Charybdis here is a very specific and important one in the context of the other Odyssean allusions discussed in this article. Moreover it is clear from the voyage to the north of the island that the Athenians, like Odysseus, pass through the Straits (6.62). Crossing this 'threshold' leads on to the Athenian military operations against Syracuse. These operations in turn lead to the eventual destruction of the expedition by the Syracusans and their allies (= Cyclopes and Laestrygonians, 6.2). Thus the allusions to Homer's folktale world within the text of the *History* point to the fact that the Athenians move backwards over the same ground covered by Odysseus. In Homer's account of these locations, Odysseus goes first to the Cyclopes (*Od.* 9.105ff.) and Laestrygonians (*Od.* 10.80ff.), then to Charybdis (and Scylla, *Od.* 12.234ff.), and then to Scheria (*Od.* 5.339ff.). The Phaeacians then transport him back to Ithaca (*Od.* 13.38ff.). The Athenians go in reverse order to this; first to Corcyra (= Scheria), then to Rhegium/Straits of Messina (= Charybdis) and then to Sicily (= Cyclopes and Laestrygonians). In this sense the Athenian folly is given further expression by the notion that they venture, as it were, into the very jaws from which Odysseus emerges.[32]

Whereas Odysseus escapes from all of the terrifying dangers that confront him, his men do not. The bulk of them are killed in the very episodes just cited (especially in the Laestrygonian harbour, 10.80ff.). One aspect of Odysseus' story of which Thucydides appears to have been conscious in his composition of the Sicilian books is the part played by specific features of the landscape. Inevitably, the Athenian fleet is not destroyed by wild cannibals, like that of Odysseus, but they do come to grief within the great Syracusan harbour. The Athenians are defeated twice in the harbour, the first being a comparatively minor skirmish in which seven ships are lost (7.22–4). The latter defeat of the Athenians however is of more significant proportions (7.59–71) because their ships are either destroyed or captured. The crucial tactic in this encounter is for the mouth of the harbour effectively to be closed off by the construction of a barrier of various types of ships (7.59). The Athenians decide to fight at sea and then head, if victorious, to Catana (7.60). They make for a gap in the

[32] Another aspect of this is that the Athenians sail to a place which was synonymous with death and slavery in Homer's *Odyssey*. This is the likely implication of the suitors' threat to put the strangers (Theoclymenus/Odysseus) in a boat and send them *ἐς Σικελοὺς* where they would fetch a good price (*Od.* 20.383). In this Odyssean sense Sicily is not the place one wants to be sent. This is true too for the Athenians and their allies in the *History*, whose eventual fate is either to be killed or sold into slavery (7.87).

barrier, which is guarded by the Syracusans, in an attempt to break through, but are met by part of the Syracusan navy (7.69–70). The ensuing battle which spreads throughout the harbour sees the crushing of the Athenian fleet, and their flight back to the land (7.70–71).[33] The blockade of the harbour is thus a crucial and very successful tactic. In a Homeric context there is a distinct parallel with the slaughter of Odysseus' men by the Laestrygonians (*Od.* 10.118ff.). Despite all the inevitable differences in the two accounts, both incoming fleets fall victim to Sicilian inhabitants in huge harbours. The reference to the Laestrygonians at the commencement of Thucydides' account of the expedition helps to signify the parallel. Likewise, in the sense that the mouth of the harbour is closed by the imposition of the barrier, we witness the same kind of threshold imagery as in the Cyclopean cave where Polyphemus places a huge rock to block the exit.

With the naval defeat of the Athenians completed, the narrative now focuses on their final destruction on land (7.72–87). There are many phases in this destruction, but two of the principal episodes cited by Thucydides are the slaughter at the Assinarus river (7.84), and the final incarceration of the Athenians in the Syracusan quarries (7.86–7). From the Homeric perspective one may think of the Assinarus as another Scamander, which Achilles caused to be clogged with dead bodies of Trojan warriors (*Il.* 21.122ff. and esp. 214ff.). Thucydides focuses his attention on the slaughter and confusion in the river, its blood-red colour, and yet the desperation of the Athenians still to quench their first, despite the state of the water. But also worth noting is the Odyssean parallel to the description of the Syracusan part in the slaughter of the Athenians. For just as the Laestrygonians hurl their huge rocks and spears down at Odysseus' fleet from the cliffs of the harbour (*ἀπὸ πετράων, Od.* 10.121; cf. Polyphemus at *Od.* 9.481ff.), so the Syracusans stand on top of the opposite bank of the river and hurl their weapons down on the hapless Athenians. Emphasis is placed, not just on the slaughter, but on the position of advantage, the height, that the Syracusans hold; the bank is *κρημνώδες*, 'precipitous'; the Syracusans cast weapons at the Athenians *ἄνωθεν*, 'from above', 7.84.4.[34]

These Odyssean parallels for the disaster at the Assinarus are reinforced by the final humiliation of the Athenians. As wanderers in Sicily they are reduced, like Odysseus in his various hostile environments, to seeking out food and drink wherever they can get it. Hunger is a thing of shame and humility in the *Odyssey*, and one aspect of the final chapters of Thucydides' description is the attention paid to the Athenians' desperate pursuit of basic sustenance.[35] Then as captives they end up miserably confined into quarries by the Syracusans (7.86–7). Having abandoned their dead still unburied (7.72; 7.75), they themselves are now ruthlessly entombed in the earth where many of them die. In the light of Thucydides' opening reference to the Cyclopes (6.2), this episode inevitably recalls the Homeric Odysseus and his men who are confined in the cave of Polyphemus. Yet in the face of great adversity Odysseus at least can put

[33] Thucydides also pays attention to the two armies who watch the conflict in the harbour (7.71). Of particular concern in this description is the response of the Athenian spectators, and most especially the terrible fear and panic that the defeat creates. In the context of the war at Troy it is worth bearing in mind the fear and suffering endured by the Trojan spectators (esp. in response to Hector's death, *Il.* 22.405ff.). Priam and Hecuba are so near to Hector that they can call out and talk to him (22.33ff., 79ff.). Likewise the Athenians are very near to their comrades (*δι' ὀλίγου γὰρ οὔσης τῆς θέας*, 7.71.3), but at the same time are utterly unable to alter the result of the sea-battle. In this sense Nicias' earlier words to the Athenians ring true, that the besiegers have become the besieged (7.11.4).

[34] Cf. the attack on Demosthenes and his men at 7.81, who come under a volley of missiles from the Syracusans; see too 7.83.

[35] In the final chapters of his account, see 7.60; 7.75; 7.77–8; 7.83–7.

his *metis* to good use, and is able to find a way out of the cave. But for the Athenians there is no heroic escape from these caves, because this is not a folktale world. The focus in this final episode is on the utterly grim and hopeless nature of their plight. Some of the enduring images of Thucydides' account have their parallels in Homer (especially the harbour and the cave), but the difference is that the Athenian suffering is tragically real.

There may be no real heroes in Thucydides' account, but one individual does get away, if not from the quarries, then certainly from the general disaster that engulfs the Athenians and their allies. This of course is Alcibiades who, like Themistocles before him, has his own Odyssean characteristics. It is a significant parallel that both in the *Odyssey* and Thucydides only *one* ship escapes from the disaster in the harbour. These are the ships of Odysseus (*Od.* 10.95–6; 131–2), and Alcibiades (Th. 6.60–61), the latter of whom is recalled to stand trial on the charge of profaning the Mysteries. Alcibiades' ship accompanies the *Salaminia* back towards Athens, but he jumps ship at Thurii, after which he goes to Cyllene in Elis, thence to Sparta itself (6.88.9). In the light of all the other Odyssean reminiscences in the Sicilian books, the escape of Alcibiades in his ship points us firmly to the way that Odysseus avoids death in the Laestrygonian harbour.[36] But their crafty escape from death in a Sicilian harbour is only one thing that they have in common, for their careers reveal many shared characteristics; their sharp intelligence, their leading of the fleets into disaster, their own survival skills, their lives of exile longing for home (cf. Th. 6.92), and their ability to triumph over some fierce opposition upon their return.

The extent to which anyone will want to read the Sicilian expedition 'through Homeric eyes' may well depend on their interest in Homer. It would be unduly reductionist to press the Homeric associations too far; but given that Homer tends to play a rather small part in Thucydidean studies (including Dover's revision of Gomme's commentary on Books 6 and 7—admittedly, a *historical* commentary), there is some scope for such a focus.[37] The Homeric allusions and reminiscences cited in this article allow us to assume with some confidence that Thucydides was as familiar with Homer as were the other *literati* in his world. Despite this there is certainly no scholarly unanimity that Homer's epics exert a strong *direct* influence on Thucydides' narrative and speeches. Even Hornblower, who is very conscious of Homeric influences, is equivocal here.[38] By comparing Herodotus, whose language is 'closer to the surface of Homer' (p. 65), he points to problems in establishing direct reminiscences. One aspect of the Herodotean dimension is the extent to which Thucydides is influenced by Homer *indirectly*, through Herodotus, whose epic treatment of historical topics may have found its way into the *History*.[39] Such a

[36] It is worth noting that the theme of the sole survivor of a military rout is found in the Persian campaigns too. In Herodotus' account of the battle of Thermopylae (7.229–32) only one man of the three hundred Spartans, Aristodemus, survives their defeat by the Persians.

[37] On Thucydides and the poets, including Homer, see C. Macleod, 'Thucydides and Tragedy', in *Collected Essays*, O. Taplin (ed.) (Oxford, 1983), pp. 140–58, esp. 157–8; and more recently S. Hornblower, *A Commentary on Thucydides Vol. 1* (Oxford, 1991), *passim*; and S. Hornblower (ed.), *Greek Historiography* (Oxford, 1994), especially pp. 9–10 and 64–9.

[38] '(There is) proof of a pretty thorough knowledge of Homer; but it is still not strict proof of Homeric influence on the wartime narrative, or speeches. Such strict proof is perhaps not to be had', *Greek Historiography* (Oxford, 1994), p. 65.

[39] *CQ*'s anonymous referee points out to me, *inter alia*, that the new Simonides (P. Oxy. 3965) seems to be an epic treatment of recent historical events in which an explicit comparison is made between the Persian and Trojan wars (see Handley, Ioannidou, Parsons, Whitehorne, *The Oxyrhynchus Papyri Volume LIX* [London, 1992], pp. 4–50). Simonides seems to see his task as to confer immortality on the Persian war, as Homer did with Troy. In the light of this it is

double relationship with Homeric epic (direct and indirect) is important when one bears in mind the rather startling Herodotean echo that concludes the whole Sicilian account (*πανωλεθρία*, Th. 7.87.6; cf. Herodotus, 2.120.5, *πανωλεθρίῃ*).[40] The 'utter destruction' referred to in the case of Herodotus is Troy, and thus by recalling the passage Thucydides manages to link the destruction of the Athenian forces to that of Troy (and indeed to the Persian expedition).

But my purpose in this article has been to argue for a *direct* intertextuality between Homer and Thucydides, quite apart from indirect influences. Indeed the case has been put that the important Homeric allusions, and their close links to particular narrative patterns and contrasts, suggest that the Sicilian books were written with Homer very much in mind. It is by means of such narrative techniques, rather than a wide proliferation of verbal echoes, that the Sicilian venture has an epic feel to it, without being too obviously 'Homeric'.[41] No doubt, Homeric epic represented a world long gone, and was seen by Thucydides as an essentially unreliable source for the hard facts of history (1.21); but in the sense that human desires for glory and wealth often lead them to undertake dangerous and foolhardy missions, heroic poetry provided a very appropriate form with which to associate the Athenian course of action. As if to point Thucydides in the direction of Homer is the fact that the Athenians come to grief *in Sicily*, and, as it were, enter into the jaws from which Odysseus emerges. Likewise, some of the primary elements of the Homeric confrontation with death help to enrich the Thucydidean narrative. Either through his own design, or out of respect for historical accuracy, or both of these, Thucydides emphasizes the main topographical features that characterize the Athenian defeat in Sicily. In so doing the Athenian confrontation with death takes on epic proportions, and they are shown to endure miseries and loss of life greater even than in myth.[42]

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conceivable that both Simonides and Herodotus have their parts to play in influencing Thucydides' response to Homer.

[40] H. Strasburger, 'Thukydides und die politische Selbstdarstellung der Athener', *Hermes* 86 (1958), 17–40, at 39 n. 3; Dover (above, n. 10), *ad* 7.87.6; N. Marinatos Kopff and H. R. Rawlings, '*Panolethria* and divine punishment. Thuc. 7.87.6. and Hdt. 2.120.5', *La Parola del Passato* 33 (1978), 331–7; Connor (above, n. 1), p. 208, n. 57; S. Hornblower, *Thucydides* (London, 1987), p. 148, n. 48.

[41] This does not mean of course that verbal echoes of Homer are not to be found. Hornblower (*Greek Historiography*, pp. 67–8) discusses some cases where Homeric language (or thought) enhances a rhetorical setting: Nicias encouraging his men at 7.69 (esp. *πατρόθεν*), cf. Agamemnon at *Il.* 10.68; Nicias again at 7.77.7, cf. Ajax at *Il.* 15.733–41; the difficulties of knowing the facts in a battle fought at night, 7.44, cf. *Il.* 12.176; Hermocrates' description of Sicily as *περίῤῥυτος* (4.64.3), which recalls Odysseus' description of Crete (*Od.* 19.173). No doubt there are others, but it is clear that the prominence of Homeric *thought* in the Sicilian books is not reflected in the *language*.

[42] I am grateful to *CQ*'s anonymous referees for helpful comments and criticisms; and to K. E. Block and P. D. Salmond for their critical advice.