

“WE FOUGHT ALONE AT MARATHON”:  
HISTORICAL FALSIFICATION  
IN THE ATTIC FUNERAL ORATION

Thoukydides, in a well known passage, complains about the Greeks' imprecision and gullibility in history: οἱ γὰρ ἀνθρώποι τὰς ἀκοὰς τῶν προγεγενημένων, καὶ ἦν ἐπιχώρια σφίσι ἤ, ὁμοίως ἀβασανίστως παρ' ἀλλήλων δέχονται... (1.20.1). πολλὰ δὲ καὶ ἄλλα ἔτι καὶ νῦν ὄντα καὶ οὐ χρόνῳ ἀμνηστούμενα καὶ οἱ ἄλλοι Ἕλληνες οὐκ ὀρθῶς οἴονται... οὕτως ἀταλαίπωρος τοῖς πολλοῖς ἡ ζήτησις τῆς ἀληθείας, καὶ ἐπὶ τὰ ἔτοιμα μᾶλλον τρέπονται (1.20.3). Modern historians of ancient Greece are even today often able to uncover historical errors, deliberate or unintended, that spread in antiquity. But it is far more difficult for us to find out whether most Greeks knew these were falsehoods and whether they were disturbed by them. In one case at least we are fortunate enough to have a means of checking. The Athenian boast in their patriotic funeral orations that they had fought alone at Marathon to repel the Persian invader was clearly and directly contradicted by contemporary evidence available to every citizen, indeed by evidence literally right before his eyes. If we examine this material, we get an unusual and valuable insight into the Athenian historical mentality.

It is well known that the Attic Funeral Oration gives a tendentious view of Athenian history<sup>1</sup>). This genre of early epideictic oratory began sometime after the Persian wars and was in full swing at Athens by the second half of the fifth century<sup>2</sup>). Most of the evidence for the *topoi* in the Funeral

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1) G. Vlastos, “Ἰσονομία πολιτικὴ” in *Isonomia: Studien zur Gleichheitsvorstellung im griechischen Denken*, ed. J. Mau and E. G. Schmidt, Berlin 1964, pp. 22–25. H. Strasburger, “Thukydides und die politische Selbstdarstellung der Athener”, *Hermes* 86 (1968) 17–40, esp. 20–28. P. Wendland, “Die Tendenz des platonischen *Menexenus*”, *Hermes* 25 (1890) 171–195.

2) The traditional date for the foundation of the institution was 479/8 (after the battle of Plataia): cf. Dion. Hal., *Ant. Rom.* 5.17.4, and Diod. Sic. (relying on Ephoros) 11.13.3. For details of the controversy on the best dating see F. Jacoby, “ἸΑΤΡΙΟΣ ΝΟΜΟΣ: State Burial in Athens and the Public Cemetery in the Kerameikos”, *JHS* 64 (1944) 37–66, and A. W. Gomme *A Historical Commentary on Thucydides*, Oxford 1956, vol. 2, pp.

Oration comes from fourth century speeches and even later. But the remnants of fifth century *ἐπιτάφιοι λόγοι*, including Thoukydides' version put in Perikles' mouth, are supplemented by other speeches found in Herodotos, Thoukydides, and the tragedians. While these are not themselves funeral orations, they quite obviously contain topics derived from *ἐπιτάφιοι*.

The ostensible subject of the Funeral Oration were those who had fallen in battle for Athens, but in effect these glorious dead were hardly so much praised as the city itself. Scholars have already treated in some detail the *τοποί* of the Funeral Oration<sup>3</sup>), and I shall only briefly recount some of the main points here. These include the Athenians' piety, justice, and love of freedom. They are the benefactors of all Greece, liberators of the oppressed, chastisers of oppressors, a bulwark against the Persians, selflessly fighting to keep all Greece free. These claims are illustrated with examples from mythology and history<sup>4</sup>). The historical analysis is universally lop-sided and chauvinistic. For instance, the battle of Tanagra, cited as a victorious effort to liberate the Boeotians, was really an abortive attempt by the Athenians to break up the Boeotian league. Athenian civil disorders and the reign of the tyrants are quietly passed over. It is claimed the Thebans and Argives were willing, while the Athenians alone refused, to accede to the Persian King's peace proposal in 392 that stipulated Persian control of Greek Asia Minor<sup>5</sup>). The list could be lengthened<sup>6</sup>).

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94-98. Jacoby seeks a late date (*ca.* 464/3), but Gomme has pointed out the weakness of Jacoby's arguments and the fallibility of the evidence available to us. The delivery of an encomium by a leading citizen over the dead was probably begun at the same time (479): historical paradeigmata start with τὰ Περσικά. See Otto Schroeder, *De laudibus Athenarum a poetis tragicis et ab oratoribus epidicticis excultis* (diss). Göttingen 1914, esp. 68-76. There seems no reason to object to Diodorus' date (above).

3) Schroeder (*supra*, n. 2). For a convenient compendium cf. Strasburger (*supra*, n. 1) 22-26. Also, J. Ziolkowski, *Thucydides and the Tradition of Funeral Speeches at Athens*, unpub. diss., Chapel Hill 1963.

4) On the use of mythology in political propaganda see G. Schmitz-Kahlmann, "Das Beispiel der Geschichte im politischen Denken des Isokrates", *Philologus*, supp. bd. 21 (1939) 39ff. A consideration of any of the extant *ἐπιτάφιοι* will reveal the range of παραδείγματα. Schroeder (*supra*, n. 2) compiles them all. See also H. Herter, *RE*, suppl. bd. XIII, s. v., *Θησεύς*, and *RM* 88 (1939) 301f.

5) Tanagra: *Menexenus* 242 A-B; the King's Peace: *Menexenus* 245 C.

6) Cf. Strasburger's judgment (*supra*, n. 1) on „die geradezu ungläubliche Willkür und Sprunghaftigkeit in der Auswahl der Fakten" (25) in the

How much were the Athenians aware of such falsifications? Were the facts sufficiently obscure or the events by-gone enough that the average hearer would not notice or care about them? Did the Athenians come to believe the distortions they heard in the *ἐπιτάφιοι*? Our test case to help answer these questions is the Athenian claim 'we fought alone at Marathon'. It was a recurrent topic in the historical section of the Attic Funeral Oration. For the Athenians the Persian wars was their finest hour. In a speech based on Funeral Oration *τοιοί*, Herodotos (9.27.5) reports this claim in the Athenian reply on who should lead the right wing at Plataia: ἀλλὰ καὶ ἀπὸ τοῦ ἐν Μαραθῶνι ἔργου ἄξιοί εἰμεν τοῦτο τὸ γέρας ἔχει καὶ ἄλλα πρὸς τούτῳ, οἵτινες μόννοι Ἑλλήνων δὴ μονομαχήσαντες τῷ Πέρσῃ καὶ ἔργῳ τοσοῦτῳ ἐπιχειρήσαντες περιεγεγόμεθα καὶ ἐνικήσαμεν. The same point is made in book seven (7.10.β.1), where Artabanus urges Xerxes to retreat from Greece. And in Thoukydides (1.73.4) the Athenians at Sparta warn the Peloponnesians against starting a war, recalling their earlier exploits: φαιμὲν γὰρ Μαραθῶνι τε μόννοι προκινδυνεύσαι τῷ βαρβάρῳ. These fifth century examples find firm parallel in the fourth century tradition: Andokides (1.107), Lysias (2.20), and Demosthenes (60.10–11)<sup>7</sup>.

Yet despite such claims it is a well known historical fact that the Athenians did not fight alone at Marathon. The Plataians fought alongside them, as Herodotos in his description of the battle clearly tells us (6.108). Ἀθηναίοισι δε τεταγμένοισι ἐν τεμένει Ἡρακλέος ἐπὶ ἤλθον βοηθέοντες Πλαταιέες πανδημί. Gregory Vlastos, attempting to explain how Plato could have stated the Athenians fought alone at Marathon in the *Menexenus* and then repeated that notion in the *Leges*, says, "This error was so entrenched in the Athenian image of its own past that Plato may have been honestly mistaken on this point"<sup>8</sup>). In like manner, Jacqueline de Romilly, commenting that the Athenian ambassadors in Thoukydides (book 1) "recall that at Marathon the

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Funeral Oration, or Wendland's comment (*supra*, n. 1) on the "grobe Übertreibungen" and "die systematische Verfälschung der historischen Wahrheit" (183).

7) See also Plato's brief excursus in *Leges* 698B–699D on Athenian history, where he clearly leaves out the Plataians' role at Marathon. It might be that Plato had in mind there his earlier remark in the *Menexenus* (240C). For similar omissions see too Isokrates 4.86, and 7.75, and Lykourgos, *Contra Leocratem* 4.86 and 4.109.

8) Vlastos (*supra*, n. 1) 23, n. 8.

Athenians acted alone”, says, “such an oversimplification is normal... The Athenians are thus mentioning a widely admitted and true fact”<sup>9</sup>). But whatever the cause of Plato’s slip, it is not possible to say so simply that the distortion of fighting single-handedly at Marathon was an honest error in the Athenians’ view of themselves or “a widely admitted and true fact”.

In fact, the Athenians must have known very well that they did not fight alone at Marathon, that the Plataians aided them. In the *Contra Neaeram* Demosthenes in the course of a long argument describes in some detail the special relationship the Plataians enjoy with Athens (59.94–106). He begins his remarks with his most important point (94), that *the Plataians were the only Greeks to help Athens at Marathon*. And he buttresses his statement by reminding his audience that the battle of Marathon is depicted in the Stoa Poikile, and it is particularly easy to identify the Plataians in the picture because they are wearing distinctive Boeotian helmets: *καὶ ἔτι καὶ νῦν τῆς ἀνδραγαθίας αὐτῶν ὑπομνήματα <ῆ> ἐν τῇ ποικίλῃ στοᾷ γραφῇ δεδήλωκεν. ὡς ἕκαστος γὰρ τάχους εἶχεν, εὐθὺς προσβοηθῶν γέγραπται, οἱ τὰς κυνᾶς τὰς Βοιωτίας ἔχοντες* (94). Now the Stoa Poikile was one of the most outstanding buildings in Athens. It stood right in the Agora (Aischines, 3.186). And of the paintings in the Stoa the battle of Marathon was most famous<sup>10</sup>). Pausanias (1.15.3) says of it, *τελευταῖον δὲ τῆς γραφῆς εἰσὶν οἱ μαχεσάμενοι Μαραθῶνι. Βοιωτῶν δὲ οἱ Πλάταιαν ἔχοντες καὶ ὅσον ἦν Ἀττικὸν ἴασιν ἐς χεῖρας τοῖς βαρβάροις... κτλ.* It is clear that the Athenians had daily before their eyes a visual reminder of the Plataians’ valor and loyalty at Marathon. But there were other important reminders as well. Herodotos tells us that thanksgiving for both the Plataians and Athenians was proclaimed by the herald at every Great Panathenaia, the premier festival at Athens (6.111.2). *ἀπὸ ταύτης γὰρ σφι*

9) J. de Romilly, *Thucydides and Athenian Imperialism* (trans. P. Thody) Oxford 1963, p. 245: “Thucydides repeats it [the claim] in his own account when he writes in 1.18.1: *ἡ ἐν Μαραθῶνι μάχη Μήδων πρὸς Ἀθηναίους.*” But de Romilly’s assertion in fact fails. The Plataians are omitted not to foster the tendentious claim but merely to avoid pedantry where their mention would be unnecessary.

10) J.G. Frazer, *Pausanias’ Description of Greece*, London 1898, 1.15.3, *ad loc.* Cf. n. 15. Most recently H.A. Thompson and R.E. Wycherly, in *Agora XIV, The Agora of Athens*, Princeton 1972, pp. 90–94: “The Poikile was one of the main focal points around which Athenian life in all its varied forms revolved. To judge by our plentiful evidence, it was primarily a superior lesche or place of informal conversation.” (92).

τῆς μάχης Ἀθηναίων θυσίας ἀναγόντων ἐς πανηγύριος τὰς ἐν τῆσι πεντετηρίσι γινομένας κατεύχεται ὁ κῆρυξ ὁ Ἀθηναῖος ἅμα τε Ἀθηναίοισι λέγων γίνεσθαι τὰ ἀγαθὰ καὶ Πλαταιεῦσι. Pausanias further records that at Marathon there were twin graves for the Athenian and Plataian war dead (1.32.3). τάφος δὲ ἐν τῷ πεδίῳ Ἀθηναίων ἐστίν, ἐπὶ δὲ αὐτῷ στήλαι τὰ ὀνόματα τῶν ἀποθανόντων κατὰ φυλὰς ἐκάστων ἔχουσαι, καὶ ἕτερος Πλαταιεῦσι Βοιωτῶν καὶ δούλοις. This statement has recently been corroborated by excavations at Marathon under the directorship of Professor Marinatos that have uncovered the *taphos* of the Plataians<sup>11</sup>). Finally, the Plataians themselves erected in their city a famous statue of Athena Areia with the booty allotted them by the Athenians after Marathon. This statue was just slightly smaller than the bronze Athena on the Acropolis, and both were made by Pheidias (Paus. 3.4.1).

What are we to make then of this clear conflict between the fact, obvious to any Athenian, that the Plataians were at Mara-

that the Athenians fought alone? An attempted resolution of this problem is to point out that after 427, when Plataia had been destroyed by Thebes and Sparta, the Plataians gained *ἰσοπολιτεία* ('equivalent citizenship') at Athens (Th. 3.55.1; 3.63.2; Isok. 4.109)<sup>12</sup>. In fact, Demosthenes (59.104-106) expatiates about

this grant of *ισοπολιτεία* in the *Contra Neaeram*. Such a blanket award of citizenship to a whole people was of course uncommon in ancient Greece. Usually it was granted only to individuals and then only for meritorious service to the state, and at Athens only through full vote of the assembly. Herodotos tells us that in his day only two outsiders ever gained this honor at Sparta (9.35). The Athenians were more lenient, but they could still be strict. Lysias the orator, who was of course a metic, was denied Athenian citizenship after the Peloponnesian War despite his great services to the city<sup>13</sup>). The reason for the extraordinary grant to the Plataians, who were Boeotians, undoubtedly was their great loyalty to Athens, evinced as early as the late sixth century (Hdt. 6.108). We must assume that the Plataian presence at Marathon was what ultimately moved the Athenians to grant them *ισοπολιτεία* after 427.

Thus, it might be argued that the Plataians were considered one with the Athenians, were considered to be Athenians; hence the Athenians fought 'alone' at Marathon. But there are objections. First, it appears from the publication date of Herodotos' work that the *topos* of fighting alone at Marathon antedates Plataian *ισοπολιτεία* in 427: the typical claims occur in Herodotos at 9.27, while the work was probably published *ca.* 430<sup>14</sup>). Hence the grant of *ισοπολιτεία* will have come too late to cause the rhetorical *Anschluss* of Plataians with Athenians in the Marathon *topos* of the Funeral Oration. Significantly, too, the Stoa Poikile and its murals, among which was the Marathon painting showing the Plataians alongside the Athenians, were completed around 460<sup>15</sup>). It may well be, then, that the claim of *μονομαχία* developed after 460, sometime in the next couple of decades.

13) Plut. *Vit. Lys. (Moralia)* 835 C-836 A.

14) Herodotos' work mentions no event later than 430 but was in circulation by the early 420's in time to be parodied by Aristophanes (*Archarnenses* 513 ff.) He had heard at Athens or knew by report of Perikles' Samian Funeral Oration: E. Meyer pointed out (*Forschungen zur alten Geschichte*, vol. 2 (1889) 219 ff.) that two speeches in Hdt. (7.161 and 9.27) contain *topoi* common to the Funeral Oration tradition. He further asserted both were composed after 440, from the similarity of the expression of 7.162 (*ἐκ τοῦ ἐναντιοῦ τὸ ἔαρ ἐξαιρείσθαι*) with the phrase Aristotle (*Rhet.* 1411 a 2-4) attributed to Perikles in his Funeral Oration. Wilamowitz (*Hermes* 12 (1877) 365, n. 51) had already pointed out that this must refer to the *ἐπιτάφιος* delivered by Perikles after the reduction of Samos in 440/39 (Plut., *Per.* 28.3-5).

15) See L. H. Jeffery, "The Battle of Oinoe in the Stoa Poikile: A Problem in Greek Art and History", *BSA* 60 (1965) 41-56, esp. 43-45.

But the remarks of Lysias in his *Contra Panleon* offer a stronger case that the Plataians retained a distinct and separate identity at Athens. In that speech the speaker wishes to show that a certain Panleon is not a Plataian as he claims. Panleon had said that he was a demesman of Dekeleia, but the speaker's inquiries there revealed that the defendant is in fact an escaped slave. Now, in his detective work the speaker went to the cheesemarket in Dekeleia on the last of the month, the day the Plataians customarily gathered together. This gathering is significant, for it shows that even forty years after the initial grant of *ισοπολιτεία* the Plataians are still recognized as different by the Athenians and so recognize themselves. By their convention in the cheesemarket at the end of every month they assert their separate ethnic identity as distinct from the rest of the Attica: the Plataians have not become assimilated into the Athenian body politic<sup>16</sup>).

If this is so, it seems most unlikely that the Athenians think of themselves and the Plataians as 'one' when they claim in their *ἐπιτάφιοι* that they, the Athenians, fought alone at Marathon. Indeed, Lysias (2.46) in his *ἐπιτάφιος* specifically mentions how the Plataians fought with the Athenians at the battle of Plataia in 479. While it was certainly natural that they were expressly mentioned for this event, this clear assertion shows that the Plataians were thought of in the Funeral Oration tradition as a

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Dating the paintings is difficult, but there seem to be some indications. The building itself seems to have been completed or near completion by 462/1, the year of Ephialtes' reforms. Jeffery 42, "... Russell Meiggs has pointed out that its original name, τὸ Πεισιανάκειον, after its founder Peisianax, would hardly have been coined if it had been begun after that year: buildings after 462/1 did not carry any private donor's name, for that aristocratic privilege vanished under the leveling foundations of radical democracy". In the Marathon painting Jeffery sees a 'Kimonian climate'. Since Miltiades' son Kimon was ostracized in 462/1, we may be able to establish a *terminus ante quem*. See Thompson and Wycherly (above, n. 10), who date the building to around 460 on the style of the mouldings.

16) The Plataians fought, for example, as a separate unit with Athenian army (Th. 4.67). Aristophanes (*Ranae* 684) refers to slaves upon fighting a single sea battle becoming 'Plataians'. The scholiast RV cites Hellanikos (*FGrHist* 323 a F 25) to show that a reference is made to the freeing of slaves and granting of 'Plataian rights' to them for fighting at *Arginusai* alongside the free Athenians. It seems clear that the Plataian status is considered distinct and separate from normal Athenian citizenship. Note too that Aischines (*In Ctesiphontem* 162) remarks with a sneer on a 'certain Aristion, of Plataian status'. Once again, the distinction is felt.

separate political entity for the Persian Wars even many years later. We are faced, then, with this curious phenomenon. The Athenians know very well that they did not fight alone at Marathon. Indeed, they are confronted daily with contrary evidence at the Stoa Poikile. And the other evidence, such as the *tumuli* at Marathon, the Plataian Athena, and the quadrennial prayer at the Great Panathenaia must have corroborated this realization.

Theopompos may well have had this distortion in mind when he criticized the Athenians for their boastful lies (*FGrHist*



Φιλιππικῶν, ὅτι ὁ Ἑλληνικὸς ὄρκος καταφεύδεται, ὃν Ἀθηναῖοι φασὶν ὁμοῖαι τοὺς Ἕλληνας πρὸ τῆς μάχης τῆς ἐν Πλαταιαῖς πρὸς τοὺς βαρβάρους, καὶ αἱ πρὸς βασιλέα Δαρείον Ἀθηναίων (καὶ) Ἑλλήνων συνθῆκαι. ἔτι δὲ καὶ τὴν ἐν Μαραθῶνι μάχην οὐχ οἶαν ἅπαντες ἕμνοῦσι γεγενημένην, καὶ ὅσα ἄλλα, φησὶν, ἢ Ἀθηναίων πόλις ἀλαζονεύεται καὶ παρακρούεται τοὺς Ἕλληνας. Theopompos is saying of course that the Athenians deliberately invent these lies to aggrandize themselves. Yet in the Marathon distortion we have a special case. Two distinct versions of the same event are current and in conflict. While it is not surprising to find that historical accuracy often founders before the impulse to patriotic propaganda, it is striking that here two versions of the same event can exist side by side in different official traditions. It is not simply forgetfulness or the obscurity of the Plataians that