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Thucydides' Account of Casualties in the Egyptian Expedition

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Abstract: Thucydides' account of the prodigious Athenian losses during the Egyptian expedition has long seemed implausible to many historians and thus potentially inconsistent with his stated commitment to accuracy. Most have taken a reductionalist position, finding one reason or another to regard the historian's report as technically correct if somewhat slanted. This paper attempts to explain the reasons why the Athenian historian described the campaign as he did. In order to foreshadow the blunder of the Sicilian expedition in the sharpest possible terms, thus indicting the Athenian leaders who followed Pericles for failing to follow his strategy, Thucydides highlights the disaster as far as the facts will allow, while at the same time omitting all mention of Pericles' possible complicity so as to preserve that statesman's reputation.

Keywords: Thucydides, Egyptian Expedition, Pericles, Athens, Sicilian Expedition

In discussing Athenian resiliency in the face of Athens' imperial disasters of the past, Isocrates remarks in regard to the Egyptian campaign that the “two hundred ships which had sailed for Egypt were destroyed along with their crews”.¹ As Westlake notes, “the whole of this passage seems to be founded upon a casual study of Thucydides”.² But if “Isocrates' study” of Thucydides' narrative of this event and its repercussions was “casual”, it does not seem altogether indefensible – and may pos-

1 Isoc. *De Pace* 8.86. The precise dates for the campaign are not certainly known, but it is generally accepted to have ended ca. 455/4; see Wade-Gery (1932), 205–227; Wallace (1936), 252–260; de Ste. Croix (1972), 312. For its commencement, see Schreiner (1997), 50–52. For an argument for dating the campaign earlier (462–456), see Paršikov (1970), 107–112. Kahn (2008) makes a persuasive case for placing the campaign earlier, a six-year involvement ending with the destruction of the relief force in 457. All dates in this paper are BC unless otherwise noted.

2 Westlake (1950), 215, n. 6.

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sibly even be conservative – based upon what the historian actually wrote (especially if one were to add to the tally the losses of the relief expedition):

Thus this undertaking of the Hellenes came to naught after a war of six years; and but few out of many (ὀλίγοι ἀπὸ πολλῶν), making their way through Libya into Cyrene, escaped with their lives; the most of them perished (οἱ δὲ πλείστοι ἀπώλοντο) (Thuc. 110.1; trans. Smith 1980).

And when fifty triremes, which sailed to Egypt from Athens and the rest of the confederacy to relieve the fleet there, put in at the Mendesian mouth of the Nile, quite unaware of what had happened, the infantry fell upon them from the shore, and a Phoenician fleet from the sea and destroyed most of the ships, a small number only escaping (αἱ δ' ἐλάσσους διέφυγον πάλιν). So ended the great expedition against Egypt of the Athenians and their allies (τὰ μὲν κατὰ τὴν μεγάλην στρατείαν Ἀθηναίων καὶ τῶν ξυμμάχων ἐς Αἴγυπτον οὕτως ἐτελεύτησεν) (Thuc. 1.110.4–5; trans. Smith 1980).

Taken at face value, the destruction of an original 200 ships (Thuc. 1.104.2) as well as a relief force of an additional 50 along with their complements of men, with only “few out of many” escaping from the first contingent and “a small number only” from the second, would seem to be an immense loss, one which few city-states might endure without catastrophic consequences for their future military operations and for their polity. Not only Isocrates, but any reader of Thucydides could easily do the math here, with “few” and “small” not seeming to allow a casualty count of much less than the roughly 50,000 men putatively engaged (assuming a standard ship's company of 200)³, irrespective of other possible casualties which might have been replaced then lost in turn over the course of the three-year campaign.⁴ In spite of Athens' noted resiliency (the point Isocrates was making and one made elsewhere by Thucydides as well, e.g., 8.96–97), that such an astounding loss, even allowing for a large percentage of casualties to have come from allied contingents such as the Samians⁵, could not have had significant negative effects on Athens and its ability to wage war is hard to accept. Yet Thucydides gives no indications of such in his narrative of robust Athenian operations thereafter over the course of the First Peloponnesian War.

This seeming inconsistency – the suffering on Athens' part of such a complete disaster yet with no apparent political disruption or stifling effect upon its military

³ See Morrison and Coates (1986), 107–108.

⁴ Meyer (1894), 606 suggests that the Greek fleet may have been reduced in numbers during the course of the campaign.

⁵ Thuc. references allies as part of the expedition and its relief at 104.2, 110.1 and 110.4, but gives no specifics. See ML 76–77 for discussion of possible epigraphical evidence of Samian involvement in the campaign (ML 34); Fornara 77 is skeptical of the connection; Schreiner (1997), 64–65 attributes this inscription to fighting on Cyprus instead.

operations – has led scholars to attempt to find some resolution to this apparent problem of reliability in Thucydides' account, often by appealing to the two other major sources which treat the scope of Athenian losses in Egypt, Diodorus and Ctesias.⁶ In the former's account⁷, we are told that the Persians allowed the Athenians to depart under a truce, so that "against all expectations they came safely home" (ἀπελθόντες ἐσώθησαν παραδόξως εἰς τὴν πατρίδα).⁸ Westlake took this to reflect an attempt on Ephorus' part (Diodorus' source here) to reconcile Thucydides and Ctesias.⁹ Ctesias with more specificity speaks of 40 Athenian ships (*Persica* F14, 36) and 6,000 survivors allowed to depart under truce (F14, 38).

Gomme blamed Thucydides' method in the Pentecontaetia (or our misunderstanding of it¹⁰) for the discrepancy:

It is highly probable that after the investment of Memphis ... the majority of the Athenian forces returned. The loss of 40 or 50 ships (cf., Ktesias' figures) was serious enough. This is not, of course, the impression one would get from Thucydides; the sketchiness of the *Pentecontaetia* must account for it.¹¹

6 E.g., Caspari (1913), 198–201, in arguing for accepting Ctesias' lower figures, notes at p. 199 that Thuc. "... does not say that the entire Greek fleet proceeded from Cyprus to Egypt, or that the force dispatched to Egypt was maintained at original strength after the first campaign". Similarly, Peek (1939), 289–306 argues for only the smaller contingent of 40 ships having made their way up the Nile to be subsequently trapped. Meyer (2018), 42–61 maintains that Thuc.'s claim of few losses does not necessarily contradict Ctesias.

7 D.S. 11.77. Westlake (1950) 213, 215 n. 2, regards D.S.'s account as reflecting an attempt by Ephorus to reconcile Thuc. and Ctesias. For analysis of D.S.'s reliability, see especially Meiggs, *AE* 447–458; Green (2006), ix–xiv, 1–47; for an in-depth treatment of D.S.'s use of Ephorus, see Raccuia (1990), 71–106.

8 This is echoed by Just. *Epit.* 3.6. 6–7 who "solves" the problem of post-Egypt Athenian resilience in the First Peloponnesian War by attributing it to its citizens' safe return: *interiecto deinde tempore post reditum suorum aucti et classe et militum robore proelium reparant*; Just.'s account is considered credible by Green (2006), 242.

9 Westlake (1950), 215 n. 2.

10 Wallace (1936), 260: "Thucydides has omitted to explain that the fleet did not remain in Egypt. But he omits a good many important events in the Pentecontaetia. And he could not have dealt so briefly with the fate of 250 ships and 50,000 men. To convict him of such gross disproportion is to show that we have misread his history". For less sympathetic readings, see Węcowski (2012), 154: "From our modern perspective, the practical result of this highly impressionistic narrative is deplorable, to put it mildly"; and Irwin (2023), 110–125; 112: "The omissions one finds in Thucydides' so-called *Pentecontaetia* ... should have compromised his credibility forever". Kallet (2017), 77–78 suggests that part of the blame lies with the incomplete nature of Thuc.'s work.

11 *HCT* 1.322. In terms of what Thuc. left out, there is also famously the Peace of Kallias; see Wade-Gery (1940), 121–156; Mattingly (1965), 273–281; Badian (1987), 1–39. Westlake (1950), 216, n. 39 rightly points out that each excursus in the Pentecontaetia presents its own unique problems. And, the Pentecontaetia is not the only place where Thuc. says less than he might have done in order to provide us with "the gist" (1.22.1), "accurately" (1.22.2–4), and in search of "the truest cause" (1.23.5); cf., his infamous reti-

And, commenting upon Walker's criticism of Thucydides for disposing of the Egyptian campaign "in a couple of pages", while spending two full books on Sicily, even though the former was "the greatest [disaster] in Athenian history" prior to Sicily, Gomme claims, "it was certainly not disastrous *in its effects*; and that makes all the difference, even if we accept the 250 ships and 50,000 men".¹² This last comment is likewise not so easy to accept.¹³ According to Kagan, the distraction of the Egyptian campaign cost Athens an opportunity of eliminating the Spartan threat. Even the loss of the smaller number (of 40 ships and 8,000 men) was a "terrible disaster", which "broke an uninterrupted series of Athenian victories over Persia, caused serious unrest in the Aegean, and put a stop to Athenian efforts on the Greek mainland".¹⁴ This seems a fair assessment. But it is also one which is not at all obvious from Thucydides' narrative. As Wallace noted, "Such [i.e., the complete destruction of the 200 ship contingent along with the 50 sent later] seems to be the natural interpretation of Thucydides".¹⁵

In commenting upon Isocrates' acceptance at face-value of Thucydides' ostensible casualty count for the Egyptian campaign and operations on Cyprus (and noting that he is followed in this by Ael. *VH* 5.10), Green remarks, "[t]hese figures are incredible. The number of triremes is more than Athens' total fleet; the manpower, at 70,000 (350 X 200), is over twice the city's able-bodied free male population."¹⁶ It is fair to say that, while various solutions have been proposed to harmonize Thucydides' language with the reality of the above, this "reductionalist view", as Holla-

cence before Book 8 to comment on Persian matters (for this observation, I am indebted to the referee).

¹² *HCT* 1.322; Walker, *CAH*¹ 5.84.

¹³ In terms of the losses themselves, see also Holladay (1989), 176–182.

¹⁴ Kagan (1991), 86–87.

¹⁵ Wallace (1936), 252; Bigwood's (1976), 1–25 "complex numerical calculations" whereby he attempts to downplay the casualty count are roundly criticized by Green (2006), 242.

¹⁶ Green (2006), 242. The issue of the precise number of Athenian citizens during this period, however, is a vexed one, and not everyone agrees with the ca. 30,000 figure Green is using; Green suggests, based upon Athenian casualty lists, that periods of heavy losses were sustainable because of an Athenian "population explosion" during this time. In comparing Spartan brittleness in this regard to Athenian resiliency, noting that Athens' losses during the Peloponnesian War from repeated combat, the plague, Sicily, etc., did not prevent it from resurgence in the next century, Akrigg (2019), 172 remarks that "this seems a compelling argument in favor of a picture of a fifth-century Athens that was overflowing with people". Similarly, Gomme (1933), 33 suggests 50,000 as a likely figure for Athenian citizen population in 434. See, however, Hansen (1981), 19–32, for the argument that Thuc.'s figure of 13,000 men for the army and 16,000 for the reserve refers to all free citizens and metics capable of bearing arms (2.13.6–7); and for an analysis of the negative effects of Pericles' citizenship law of 451 on the Athenian citizen population, see Hansen (1982), 172–189. Moreno (2007), 31 suggests a total population for Athens of 337,000 on the eve of the Peloponnesian war.

day¹⁷ has termed it, stands as the current scholarly consensus.¹⁸ While any one of the solutions these scholars adduce may provide some reduction of the friction between the implausibility of the numbers Thucydides provides and his reputation for accuracy, none of them satisfactorily resolves the reason for our uneasiness about this issue in the first place, namely, the grating disharmony between what we may think we know and what Thucydides actually says.

Thucydides criticized the Athenian involvement in Egypt. He diminished the importance of the Athenian participation and initial success. He intentionally exaggerated the defeat of the Athenians, making it one of the colossal disasters which marked the beginning of the end of Athenian power.¹⁹

Kahn's assessment is surely correct and fine as far as it goes in suggesting that Thucydides is doing his best to exaggerate the disaster without, at the same time, actually distorting the facts.²⁰ Why he should do so, however, especially in the Penteconteaia, is the more interesting question. It seems wrong to suggest, as Kahn states, that the fiasco in Egypt was one of the developments that "marked the beginning of the end of Athenian power" as this predated the war which is the subject of Thucydides' *History*, especially given his insistence at the outset that Athens (as well as Sparta) was at the peak of its power when hostilities commenced.²¹ Suggesting that Thucydides either at the time or in retrospect felt that the war was doomed to failure regardless of Athenian actions (irrespective of bad policies which overturned Pericles' original strategy for outlasting the Peloponnesians: 1.143–144; 2.13.2; 2.55.2; 2.65.5; 2.65.7) is to misread his method and his purpose entirely.²² Utility based upon

17 Holladay (2006), 176.

18 Adherents of the reductionalist view who are in agreement that Isoc.'s extreme figure does not represent reality and, for various reasons, may be harmonized with Thuc. include: Caspari (1913), 198–201; Wallace (1936), 260; Gomme (1933), 322; Peek (1939), 289–306; Westlake (1950), 214; Ehrenberg (1968), 214–215; French (1971), 59–60, n. 106; Meiggs, *AE* 104–105; Holladay (1989), 399–427; Libourel (1971), 605–615; Robinson (1999), 132–152.

19 Kahn (2008), 424–440.

20 We do not have any clear indications of Thuc.'s source for these events or for these figures. Hornblower, *Comm. on Thuc.* 1.164, suggests that Thuc. may have known, heard or even interviewed survivors; Westlake (1950), 214, on the other hand, attributes the overestimate of casualties to a "mistaken preconception" received in his youth which "may have been added to the probable inadequacy of his information"; for the suggestion that Thuc. may have made use of a Persian source (i.e., Zopyros; cf., *Hdt.* 3.160.2), see Gimadejev (1983), 106–111.

21 Thuc. 1.1.1; 1.19; 1.23.6; 1.69.5; 1.99.3; 1.118.1–2; 144.4; 2.65.13; 7.28.3; 8.96.

22 For an excellent synopsis of the strategy, see Conwell (2008), 80–81; similarly, Tracy (2009), 50; see also n. 42 *infra* for additional bibliography.

insight into the events of the past as a guide to the future is a clearly stated aim (Thuc. 1.22.4).

In light of the above (and in light of his analytical approach overall), it is fair to explore the possibility that the precise manner of Thucydides' presentation of the Egyptian disaster might not have been accidental nor the result of concision in his treatment of this period, but instead conscious and deliberate. For while it is fine to say as Kahn does that Thucydides wrote to explain "where the city went wrong"²³, it remains to explain just how the historian felt that presenting the Egyptian campaign as he did advanced that purpose. After all, one of the main reasons scholars express skepticism about the worst case scenario for Athenian casualties on that occasion is precisely because of the lack of any apparent negative consequences in his narrative thereafter, either in events as he relates them or in his commentary on them.²⁴ This is not, of course, the case with the Sicilian disaster (e.g., Thuc. 2.65.5, 2.65.10–11).

Few readers have failed to connect these two catastrophes, not only because of the obvious similarities of the failure of a nonessential imperial expansion and over-extension conducted while hostilities with Sparta and its allies were still in train, but also no doubt because of the way Thucydides leads us to assume the worst in the case of the outcome in Egypt. And, it is not only the putative casualty count which invites us to make the comparison. In the historian's own words, it was a "great expedition" (τὴν μεγάλην στρατείαν) that came to grief in Egypt (1.110.4), and everything about his treatment of it seems designed to enhance rather than to mitigate the magnitude of the disaster. As Hornblower says, "... the scale is clearly thought of as large".²⁵ Moreover, "Th.'s formulation ... is closely similar to the language with which he concludes the Sicilian expedition, especially the final words of 7.87.6, ὀλίγοι ἀπὸ πολλῶν ἐπ' οἴκου ἀπενόστησαν, 'few out of many returned'".²⁶

So in the end, despite much scholarly evaluation and parsing of the evidence, we are still left with a confounding double question. If the losses of the Egyptian campaign were not quite as large as Thucydides seems to be leading us to believe, why did he choose to leave us with the opposite impression? Moreover, even if the

²³ Kahn (2008), 436; cf., Williams (1998), 299; Crane (1998), 68–71.

²⁴ As Libourel (1971), 614 remarks: "If the Athenian disaster in Egypt was indeed of the magnitude suggested by Thuc.'s account, there remains the problem of why so great a disaster did not produce more important consequences, such as occurred after the disaster in Sicily".

²⁵ Hornblower, *Comm. on Thuc.* 1.177; similarly Green (2006), 242; Hornblower, *ibid.* 1.176, also draws the parallel between the wealth of Egypt and Sicily as imperial enticements.

²⁶ Hornblower, *Comm. on Thuc.* 1.176; cf., Kahn (2008), 436: "... by phrasing similar to the description of the disaster in Sicily (7.87.6), [Thuc.] perhaps intended to create a resemblance and compare the two defeats"; cf., also Rood (1998), 247, n. 85, on Thuc.'s deliberate paralleling of the two disasters.

disaster were only as bad as those who argue for a much reduced casualty count suggest, why are the negative effects of this disastrous expedition not present in Thucydides' subsequent treatment of the First Peloponnesian War? Even in terms of the actual historical event we agree with Meiggs and the reductionalist consensus that Egypt was "a serious setback but not a crippling disaster"²⁷, Thucydides' depiction of it still needs to be explained in light of the treatment of his main subject, the Peloponnesian War itself: Athens made mistakes; Athens lost that war as a result. The way Thucydides presents the Egyptian disaster seems clearly meant to foreshadow what happened in the later war and also no doubt to serve as a negative example, with the parallel of Sicily looming large.

Thucydides attributes Athens' eventual loss to mistakes like Sicily but does not actually say she could not have won anyway. He never says or even directly implies that Athens might have won the earlier war had she not squandered so many resources in Egypt (whatever the true casualty count, it was serious enough), but it seems a fair question to ask based upon his framing of the issue. Without such attribution by the author himself, however, both Egypt and later Sicily provide us with a picture of an extremely resilient Athens. "There is a sense of wonder at Athenian resilience in maintaining campaigns in Egypt and Aigina despite the threat at home."²⁸ Given the weight of the evidence, and the argument from silence as much as anything else (i.e., the apparent lack in Thucydides' narrative of any military or political consequences stemming from the Egyptian misadventure), the reductionalist position would seem to be correct in so far as it goes: for whatever reasons, whether we posit a disproportionate loss from Athens' allies, an earlier withdrawal of significant elements not chronicled by Thucydides, a greater eventual repatriation of those who escaped or were captured than meets the eye in Thucydides' narrative, or a combination of the above and/or other possible reasons, the loss in Athenian manpower was doubtless not as great or as crippling as Thucydides' account seems to imply it should have been. However, even for those who feel that Thucydides' presentation of the campaign is not technically incorrect, there is little question but that the impression he gives is indeed one of a "crippling disaster" and not just a "serious setback", and that is remarkable inasmuch as has already been noted there is no evidence in his narrative of any repercussions at all.

If we accept the reductionalist consensus that Athenian losses in Egypt, though tragic, were not in the end catastrophic, why then did Thucydides choose to present them in such an emphatic and, as it has turned out, controversial way? As suggested above, the compound blunder of the Sicilian expedition has much to do with the

27 Meiggs, *AE* 105.

28 Rood (1998), 241.

answer to this question. We have already noted above the textual signals Thucydides provides to ensure that no careful reader would fail to draw the parallel. Portraying the Egyptian campaign as he does not only foreshadows the later, eerily similar mistakes of the Sicilian expedition, providing the reader with a sense of foreboding, but also ties directly into his historical thesis of informing present decision-making through past experience, the very utility he claims for his *History*:

The absence of romance in my history will, I fear, detract somewhat from its interest; but if it be judged useful by those inquirers who desire an exact knowledge of the past as an aid to the interpretation of the future, which in the course of human things must resemble if it does not reflect it, I shall be content (Thuc. 1.22.4; trans. Crawley 1874).

The clear implication, therefore, of Thucydides' "spinning" of the disaster of the Egyptian campaign as, if not worse than it actually was, at least leaving us with the worst possible impression of its probable consequences along with an ominous feeling about the future, is that his purpose was to indict later Athenian leaders for making very similar and equally costly blunders. This was the sort of mistake which may have cost Athens the war which is the subject of his *History*, undertaken out of a preoccupation with their own power rather than with what was objectively beneficial for the prosecution of that war:

With his successors it was different. More on a level with one another, and each grasping at supremacy, they ended by committing even the conduct of state affairs to the whims of the multitude. This, as might have been expected in a great and sovereign state, produced a host of blunders, and amongst them the Sicilian expedition (Thuc. 2.65.10–11; trans. Crawley 1874).

Thucydides' treatment of Sicily is, of course, extensive, both in terms of the debate which preceded the launching of the campaign and the conduct of the campaign itself, dominating two entire books of the *History*. Given the weight and space given to Sicily, and since Egypt is offered up by Thucydides as a deliberate parallel, why, one may ask, is his treatment of that earlier campaign so spare? It is true, as mentioned above, that the Pentecontaetia is often economical, even to the point of leaving out entirely events that many have considered of great importance (see notes 12 and 13 above). However, since the error of Egypt is clearly important to Thucydides for its foreshadowing and illuminating of Athens' greatest and most costly mistake, namely, Sicily, one would have expected more details, both in terms of the negative effects it produced and also importantly in terms of the decision-making that led to this particularly dangerous over-extension of Athenian resources in time of war.

Whom did Thucydides think was responsible for that gross miscalculation? Did Pericles even have the power at that time to have influenced that event? According to Walker, Pericles' ascent began immediately after Ephialtes' assassination: "It was the death of Ephialtes that gave Pericles his opportunity. In him the democratic

party found a leader whose fame was destined to eclipse that of Ephialtes; and the eclipse was to prove all but total.²⁹ The assassination of Ephialtes took place in 461, but neither Thucydides nor our other sources allow us to extrapolate the exact point at which Pericles became the dominant and guiding figure in Athenian politics as portrayed in the *History*.³⁰ That being the case, in the absence of any specific evidence, we cannot say for certain whether or not Pericles had any role in shaping policy for the Egyptian campaign, let alone what that role that might have been. This would be particularly true if we accept Kahn's earlier date for the commencement of Athenian involvement (potentially as early as 462, predating Cimon's ostracism).³¹ Then again, Thucydides does not attribute the policy to anyone, even though, as we have seen, he clearly frames it as a great mistake along the lines of the later Sicilian expedition.

Thucydides' stated purpose for the Pentecontaetia was to explain the growth of Athenian power which in turn led to the war (compare 1.89 with 1.23.6). As described in his methodological section (1.21–23), fulfilling this purpose from his point of view involved an analysis of the "clearest cause" of the war he was chronicling, along with its course and outcome. That is why linking Egypt with Sicily was so important to his program, namely, to lay the groundwork for explaining Athens' defeat: the Egyptian fiasco preceded Athens' defeat in the First Peloponnesian war; analogously, Sicily was the preeminent blunder which cost Athens so dearly in the next and greater conflict.

It is possible that Pericles bore no responsibility for the Egyptian campaign. Thucydides' narrative certainly tends to lead the reader in that direction. And, if Kahn's early dating is correct, that would be reasonable to conclude, at least in terms of the initial Athenian commitment. However, given what Thucydides has to say of Pericles' tenure later on, it would seem imprudent to assert that he played no role whatsoever – much less that he bore no personal responsibility for the Athenian decision to "double down" in the sending out of later reinforcements (at least in terms of supporting his faction in so doing).³² For being the most powerful man of his time, and the leading Athenian statesman, [Pericles] opposed the Lacedaemonians in everything, and would have no concessions, but ever urged the Athenians on to war" (Thuc. 1.127.3; trans. Crawley 1874). And, "in short, what was nominally a

²⁹ Walker, *CAH*¹ 5.72. See also Kagan (1991), 46f.

³⁰ See especially the criticism of Knight (1970), 1–12 by de Ste. Croix (1972) 79.

³¹ Kahn (2008), 438–440.

³² Cf., Kagan (1991), 73 who remarks in regard to the Egyptian expedition: "Pericles undoubtedly approved the policies adopted by his faction, and since he was its foremost spokesman, he surely took the lead in persuading the Athenians to accept them"; similarly de Wet (1969), 118; Ehrenberg (1968), 214. For important caveats regarding this position, see de Ste. Croix (1972), 316–317.

democracy became in his hands government by the first citizen" (2.65.9; trans. Crawley 1874). If Pericles had been a voice of reason on Egypt, seeking to dissuade his countrymen from overextending themselves in the midst of an ongoing struggle with Sparta (along the lines of his later advice for prosecuting the Peloponnesian War), it seems inexplicable that Thucydides would not have mentioned it at some point. This is especially the case if we accept that Thucydides exaggerated the Egyptian disaster, even if what he says about it was not technically untrue or inaccurate as far as he knew.

Rather than stemming from ignorance, Thucydides' failure to mention the proponents of the Egyptian expedition may have been a deliberate choice. Given his careful research and dedication to accuracy, positing that he may have been too poorly informed to comment in this case seems dangerously speculative, especially given his intimate knowledge expressed in the *Pentecontaetia* of the political and military activities of, e.g., Themistocles (1.91–93), Pausanias (1.95), and Cimon (1.98–102). Further, the details Thucydides gives us of the course of the Egyptian revolt under Inaros and the specifics of the Athenian military campaign (1.104; 1.109–110) make it highly likely that he knew very well the political backstory of its initiation as well.

Positing protecting Pericles' reputation as one possible reason for Thucydides' silence about any role he may have played in that disaster would be speculative. But it seems appropriate to note that introducing Pericles as a political leader only later on serves Thucydides' purposes of explaining Athens' defeat very well: Pericles had a strategy which, arguably, could have been successful. His advice for Athens to wage a conservative war, to husband her resources, and to avoid risky and expansionist operations was ignored by his successors and, in Thucydides' opinion, contributed to her eventual defeat (2.65.10–11). Introducing Pericles earlier would only have muddied these waters, whatever the truth may have been about his part in the Egyptian decision, whether pro, contra or non-existent. In order to heighten the anticipation of similar, repeated mistakes dooming future Athenian chances, overlooking the issue of personal responsibility for Egypt allows the reader to concentrate on the mistake itself. That in turn invites us to assign appropriate blame later on for the loss of the war, guided by Thucydides himself. Repetition by those responsible of what should have been commonly known as grave strategic errors, especially in light of Pericles very specific advice, we are to take as the ultimate cause of defeat.

Although far from being universally accepted, the position that Thucydides' portrayal of Pericles was at least generally favorable has been noted often enough to be less than controversial.³³ Less often recognized is Pericles' essential absence

³³ For the positive assessment position, see de Romilly (1963), 375–376; Connor (1984), 47; Will (2003), *passim*; Christodoulou (2012) 225–254; Martin (2016), 213–214; see Foster (2010), 1–2, for bibliography.

from Thucydides' treatment of the Pentecontaetia (in terms of any possible direction of Athenian policy).³⁴ While Thucydides does record a number of Pericles' military exploits during this period (1.111; 1.114; 1.116–117), in terms of any direction of Athenian policy, whatever part he may have played in formulating it in the time following Ephialtes' assassination all the way up until the threshold of the Peloponnesian War is notably omitted from the historian's narrative throughout the Pentecontaetia. In that respect, leaving out any action on his part in initiating or at least supporting the Egyptian campaign is at least consistent.

However, given the importance Thucydides attached to the Sicilian debacle and his pointed parallels between the two debacles, had Pericles *opposed* the earlier operation and/or its continuation, informing us of that fact would have made the comparison all the more compelling. If, on the other hand, Pericles had been complicit, there would have been good reason for Thucydides to leave out such details. After all, if part of Thucydides' purpose in the *History* is to defend Pericles' strategy for the war, a strategy which failed in his view primarily because Pericles' successors decisively chose not to follow it (2.65.9–10), then attributing to him to any degree participation in an earlier analogous strategic error of comparable magnitude would certainly have undermined Thucydides' case. Sicily was "exhibit A" in the historian's indictment of Pericles' successors (2.65.11).³⁵

If the Egyptian campaign were half as disastrous as Thucydides' narrative leads us to believe, then the Athenians were most definitely ill-served by the demagogues who, failing to learn from their own history, led Athens to abandon Pericles' careful strategy of avoiding just such unnecessary over-extensions of their resources as long as war with Sparta and its allies persisted, and to plunge instead into all man-

For the negative assessment position, see especially Meier (2006), 131–167. Representative of a more mixed assessment is Salmons (2016), esp. 284, n. 72.

³⁴ Apart from military leadership on specific operations in his capacity as general (Thuc. 1.111; 1.114; 1.116–117); Kagan (1969), 88–89 suggests that Periclean involvement in the decision to undertake the Egyptian campaign may have been reason enough for Thuc. to have left Pericles out of the Pentecontaetia altogether in this regard.

³⁵ In any case, it would be hard to accept that Thuc. thought that Pericles at least had not "learned" from the errors Athens made during that first conflict, and that such knowledge had not informed his proposed strategy of waiting out the Spartans and their allies while avoiding unnecessary operations (based in no small part on the negative experience of the Egyptian campaign). For discussions of what Pericles' strategy actually was and what it entailed (which, of course is not necessarily precisely the same as Thuc. gives him to articulate), see in particular Westlake (1945), 75–84; de Wet (1969), 103–119; Delbrück (1975), 139–143; Knight (1975), 150–161; Holladay (1978), 399–427; Spence (1990), 91–109; Lewis, *CAH*² 5.380–388. For a particularly trenchant rejection of equating Thuc.'s description of Pericles' original plan, see Wade-Gery, *OCD*¹ s.v. "Thucydides".

ner of risky enterprises³⁶, of which Sicily was the prime example. “And again, they are bold, even beyond their strength and risk-takers daring beyond their judgment and hopeful amidst dangers” (Thuc. 1.70.3; trans. Lattimore 1998, 34).

The Peloponnesian War saw Athens engaging in many deviations from Pericles' advice, chief of which, according to Thucydides, was the Sicilian expedition, a campaign which bears an uncanny resemblance to the Egyptian expedition during the First Peloponnesian war both in its gratuitous nature and its devastating results as the historian portrays them. According to Thucydides, Pericles had surely been right in the advice that historian gives him to proffer before the war and the Athenians should have known better than to violate it after his demise, informed through a proper consideration of past events (Egypt in particular vis-à-vis Sicily). Such wise deliberation and forethought had been Pericles' particular strength (Thuc. 2.65.8; cf., 1.140.1; 2.34.6), in tandem with the ability to bring the Athenians along to his proper way of thinking (Thuc. 2.65.9). Absent a stern hand on the tiller, however, Pericles' followers allowed the ship of state to drift into the dangerous waters of over-extension of the empire in wartime, a tendency which eventually swamped it. Thucydides' accentuation of the Egyptian campaign's casualties helps to make this particular interpretation of events more persuasive:

... and after he died, his foresight regarding the war was even more widely recognized. For he said that by keeping quiet, looking after the fleet, not extending the empire, and not endangering the city they would prevail; yet they managed all these affairs in the opposite way and in accordance with personal ambition and personal gain they pursued other policies that seemed unrelated to the war, to the detriment of both themselves and the allies, since, when these succeeded, they brought honor and benefit more to individuals, but, when they failed, they did damage to the city regarding the war (Thuc. 2.65.6–7; trans. Lattimore 1998, 107).

It suited Thucydides' purposes to leave the impression of an Egyptian disaster which was more rather than less catastrophic, both to demonstrate the folly of engagement in imperial expansion in the midst of open conflict with Sparta on the one hand, and on the other to demonstrate that the death of Pericles and the abandonment of his plan was the reason why Athens lost the war. In the historian's view, defeat at the hands of the Peloponnesians had not been inevitable, Rather, it was Pericles' successors who were responsible for the defeat rather than Pericles having

³⁶ Thuc. 2.13.2; 2.65; cf., 1.70.1–9; 4.65.4; 8.96.5. Kahn (2008), 436, describes Thuc. as depicting the Athenians as “restless, ambitious adventurers who engaged in war on many fronts in contrast to the cautious Periclean strategy”; similarly, Connor (1984), 45; Rood (1998), 247, 289. Crane (1998), 170–171 states that their resultant expansionism is Thuc.'s “main theme”.

been responsible for starting the war in the first place.³⁷ The best way for him to treat this evidence so as to deflect any possible suspicion that might have come Pericles' way, rightly or wrongly, while foreshadowing the failures of his successors, was to present the Egyptian campaign in the worst possible light without naming names.

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³⁷ For Thuc.'s efforts to diminish any impression of Pericles' responsibility for the war and the defeat, see Vogt (1956), 249–266; Badian (1993), 125–162; Rasmussen (1995), 25–46; Podlecki (1998), 135.

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