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Thucydides: The Funeral Oration of Pericles Study Guide, 2011

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THUCYDIDES: THE FUNERAL ORATION OF PERICLES

STUDY GUIDE, 2011

Steven Alan Samson

Outline

Pericles presents a formal public eulogy (panegyric) to honor the war dead. He died within a matter of months due to a plague that broke out as a result of the war.

1. Pericles alludes to Solon, the lawgiver, who made such a speech part of the law. He begins with the usual apologies that his words will be inadequate for the occasion. He also extols the fallen in terms that might cause the audience to become incredulous and even envious. In the American tradition, we would call it a typical example of *buncombe*, from which we derive the slang word bunk (an American form of blarney, bombast, or patriotic “tub-thumping”).
2. Pericles hits all the expected notes: honoring the valor of **ancestors** [filial piety], who built Athens into an empire; the bounty of the mother country; its military achievements; its originality and admiration as a model to be imitated by other countries (“our constitution does not **copy**. . .”); the equality of its citizens and rule by the whole body of them (**democracy**); the path to office-holding depends on ability, not connections (cf. Roman idea of a *cursus honorum*); its liberality (everyone minds his own business); fear for reputation instills law-abidingness (obedience to and respect for the law) and respect for custom in the citizenry. These are all expressions of mimetic desire.
3. Athens is depicted as a casual place where people enjoy themselves: a magnet for commerce. Athens is an open city that welcomes strangers and the produce and luxuries of the whole world.
4. The Spartans and their allies do not invade Athens alone, while Athens advances unsupported into their territory. Yet Athenians are not regimented; they live as they please. But such a free citizenry produces naturally courageous warriors who win battles even on foreign soil. Evidently Thucydides wishes to leave an impression of *hubris*.
5. Alternative translation: “Our love of what is beautiful does not lead to extravagance; our love of the things of the mind does not make us soft.” Ordinary citizens are shrewd judges of politics; public men have their private affairs, as well. Those who do not participate in public affairs are useless (lit. idiots). The generosity of Athenians (in giving but not receiving favors) is exalted, but this confidence of liberality suggests something similar to Bastiat’s false philanthropy, designed to keep the recipient in the doer’s debt.
6. Athens is called “the school of Hellas.” The versatility of its citizens enhances the power of the state. Thus education is meant to promote the state: an issue that was later raised against Socrates and his students, including Alcibiades. When tested, Athens exceeds her reputation and has earned ever-lasting admiration. Pericles boasts that Athens has forced every sea and land to be the highway of its daring and has left imperishable monuments.
7. Steadfastness in fighting for the “glory that was Greece” is thought to sanctify or cover a man’s imperfections. Athenians would risk all and only flee from dishonor. Pericles extols the Athenian heroes who have the whole earth as their tomb. This is significant in light of the myth that that Athenians are born of the earth (Gr. *autochthony*). As Jean-François Pradeau puts it (*Plato and the City*, p. 16), the Athenians regarded themselves as “humans born from the earth (Lat. *humus*) which nourished them and then made them the friends of the gods.” Pericles commends them as a model to be imitated. He celebrates the glorious death that rescues the warrior from ignominious reverses and the envy of the living. It is only the love of honor that does not grow old.

8. Pericles' model of female excellence for widows is to be invisible and not the subject of gossip. The children of fallen heroes are brought up at state expense as a garland of victory (Gr. *stephanos*) for the fallen and their families.

Review

ancestors
law-abidingness

originality
confidence of liberality

democracy