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Cain and Alcmaeon: Repetition and Variation in Thucydides

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AT THE END of his account of the third year of the Peloponnesian War (429–428 BCE), Thucydides recounts a strange story. While describing an Athenian campaign in the region of Acarnania, he starts to explain why Athens decided it was impractical to fight with the inhabitants of Oeniadae, namely that when the River Achelous rises in winter, the city becomes surrounded by water. But then Thucydides gets side-tracked, and starts talking about the islands opposite Oeniadae, the Echinades:

And most of the Echinades islands lie opposite Oeniadae, right by the mouth of the Achelous, with the result that this large river is constantly building up deposits of silt there. Some of the islands are already joined to the mainland, and there is reason to expect that the same thing will befall each of them before too long. The current is strong, deep, and turbid, and the islands are closely packed together and serve to trap the silt (which cannot disperse), lying as they do in an irregular pattern and not in rows, with the result that they do not offer the water a straight channel into the sea (2.102.3–4).¹

κεῖνται δὲ καὶ τῶν νήσων τῶν Ἐχινάδων αἱ πολλαὶ καταντικρὺ Οἰνιαδῶν τοῦ Ἀχελῷου τῶν ἐκβολῶν οὐδὲν ἀπέχουσαι, ὥστε μέγας ὢν ὁ ποταμὸς προσχοῖ αἰεὶ καὶ εἰσὶ τῶν νήσων αἱ ἠπειρώνται, ἐλπίς δὲ καὶ πάσας οὐκ ἐν πολλῷ τινὶ ἄν χρόνῳ τοῦτο παθεῖν· τό τε γὰρ ῥεῦμά ἐστι μέγα καὶ πολὺ καὶ θολερόν, αἶ τε νῆσοι πυκναὶ, καὶ ἀλλήλαις τῆς προσχώσεως [τῷ μὴ σκεδάννυσθαι] ζύνδεσμοι γίνονται, παραλλάξ καὶ οὐ κατὰ στοιχὸν κείμεναι, οὐδ' ἔχουσαι εὐθείας διόδους τοῦ ὕδατος ἐς τὸ πέλαγος.

This digression is slightly puzzling, but it is still in line with what most historians expect of Thucydides. It fits that model of an analytic historian, who appears to promise in his introduction (1.22.4, developing 1.21.1) that he will not include the fabulous (τὸ μυθῶδες), but will instead offer a clear picture both of what has happened *and* what can be expected to happen—which, he says, will be similar, if not always quite the same. Besides, alluvial deposits were something of a hot topic in contemporary Greek historiography. Herodotus had theorised that the land in the Nile Delta was created through this process (2.10–11), and he had even mentioned Acarnania and the Echinades as a point of comparison (2.10.3).² So far, so scientific. But then Thucydides goes even further off-piste, and starts talking about the distant, mythical past:

These islands are deserted and quite small. And there is a story that, when Alcmaeon son of Amphiaraus was wandering in exile after murdering his mother, Apollo told him in an oracle to live in this land. He intimated that Alcmaeon would have no release from his terrors until he found a place that, at the time when he killed his mother, had not yet seen the sun and was not even land then, since he had polluted all the other land. Alcmaeon was at his wits' end, as the story goes; but eventually, he noticed this sandbank of the Achelous, and he thought that sufficient land to support life had been deposited there since he had begun his long wanderings after killing his mother. So, he settled there near Oeniadae, established a seat of power, and named the country after his son Acarnan. These are the sort of sayings we have received about Alcmaeon (2.102.5–6).

ἐρημοὶ δ' εἰσὶ καὶ οὐ μεγάλαι. λέγεται δὲ καὶ Ἀλκμέωνι τῷ Ἀμφιάρειω, ὅτε διη ἀλᾶσθαι αὐτὸν μετὰ τὸν φόνον τῆς μητρός, τὸν Ἀπόλλω ταύτην τὴν γῆν χρῆσαι οἰκεῖν, ὑπειπόντα οὐκ εἶναι λύσιν τῶν δειμάτων πρὶν ἂν εὐρῶν ἐν ταύτῃ τῇ χώρᾳ κατοικήσῃται ἥτις ὅτε ἔκτεινε τὴν μητέρα μήπω ὑπὸ ἡλίου ἑωρᾶτο μηδὲ γῆ ἦν, ὡς τῆς γε ἄλλης αὐτῷ μεμιασμένης. ὁ δ' ἀπορῶν, ὡς φασί, μόλις κατενόησε τὴν πρόσχωσιν ταύτην τοῦ Ἀχελώου, καὶ ἐδόκει αὐτῷ ἰκανῆ ἂν κεχῶσθαι δίαίτα τῷ σώματι ἄφ' οὐπὲρ κτείνας τὴν μητέρα

οὐκ ὀλίγον χρόνον ἐπλανᾶτο. καὶ κατοικισθεὶς ἐς τοὺς περὶ Οἰνιάδας τόπους ἐδυνάστευσέ τε καὶ ἀπὸ Ἀκαρνᾶνος παιδὸς ἑαυτοῦ τῆς χώρας τὴν ἐπωνυμίαν ἐγκατέλιπεν. τὰ μὲν περὶ Ἀλκμέωνα τοιαῦτα λεγόμενα παρελάβομεν.

What should we make of *this* story? Why did Thucydides include it?

The scholarship has struggled for an answer. We know that by Thucydides' time, Alcmaeon had already been the subject of two plays by Euripides, another by Sophocles, and an epic poem besides.³ Maybe Thucydides wanted to record a less-known version of the tale. Maybe he wanted to give a more rational account of it. Or maybe, as one recent commentator suggests, Thucydides highlights the reported nature of this story—stressed three times—not because he wants to offer his own version, but to make his reader reflect on the limitations of their own mythical tradition.⁴ Perhaps. But why, then, did Thucydides include it *here*? Because, by coincidence, he just happened to be on the subject of alluvial deposits in Acarnania?

There is much we simply cannot know. The plays and poems about Alcmaeon are largely lost. Thucydides, who left his work unfinished, may have planned to revise this section anyway. There is a sense in which Alcmaeon's story appears to us as a fragment, without much of its literary and historical context. But one context we do have for trying to make sense of it is a comparative one. Thucydides' story about Alcmaeon resembles in several respects the story about Cain told in the Hebrew Bible, in Genesis 4, after he had killed his brother Abel:

And the LORD said to Cain, "Where is Abel your brother?" And he said, "I do not know. Am I my brother's keeper?" And He said, "What have you done? Listen! your brother's blood cries out to me from the soil. And so, cursed shall you be by the soil that gaped with its mouth to take your brother's blood from your hand. If you till the soil, it will no longer give you strength. A restless wanderer shall you be on the earth." And Cain said to the LORD, "My punishment is too great to bear. Now that You have driven me this day from the soil and I must hide from Your

presence, I shall be a restless wanderer on the earth and whoever finds me will kill me.” And the LORD said to him, “Therefore whoever kills Cain shall suffer sevenfold vengeance.” And the LORD set a mark upon Cain so that whoever found him would not slay him. And Cain went out from the LORD’s presence and dwelled in the land of Nod east of Eden. And Cain knew his wife and she conceived and bore Enoch. Then he became the builder of a city and called the name of the city, like his son’s name, Enoch. (Gen. 4:9–17).

Cain and Alcmaeon have a lot in common. Both kill a family member. Both suffer a curse, which specifically relates to the blood of their victim polluting the land. Both become wanderers and receive some kind of divine guidance. Both find a distant land, in which they settle, and both name the place after their sons. They are both stories about what happens after an internecine crime. But more than that, both stories are framed aetiologically: Alcmaeon’s story explains how Acarnania got its name, while Cain’s explains both the name of the city and, in a more poetic way, the land itself, for “Nod” means “wandering.” And both seem, in their style and composition, to be versions of well-known stories woven into a wider narrative. The parallels between the two tales are not simply thematic; there are also parallels in literary craft. And that is because both stories, above all, are about repetition and its limits.

There are, of course, various stories about exiles who killed family members or founded cities within the Ancient Greek world, although none resemble Alcmaeon’s quite like Cain’s. And there have been many sophisticated treatments of repetition in all sorts of Greek literature, from Homer to Herodotus. Bringing in Biblical Hebrew might seem *unnecessary*. But there is innate value, I think, in comparative reading as a heuristic, as a way of seeing new sides to old stories—even if, on reflection, it reveals the distinctive as much as the common, and even if, in the end, we can say we did not *need* to do it. The act of comparison can be both clarificatory as a starting point for reading and thought-provoking as an end in itself. I think that is true

even for a text as prosaic as Thucydides'. And it is especially so when studying repetition and variation, for comparative reading intrinsically foregrounds those themes.

At the very least, reading Alcmaeon's story alongside Cain's will help us to see new, literary aspects of the Thucydidean passage. It might also illuminate something of why Thucydides includes Alcmaeon's story in the first place. But, most importantly, it will cast new light on the significance and complexity of repetition for Thucydides: both as a property of the past about which he writes and as a feature of the text he creates.

Repetition in Thucydides

AT A METHODOLOGICAL level, the comparison is not as crazy as it seems. Both scholars of Thucydides and scholars of the Hebrew Bible have long been attentive, in their different ways, to the importance of repeated words. In *Histoire et Raison chez Thucydide*, now almost 70 years old, Jacqueline de Romilly stresses the significance in Thucydides' *History* of what she calls *filles conducteurs* ("guiding threads"): verbal correspondences which indicate thematic unity between sections.⁵ These correspondences might link two passages with a precise echo, or they might thematise a set of passages through one repeated term. De Romilly gives the example of *ῥώμη* ("strength"), which is used repeatedly in Book Seven to highlight the significance of growing Syracusan morale.⁶ De Romilly sees these guiding threads as a way of insinuating rather than explicitly stating interpretations, and says that they give the relationships they describe an "almost mathematical rigour."⁷ Whether or not they would put it in de Romilly's terms, pretty much every literary scholar of Thucydides has been struck by the extent to which he uses intricate intratexts—especially in connecting disparate parts of the narrative—and the deeply analytic way in which he appears to do so.⁸

Over the course of the twentieth century, Biblical scholars were developing similar ideas. Among the wealth of insights they have offered into the narrative art of the Hebrew Bible, lit-

erary scholars such as Robert Alter and Meir Sternberg have especially stressed the importance of repetition, including the repetition of key terms, as a convention of Biblical prose. Alter traces this idea back to Buber's discussion of the *Leitwort* ("keyword") in biblical prose—especially the Pentateuch—which Buber summarised in a lecture from 1927 as follows: "By *Leitwort* I understand a word or word root that is meaningfully repeated within a text or sequence of texts or complex of texts; those who attend to these repetitions will find a meaning of the text revealed or clarified, or at any rate made more emphatic."⁹

As Buber acknowledges, this *Leitwortstil* was known and understood by many Jewish commentators before him. Like de Romilly, he simply named it and described it. But where de Romilly describes the repetitions as almost *mathematical*, Buber prefers to think of them as *musical*. Shortly after the passage above, he writes: "Such measured repetition, corresponding to the inner rhythm of the text—or rather issuing from it—is probably the strongest of all techniques for making a meaning available without articulating it explicitly."¹⁰ And a few lines on: "...without encroaching on the configuration of the narrative, it nonetheless significantly *rhythmicizes* it—by *Leitworte*. Those who listen will hear the higher meaning in the similarity of sound."¹¹ I wonder whether this difference arises because Buber encountered repetition as a translator, whereas de Romilly was first concerned with proving the unity of Thucydides' text.

In this last passage especially, I think Buber touches on something about repetition which is valuable for understanding its nature in Thucydides' *History*. Thucydides, as we noted, promised his readers a clear picture both of what had happened and what would happen (1.22.4), but he qualified this second claim, to say that these future events would often only be *similar* to—not the same as—the past ones. That is not the sort of qualification which comparisons with mathematics readily convey. What the language of music captures is the way repetition not only suggests certain interpretations, but also structures the narrative through its rhythm—creating its own time *within*

the text, where comparisons take place—and then shows how events *sometimes* repeat themselves, but are sometimes slightly different. Thucydidean scholars have long been attentive to the ways Thucydides creates his own kind of time. Most famously, Pierre Vidal-Naquet argued for a distinction between “historical time” and “logical time,” suggesting that figures from the distant past such as Minos (we might add Alcmaeon) existed in the latter, where they served as a prototype for future events.¹² But whenever intratextual echoes suggest this sort of comparison, Thucydides is often just as interested in change as he is in continuity. Verbal *similarity*, as scholars of intertextuality know well, illustrates not only repetition but also its limits.

Sometimes these subtle discontinuities are simply part of Thucydides’ craft. In a famous example, Pericles tells the Athenians their empire is *like* a tyranny (2.63.2) and then Cleon tells them, three years later, that their empire *is* a tyranny (3.37.2). We hear in that repetition *both* a sense of how alike the two leaders and their visions of Athens seemed, *but also* of how they were not quite the same. That difference turns out to be central to Thucydides’ account of Athens’ demise (2.65.10). But especially when he reflects on the dangers of oral tradition, Thucydides is also fascinated by what he sees as a general propensity to mishear similarity as sameness. Earlier in Book Two (2.54.2–3), when the plague devastated Athens, Thucydides says many Athenians saw a parallel between their situation and the plague which an ancestral oracle had supposedly foretold. But others thought they remembered the oracle wrong, because it spoke not of a plague (λοιμός) but a famine (the ever so-slightly different Greek word λιμός).¹³ Thucydides does not pass judgment either way. He simply records what was said. But he does predict that if another war with Sparta came and they suffered a famine, they would probably (but only probably!) remember the oracle the other way round. Thucydides finds a higher meaning, concerning repeated human behaviour (per 1.22.4: κατὰ τὸ ἀνθρώπινον). But that meaning lies precisely in his observation that people create the verbal repetitions which they want to hear.

So, when thinking about Thucydidean repetition, there might be something for choosing the comparison with music over mathematics. Variation matters just as much as connection. But either way, mathematical or musical, both biblical and Thucydidean scholarship have seen repetition as an important way of implying deeper themes within and between stories.

Local Repetition

THERE ARE TWO specific kinds of repetition, both in Cain's story, that might particularly help us understand its role in Alcmæon's. The first is the role of local repetition (i.e., within a short section) in characterization, especially when juxtaposing the human and the divine. Meir Sternberg gives a fine discussion of such repetition in Cain's story in *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative*:

One measure consists in developing structures of repetition whose features (redundancy, equivalence, variance) gain intelligibility in terms of the perspectival gulf between God and man. . . . Thus, the first interpersonal crime in history is preceded by the notice, "Cain was very angry and his countenance fell" (4:6). Since this inside view conveys the truth on the highest authority, it is strange to find it repeated in the next verse: "The Lord said to Cain, Why art thou angry and why has thy countenance fallen?" For the repetition involves both extreme redundancy in meaning and, despite the change of the speaker, parallelism in form. Yet the excesses combine to make rhetorical sense: the twofold equivalence demonstrates God's knowledge—of internals (anger) as well as externals (fallen face)—by maximum reference to the narrator's authority. In turn, this effect sharpens the irony levelled at Cain, who soon plays the innocent in a manner reminiscent of his father's attempt at concealment.¹⁴

We could say much the same about Alcmæon and Apollo. Why does Thucydides make Alcmæon repeat in his thoughts both the narrator's detail that he is a wanderer and Apollo's re-

minder that he killed his mother? Because he is slow to grasp the divine plan. There is perhaps a touch of humour as well as tragedy in the way Thucydides characterizes Alcmaeon, who grasps the process of siltation with difficulty (μόλις κατενόησε) after wandering for time which, he admits himself, was hardly brief (οὐκ ὀλίγον χρόνον). Thucydides does not tell us exactly how long Alcmaeon had been wandering before he heard Apollo's oracle. But we can imagine Alcmaeon trekking all over Greece, repeating Apollo's oracle to himself—potentially for the *entire time* it took an inhabitable mound of land to form—until he finally saw the siltation and realized this was the place he could settle. And perhaps, when he realized this, Alcmaeon cunningly exploited the vagueness of Apollo's oracle. But more likely, I think, Apollo had this specific place in mind from the start, and therefore must have known all along that it would take Alcmaeon a while to figure it out.

Thucydides' Alcmaeon must cut a different figure to the tragic Alcmaeons of Sophocles' and Euripides' plays. From what we can tell, they seem to have had rather more lamented sufferings. In the later of Euripides' versions, *Alcmaeon in Corinth* (probably produced in 405 BCE), some of these are probably blamed on the eponymous city, Athens' wartime enemy. They also seem to have had rather more direct journeys to safety. Thucydides' Alcmaeon definitely differs in this respect from Pausanias's, who is conveniently told that the land will be created through alluvial deposits, and even more so from Apollodorus's Alcmaeon—perhaps drawing on Euripides' earlier play about Alcmaeon, *Alcmaeon in Psophis*—who is told by Apollo to head straight for the River Achelous.¹⁵ If Thucydides' Alcmaeon has a parallel, it is in Plutarch's wry account from *On Exile*. Plutarch says that the poets said Alcmaeon settled on land created by siltation to escape the curse, but he reckons that Alcmaeon just wanted to live somewhere small, quiet, and peaceful.¹⁶ Like Plutarch, Thucydides opts for a more prosaic tradition; but in Thucydides' version, that choice emphasizes Alcmaeon's ignorance.

It is for this reason Thucydides changes the term used for wandering from ἀλάομαι in the first case (a *hapax legomenon* in Thucydides, but common in tragedy) to πλανάομαι in the second: for the latter, like our Latinate word, connects wandering with being in a state of *error*. And perhaps this kind of characterization is also why Thucydides repeatedly qualifies his story with phrases like “it is said.” On the one hand, like the thematic repetition of terms to do with wandering in Genesis 4, it tells us the story has something specially to do with the theme of oral repetition. But on the other, it mimetically represents the unnamed storytellers—and their audiences—as characters rather like Alcmaeon themselves.

Connective Repetition

THE OTHER KIND of repetition in both Alcmaeon’s and Cain’s stories is the way *Leitwörter* can explain the arrangement, and even the presence, of passages which seem disconnected from the surrounding narrative. In *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, Robert Alter puts it clearly:

Word-motifs are more typically used, however, in larger narrative units, to sustain a thematic development and to establish instructive connections between seemingly disparate episodes. . . . This sort of literary mechanism, at once a unifying device and a focus of development in the narrative, will be recognizable to anyone familiar with, say, Shakespeare’s elaboration of the multiple implications of the word “time” in *1 Henry IV*, or with Fielding’s multifariously ironic treatment of “prudence” in *Tom Jones*, or, in a more musically formal compositional deployment, Joyce’s conjuring with “yes” in Molly Bloom’s soliloquy.¹⁷

For Alter, a key case-study is Tamar’s story in Genesis 38. Like Alcmaeon’s story, this passage seems to have very little to do with those around it, until you see the verbal repetitions linking it both with the previous chapter, when Joseph’s brothers sell him into slavery, and with subsequent episodes in Joseph’s story.¹⁸ The repetitions explain why that story is told where it is, the way it is.

We see something similar in Genesis 4. At the end of the previous quotation, Sternberg touched on one way Cain's story repeats Adam's from Genesis 3. As Nahum Sarna's commentary on Genesis elucidates, such repetitions are crucial for understanding why Cain's story—which, like Alcmaeon's, almost certainly existed previously in some independent form—is told in the place and the fashion that it is. The language of Genesis 4 retraces the steps of Genesis 3: the wording of 4:11 echoes 3:14, 4:7 closely resembles 3:16, and the verb “know” (*yada'*) occurs exactly four times in each chapter.¹⁹ In turn, Cain's conflict with Abel prefigures the fraternal rivalries which persist in Genesis from generation to generation: Isaac and Ishmael, Jacob and Esau, Joseph and his brothers. Although Cain's line vanishes after Genesis 4, the pattern and the language of his crime do not. It is already a grisly echo of his father's disobedience, and it will be echoed itself—although not without variation. It is striking, for instance, that Joseph's brothers do not shed his blood (37:22, 27, 31)—the blood which, in Abel's case, cried out to the Lord from the ground (4:10–11)—but instead throw Joseph into the earth *alive*, before selling him into slavery. Because Joseph lives, Genesis does not finish with vengeance, which Cain fears will follow him forever (4:14). It finishes with fraternal reconciliation, and an end to the repetition.

We can make some sense of Alcmaeon's story in the same way. In the immediate vicinity of 2.102, there are several verbal links with the revolt on the island of Lesbos and the subsequent Athenian invasion, which come at the start of Book Three: several months along chronologically, but only a few lines along in Thucydides' text. This revolt marked a new stage of the war: the Athenian invasion which followed was the first large-scale amphibious attack in the Archidamian War. And Thucydides is concerned to connect that story with Alcmaeon's. Thucydides interrupts his account of the invasion to remind the reader of the Acarnanians, juxtaposing the attack on Lesbos with another attack on Oeniadae, by both land and sea (3.7). The Mytilenians pointedly describe the Lesbian cities as isolated (3.11.1:

ἐρημότεροι), recalling Thucydides' first description of the Echinades (2.102.5: ἐρήμοι δ' εἰσί). By the time winter comes, the Mytilenians are cut off by land and sea (3.18.5), just as Oeniadae is in winter (2.102.2)—but whereas Oeniadae is isolated through its natural defences, the Mytilenians are isolated by their enemy's walls. In short, Lesbos *looked like* one of those islands from the mouth of the Achelous, or their quasi-island capital of Oeniadae, in the land which was said to have offered Alcmaeon refuge from conflict. But things turned out differently. Lesbos ended up joined with the mainland.

Most importantly, Thucydides connects the two stories through the name of Apollo. Thucydides very rarely names Apollo, but when he does, it is usually in the context of liminality. In Book One (1.29), the temple of Apollo stands literally at the edge of land and sea, and literarily at the boundary between war and peace. Later in Book Three (3.94), Thucydides mentions a temple of Apollo when all the Acarnanians—*except* the people of Oeniadae—try to attack Leucadia, which had once been an island, but was since joined by siltation to the mainland. And shortly afterwards (3.104), when the Athenians dedicate the island of Rheneia to Delian Apollo, they link Rheneia and Delos with a chain. This association between Apollo and liminality goes back at least to the *Homeric Hymn to Delian Apollo*, which Thucydides himself cites parts of in 3.104. There, the personified island of Delos fears rumours of Apollo's power to turn land into sea:

I am deeply afraid, in my mind and my heart,
That whenever he first sees the light of the sun,
Scorning me, the island (for I have rocky soil),
He will flip me over with his feet and push me down, deep in the sea.
Then huge waves will roll endlessly over my head
And he will go to another land, which pleases him,
Where he will set up his temple and his wooded groves.
But in me, many-footed creatures will make their lairs,
And black seals will make their homes, undisturbed, in the absence of
people (70–78).

τὸ ρ' αἰνῶς δεῖδοικα κατὰ φρένα καὶ κατὰ θυμόν,
 μὴ ὀπότ' ἂν τὸ πρῶτον ἴδη φάος ἡελίοιο
 νῆσον ἀτιμῆσας, ἐπεὶ ἦ κραναήπεδός εἰμι,
 ποσσὶ καταστρέψας ὥσῃ ἄλλος ἐν πελάγεσσιν·
 ἔνθ' ἐμὲ μὲν μέγα κῦμα κατὰ κρατὸς ἄλις αἰεὶ
 κλύσσει, ὃ δ' ἄλλην γαῖαν ἀφίξεταί, ἧ κεν ἄδη οἱ
 τεύξασθαι νηὸν τε καὶ ἄλσεα δενδρήεντα·
 πολὺποδες δ' ἐν ἐμοὶ θαλάμας φῶκαί τε μέλαινα
 οἰκία ποιήσονται ἀκηδέα χητεῖ λαῶν.

Alcmaeon's story clearly reverses the fate of his father, Amphiarus, who was swallowed by the earth before Periclymenus—son of Poseidon—could kill him. But since Alcmaeon's story is also a story about Apollo, we might equally think about it as an inversion of these lines. Thucydides' Apollo does not condemn land to the sea, but out of the sea creates land.

Early in his account of the Athenian invasion of Lesbos, Thucydides twice mentions the *Leitwort* Apollo (3.3.3, 3.3.6). It is a clear reminder of Alcmaeon's story. And in 3.3, just as in 2.102, Apollo is named in the context of a reported story. The Athenians were told that the Mytilenians would come out of the city to celebrate the festival of Apollo Maloeis, as they presumably did every year. As in 2.102, Thucydides does not say who told them. On this basis, the Athenians reasoned they could launch a surprise attack at that time—that is, once the Mytilenians had crossed the boundary out of the city. But boundary crossing works both ways. The Mytilenians heard about this plan from a man who crossed from Athens to Euboea, went by foot to Geraestus, and then by boat to Mytilene (3.3.5)—a journey, Thucydides stresses, across both land and sea. So, Thucydides says, they did not go to the temple of Apollo Maloeis. Instead, they barricaded their walls and the harbour: both land and sea again.

This story involving Apollo is, once again, concerned with the possibility of isolation. It asks whether the city of Mytilene can serve as a sanctuary, like Alcmaeon's land, once the Athe-

nians alight on Lesbos. When the city is cut off from Apollo, that seems to prefigure its fate. But the story is also concerned, like Alcmaeon's, with beliefs *about repetition*. And from this perspective, it shows how stories *themselves* can mislead those, like the Athenians, who take historical repetition for granted.

From Sea to Land

SO, ONE REASON why Alcmaeon's story is placed where it is in Thucydides' *History* is to contrast it with Lesbos. That is because, in Thucydides' view, the moment when the cities on Lesbos revolted from the Athenian Empire is the moment when being on an island ceased to offer protection from the Archidamian War. In isolation, Alcmaeon's story sounds like an encouraging story for the Lesbians: about finding a peaceful land, in and amongst the water, which offered a refuge from conflict. Maybe that is how the story was first told. But, by putting the story in its geological context, Thucydides tells it differently. For him, it is an illustration of the inexorable, natural shift from sea to land. That is why he prefaces it with that all-important remark about the Echinades in 2.102.3: ". . . Some of the islands are already joined to the mainland, and there is reason to expect (ἐπιτις) that the same thing will befall each of them before too long."

Herodotus had asserted that half these islands had joined the mainland (2.10.3). Thucydides is unwilling to make such a precise claim about something so hard to prove. But Thucydides nonetheless looks to the future. He appeals to his distinctive notion of hope (ἐπιτις), which so often misleads his characters, but is also the basis on which he decided to begin his narrative (1.1.1). And he predicts, cautiously as ever, that no island will escape the process.

At this point we must move beyond the comparison with Cain. As many commentators have observed, the dissolution of the boundaries between land and sea is a rich and distinctive theme in Thucydides' work. It is an important

aspect of the way he sees movement (κίνησις) as characteristic of the war—itself a uniquely great κίνησις. As his preface shows (1.23.3), he associates this κίνησις with natural disasters, and he also states that such disasters meant that tales of old which were passed down orally ceased to be unbelievable (τά τε πρότερον ἀκοῆ μὲν λεγόμενα [. . .] οὐκ ἄπιστα κατέστη), even when they were not backed up by facts. Alcmaeon's story seems like it might be this kind of tale. In the way Thucydides claims to reproduce and contextualize it, it illustrates a core motif within his understanding of the war and its influence on storytelling.

But more than that, the story illustrates Thucydides' wider sense of an almost cosmic instability, exposed by the war, which threatens any straightforward claim to predictability or repetition. That sense of instability is something he shared with Aristotle. When Aristotle comes to discuss alluvial deposits in his *Meteorologica* (351a19–353a26) he begins (and ends) his discussion by stressing that places are constantly changing from sea to land and land to sea: “Thus, mainland and sea also change places. It is not that one area is always earth, another area always sea, for all time, but rather what was once dry land becomes sea, and where now there is sea, there again will be land” (351a23–26).

While Aristotle supposes there must be some order to this process, he says that the brevity of human memory makes it very hard to tell (351b9–28). He lists war, alongside famine and plague (both mentioned in Thuc. 1.23.3), as one cause of this inscrutability. So, when Aristotle goes on to discuss the siltation of the Nile, he implicitly calls into question accounts like Herodotus's, which speculates, based on the siltation of the Nile, about how long it would take the Arabian gulf to silt up. For Aristotle, war and other disasters limit our capacity to make such predictions about an ever-changing natural world.

In the section of the preface mentioned above, Thucydides compares his work directly with Herodotus's. Herodotus's war, Thucydides tells us (1.23.1), was resolved in two sea battles and two land battles; but his own war, marked by unsurpassed nat-

ural disasters, represented much greater upheavals in both the natural and human world. His war was not just different in degree, he suggests, but in kind, because it was a period when Herodotus's static vision of land and sea suddenly appeared short-sighted. Herodotus's work ends, after all, with a view of historical repetition that seems to presuppose certain land is continuously fertile or poor (9.122). And while Thucydides, in his *Archaeology*, initially seems to endorse that view—in his description of archaic Athens (1.2), for instance, and when he divides Athens and Sparta into a sea-power and a land-power (1.18.2)—once his war begins, he leaves it behind. During his war, the natural world became more unpredictable than anyone could remember—it made them rethink their sources of memory altogether—to the extent that stable designations of land and sea collapsed. It is the realization of that collapse, and the limits it places on historical repetition, which Thucydides' framing of Alcmaeon's story recalls.

Periclean Repetition

BUT THUCYDIDES' PREDICTION that each of the Echinades would eventually join the mainland has another specific resonance besides Lesbos. It also echoes the fate of Athens, which we are told Pericles had construed as a quasi-island. Besides looking forward to the start of Book Three, 2.102 looks back to Pericles' words in his speech to the Athenians just before the war started, where the *Leitwörter* land (γῆ), mainland (ἡπειρος), and island (νῆσος) also appear in close connection:

If they march against our territory, we shall sail against theirs, and you cannot equate the devastation of a part of the Peloponnese with the devastation of the whole of Attica. They will have no other territory they can replace it with, except by fighting; but we have plenty of land both in the islands and on the mainland. Mastery of the sea is the key. Just think: if we were island dwellers, who would be more impregnable? So,

we must now think like islanders as much as we can: let your land and your homes go, but keep guard of the sea and the city . . . (1.143.3–5).

ἦν τε ἐπὶ τὴν χώραν ἡμῶν περὶ ἴωσιν, ἡμεῖς ἐπὶ τὴν ἐκείνων πλευσσοῦμεθα, καὶ οὐκέτι ἐκ τοῦ ὁμοίου ἔσται Πελοποννήσου τε μέρος τι τμηθῆναι καὶ τὴν Ἀττικὴν ἅπασαν· οἱ μὲν γὰρ οὐχ ἔξουσιν ἄλλην ἀντιλαβεῖν ἀμαχεῖ, ἡμῖν δ' ἐστὶ γῆ πολλή καὶ ἐν νήσοις καὶ κατ' ἡπειρον· μέγα γὰρ τὸ τῆς θαλάσσης κράτος. σκέψασθε δέ· εἰ γὰρ ἦμεν νησιῶται, τίνες ἂν ἀλιπτότεροι ἦσαν; καὶ νῦν χρὴ ὅτι ἐγγύτατα τούτου διανοηθέντας τὴν μὲν γῆν καὶ οἰκίας ἀφεῖναι, τῆς δὲ θαλάσσης καὶ πόλεως φυλακὴν ἔχειν . . .

Pericles' plan rings with the perceived wisdom of Alcmaeon's story. He tells the Athenians that there will always be more land, away from the fighting, even if the land they have now gets devastated because of his policy. But if they control the sea and act like islanders, Pericles says, they will be safe from the worst of the war. In the words he gave Pericles, Thucydides grasped that the Periclean strategy of abandoning the land in Attica and hiding behind the Long Walls essentially treated Athens as if it were the city of Oeniadae or that sandbank Alcmaeon found: as an amphibious place, a utopia between island and mainland.

But, as the narrative of Thucydides' *History* progresses, that strategy turns out to be short-sighted. Athens invaded a succession of islands, and eventually fell itself in 404. As various commentators have noticed, one feature of Thucydides' battle narratives—at least to the end of Book Seven—is the way land-battles and sea-battles increasingly overlap, most famously at Pylos and Sphacteria, culminating in that tragic scene in Sicily where the invading Athenian fleet is forced to try to flee on foot (7.75.7).²⁰ Like Alcmaeon, Pericles reasoned from past to present, but not to the future. He did not reckon with the process by which islands would join the mainland. Now, it is true that in 2.65.12–13, Thucydides suggests that the strategy itself was essentially sound. He says that Athens might never have lost the war had it not been for Athenian infighting. But in the way Thucydides presents Alcmaeon's story, we see a more crit-

ical perspective. It suggests that Pericles' logic of sharply dividing the world into land and sea (which is also prominent in his third speech: 2.62.2), like Herodotus's, had too narrow a view of the movements, the rhythm of history, the forces of change at work. One generation might benefit from a change from sea to land, as Alcmaeon did, only for a later generation to suffer from the same. But no city, according to Thucydides' prediction in 2.102.3, could hope to make itself an island forever.

Several commentators have wondered whether Alcmaeon's story is meant in some way to recall Pericles, who was supposedly descended from a different Alcmaeon. Some have suggested a link with Thucydides' account of the Cylon conspiracy (1.126), which also foregrounds oracles and the oral tradition, but relates directly to Pericles and the alleged Alcmaeonid curse.²¹ There is definitely something to this link; hopefully it is now clear why. The Alcmaeon of 2.102 may not have been Pericles' biological kin, but he is a poetical relation. And in a similar vein, the fate of Oeniadae is closely linked with Pericles' story. It is first mentioned in 1.111.3, where Pericles fails to take the city in an otherwise successful campaign. We might imagine him reflecting on his failure as he left, perhaps noticing the siltation, and starting to think about his island strategy. And for a time, Oeniadae seemed safe from the war, repelling the Athenian general Asopius (3.7.3) and offering refuge to those on the run (3.114.2). But eventually, in the eighth year of the war, even it was forced into the Athenian alliance (4.77.2). And that is the last we hear of it.

The Exile's Voice

AT THE END of Alcmaeon's story, Thucydides does something which, for him, is very unusual. He uses a first-person plural verb in his authorial voice: "These are the sort of sayings we have received (*παρελάβομεν*) about Alcmaeon" (2.102.6). This usage repeats—or rather, varies—what Thucydides did in the passage where he introduced Minos as the oldest thalassocrat

of whom we know by oral tradition (Μίνως γὰρ παλαιάτατος ὢν ἀκοῆ ἴσμεν, 1.4.1). There, as various commentators have noted, the first-person plural verb imitates Herodotus's own phraseology in 3.122.2. Herodotus says that we know (ἡμεῖς ἴδμεν) Polycrates was the oldest Greek to try to be a thalassocrat, explicitly aside from Minos and anyone earlier, because Polycrates was "the first of what might be called the human race" (τῆς δὲ ἀνθρωπίνης λεγομένης γενεῆς Πολυκράτης πρῶτος). Unlike Herodotus, Thucydides considers Minos's story in some sense part of human history, part of repeatable time. As Vidal-Naquet observes, Minos's story is, among other things, a prototype for Athenian imperialism.²² In that respect, it is like Alcmaeon's. But unlike Alcmaeon's story, which is *received*, Thucydides says that Minos's story gives him and his readers *knowledge*. Thucydides' wording in 1.4.1 seems to commit to the truth of Minos's story, like his other uses of ἴσμεν in the Archaeology (1.13.4, 1.18.1). But its echo in 2.102.6 makes no such commitment. Thucydides is simply interested in the reportage.

Thucydides' "we" in 1.4.1 is clearly Herodotean. But who is Thucydides' "we" at the end of Alcmaeon's story? Maybe it is just a stylistic oddity, a lapse into the royal "we." But it might be another nod to the Athenian resonances of this story. We know, after all, that tales about Alcmaeon, such as Euripides' *Alcmaeon in Corinth*, were popular there in the last years of the war. And this section of Book Two almost certainly post-dates them: several commentators have observed that the account of the Macedonian King Archelaos in 2.100 sounds like it was written around or after the time of his death in 399 BCE. Perhaps, when he used that first-person plural, Thucydides was especially keen to stress—as he was in his account of Harmodius and Aristogeiton (6.54–59)—that Athenian oral traditions *continued* to be inaccurate, if not dangerous, right up to the time when he wrote. Maybe echoes of the Periclean dream endured.

Or maybe, Thucydides' "we" tells another, more personal story. Like Alcmaeon, Thucydides spent time as an exile. Athens was his home, but in 424, after failing to defend Amphipolis, he

was forced to leave it behind (5.26.5). We do not know whether he ever returned. For someone who fought in the war, presumably killed in it, and was then exiled by it, this version of Alcmaeon's story would have been a melancholy one, but also hopeful: the sort of story, whether or not it was true, which an exile might *want* to repeat. It tells of hope in a new land, free from the pollution of the past, where one can raise a new family and belong to a new people. The realism of that story is undiminished: each island must eventually join the mainland, and all the troubles that it brings. But it embraces, at least, the hope of a fresh start.

The distinctive feature of Thucydides' version of Alcmaeon's story, and the way he weaves it into his narrative, is his stress on the alluvial deposits. And at first, they sound like a way of naturalizing a pre-existing story. But in reality, the alluvial deposits turn that story into something else altogether. It is a reflection on repetition, historical and linguistic, and above all—in a Heraclitan vein—on the way that a process of constant repetition might, in time, yield change. It illuminates something even deeper than the Thucydidean motif of subverted expectations, which Hans-Peter Stahl famously saw as central to Book Two, and to the *History* as a whole.²³ Just as the constant flowing of the river and the constant siltation yields new land, so various repetitions in Thucydides' history yield new outcomes, and this story itself, passed down through the generations, yields a new meaning in Thucydides'—the exile's—voice.

In Euripides' *Alcmaeon in Corinth*—assuming the story Apollodorus attributes to him (3.7.7) is a summary of this play—it seems that Alcmaeon had left his son Amphilocus and his daughter Tisiphone to be raised by Creon and Merope, King and Queen of Corinth. Creon and Merope, however, sold Tisiphone into slavery and claimed that Amphilocus was their own son. Alcmaeon, after inadvertently buying Tisiphone, returned to Corinth to find Amphilocus. That Amphilocus, Apollodorus's summary says, would later found Amphilocian Argos (a city in the region which neighbored Acarnania) in ac-

cordance with Apollo's oracle. Meanwhile, one of the very few surviving fragments from Euripides' play—presumably from the end—describes King Creon fleeing the city in exile: "Look! The king is fleeing, as a childless old man. Anyone who is mortal ought not think too much of themselves" (F 76).

In Euripides' version, Alcmaeon's story seems to be one of return and reconciliation, whereas the Corinthian Creon goes into exile: a reversal which surely reflects the enmity between Athens and Corinth at the end of the Peloponnesian War. As far as we know it, *Alcmaeon in Corinth* sounds like a partisan story. And in that story—which, Aristotle says, had more than a little of pantomime about it²⁴—exile is the fate of the defeated. But more than that, Euripides stresses that Creon's is a childless exile, without any hope that his royal line might continue to the next generation. His exile represents his total defeat.

Thucydides' story is different. In his account, Alcmaeon's exile ends not in a return, but in new land; and there, despite his matricide, his family history goes on. To an Athenian reader after the war, that variation from Euripides' story would, I suspect, have been immediately striking. There are other, superficial ways in which Thucydides might be critiquing Euripides' account. When he introduces Amphilocian Argos, for instance, he mentions that Amphilocus was its founder (2.68.3), but says that Amphilocus was the son of Amphiaraus, which would make Amphilocus Alcmaeon's brother, not his son. But at a rather deeper level, Thucydides tells a different story about exile than Euripides' wartime play. For Thucydides, exile does not necessarily mark the end of one's history. It can instead mark a new beginning.

That possibility of a new beginning is, I think, one last thing that Thucydides' story shares with Genesis 4. The root from which the name of Cain's son, Enoch, is derived (*ḥ-n-kh*) denotes education and inauguration.²⁵ Although Genesis, on the whole, is rather suspicious of urban life, the name which Cain gives to both his son and his city strikes an optimistic contrast to the name of the land in which he

wanders. And back in the west, from where Cain fled, the story also ends with hope. There, it ends with the birth of Seth, a new child for Adam and Eve (4:25). In another piece of parallelism with Genesis 3, this is the second and last time Eve is mentioned by name in the Hebrew Bible. In Genesis 4, despite Cain's fratricide, history continues to the next generation. And the same is true for Thucydides' Alcmaeon. Reflecting on the tragedies and vagaries of historical repetition, both stories of murder and exile sound mournful and hopeful notes.²⁶

NOTES

1. Translations of Thucydides are lightly adapted from Jeremy Mynott, ed. and trans., *Thucydides: The War of the Peloponnesians and the Athenians* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013). Translations of Genesis are from Robert Alter, *The Five Books of Moses* (New York: Norton, 2004). All other translations are my own. The Greek text of Thucydides is taken from Henry Jones and Enoch Powell, eds, *Thucydidis Historiae* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1942); the Greek text of The Homeric Hymn to Apollo is taken from Martin West, ed. and trans., *Homeric Hymns. Homeric Apocrypha. Lives of Homer* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003).

2. On siltation, cf. Arist. *Mete.* 351a19–353a26 (discussed below); Strab. 1.2.29–30. Πρόσχωσις in these texts can refer to accumulated silt (cf. Thuc. 2.77.3) or to the process of siltation itself.

3. We have fragments of the two Euripides plays: *Alcmaeon in Psophis* (produced 438 BCE) and *Alcmaeon in Corinth* (produced c. 405 BCE). Apollod. *Bibl.* 3.7.7, which mentions Euripides, seems to summarise the latter.

4. Amanda Ledesma Pascal, "Reading Thucydides' Mythological Stories: Alcmaeon in The Peloponnesian War," in *Our Beloved Polites: Studies Presented to P.J. Rhodes*, ed. Delfim Leão et al. (Oxford: Archaeopress, 2022), 23–30, which includes an extensive bibliography of earlier discussions of this passage. For a recent, general discussion of Thucydides and myth, see Tim Rood, "Thucydides and Myth," in *Historical Consciousness and the Use of the Past in the Ancient World*, ed. John Baines et al. (Sheffield: Equinox, 2019), 331–44.

5. Jacqueline de Romilly, *Histoire et Raison chez Thucydide* (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1956), 33–45. In Elizabeth Trapnell Rawlings' English translation, *The Mind of Thucydides* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2012), the equivalent pages are 15–23.

6. Jacqueline de Romilly, *Histoire et Raison chez Thucydide* 36–37.

7. Jacqueline de Romilly, *Histoire et Raison chez Thucydide*, 33–34.

8. Another important perspective is Antonios Rengakos's use of the con-

cept of *Fernbeziehungen* (“long-distance relationships”), which he borrows from scholarship on epic poetry. See his “Fernbeziehungen Zwischen den Thukydideischen Reden,” *Hermes* 124 (1996): 396–417.

9. Martin Buber, “Leitwort Style in Pentateuch Narrative,” in *Scripture and Translation*, Martin Buber and Franz Rosenzweig, translated by Lawrence Rosenwald with Everett Fox (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 114. This passage is discussed in Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, rev. ed. (1981; repr. New York: Basic Books, 2011), 116–17.

10. Martin Buber, “Leitwort Style in Pentateuch Narrative,” 114.

11. Martin Buber, “Leitwort Style in Pentateuch Narrative,” 115.

12. Pierre Vidal-Naquet, “Divine and Human Time,” in *The Black Hunter* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986), 46–47. Vidal-Naquet explicitly draws on de Romilly’s work in this section.

13. There are various poetic resonances in this passage, most importantly Hes. *Op.* 243.

14. Meir Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985), 92.

15. Paus. 8.24.8–9; Apollod. *Bibl.* 3.7.5.

16. Plut. *Mor.* 602e.

17. Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, 118–19.

18. Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, 9–11.

19. Nahum M. Sarna, *The JPS Torah Commentary: Genesis* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1989), 31.

20. One particularly thoughtful discussion of this motif (and its own limits) is Stewart Flory, “The Death of Thucydides and the Motif of ‘Land on Sea,’” in *Nomodeiktēs: Greek Studies in Honour of Martin Ostwald*, ed. Ralph M. Rosen and Joseph Farrell (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1993), 113–25 (esp. 117–21).

21. See, for instance, Simon Hornblower, *A Commentary on Thucydides: Volume One* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1991), 378.

22. Pierre Vidal-Naquet, “Divine and Human Time,” 46.

23. Hans-Peter Stahl, *Thukydides: die Stellung des Menschen im geschichtlichen Prozess* (Munich: Beck, 1966); the expanded, English edition is Hans-Peter Stahl, *Thucydides: Man’s Place in History* (Swansea: The Classical Press of Wales, 2003). The chapter on Book Two (‘Plan und Wirklichkeit (Buch II)’) is 75–102 in both editions.

24. See Arist. *Eth. Nic.* 1110a27–28.

25. As Nahum M. Sarna (*The JPS Torah Commentary: Genesis*, 36) explains, there is an alternative reading where the city is named after Enoch’s son, Irad. Although few commentators favour it, that reading has something going for it, since Irad sounds rather like Eridu, the oldest city in Sumerian thought.

26. The author would like to thank *Arion*’s anonymous reviewers and the members of the Cambridge University Classics Faculty’s Postdoctoral Work-In-Progress group for their comments and encouragement.