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HPAH4005 Cauldron of Democracy and Tragedy: Classical Greek History and Literature

Timeline Additions for 431-421 B.C

On the use of Homer in Book 3 of Thucydides' The Peloponnesian War

Thucydides' use of Homer in his own work, *The History of The Peloponnesian War*, occurs on more than one occasion. Homer's *Iliad* is used at the very start of the work to accentuate the severity of the Peloponnesian War, drawing direct comparison to the Trojan War that takes place in the *Iliad*, with Thucydides believing that, that War (Trojan) will pale into insignificance compared to this War (Peloponnesian)¹.

The mention of Homer's *Iliad* early in Thucydides' own work shows that the works of Homer were not far from Thucydides' mind whilst he is composing his chronicle of a Great War. In book 3, the relevance of Delos and its purification enables Thucydides to tie into to his effort the Homeric Hymn to Apollo and to glorify the actions of the Athenians². Thucydides believes the Hymn to Apollo to be the work of Homer³. The initial cleansing of Delos by Peisistratos is mentioned by Herodotus⁴. The binding of the three works must hold some significance to Thucydides, maybe the episodes use reiterates the worth of his own endeavour. The purification of Delos and Apollo could also be looked as another reference to Homer's *Iliad*, and its opening book, the plague brought by Apollo onto the Achaeans (Danaans/Argives) caused by Agamemnon's unwillingness to give up his war prize, Chryseis, the daughter of a priest of Apollo's (Chryses)⁵.

The hymn itself, also, mentions competition, an aspect key to Athenians and all other Greeks⁶. The use of the hymn is perhaps used less as a tool of comparison and used more to accentuate the importance/role of competition, its role within society and how, possibly, it inevitably leads to war. Or whether it is used as a suggestion that Thucydides is openly competing against the greatest poet, Homer, and is relishing the challenge like a true Athenian.

It is possible that Thucydides considered his work on the history of the Peloponnesian War to be more than just an endeavour of recording the historical events of the War, and that he also considered it to be an artistic tribute to the War and those who fought and died in it. Thucydides' heavy reliance on fictionalised speeches display his own rhetorical prowess and powers (those with such powers were considered virtuous within Athenian society) and, of

¹ Thu. 1.3-12

² Thu. 3.104; Hornblower, 1991, p.523

³ Thu. 3.104; Hornblower, 1991, p.523

⁴ Her. Hist. 1.64

⁵ H. Il. 1.1-25; Thu. 3.104

⁶ Thu. 3.104

course, Thucydides' allusions and references to the works of Homer are evidence to this estimation by way of displaying his elite Athenian education⁷.

Word count 443

⁷ Saunders, 2004, 'Plato Laws', p. XXXVI; Xen. Sym. 3.5; Plu. Mor. 2a-2b

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