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

Timeline Additions for 431-421 B.C

Demosthenes (General) and his portrayal by Thucydides in his 'History of the Peloponnesian War'.

Demosthenes, son of Alcithenes¹, appointed statēgos in 427/6 BC. Statēgos is the term for military commander, of both land and sea, was an elected position which with it held political connotations also². However, it is thought that Demosthenes had no designs on a political career³.

It is considered by some scholars that Thucydides is highly critical of Demosthenes in the main⁴. Evidence suggests that his plans were often too elaborate⁵. Misreporting, misrepresentation and heavily fictional accounts/speeches by Thucydides becomes a factor when using Thucydides' work to try and gain a true picture of a certain person involved in the war⁶. This issue with the work of Thucydides obviously leaves it open to interpretation, for example, it is also suggested that he was a masterful tactician⁷. What must be remembered that whatever the outcome of anything from a skirmish to a campaign victory, or defeat, lies, ultimately, at the feet of the general in command.

The two would have undoubtedly known each other, Thucydides was well aware of the strains that come with command, he himself was a general in this particular war and tasted bitter defeat⁸.

If you consider the evidence of one of Demosthenes speeches, a fictional account, by Thucydides himself, Demosthenes comes across as being in total control, inspirational to his men and standing at the front line with his men, showing great courage⁹. Also, Thucydides uses this particular speech to show the little nuances of Demosthenes command by adding into the speech details of how Demosthenes and his men will defeat the soon to be landing army of the Lacedaemonians¹⁰. Thucydides also goes on to explain that the Lacedaemonians did just as Demosthenes expected, which I believe is evidence of Thucydides portraying Demosthenes in a favourable light¹¹.

¹ Thu. 3.91

² Rhodes, Ameling and Tinnefeld, 'Strategos', 2006, Brill's New Pauly; MacDowell, 'Stratēgoi', 2005, Oxford Reference.

³ Westlake, 1968, p.98

⁴ Westlake, 1968, p.97-98

⁵ Westlake and Hornblower, 2005, Oxford Classical Dictionary online

⁶ Lattimore, 1998, p.192

⁷ Westlake and Hornblower, 2005, Oxford Classical Dictionary online

⁸ Lattimore, 1998, p. 188

⁹ Thu. 4.10

¹⁰ Thu. 4.11

¹¹ Thu. 4.11

Word count 351

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