

**David G. SMITH**

**Acting the Fools: Thucydides on the Dramatic Origins of the Sicilian Expedition**

In the opening chapter of his sixth book, Thucydides claims, "At the start of the Sicilian expedition, most Athenians were *apeiroi* both of the extent of the island they were about to attack and of its Greek and barbarian inhabitants." Although this statement is often taken to be true, upon closer inspection it proves to be one of the most easily disproven statements made by the historian otherwise known for the reliability of his facts.

This paper first demonstrates the tenuous veracity of Thucydides' claim by presenting a survey of evidence which (taken together) indicates that the Athenians were actually quite well informed about the lands and peoples of Sicily in 415. In fact, it is clear that Athens had sent hundreds and perhaps thousands of its citizens to Sicily in a variety of capacities: ever since the Persian War, Athens had continual diplomatic and (after the 430's) military contact with both Greek states and non-Greek peoples in Sicily (by Thucydides' own account, sixty boatloads of Athenians fought with Sicilian Greeks and natives from 427 to 424); in addition, Athenians could not have failed to note and learn from the presence of merchants, traders, and such highly visible and influential Sicilian visitors as Gorgias and Lysias. Given that these types of contact involved public meeting and discussion in the assembly and elsewhere, there can be no doubt that a large amount of both first and second-hand information about Sicily and its peoples was circulating among the Athenians at the very moment when Thucydides accuses them of being *apeiroi*.

What, then, are we to make of Thucydides' claim? This paper proceeds to explore the historian's motives for making such an easily disproven statement. Recent work has suggested that Thucydides' treatment of the Sicilian expedition is a part of a wider elite attack on democratic modes of knowledge (Morris 1996, Ober 1998). It is exactly this type of uncontrolled, public dissemination of information to which Thucydides is referring when he claims that the Athenians are *apeiroi*. In other words, what makes Thucydides call the Athenians ignorant of Sicily is not the actual state or amount of their knowledge, but the haphazard and indiscriminate manner in which they have come to know. For the Athenians very precisely have NOT learned about Sicily from reliable authorities on the subject (e.g. Thucydides' own likely source, Antiochus), but from each other in the agora, the stoa, and the assembly. Just as, even now, the citing of journals is more respected than the citing of web pages, so the horizontal dissemination of information under democratic control at the end of the fifth century was disparaged as a source of true knowledge by elite Athenian intellectuals such as Thucydides.

Finally, this paper reveals what must have been, for Thucydides, the most dangerous possible source of (mis)information about Sicily: the dramatic stage. For indeed, the same Athenian citizens who were exchanging information in the assembly and on the streets had been bombarded for decades by the dramatic poets with bits of information about the peoples, places, flora, fauna, myths, legends, and history of Sicily. This phenomenon started with Aeschylus (whose autopsy had made him a '*vir utique Siculus*') and continued all the way down through Aristophanes' early comedies to Euripides' *Troades*,

produced just weeks before the departure of the Sicilian Expedition. In the extant dramatic passages which mention Sicily, the same types of themes reoccur over and over again: the fertility of its land, the number and variety of its peoples, its position in relation to Carthage and Italy, etc. It is, therefore, highly significant that these are the same themes around which Thucydides builds the rhetoric of the debate between Nicias and Alcibiades over whether or not to attack Sicily. By twisting the dramatic *topoi* about Sicily generated over decades in front of dramatic audiences into the rhetorical *topoi* manipulated by the Athenian elite in front of the assembly, the historian indicates his mistrust of the public knowledge base. By retracing how these dramatic commonplaces about Sicily became the rhetorical basis for invading it, we can see why the quintessentially democratic formation of knowledge was, for Thucydides, no knowledge at all.