Language plays a substantial role in the Themistocles legend. In this paper I will discuss three incidents of language interaction and acquisition in the Life of Themistocles and read Plutarch's account against the earlier tradition.

I will argue that by Plutarch's time the Themistocles legend had become a battleground for questions of language and self-definition. We will also see how this trend is continued by authors after Plutarch, who emphasize and invent incidents in Themistocles' life which demonstrate the primacy of the Hellenic language and culture.

PART I: LANGUAGE BARRIERS AT ARTEMISION

The first incident that I will discuss is the message Themistocles allegedly inscribed on the shores of Euboea after Artemision. The inscriptions ask the Ionian Greeks serving with the Persians to defect, and Herodotus (8.22.3) deduces that Themistocles had two plans. Either the Persians would not be able to read the message, and the Ionians would choose to defect, or the Persians would read it and consequently distrust the Ionians.

It is extremely unlikely that such a message was ever inscribed, and Herodotus' inclusion of that detail has called into question the historicity of the entire anecdote. Even Pritchett, in his rebuttal of the "liar school", has to concede that such a message, although it may well have been

---

1. This essay has benefited greatly from the comments and criticisms of Jacqueline Long, Gwyn Morgan, and Peter Green. My thanks to them, as well as to Carlos Schrader and the other organizers of the V Simposio Español sobre Plutarco.
written, could hardly have been inscribed. Nonetheless Herodotus found the anecdote worth telling, regardless of its inherent implausibility, because it sets up an implicit contrast with Themistocles' later career.

Herodotus stops his narrative without telling of Themistocles' exile and time in Persia. I agree with Fornara's argument that Herodotus' history is pointed towards these unreported incidents, and that his portraits of both the Athenian politician and the Spartan Pausanias are clearly played against his audience's awareness of their future careers. This is especially true of their Medism, as I will show by the example of Pausanias, and then demonstrate how these concerns apply to the inscriptions at Artemisium.

Pausanias was condemned for his collaboration with the Persians, but the offense that is emphasized in all the sources after Herodotus is his adoption of their clothing and customs. Herodotus does not depict Pausanias decked out in Persian garb, but instead shows him refusing to stoop to barbarian customs like defacing a corpse: τὸ πρὸς μὲλαν νεκρόν βασιλέως ποταμός ἐν πέρι Ἑλληνικοῖς, καὶ εἰς τὸν ναὸν δὲ ἐπιβλέποντα (9.79). Herodotus then shows Pausanias resisting if not mocking Persian luxury (9.82), by contrasting the Persian food and splendor with simple Spartan fare.

Instead of portraying him as a cross-cultural collaborator, Herodotus makes him a defender of traditional Greek values. He is not being revisionist—he is being dramatic, by heightening the contrast between what Pausanias was and should have been and what he eventually became.

Something similar seems to be happening in his depiction of Themistocles, particularly in the field of language and language acquisition. Ever since Thucydides, all our sources have commented on Themistocles' impressive feat of mastering the Persian language. He is shown acquiring a foreign language to communicate with another culture. Herodotus, on the other hand, depicts Themistocles exploiting linguistic difference to create barriers between Greeks and barbarians. His ruse at Artemisium relies on the assumption that cross-cultural negotiations like the Ionians, despite their best efforts, are never completely trusted. Either the message will be confined to the Greeks alone, or, if passed on to the Persians, it will serve to incite suspicion. As was the case with Pausanias, here too Herodotus seems to be playing with his audience's awareness of the later life of Themistocles. As we can deduce from other sources at least as early as Thucydides, Themistocles soon became legendary for his skill in learning Persian, and for the trust and power that this knowledge gave him. Herodotus' audience could understand Themistocles' famous exile in Persia as the unreported antistrophe to the scene after Artemisium.

After Herodotus the inscriptions at Artemisium are only reported by Trogus, Plutarch, Polyaeus, and Aelius Aristides. Of these only Plutarch and Polyaeus include Themistocles' double ruse of exploiting bilingual misunderstanding and suspicion as found in Herodotus. But for Plutarch, unlike Herodotus, there is no other side of the coin. He knows Themistocles as a hero of Greek culture, not an ambivalent figure who slips between Persians and Greeks.

PART II: KILLING THE INTERPRETER

Themistocles' role as a defender of Greek culture is particularly clear in the second incident, the story of the execution of the interpreter of Xerxes' offer of land and earth in 491 BC. Our earliest source for the incident is Plutarch, who includes it in a series of anecdotes leading up to the events of 480:

ηπανείπετα, δὲ αυτὸν καὶ τὸ πέρα τῶν διήγεσεν ἔργον ἐν τοῖς περιήγοροις ἀπὸ βασιλέως ἐπὶ γῆς καὶ βασιλέως εἶσθαι, ἐρμηνεύει γὰρ ὧν ἄλλους ἐνεργεῖται ἐπὶ τοῖς ἑλληνικοῖς βασιλείας προστάγμαται ἠπόλλος χρήσατο (Themistocles 6.1).

There are several problems here. It is doubtful that Xerxes sent heralds to Athens at all. Herodotus (7.32) explicitly says that they were sent everywhere but Athens and Sparta, because Darius' heralds had been killed there in 491 (H. 6.48, 7.133). Aelius Aristides is the only source besides Plutarch for the death of the interpreter and he gives two conflicting accounts:

τῷ δὲ ἐρρέεται τὰ γράμματα διαχειριστών μὲν ἀπεδόοσαν, ὡς ἐπηνειδήτερ Ἑλλην ἠρι, ἔχου πλέον τῷ πάθει πάντων εἰς, ἀπέκρισε δὲ καὶ πάντων, ὡς ἐν τῇ φήμῃ τῶν Παρναθαίων ἕξεσιν τοῖς βασιλείωσι, καὶ τὸ ἱερων περιήγημα αὐτοῦ τὸν γᾶς τῆς πάλαις ἀπόκειτο οὐκ ἔχουσι κατὰ τὴν πάλαις τῶν Ἑλλήνων ἑμφατίας τῇ φώτες πολεμίας γενεαλογίας, καὶ οὕτω δὴ ἡπότους εἰς τὸ βάρβαρον
Or. 13, Panathenaei (1198 Dindorf, 122 Jebb, 80 Oliver)

6 This tradition is discussed in detail in the third section of this paper.
The first account is set in the time of Darius, in the second account, the heralds are killed at Themistocles' instigation. By Plutarch's day the tradition seems to have been thoroughly confused. Nonetheless, the three accounts have one thing in common: an insistence on the purity of the Greek language. According to Plutarch Themistocles was praising for arranging that Xerxes' interpreter should be killed 'on the grounds that he dared to use the Greek language in the service of barbarian overlords'. Aelius' comments are, first: 'They killed him, because it was not right to serve barbarians, even just with one's voice', and second: 'Themistocles accused him of using his speech for the Persian against the Greeks, just as if it were any other weapon'. The Greek military victory over the Persians is now recast as a triumph of Greek culture as well. Themistocles is praised, not for his adaptable language skills, but rather for his rejection of such opportunistic bilingualism. He is shown keeping the language barrier intact, thereby preventing Greeks from acceding to the barbarian.

In the *Alexander*, Plutarch states that he is on the lookout for significant details that reveal a man's character. While the interpreter incident in the *Themistocles* does not receive any drawn-out dramatic emphasis, Plutarch did remember it and think it worthy of inclusion. It suited Themistocles as Plutarch wanted to portray him, and this picture had some resonance among later Greeks, as shown by quotes from Aristides. Both authors are happy to represent Themistocles as a hero resisting other cultures and preserving the primacy of Greek culture. This resistance is in marked contrast to earlier accounts of Themistocles' acquisition of the Persian language.

**PART III: LEARNING PERSIAN**

All of our sources agree on the following: Themistocles went to Persia and was received by the king; he asked for one year's time, in which he studied the Persian language. And he died before he could or would aid the king in conquering Greece. There are differing accounts of his journey to Persia, his promises to the king, and the manner of his death. Right now I am concerned with how each author offers a different portrayal of Themistocles' motivation for learning Persian and his success in doing so.

Thucydides mentions that Themistocles learned all he could of Persian language and customs, and then promised to subjugate Greece for the king. He died before the king could call in that promise, and Thucydides mentions a rumor that Themistocles committed suicide because he was unable to make good on his promise. Nepos follows Thucydides' account very closely, but he adds the claim that Themistocles could speak Persian better than the Persians, a claim which is not necessarily an exaggeration.

Diodorus presents a different account. There are no promises made by Themistocles and no discussions of attacks against Greece. The king and Themistocles are somehow reconciled without a hint of betrayal. But all is not peaceful in the Persian court. A faction of noble Persians holds a grudge and wants Themistocles executed for Salamis. Themistocles learns Persian, not to help the Persians or to adapt to their ways, but to do that most Athenian of all things: to go against other Persians.

At this point Diodorus reports that some writers have the Great King ask Themistocles to prepare the invasion of Greece. Themistocles kills himself instead and is accorded this praise: 'And the Greeks were jubilant when they heard of his death. He died in his own land, a true Spartan.' Diodorus distances himself from this account, but does not offer an alternative and raises the patriotism issue in his own evaluation of Themistocles which immediately follows. A summary will show how Diodorus has recast the final act of Themistocles' life differently from Thucydides' version.

1. He makes no promise of an invasion of Greece.
2. He is not working against the Greeks, but against some Persians.
3. He does not learn Persian to converse with the king, but to defend himself against other Persians.
4. He commits suicide rather than fight against Greece.

---

10 Th. 1.138: ὁ δ' ἐν τῷ χρόνῳ ἀντ' ἑαυτοῦ τῆς τοῦ Περσίδος γλώσσης ὅταν ἔδωκε τὸν καταλόγον κατεχόμενον καὶ τῶν ἐπισκέψεως τῆς χώρας ἀδελφονόμενον ἐκ τοῦ τοιούτου γεγονότος ἐπέδωκε τῷ Περσίδι τὴν ἔκπληκτην. Ἐπεξεργάστηκεν την ζωήν τοῦ Περσοκράτους καὶ τὴν μνήμην τῆς ἄνθρωπος ἐν τῇ παρέχοντος ἀγέρων καὶ τοῦ ἐπισκέπτοντος ἐξωτερικοῦ τοῦ Περσοκράτους.
11 Themistocles 10: ille omne illud tempus litteris sermonique Persarum se dedidit: quibus adeo eruditus est, ut multa commodius diceret. Th. 1.138:
12 Diodorus 11.57.5: οἱ μὲν θεμιστοκλῆς μισθοὶ τῆς περσίδος διδέσθαι, καὶ τὸν Χρήστον κατὰ πολλὰς ἐκπευτείας ἐργάζεσθαι, καὶ τὸν Περσίδα ἐργάζεσθαι, καὶ τὸν Χρήστον κατὰ πολλὰς ἐκπευτείας ἐργάζεσθαι.
Plutarch’s portrayal is similar in several respects. Again there is no promise of an invasion of Greece. Again Persian nobles plot against Themistocles: first the threats of Roxanes the Chilarch (Them. 29), then the assassination attempt by the satrap of Upper Phrygia (Them. 30). Plutarch reports that the main grievance that these Persians had was not the events of Salamis (as in Diodorus) but the fact that Themistocles was promoting reform within the Persian court:

This passage presents the concerns of Persian nobles and Plutarch makes no statement as to their validity. However, he neither questions this account nor presents alternatives (as he does in, e.g., Them. 2.6, 25.1).

Plutarch is content to leave us with the impression that Themistocles was not talking to the king about Greek affairs (as others thought), but he was actually telling the king how to arrange his own court. He has learned Persian not to harm Greece, but to change the Persians. He is not humbling himself and acceding to the king’s wishes, but rather holding forth in the manner of a Greek philosopher. In Plutarch’s time all the major philosophical schools praised parrhesia. It is clear from every anecdote and from occasional real life examples that no self-respecting Greek philosopher could stand before a tyrant without using parrhesia to tell him things he doesn’t want to hear. Parrhesia is of course meaningless unless one is saying things that are unwelcome, and that is what Plutarch invites us to imagine Themistocles as saying.

By including this material, Plutarch has subtly recast the story. Themistocles is now seen in an adversarial relationship with the Persians. He is not proposing to lead the King to Greece but to make the King humble the Greeks. He is not adapting to Persian ways, but getting the Persians to adopt his. Plutarch thereby clears his hero, not just of the charge of political Medism, but of cultural Medism as well.

PART IV: NACHLEBEN

Thus far I have documented subtle alterations of the Themistocles legend in Plutarch’s text. In the final section I want to point out how the same trend continued in later writings of the Second Sophistic. I will first

---


success. Plutarch has made Alexander, like Themistocles, a missionary of Greek language and literature.

We see the missionary theme developed further by the earlier, more famous Philostratus in the novelistic *Life of Apollonius of Tyana*. In many respects the protagonist incorporates both the Alexander and Themistocles legends. Like Alexander, Apollonius travels to the Eastern ends of the earth, stopping among the Parthian kings and continuing into India. He neither studies Persian, nor casually acquires it —from the beginning he is blessed with the ability to understand all languages (1.19). When he gets to the Parthian border, he explains his civilizing mission, "I gave myself the task to see whether I can make men of you, whether you like it or not" (1.21). Thereupon he visits the Parthian king, who had just dreamed that he was Artaxerxes (1.29). When Apollonius' presence is announced, he realizes that he is being visited by a reborn equivalent of Themistocles. And true to form, Apollonius belittles the king's palace and wealth (1.38) and then boldly goes on to find other people he can talk into being more like himself. This account stretches the Themistocles legend to Alexandrian proportions. Instead of conquering the world with his might, this *Alexandristocles* goes about converting the world to his culture.

**CONCLUSION**

This essay has strayed a long way from Plutarch—and it is time to return to him and to Greece. In the first three sections I think that I have documented that Plutarch has created a Themistocles subtly but significantly different from earlier representations. In the final section I have shown that later authors further manipulated the tradition along the same lines. I find this later material useful because it suggests that something more than a personal idiosyncrasy lay behind Plutarch's reinvention of Themistocles the missionary.

In Plutarch's day Greece could no longer lay claim to political, military, or economic supremacy. The doors for civic participation in the Roman Empire were opening, but this only problematized the issue of Greek ethnicity. As Greeks became generals, governors, and senators by virtue of their Roman citizenship, they were forced to create a new national identity, grounded in their language, their culture, and their past. They purified their language. They looked for cultural heroes. Plutarch has the honesty to acknowledge that his heroes adopted foreign ways, but he also has the desire to defend this by invoking the greater good. Thus we have an Alexander wearing foreign garb as a ruse to get the barbarians to support him, and a Themistocles speaking Persian to convince the king of the errors of his ways.