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Archidamus Revisited:
The Case for an Alternate Narrative of the King of Sparta

History 337-001

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December 6, 2018

Of all the figures who took part in the Peloponnesian War, perhaps no single person contributed so much to the outcome of the war as Archidamus II. However, if you scour the ancient primary sources, you will be hard-pressed to find a good, objective biography of this Spartan king. Plutarch mentions him only in passing in his *Parallel Lives* when writing of Agesilaus II, his son. In Xenophon's *Hellenica*, Archidamus receives no mention at all, even though his descendants, one of whom bears the same name, feature prominently. Scholars must rely on Thucydides, therefore, to construct a rendering of Archidamus, son of Zeuxidamus. However, this presents a natural problem, for, as classicists have rightly pointed out for decades, Archidamus is not presented in a vacuum and often figures as a mouthpiece for Thucydides. In spite of this, the speeches of Archidamus that are recorded in the *Peloponnesian War* are significant, and must be intently studied to do him justice and bring out an accurate profile. This paper will seek to discredit the traditional portrait of Archidamus as dragged out of Thucydides by classicists and settle on a fairer, more realistic one, deduced by his appearances in the *Peloponnesian War* of Thucydides.

To understand Archidamus' portrayal by Thucydides in the *Peloponnesian War*, one must first have a grasp on some undisputed facts. Thucydides informs us that Archidamus is the son of Zeuxidamus (Thuc. 2.19), who in turn was the son of Leotychidas, and the king of Sparta at the time of the Peloponnesian War's beginning in 431 (Thuc. 1.79).¹ As already mentioned, extra-Thucydidean information about Archidamus is limited. Nonetheless, knowing that he is a king of Sparta brings us to some quick conclusions. Herodotus relates a story in his *Histories* that

¹ Thucydides, *The Peloponnesian War*, trans. Martin Hammond (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009). All translations for Thucydides in this paper are from Martin Hammond.

is the apparent explanation for the dual nature of the Spartan kingship (Hdt. 6.52),² and from this we know that the Agiads and Euryontids, who ruled Sparta together down to the time of the Peloponnesian War, were not equal in influence, Archidamus being of the less prestigious, Euryontid line. Furthermore, Brenda Griffith-Williams gives us another detail concerning the Spartan kingship: “According to Plutarch, Spartan law exempted heirs to the kingship...from the rigorous educational curriculum (the *agōgē*) that was imposed on other Spartan boys.”³ So, we already know that Archidamus was a “lesser king” (if the term is appropriate) and never underwent the one thing that unified nearly all Spartiate men in Spartan society. There is also a disputed anecdote of history that Archidamus was the leader of the force that suppressed the revolt of the helots in 464 in the aftermath of the severe earthquake of that same year.⁴ After this possible instance of heroism, Archidamus does not appear in recorded history for the next thirty years until he appears in Thucydides at the debates in Sparta over whether to go to war (Thuc. 1.67-88).

When we meet Archidamus, Thucydides introduces him to us as having “a reputation as a man of intelligence and good sense” (Thuc. 1.79). At the debates at Sparta, Archidamus first speaks after the Corinthians and Athenians have already aired their grievances and defenses, and the climate of the discussions has the potential to become hostile. However, Archidamus dilutes any passion in the room full of Spartans when he makes his speech, which, at its heart, warns that if Sparta goes to war hastily, “[they] shall have the worst of it” (Thuc. 1.81). To caution even

² Herodotus, *The Histories*, trans. A.D. Godley (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1920).

³ Brenda Griffith-Williams, “The Succession to the Spartan Kingship, 520-400 BC,” *Bulletin of the Institute of Classical Studies* 54, no. 2 (2011): 44, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43694087> (accessed December 5, 2018).

⁴ The Editors of Encyclopædia Britannica, “Archidamus II,” in *Encyclopædia Britannica* (Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc., 1998), accessed December 6, 2018, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Archidamus-II>.

further, he goes on, saying, “At all events we should not entertain the hope that the war will soon be at an end if we devastate their land. My fear is rather that we shall bequeath this war to our children” (Thuc. 1.81). Felix Wassermann is right to note about Thucydides that he is “too clear-sighted and too skeptical to share the blind idealization of the Spartan character, not uncommon with the anti-democratic members of his class.”⁵ Certainly, what Archidamus says before the assembled Spartans is not the “heroic” thing to say; not brave or daring or any adjectival that has come to be synonymous with the word “Spartan.” Caution seems to be his message. However, to take this at face value without qualification would be doing him a disservice. It would not be terribly wrong to see this prediction of Archidamus just as something Thucydides wanted him to say. Wassermann reminds us that it is clear throughout the *Peloponnesian War* that Thucydides presents his characters with an aim for each to be a sort of poster child for some various aspect of a particular national character.⁶ In this case, it is not far-fetched to see Archidamus as Thucydides’ perfect Spartan. But this prompts the question of what Thucydides’ perfect Spartan actually is. When Archidamus praises the Athenians for their advantages in a potential war (Thuc. 1.80), it should be remembered that they have left the presence of the assembly of Spartans by this point, so this is no flattery. Archidamus seems a Lacedaemonian unicorn, more so akin to what Thucydides would like to see in the pro-Spartan Athenian aristocrat than to any true Spartiate. His flattery is just that—words that Thucydides puts in his mouth, touting the strength of Athens. In other words, it is doubtful a Spartan as cautionary as this existed. Evidence of this, besides Thucydides’ praise of Athens’ strengths via the mouth of Archidamus, is clear in the Spartans’ final vote to go to war, completely

⁵ Felix M. Wassermann, “The Speeches of King Archidamus in Thucydides,” *The Classical Journal* 48, no. 6 (March 1953): 193, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3293172> (accessed December 5, 2018).

⁶ *Ibid.*, 193.

disregarding any of their king's supposed opinions or warnings. As Edmund Bloedow notes, "[T]he complete failure [of the speech] to achieve its object accounts for its awkwardness. This awkwardness is further accentuated by the fact that Thucydides does not indicate specifically why it was a total failure."⁷ Keeping in mind he is a king, he is royally mocked (pun intended) if he truly is ignored in such a blunt way as this.

When Archidamus, in this same speech, advises the Spartans to first try a diplomatic approach and send envoys to Athens so they can all make preparations in the interim (Thuc. 1.82), he is misunderstood. It seems most classicists take this move as Archidamus solely trying to pacify his fellow Spartans, with no true intention to ever heighten the stakes if need be. Bloedow insists this suggestion "was designed to dissuade the Spartans from going to war, at all events for the present."⁸ Wassermann even suggests that Archidamus "sees in war—as does Thucydides himself—only the *ultima ratio* to be resorted to if all attempts of a peaceful settlement have failed."⁹ This seems like conjecture gone too far. Not only does Archidamus not explicitly state he does not wish war to be the final end, but he takes several digs at Athens that classicists seem to miss. Archidamus warns his fellow Spartans, "[A] war undertaken by a whole confederacy in pursuit of individual grievances, with the outcome impossible to tell, cannot easily be settled on honorable terms" (Thuc. 1.82). Could an Athenian not have expressed this same sentiment in context? Archidamus was right about bequeathing the war to later generations, but he himself would lead three successful invasions of Attica following this speech (Thuc. 2.10, 2.47, 3.1). In writing this, then, it seems doubtful that Thucydides ever intended this warning of

⁷ Edmund F. Bloedow, "The Speeches of Archidamus and Sthenelaidas at Sparta," *Historia: Zeitschrift für Alte Geschichte* 30, no. 2 (1981): 131, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4435752> (accessed December 6, 2018).

⁸ *Ibid.*, 131.

⁹ Wassermann, 195.

Archidamus to be foreboding or “tragic,” as has stuck in the modern mind. It could even be taken as mocking the Athenians, who ultimately get the worse end of the stick in the part of the war that bears Archidamus’ name (431-421 B.C.). And at the end of the day, Sparta comes out victorious as a whole and Athens capitulates at the end of the war (though Thucydides could never have known this). Thus, the Peloponnesian War was not, on the whole, a tragedy for Sparta, if the word is used in its most literal sense. To add a final nuance to Archidamus’ speech at Sparta, something that classicists seem to miss, Archidamus compliments the Spartan character saying, “Our discipline makes us both brave in war and sensible in policy” (Thuc. 1.84), and then remarks,

Let us not abandon [our practices], or be rushed in the brief space of one day to a decision affecting many lives, much expenditure, many cities, and our own reputation. We must be calm about it: and we can afford that, more than the others, because of our strength. (Thuc. 1.85)

This remark could easily have been used in the Athenian debate over Mytilene, which certainly was hasty and nearly affected many lives and Athens’ reputation. It is my hypothesis that this is another crack at Athenian tactics used in the war, voiced by the exiled Athenian historian through the mouth of the king of Sparta.

It is clear thus far that we are dealing with two problems: one is that Thucydides seems to be embellishing what Archidamus says in such a way to fit certain purposes; the second is that classicists take these characterizations of Archidamus too far. His reputation as the prophet unheeded must be seen in a different light. Moving on from the debate at Sparta, Archidamus next speaks when the Peloponnesian forces gather on the Isthmus of Corinth before the first invasion of Attica. He encourages the assembled Peloponnesians when he says to them, “We must not, then, show ourselves inferior to our fathers or fall short of our own reputation. All Greece is excited by this enterprise and is watching it intently, willing us to succeed in our

aims—such is the hatred of Athens” (Thuc. 2.11). When Archidamus mentions Spartan reputation specifically in his speech in 1.85, it sounds more foreboding, carrying the sentiment that perhaps Sparta’s reputation is ruined for good if she engages in hostilities, whether or not she is successful. However, Archidamus, in this instance, uses the word “reputation” and a more hopeful connotation is sensed—Sparta’s reputation can be enhanced if she roundly defeats her enemy, adding to the cumulative glories of Sparta. I posit that Archidamus can be seen throughout Thucydides as intent on embodying Spartan values. Classicists generally do not focus on this aspect, and it is admittedly subdued in Thucydides. Referring back to the speeches at Sparta, Sthenelaidas (the Spartan to speak after Archidamus) uses more Laconic, clipped language in addressing the Spartans (Thuc. 1.86), drawing a greater contrast to Archidamus’ much longer, grammatically complex speech. In his rebuke, Sthenelaidas even uses specific phrases that refer to the Spartan *agoge*,¹⁰ something, as should be remembered, that Archidamus would not have underwent. Archidamus must have been keen to prove himself a Spartan through and through, not being able to relate to his men in this way. Thus, we find him wrapping up this speech before the invasion of Attica, intent to win while also making it clear he is totally invested in Spartan victory, despite his being ignored previously in Sparta:

Remember, then, that we are fighting a great city; and remember that on the result depends, for good or ill, the ultimate reputation we shall bring on our ancestors and ourselves. So follow your leaders; make discipline and security your absolute priorities; and be quick to respond to orders. Best and safest is when a large army is seen as a single disciplined body. (Thuc. 2.11)

¹⁰ E.D. Francis and David Francis, “Brachylogia Laconica: Spartan Speeches in Thucydides,” *Bulletin of the Institute of Classical Studies*, no. 38 (1991-1993): 204, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/43646742> (accessed December 6, 2018).

Here, reputation is mentioned once more, as well as the virtue of discipline that Archidamus sung the praises of in his speech at Sparta. Paying attention to his admiration of discipline, he seems more and more a genuine lover of military order and thus more like a true Spartan.

At this point, it seems safe to say that Archidamus could be characterized less so as reluctant to advance the war aspirations of Sparta and more so as intent on being a strong and praiseworthy king. Our shifting understanding of Archidamus continues to be enhanced when the Peloponnesian forces actually invade Attica. Thucydides notes that Archidamus was a guest-friend of Pericles (Thuc. 2.13), a fact that, though potentially beneficial for Archidamus, obviously would make him seem sympathetic to the Athenians in the eyes of his men. Thucydides further mentions that Archidamus had this embarrassment and his humiliation of being ignored at Sparta on his shoulders when he finds himself held up at Oenoe in the northwest of Attica (Thuc. 2.18). Being “already thought soft and over-friendly to the Athenians,” Archidamus decides to abandon Oenoe and commences a warpath toward Athens, destroying the Attica countryside as he goes (Thuc. 2.18-9). Constantly pressured to prove himself, Archidamus dispels any pro-Athenian rumors when he reaches Athens. Upon reaching the city, which was providing refuge for all people from the surrounding area, Archidamus lingers in the Acharnae area with his men ravaging the countryside. His devious plan was to draw the Acharnians, not wanting to see the devastation of their land, out of the city, pulling the rest of the Athenian fighters out, thus allowing him to win the day. Even if he did not succeed in drawing his enemies onto the battlefield, Acharnian anger, he supposed, would divide Athenian policy (Thuc. 2.20). G.T. Griffith sees this whole first invasion, one of great force and military stratagem, as a “point of no return,” evidenced by the fact that Thucydides, on this occasion, introduces Archidamus as

“son of Zeuxidamus” with the intention “to strike a note of solemnity.”¹¹ Griffith’s hypothesis seems justified very soon after when Thucydides mentions that “fourteen years earlier the then king of Sparta, Pleistoanax the son of Pausanias, had invaded Attica with a Peloponnesian army as far as Eleusis and Thria, but had then turned back without advancing any further” (Thuc. 2.21). Pleistoanax, also introduced with a patronymic, did not succeed in beating the Athenians; Archidamus goes ahead with the stratagem that just might bring him that victory. Pair this with the fact that Pleistoanax was an Agiad king (thought to be the greater in comparison to a Eurypontid), and the Eurypontid underdog Archidamus now looks driven to become a hero among Spartans at the expense of Athens.

The much-changed image of Archidamus is bolstered with the second invasion of Attica, mentioned by Thucydides as the first event to take place in the second year of the war. Here again, Thucydides reports the Peloponnesian force invaded Attica “under the command of Archidamus the son of Zeuxidamus, king of Sparta” and they “settled in and began to ravage the land” (Thuc. 2.47). Use of the patronymic highlights the importance of this second invasion. Archidamus’ leadership could be award-winning if taken into the account the amount of time his force had the ability to occupy Attica: “In fact on this invasion they spent their longest time in the country and ravaged the whole of it: they were in Attica for about forty days” (Thuc. 2.57).

In the summer of 429, the Spartans turned to Plataea instead of invading Attica. Eager to neutralize the city, Archidamus gives the Plataeans assurances of peace and protection if they would not side with the Athenians and resist from engaging in any hostilities with their

¹¹ G.T. Griffith, “Some Habits of Thucydides When Introducing Persons,” *Proceedings of the Cambridge Philological Society*, New Series, no. 7 (187) (1961): 22, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/44687117> (accessed December 5, 2018). Though not pertinent enough to appear in the body of this essay, Griffith’s study of Thucydidean introductions is fascinating and a thorough reading of the entire article would strongly support this argument.

archenemies, the Thebans (Thuc. 2.72). Wassermann praises Archidamus for what he perceives to be his capacity for dialogue and compromise with the Plataeans,¹² but he forgets about the Spartan king's level of willingness to utterly destroy the people getting in his way. After all, Thucydides records that "Archidamus had set his army in position and was ready to ravage the land" (Thuc. 2.71) before *he* was approached by Plataean envoys. To emphasize, it was the Plataeans who took the first step of negotiations, and there is no indication Archidamus was even considering speaking with them. Despite hearing about old promises Pausanias had made to leave the Plataeans free (Thuc. 2.71), Archidamus invokes the favor of the gods on his aggression and orders his Spartans to attack (Thuc. 2.74-5). The siege of Plataea would last nearly two years, thanks to Archidamus.

The words of Archidamus spoken in the negotiations with Plataea are the last of his recorded by Thucydides. The last significant thing we hear of him occurs in the summer of 428 with the third invasion of Attica. Here, once again, he is introduced as "son of Zeuxidamus, king of Sparta" (Thuc. 3.1). Thus, Archidamus has undergone a drastic character change since he first appeared in Sparta advocating for a delay of hostilities. While most classicists, seeing him as a tragic symbol paraded by Thucydides, base their opinions on Archidamus largely or solely on his initial precaution, we have traced out all his extant appearances in Thucydides. It should now be clear that, though perhaps more careful in his deliberations, Archidamus is through and through a Spartan in command of Spartans for the glory of Sparta. His successes, by the end instances of utter ravaging, speak for themselves. This should be sufficient for a more accurate portrait of the Spartan king. The term, the "Archidamian War," is a fitting testament to his importance in the first phase of the Peloponnesian War and the achievements it brought Sparta.

¹² Wassermann, 198.

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