Thucydides’ narrative tends to demonstrate unforeseen, destabilizing effects originating from seemingly minor, even inconspicuous, beginnings. The *Vorgeschichte* leading up to the outbreak of the Peloponnesian War (and the War is the historian’s chosen topic, according to the work’s opening sentence) starts in remote Epidamnus at the north-western outskirts of Greece—so remote is Epidamnus that the historian first has to describe its location on the map for his readers. The development that results in the (limited) armistice of 423/2 BC (and ultimately in what today is termed the “Peace of Nicias”) originates from the Athenians’ occupation and fortification of an uninhabited hilltop on the west coast of the Peloponnesus—so inconspicuous is the spot that the Athenian generals in charge refuse to get involved and joke about wasting the city’s money...

This much said, one can already formulate two complementary aspects of Thucydides as a narrator (and thinker). One is his capacity of synoptic analysis, combining the presentation of long-range processes with inquiry into the trigger value of seemingly unimportant events. The other is the distinction between surface phenomena and a developing historical undercurrent. Both aspects together help us understand the reasoning and perspicacity the author bestows upon establishing and approaching his subject matter.

I. *(Un-*)Blocking the Road to War

Reviewing the first prewar section, which narrates the first of two prewar action sequences (1.24.1–1.55.2; 1.56.1–1.66), will offer an apposite introduction to Thucydides’ narrative art. Preceding this section, an outline of early Greek history (the so-called *Archaeology*, 1.1.3–1.21.1), with emphasis on sea power in the Mediterranean, provides a negative foil for the greatness of the Peloponnesian War;
it is followed by two programmatic chapters: one (1.22) on method, distinguishing the greater reliability of the factual narrative from the speeches contained in the work (the speeches are necessarily less accurately reported and less objective); the other (1.23) on the suffering the war caused Hellas ("Hellas" is the author’s term for what today is called Greece). This chapter also adds the distinction between, on the one hand, the underlying “truest” (but at the time least mentioned) cause of the war (ἡ ἀληθεστάτη πρόφασις), viz., Sparta’s fear of Athens’ growing power, and, on the other hand, the openly raised accusations (αἰτίαι) and disagreements (διαφοραι). To prevent his reader from vainly searching for the surface origins of the great war, Thucydides precedes (προὔγραμα πρῶτον, 1.23.5) the war itself by a description of those trigger factors.

So the two prewar sections should be seen as one track of a dual track concept. The first section begins at 1.24.1 with the above-cited geographical description, which provides the reader with some necessary information: “Epidamnus is a city one encounters on the right when sailing into the Ionian Gulf [here = the Adriatic Sea]. In the neighborhood, there live non-Greek Taulantians, an Illyrian ethnic group”. The reader is truly taken to the periphery of Greece.

The next piece of information indicates the seeds of a potential conflict inherent in the city’s political setup. Epidamnus was settled by the Corcyreans, but the founder (and also a few settlers) came from Corinth, the mother city of Corcyra. There could be a latent problem of differing loyalties among the citizenry as well as of differing claims made from outside on the citizens’ loyalties.

Though becoming rich and powerful, Epidamnus was later worn down by inner strife, and also by a war with the neighboring non-Greeks. In the years before the Peloponnesian War, a social war broke out in Epidamnus itself: the δῆμος (ὁ δῆμος) drove out the (rich and) powerful (τῶς δυνατῶς). The latter allied themselves with the area’s non-Greeks and gave those in the city a hard time. So the people sent an embassy for help to the mother city. But though the emissaries sat down as suppliants in the shrine of Hera, the Corcyreans flatly dismissed them.

Following the advice of the oracle at Delphi, the people of Epidamnus next turn for help to their mother city’s mother city, and, pointing to their Corinthian founder, formally make their city over to Corinth as its own colony (τὴν ἀποικίαν, 1.25.2). The Corinthians are only too happy to oblige, with justice on their side (κατά . . . τὸ