I borrow my title from an article on Thucydides by the late Sir Ronald Syme. Reviewing the historian’s life, he has the following to say about Thucydides’ exile:

Twenty years away from Attica until the fall of the city in the year 404 BC, Thucydides acknowledges the advantage. It enabled him to travel and to see the other side. But there is something more, which he has not said: exile may be the making of an historian. That is patent for Herodotus and Polybius. If a man be not compelled to leave his own country, some other calamity—a disappointment or a grievance—may be beneficial, permitting him to look at things with detachment, if not in estrangement. In Thucydides there is estrangement proclaimed by the creation of a style individual, wilful, elaborate, and non-contemporary. Even did the style not avow it, the author parades as a thinker with a method all his own. He is proud, imperious, even didactic.¹

There are details here that I will dispute, but Syme has put his finger on an important issue attaching to exile and the Greek historian. Many observers, both ancient and modern, have noted the beneficial effects of exile, in particular the positive aspects for an historian of being forced to live away from his native city.² Syme sees this too, even alluding to Thucydides’ own remarks at 5.26.5 (“Thucydides acknowledges the advantage”). But Syme has also seen that exile involves not just the

¹ Syme (1962) 40–1. I know of this passage thanks to Hornblower (1987) 27. Cf. also Syme (1977) 49.
² So, e.g., compare Syme’s observation with Westlake (1966) 246–7: “[Xenophon] also enjoyed the misfortune, so valuable to a historian, of having been exiled. Banishment, as Plutarch [sc. De Exil. 605C–D] points out, was the lot of many Greek historians; it was almost a professional qualification. Xenophon was absent from his native city for at least thirty-five years and lived for most of this period in the Peloponnesian. Although he might have made better use of the opportunities for historical research afforded by his long exile, it did confer some obvious advantages, one of them being that the Hellenica is not written wholly from the viewpoint of a single city.” See p. 62 below as well as Gaertner and Nesselrath on pp. 10–11 and 96–7 on Plut. De Exil. 605C–D.
physical displacement of the historian from his homeland and its attendant “advantage”, namely access to different sources and a different perspective. Exile also influences the historian’s style, indeed it leads to the development of a unique “method”—profound changes that shape the historian’s outlook or “voiceprint”.

But that so many have noticed the utility of exile for the ancient historian should excite concern. If the belief is so widely held, it risks becoming an expectation. We then face the danger of slipping into serious error, creating significance for exile in the case of some historians, and even inventing it outright in the case of others. One cannot help but conclude that if exile is “the making of the historian”, it would appear that a person could not be one without it in the ancient Greek world, at least one worth talking about. I exaggerate, of course, but if exile is indeed a, if not the decisive force in the shaping of the historian, it behooves us to figure out what precisely it was, why it was imposed, and which ancient Greek historians were in fact so treated. The first part of this essay will be focussed on attempting to answer these questions, if only provisionally. The second will take up larger, more general issues raised in the course of the first part, ones that will return us to the introduction and Syme’s acute observation.

First, a brief look at terminology. ‘Exile’ is an inexact term when applied to ancient Greek historians, for several figures who are routinely thought of as ‘exiled’ were not in fact. The Greek noun for the experience of ‘exile’ is φυγή, and the person who suffers it a φυγάς; to be in exile is represented by the verb φεύγειν, and to exile another is ἐλαύνειν etc. While we shall see that, e.g., both Thucydides and Xenophon were most certainly exiled, as we can tell from their own testimony (cf. Thuc. 5.26.5: ἔφυγεν τοῖς ἐξοικεσθαι; Xen. An. 5.3.7: ἔπει δ’ ἐφευρεῖν ὁ Ξενοφῶν), others were what we would call ‘detained’ or held hostage in a foreign land: the obvious example is Polybius. But we should note that in none of the ancient passages cited by Walbank in his discussion of Polybius’ mandatory residence in Rome is the concept ‘banishment’ or ‘exile’ used. As Polybius himself characterizes the detention of the Achaean statesmen, among whom he was one, they were “those summoned (to Italy)” by

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4 I am much indebted to the earlier work of Seibert (1979) vol. 1, 311–16.
5 Cf. Polyb. 30.13, 32.1–12, Paus. 7.10.11, Livy 45.31.9. See Walbank (1957–79) vol. 1, 3 and n. 4. See also Walbank (1972) 7–8.