CHAPTER TWO

AElius Aristides and Thucydides:
Some Remarks about the Panathenaic Oration*

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'We did not choose the task of writing a jejune history, of narrating the deeds of the city (...). But we chose to mention its most famous actions in war, and as far as possible to omit none of the city's good qualities. This cannot be, if we discuss each point fully, but only if we omit no category of praise'.

This assertion comes in the middle of the Panathenaic Discourse of Aristides. If Plato is clearly, for this orator, the most debated author from the classical Greek past, as is clear from the three Discourses where he defends rhetoric—especially against the criticisms of the Gorgias—history too really falls into his field of thought.

His relation to history was shaped by his rhetorical training which, especially thanks to the progymnasmata, gave him a very precise and deep knowledge of historians, above all Herodotus, Thucydides, Ephorus, Diodorus, and led him finally to write meletai like the Leuctran Orations and the Sicilian Orations. I have chosen to focus this paper on the way Aristides reads, uses and rewrites the History of Thucydides—Thucydides who, according to the rhetor, 'seems to excel by far the other writers of history not only in the power and dignity of his expression, but also in factual accuracy' (... δς ου μόνον τη των λόγων δυνάμει

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1 Panathenaic Oration 230; cf. also sect. 99. We follow the structure drawn up by F.W. Lenz and C.A. Behr (Leiden, 1976–1980). We generally follow Behr's translation, sometimes slightly changed.

2 Or. II (To Plato: in Defence of Oratory), Or. III (To Plato: in Defence of the Four); Or. IV (To Capito). Pernot 1993b, 322–327.


The best way to evaluate the relationship between the rhetor of the Second Sophistic and this very significant intellectual figure is probably to examine it through the *Panathenaic Oration*. Indeed, this work stands out for several reasons. Firstly, this long celebration of Athens—a speech delivered in the city, during the Panathenaic festival, probably during the reign of Antoninus Pius or of the joint rulers Marcus Aurelius and Lucius Verus—is, for the most part, a historical narrative. Aristides plans to prove the essential qualities of Athens (her ἄξιον, which appear to be original (they pre-existed the birth of the Athenians)) through the city’s actions (πράξεως, ἐξευτελεῖσθαι). By choosing this way (which is a manner of adjusting the topic), Aristides gives a real history of the city, from the mythical autochthony up to Macedonian conquest, and therefore it is not surprising that Thucydides’ narrative (including remembrance of the Persian Wars, the ‘Fifty-Years’ period and the Peloponnesian War) corresponds in many ways to Aristides’ *Panathenaic Oration*.

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5 Or. III (To Plato: in Defence of the Four). 20. Cf also section 23, on the reliability of the historian’s portrait of Pericles: ‘He reports this, not to press a personal quarrel, nor are all these references for the use of his argument, nor for a single proposition, but in his history and narrative he simply thus reports the truth, as when he narrates the invasion of the Peloponnesians or any other event of his time.’

6 Cf. for instance Sacred Tales IV. 14–15, one of the many occasions where the god Asclepios encourages Aristides to practice oratory: ‘While I rested in Pergamum because of a divine summons and my supplication, I received from the god a command and exhortation not to abandon oratory. It is impossible to say through the length of time whatever dream came first, or the nature of each or the whole. It befits you to speak in the manner of Socrates, Demosthenes, and Thucydides...’. See, for example, Schmitz 1999.

7 Behr (1968, 87–88 and 1994, §8) suggests the year AD 155, while Oliver (1968, 32–34) comes down to the year 167, basing his conviction both on Eleusis’ destruction by the Costoboci in 170 (‘the tone in which Aristides discusses the wars and festivals would have been irritatingly false soon after the shocking sack of Eleusis’, p. 33) and on the significance of the word πυρ which could reflect the military successes of Lucius Verus over the Parthians in 164–165. Follet (1976, 331–333) implicitly agrees with the overall argumentation of Oliver, but corrects the date to 168 (333 n. 2): it must be an even year, given the changes in the calendar introduced by Hadrian.

8 Sections 75–321 (out of 404 sections) are devoted to historical deeds of Athens: mythical times (78–91), Persian Wars (92–209), wars in defence of the Greeks (210–227), Peloponnesian war (228–263), wars against the Greeks (264–313), war against Philip of Macedon (314–316), epilogue of the deeds performed in war (317–321).

9 Oudot 2006.

10 Pernot 1993b, 325.

11 Two scholars have investigated the historical sources of Aristides’ *Panathenaic Oration*: Haury (1888), wishing to improve A. Haas’ conclusions, according to which Arist-