

# Nikias, Crete and the Plague

*George Huxley*

NOT UNTIL 3.51 is any mention made of Nikias son of Nikeratos in the narrative of Thucydides. There we are told how he commanded in the successful attack on the island of Minoa off Megara. The previous silence of Thucydides should not be taken to imply, however, that before 427 B.C. Nikias had not come to the fore in Athenian public life; it may mean only that hitherto Nikias had done nothing that was, in the opinion of Thucydides, worthy of comment. Besides, there is Plutarch's statement (*Nic.* 2.2), whose truth we have no reason to doubt, that Nikias had become prominent while Perikles was still alive, had been general with him, and had held office himself many times. Whether or not Nikias had been *stratēgos* with Perikles more than once, it is plain that the son of Nikeratos was already a leading citizen at the outbreak of the Peloponnesian war. By the time of the great plague he would have been forty or more years old, since we are told by Plato (*Laches* 186c) that he was senior to Sokrates, who was born in 469 B.C.

The most striking trait of Nikias' character was his piety and superstition. In a phrase, which Plutarch repeats (*Nic.* 4.1), Thucydides remarks that he was *θειασμῶ προσκείμενος* to excess (7.50.4); in his retinue were soothsayers, whom he consulted on matters of state, but chiefly about his mining business at Laurion (*Nic.* 4.2); and his offerings to the gods, notably the bronze palm tree set up to Apollo in Delos, were renowned (*Nic.* 3.7). He also enjoyed the affection and respect of many, perhaps of most, of his fellow Athenians, as Plutarch's citations from contemporary comedy show, though his generosity could be exploited by sycophants (*Nic.* 4.4–8).

When the plague struck, the doctors knew not what to do, and men turned to supplications at shrines, oracles and the like, but all to no avail (*Thuc.* 2.47.4). Amidst the general calamity many would have felt that the city was indeed accursed—may not the Spartans have had grounds for invoking again, with Perikles as prime target, the Kylon-

ian taint (Thuc. 1.126.2–127)? And we may be sure that the superstitious Nikias was not slow to look for divine and mantic aid against the universal affliction. His part in enlisting the gods' help so as to purge the city is not entirely conjectural, however; positive evidence is to be found in the life of Epimenides by Diogenes Laertios (1.110). Here in the midst of fancy and muddle lies a valuable grain of truth.

Diogenes states that when the Athenians were overwhelmed by a plague (that arising from the Kylonian curse), the Pythia declared that they should purge the city. So they sent a ship with Nikias son of Nikeratos to Crete to summon Epimenides, who came in the 46th Olympiad (that is to say, some time before Solon's archonship, cf. Aristotle, *Ath. Pol.* 1). The Cretan seer then purified the city and put a stop to the plague. Since a Nikias Nikeratou of Solon's era is otherwise unattested, it is possible that Diogenes or his source has mistakenly backdated an actual or imagined consultation by Nikias of Epimenidean oracles from the time of the great plague to the epoch of Epimenides himself, who in fact visited Athens early in the sixth century B.C. A similar mistake was made by Plato, who states at *Laws* 642D that the Athenians consulted Epimenides ten years before the coming of the Persians—about 500 B.C. therefore; but the philosopher has confused a real or supposed consultation of Epimenidean oracles at that time with the true epoch of Epimenides himself, ca. 600 B.C. Epimenidean oracles were also circulating in Sparta shortly before the Persian wars, for king Kleomenes I, who had with Isagoras exploited the Kylonian curse against his political opponents in Attica (*Hdt.* 5.70.2), also made use of Epimenidean oracles at home in Laconia.<sup>1</sup> Apart from the Persian threat, the Athenians may have had another reason to look for mantic aid in the Epimenidean corpus of oracles, if there was plague in Attica late in the sixth century; but [λοι]μοι θανοοες ειμι | [σε]μα Μυρινες (*IG I<sup>2</sup> 1009*) does not prove that there was a plague: [οι]μοι is a possible supplement.<sup>2</sup>

As Busolt saw,<sup>3</sup> the misdated reference to Nikias in Diogenes implies that there was some tradition connecting the statesman with the

<sup>1</sup> See D. M. Leahy, *Phoenix* 12 (1958) 155, and the *Suda* s.v. 'Επιμενίδης with Steph. Byz. s.v. 'Ανθάνα.

<sup>2</sup> The stone is lost. *IG I<sup>2</sup> 1009* (Friedländer-Hoffleit 170a, Peek 65) has recently been restored by L. H. Jeffery, *BSA* 57 (1962) 142 no.54; cf. her *The Local Scripts of Archaic Greece* (Oxford 1961) 269 n.3: [οι]μοι. This has been accepted by H. R. Immerwahr, *GRBS* 8 (1967) 258 n.9, but see *contra* W. M. Calder III, *AJA* 69 (1965) 263 n.10.

<sup>3</sup> *Griechische Geschichte* II<sup>2</sup> (Gotha 1895) 212–13 n.

plague, because (a) Nikias was notoriously superstitious, (b) the Spartans had lately renewed the claim that the Kylonian curse was still effective, (c) there was plague in Nikias' time, and (d) Thucydides mentions ritual to counter the plague. "Es ist nicht unwahrscheinlich, dass damals auch die Reinigung der Stadt durch Epimenides den Athenern ins Gedächtnis zurückgerufen wurde, und dass dabei Nikias eine Rolle spielte."

It may be doubted that if Nikias went to Crete to fetch help, he sailed at the bidding of Delphi. The oracle was now difficult of access, and had been hostile to Athens even before the war began: the Pythia had told the Spartans that they would win if they fought with might and main, and promised that Apollo would take their side. Men remembered this response when the plague was raging;<sup>4</sup> then Apollo's shafts were as bitter as any that the god had shot at the Achaean host before Troy. After 431 Athens would have had good reason to turn to more distant oracles—to Dodona, for example, or to Ammon; at a time when Apollo of Delphi would offer little succour, and even if consulted, could not be expected to give sympathetic advice, Apollo in remote and militarily neutral Crete might be more friendly, for the island was an ancient and traditional source of purgation. There Apollo himself had been purged from the blood of Python by Karmanor of Tarrha;<sup>5</sup> to Crete had fled Sostratos in the legend about the origin of the Bouphonia;<sup>6</sup> thither too sailed Hesiod's murderers (*Certamen* 14). Similarly, Kallondes the Raven, a Naxian, after being excluded from Delphi, had to go to Tainaros to the shrine of Tettix the Cretan to be purified from the killing of Archilochos (Plut. *De sera* 17), and a little earlier Thaletas the Cretan had put down plague in Sparta.<sup>7</sup>

The circumstantial support for the story of a state embassy led by

<sup>4</sup> Thuc. 2.54.4. See also H. W. Parke, *Greek Oracles* (London 1967) 108.

<sup>5</sup> Paus. 2.30.3. See also Wilamowitz, *Der Glaube der Hellenen* I (Berlin 1931) 135.

<sup>6</sup> Theophrastos *ap.* Porph. *Abst.* 2.29.

<sup>7</sup> Plut. *De mus.* 1146c. Paus. 1.14.4. It is possible that the Athenians were further encouraged to look towards Crete by signs of hostility toward Delphi in the Epimenidean corpus of oracles; for one such pronouncement, οὔτε γὰρ ἦν γαίης μέσος ὀμφαλός . . . (*FGrHist* 457 τ 6), explicitly rejects Delphi's claim to lie at the centre of the earth. Conversely the famous statement *Κρήτες ἀεὶ ψεύσται* . . . may well have been in origin a criticism by Delphi of Cretans, not a self-condemnatory utterance of Epimenides (*FGrHist* 457 F 2). For Epimenidean hostility to Delphi, see G. W. Williams, *Hermathena* 78 (1951) 45, and my *Greek Epic Poetry from Eumelos to Panyassis* (London 1969) 81–82. *SEG* XII 22 is not evidence for Athenian consultation at Delphi *ca.* 430.

Nikias to Crete during the plague is therefore plausible (which is not to say that it must be true). As to the source of the tradition we can only guess, but an *Atthis* is an obvious possibility. One thinks too of the *Thaumasia* of Theopompos, an authority whom Diogenes mentions at the beginning of his account of Epimenides (1.109).<sup>8</sup>

Diogenes also remarks that when Epimenides was with the Athenians he looked at Mounichia and declared that they did not know of how many evils the place would be the cause to them. For if they knew they would rend it even with their teeth (1.114). Mounichia is the hill of Piraeus; it was in Piraeus that the great plague first struck Athens (Thuc. 2.48.2); and during the plague the men bit the ground: "dying corpses lay on each other, and in their thirst half-dead men rolled in the streets and about all the sources of water," states Thucydides. The Epimenidean 'prophecy' was, I suggest, devised *post eventum*, having been fabricated with the great plague in mind. It therefore differed from another oracle quoted during the plague (Thuc. 2.54.2): ἤξει Δωριακὸς πόλεμος καὶ λοιμὸς ἄμ' αὐτῶ, which, the aged said, had been incanted long ago. Some held that the correct version had λιμός ('hunger'), not λοιμός; but present circumstances, Thucydides relates, led people to accept λοιμός ('plague'). Old and new oracles were, it is plain, circulating at the time. One of them, I suggest, the *post eventum* Mounichia prophecy, may well have come to Diogenes from the same authority who mentioned the journey of Nikias to Crete.

According to Pausanias (1.3.4) a statue of Apollo Alexikakos by Kalamis was set up in Athens after the great plague, on Delphi's orders. However, Delphic advice, though possible, is not very likely in the circumstances, as we have seen; and Kalamis was not active so late as the Peloponnesian war: his *floruit* belongs to the first half of the fifth century. Pausanias may therefore be in error in linking the statue with the great plague; but the image of Apollo Alexikakos could have commemorated deliverance from an earlier pestilence, as Frazer suggests.<sup>9</sup>

The purifying Apollo of Crete may have been merciful, for there

<sup>8</sup> Diogenes' sources in the life of Epimenides have been investigated by H. Demoulin, *Epiménide de Crète* (BiblLiège 12, Brussels 1901).

<sup>9</sup> On Pausanias *in loco*. Another possibility is that "Pausanias' informant may have been in error and the title may really have originated with the repulse of the Persians" (H. A. Thompson, *Hesperia* 6 [1937] 109); Professor A. L. Boegehold kindly drew my attention to this aspect of the problem.

was a slight respite before the renewed epidemic of 427 (Thuc. 3.87.1). Athenian interest in Crete now becomes manifest in the Thucydidean narrative: in 429 a Nikias (the name is, presumably, coincidental unless there was some tie of guest-friendship with the Athenian's family), the Gortynian *proxenos*, alleging that Kydonia could be brought over but in fact hoping to aid the men of Polichne, persuaded the Athenians to allow a force of twenty ships to ravage the land of the Kydonians (Thuc. 2.85.5–6). Was some debt perhaps being repaid to Gortyn, where there was a sanctuary of Apollo Pythios, by this strategically inept diversion of ships urgently needed by Phormion at Rhion? (The fact that the Kydonians were colonists of the despised Aeginetans hardly justified the waste of valuable time.)

To conclude: by the combination of evidence in Thucydides, Plutarch and Diogenes Laertios it can be seen that (1) Nikias may well have gone as an ambassador to Crete—perhaps with the approval of Perikles' political opponents—to obtain supernatural assistance against the plague and the alleged curse; (2) Epimenidean oracles were in fashion during the plague owing to the desperate plight of Athens and to the renewal of charges based on the Kylonian taint; (3) the plague was regarded as a scourge sent by Apollo of Delphi. Divine anger meant little to the critical intellect of Thucydides, but to the ordinary Athenian, whose superstitions were shared by Nikias, recourse to Cretan mantic purgation, as in the aftermath of Kylon's conspiracy and again, perhaps, about 500 B.C., would have seemed a sound policy, so long as men still had hope. Even Thucydides (2.64.2) had to admit that Perikles too thought the plague to be amongst the acts of God, τὰ δαιμόνια.<sup>10</sup>

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