Cicero, *Fam.* 5.12.5: The Returning Themistocles?

In his famous letter asking Lucceius to write a historical work that will rouse the emotions of readers, Cicero cites a few historical *exempla* that have had a similar effect:

quem enim nostrum ille moriens apud Mantineam Epaminondas non cum quadam miseratione delectat? qui tum denique sibi euelli iubet spiculum postea quam ei percontanti dictum est clipeum esse saluum, ut etiam in uulneris dolore aequo animo cum laude moreretur. cuius studium in legendo non erectum Themistocli fuga redituque retinetur? etenim ordo ipse annalium mediocriter nos retinet quasi enumeratione fastorum; at uiri saepe excellentis ancipites uariique casus habent admirationem, exspectationem, laetitiam, molestiam, spem, timorem; si uero exitu notabili concluduntur, expletur animus iucundissima lectionis uoluptate.

4 redituque *M* : reditumque *GR* : interituque *Ferrarius* :

Themistocli <exilio aut Alcibiadis> fuga redituque *Schütz* : fuga, <Coriolani fuga> redituque *Tyrrell*

Although the Latin is unproblematic, scholars have found fault with Cicero’s reference to the flight *and return* of Themistocles, since, it is maintained, our historical sources know nothing about a return by Themistocles to Athens. On the contrary, historians from Thucydides onwards say that Themistocles committed suicide while still in exile. Attempts have been made to tidy up Cicero’s historical ‘error’ by assuming one of three things: (1) Cicero made a slip of the pen, and was actually thinking of another figure’s exile and return, perhaps someone such as Cimon; (2) Themistocles was indeed mentioned, but the name or names of some figures known to have returned from exile have fallen out of the text; (3) Cicero wrote something such as ‘death’ instead of ‘return’.

In this paper I argue that none of these objections is valid, and that the manuscript reading should stand.

First, the care with which Cicero has written this letter (so Shackleton-Bailey [1980] 139; *contra*, Woodman [1988] 101 n. 4; cf. Cicero’s own characterisation of it at *Att.* 4.6.4 as *ualde bella*) makes it unlikely that he would have been careless with his historical *exempla*. Second, the thesis that some names have fallen out founders on the difficulty of finding suitable candidates: Alcibiades, for example, was a problematic figure, and his deceptions would have made a very poor *exemplum* for a work in which Cicero would have wished his patriotism and unwavering devotion to his country to be emphasised. Coriolanus, with whom Cicero was to join Themistocles in the *Brutus* (42–4), might make a more attractive figure, but here too the *exemplum* of a man who marched on his own country would be inappropriate for one who claimed to have saved his country (cf. *Att.* 9.10.3 where Coriolanus in exile behaves *impie*), not to mention that all the other *exempla* in this letter are Greek. The final possibility, that Cicero wrote something other than *redituque*, is perhaps the most plausible, but at the same time the phrase *fuga redituque* suggests a natural unit in a way that *fuga interituque* (vel sim.) does not.

Driving all these emendations is the belief, of course, that Themistocles had no *reditus*, and he cannot, therefore, be meant here. If we mean the *living* Themistocles, then of course one must agree, since in all of the ancient accounts he dies before ever returning to Athens. But that is to ignore the many sources who talk of a *reditus* of sorts, especially the transportation of his bones back to Attica (a tradition already known to Thucydides, 1.138.5– 6). As we can see from the third-century BCE historian, Phylarchus (*FGrHist* 81 F 76), from Nepos (*Them.* 10.3–5), from Plutarch (*Them.* 32.4–6), and from Pausanias (1.1.2), there was a strong tradition not only that Themistocles’ bones had been returned to Attica and were buried there, but that the Athenians of later days actually honoured his memory by building him a tomb overlooking the Piraeus, the harbour of Athens that he had first built up and exploited.

It matters not whether these traditions were true; most likely they were not. But surely the important part for an understanding of the letter is that although Themistocles did not have a *reditus* of the type that we might have expected, he certainly did ‘return’ to Athens. Such a return, in which Themistocles’ body is brought back and his tomb overlooks the harbour for which he was responsible, and looks down upon the ships by which he made Athens a great naval power, would indeed suggest a scene full of pathos, and one that Cicero, who likewise had felt himself unjustly treated by the people, would have appreciated all too well.

Works Cited

Shackleton Bailey, D. R. (1980) *Cicero: Select Letters* (Cambridge).

Woodman, A. J. (1988) *Rhetoric in Classical Historiography: Four Studies* (London, Portland and Sydney).