

The Return and “Purification” of Alcibiades

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Abstract: This paper describes some aspects of Alcibiades’ return to Athens in 407 B.C., focusing on some neglected aspects and especially on the coincidence between his repatriation and the first day of the Plynteria, which was considered an ominous day because of the goddess Athena being veiled and purified in the sea. The question arises whether this happened by chance or in a well-orchestrated plan which aimed at presenting an impure but repented Alcibiades searching for “purification” in connection with the goddess. Some similarities with Euripide’s *Iphigeneia in Tauris* are also taken into account.

Keywords: Alcibiades, Return, Plynteria, Purification, Tragic models

The story of Alcibiades is well known: tried and condemned to death by the Athenians, a refugee in Sparta and then under the protection of the Persian satrap Tissaphernes, involved in negotiations with both the democrats of Samos and the oligarchs of Athens, Alcibiades finally managed to return to his homeland Athens. His return is described by Xenophon, Diodorus and Plutarch, and we learn from Plutarch that Duris, Ephoros, and Theopompus had also written about it¹.

Alcibiades’ homecoming was an important event in Athens, and all the citizens gathered at Piraeus to welcome him as Athens’ last hope to end the protracted war with Sparta. The decree for his return had been proposed by Critia and voted in the summer of 411², but caution kept Alcibiades away. Even when democracy was fully restored, he delayed going home. The right moment finally came after his long list of victories in 411-409 (Abydos, Cynossema, Cyzicus, Byzantium and Chalcedon). The precise year of his return is debated, but 407 is generally preferred over 408³. I do not wish to discuss about the year, but I will highlight the particular day of the month chosen for Alcibiades’ return.

¹ Xen. *Hell.* 1.4. 8-20; Diod. 13.68; 69. 1-3; Plut. *Alc.* 32-34; Theop. *FGrHist* 115 F 324; Ephor. *FGrHist* 70 F 200; Duris *FGrHist* 76 F 70: Duris is the only one quoted by Plutarch in detail due to his unique description of how Alcibiades arrived in Piraeus. This text was presented and discussed at the Symposium Classicum Peregrinum, *Returning Home in the Greek and Roman World*, organized by P. Johnston, A. Mastrocinque, E. Santagati, G. Stern, L. Takàks, Messina, June 2022.

² For the date see Thuc. 8.97.3 (cf. 8.76.7); for the proposer Plut. *Alc.* 33.1. Diod. 12.42.2 mentions Theramenes, not Critia.

³ Diod. 13.68-74 sets 408 as the year of Alcibiades’ return, his deeds until Notium, and his loss of command (given to Conon); for this date see Bearzot 1997 and 1999. Diodorus followed Ephorus who narrated by themes, not by years as Diodorus did, sometimes describing an entire event in the year of either its beginning or end; Xenophon’s narration is obscure following the conquest of Byzantium (he seems to skip one year, as it is clear from Beloch onwards). Schol. Aristoph. *Ran.* 1422 says that Alcibiades returned in 407/6 (unconvincingly argued in Munn 2000, 339). Summary of positions in Underhill 1900, xl, and Robertson 1980, who both choose 407, with Notium in spring 406 and Arginusae in summer, thus avoiding Conon and Lysander idle for more than one year, as it would be if Notium was in 407. For 407 see also Develin 1989, 171; Rhodes 2011, 188, and now Bearzot 2021, 163. For 408 see now Bleckmann 1998, 293-305; Trampedach 2015, 271-11.

According to Xenophon, Alcibiades wanted to be sure he would be appointed *strategos* before sailing to Athens; he learned of his election when he was at Gythion (the harbour of Sparta). His alleged reason for being there was to learn about the ships that the Spartans were supposedly constructing. However, it is difficult to imagine the Spartans unfazed by his formidable presence. He likely passed through Gythion to threaten his enemies with his fleet’s strength on his way to Athens, as he probably knew he had been elected *strategos* for the following year⁴. Plutarch and Diodorus write that he was elected when he was already in Athens, but they say he was appointed *strategos autocrator*, a role different from the normal *strategia* and probably bestowed later by the Athenians amongst other homages like the golden garland⁵.

So, Alcibiades reaches Piraeus as a victorious general, leading two hundred captured vessels, a multitude of captured soldiers, and a great number of spoils; indeed, his ships were embellished with gilded shields and garlands⁶. There are several other interesting details. On Alcibiades’ own ship, the oarsmen rowed to the music of a flute played by Chrisogonos (a famous player celebrated at Delphi) while the tragic actor Callippides kept time with his words; they were both dressed appropriately for the performance⁷. “Theatricality” was a major part of Duris’ narrative style as his purpose was to please the reader. He was especially fond of details regarding clothes and music. Plutarch questions his source as he did not find these details in Xenophon, Ephorus, or Theopompus. However, this description in itself is not far-fetched. Perhaps Duris of Samos, who boasted of being a descendant of Alcibiades and was interested in both him and his enemy Lysander for their relationships with his island, Samos, also aimed to create a parallel between Alcibiades’ arrival and Lysander’s entering of the defeated Athens, when he timed the destruction of the walls with the sound of flutes (this habit of playing flutes was probably typical of victorious generals entering a conquered city)⁸. The music played was a joyful sound, as inferred by Plutarch. Duris also states that the sails of Alcibiades’ triremes were purple-red⁹. It is hard to say whether this detail was indeed a part of the performance, but it is worth noting that, in some famous lines by Simonides,

⁴ The previous stop was Paros, where Theramenes had deposed an oligarchy in 410 (Diod. 13.47.8).

⁵ Plut. *Alc.* 33,2; Diod. 13.69.3; Xen. *Hell.* 1.4.20 says he was appointed hegemon autokrator. For other positions on the *strategia* see Hatzfeld 1931 and 1951, 292-293, n. 5; Hammond 1969, 116, argues he was appointed *strategos* of the hoplites; see discussion in Bearzot 2021, 168. For the golden garland see Domingo Gygax 2006. In Xenophon’s description of homages to Alcibiades Gray 1989 sees a demonstration of Athenian philanthropy.

⁶ Diod. 13.68.3; Plut. *Alc.* 32.1 adds figureheads of captured ships; Xen. *Hell.* 1.4.11 says he had left Paros with twenty ships.

⁷ Ath. 12.535d assigns to Callippides a sentence that Plut. *Lys.* 19.5 (citing Theophrastus) assigns to Archestratos (*strategos* after Alcibiades’ fall): it said that Athens would not cope with two Alcibiades. The same sentence is also said of Lysander (by Eteocles in Plutarch, by Callippides in Athenaeus). See also Ael. *H.V.* 11.7. For a positive evaluation of Duris’ description of Alcibiades’ return, see Landucci 1999, 243-47.

⁸ On Dionysius’ ships entering the conquered Naxos to the sound of flutes, see Polyaen. 5.2.5. Proietti 1987, 43, 109, makes a comparison with Lysanders’ return to Sparta, with an abundance of spoils; Due 1991 sees an ominous tone in both descriptions and finds a further parallel in Theramenes’ return to Athens from Sparta.

⁹ FGrHist 76 F 70: “Α δὲ Δοῦρις ὁ Σάμιος, Ἀλκιβιάδου φάσκων ἀπόγονος εἶναι, προστίθησι τοῦτοις, αὐλεῖν μὲν εἰρεσίαν τοῖς ἐλαύνουσι Χρυσόγονον τὸν Πυθιονίκην, κελεύειν δὲ Καλλιππίδην τὸν τῶν τραγῶ-
διῶν ὑποκριτὴν, στατὸν καὶ ξυστίδα καὶ τὸν ἄλλον ἐναγώνιον ἀμπεχόμενον κόσμον, ἰστίῳ δ’ ἄλουργῷ τὴν
ναυαρχίδα προσφέρεισθαι τοῖς λιμέσιν, ὥσπερ ἐκ μέθης ἐπικωμάζοντος, οὔτε Θεόπομπος οὔτ’ Ἐφορος οὔτε
Ξενοφῶν γέγραπεν· οὔτ’ εἰκὸς ἦν οὕτως ἐντρυφῆσαι τοῖς Ἀθηναίοις μετὰ φυγὴν καὶ συμφορὰς τοσαύτας
κατερχόμενον.

purple sails are said to have been used in Theseus' return to Athens after the Cretan expedition against King Minos and his Minotaur. This detail might help compare Alcibiades' return with the triumphant arrival of Theseus after his great victory. The saga of Theseus in Crete had been employed in creating the Athenian *thalassocratia*, with Athens surpassing Minos for the control of the sea, becoming master of the Aegean in his place. These stories are told in a dithyramb by Bacchilides and in the paintings of the Temple of Theseus in Athens, according to the ideological current carried on by Cymon in the middle of the V cent¹⁰. The sail colour suggested a parallel with the hero who had saved Athens from the Cretan king, recalling his triumphant return. Furthermore, once Theseus entered Athens, he pacified and united Attica through *synoecism*, just as Alcibiades' return resulted from internal negotiations and reconciliation¹¹.

As mentioned before, many had come to meet him at Piraeus. He hesitated at first, but when he saw his cousin Euripolemos, his relatives and friends, he went ashore and was accompanied to the city by a festive crowd¹². Xenophon adds a detail that stands out in this well-planned performance: he states that Alcibiades returned to Athens on the day of the Plynteria, when the statue of Athena was veiled. During that special day, no Athenian was supposed to undertake serious business, so some took this coincidence as a bad omen¹³. Plutarch also underlines the peculiarity of the day, saying that, as the statue was veiled, it seemed the goddess did not welcome Alcibiades and wished to keep him distant¹⁴. The fact that Alcibiades had decided to return home on such an ominous date seems quite odd. Nagy tries to explain it by arguing that the festival had no fixed date, as it can be inferred by the different dates given by Photius and Plutarch (Thargelion 29th and 25th): but Photius' text is confused and Plutarch's date is generally considered the canonical one¹⁵. Thus, Alcibiades returned to Athens on Thargelion 25th during the Plynteria. Little is known about this festival, its rites and duration, but the name implies the ritual washing of the statue of Athena and its holy garments: Plutarch tells that the Praxiergidai undressed the statue and covered it with a veil with secret ceremonies; Exychius adds that the Praxiergidai also dressed the statue again¹⁶. We also know that the temple of the goddess was roped off during

¹⁰ Attested by Plut. *Thes.* 17.4-5: Sim. fr. 550 PMG = 242 Poltera. Bibliography and comment in Nobili 2020. On the basis of the unknown ship's captain, Phereclos, and of the unusual colour of the sails, Poltera, 2008 401-401, considers this passage spurious and expresses an excess of criticism. He believes that purple meant disgrace, whereas Plutarch is clear in saying that Alcibiades looked like one coming home from a celebration. See also Athen. 5, 203, on Philopator's ship, which had linen seals adorned with purple.

¹¹ Theseus' return was celebrated in the Oschophoria and a ship considered that of the hero was still visible in the IV cent.: Plut. *Thes.* 22-24.

¹² Plut. *Alc.* 32.2; Xen. *Hell.* 1.4.19; Nep. *Alc.* 6.

¹³ Xen. *Hell.* 1.4.12. Krentz 1989, 21, thinks that Xenophon treats Alcibiades favorably throughout the *Hellenika*; Proietti 1987, 109, considers his treatment of Alcibiades an important part in books I and II; according to Due 1991 Xenophon appreciated Alcibiades as a strategos but not as a man; Root 1999, 369, sees some "darkness" in Xenophon's narrative.

¹⁴ Plut. *Alc.* 34. 2.

¹⁵ Xen. *Hell.* 1.4.12. Nagy 1994; cf. Trampedach 2015, 271-77. Phot. Lex. s.v. Καλλυντήρια καὶ Πλυντήρια: Photius links Thargelion 29th with Thargelion 19th, the day of the Kallynteria, a festival connected with the Plynteria; but Thargelion 19th was the date of the festival for the Thracian goddess Bendis: see Parke 1977, 152, and Christopoulos 1992 who points out that on Thargelion 29th an ekklesia would be held (Aeschin. Ctes. 27), which goes against the idea that nothing important was to be done on that day. Due 1991 thinks that the ill omen alludes to the final failure of Alcibiades' return; Kagan 1987, 290, ironically says that Nicias would have never forgotten it was a holy day.

¹⁶ Plut. *Alc.* 34.1. Hesych. s.v. Πραξιεργίδαι: οἱ τὸ ἔδος τὸ ἀρχαῖον τῆς Ἀθηνᾶς ἀμφιεννύντες, which (as IG I³ 7) explains that the cult was related to the statue of the ancient temple, that of the Poliàs: Robertson 2004;

the Plynteria¹⁷. A later inscription tells of ephebes accompanying the statue of Athena to the Phaleron and back again to Athens by torchlight, suggesting an evening ritual: this clearly refers to the Plynteria rites, involving purification of the statue in the sea, at Phaleron, and a procession back to Athens after sunset¹⁸.

Washing rites always imply purification. For instance, during the Eleusinian Mysteries, the initiates bathed at Phaleron: the formula “initiates to the sea” sent them off to the coast to purify themselves¹⁹. The ceremony of the Plynteria also meant washing and purification. After purification, the statue was dressed again, probably during the Kallynteria, a festival closely linked to the Plynteria, that implied κοσμεῖν καὶ λαμπρύνειν, the embellishment of the statue and the temple²⁰.

Similarly, Alcibiades’ own situation could be compared to that of the statue of Athena: he had returned to Athens as a great general to regain and purify his public image. But victories were not enough; he was still in a condition of impurity before the city, which had cursed him for the profanation of the Eleusinian Mysteries and the destruction of the Herms. Plutarch writes that, during the popular assembly, Alcibiades blamed his bad *daimon* and misfortune, and looked hopefully towards the future. So, after the restitution of the confiscated properties, the Eumolpides and Ceryces (who ran the Eleusinian Mysteries)

Hes. s.v. λουτρίδες αἱ περὶ τὸ ἔδος < τῆς Ἀθηνᾶς > δύο παρθένοι, αἱ καὶ πλυντρίδες λέγονται; Phot. Lex. s.v. λουτρίδες δύο κόραι περὶ τὸ ἔδος τῆς Ἀθηνᾶς ἐκαλοῦντο δὲ αὗται καὶ πλυντρίδες. οὕτως Ἀριστοφάνης (Aristoph. fr. 841). See Deubner 1969³, 17-21, who calls the Plynteria “ein Waschfest”, and Parker 1996, 307. An inscription of 236/5 (IG II² 776 = IG II³ 1, 1026 = Kotsidou 2000 59, KNr. 13 [E4] ll. 18-20), cites a priestess of Athena Polias providing 100 drachmas to the Praxergidai for their offices, curiously in the archontate of an Alcibiades.

¹⁷For the temple being inaccessible, Poll. 8.141: περισχοινίσαι τὰ ἱερὰ ἔλεγον ἐν ταῖς ἀποφράσι τὸ παραφράζει, οἷον Πλυντηρίοις...

¹⁸ IG II² 1006: ll. 11-12: the ephebes συνεξήγαγον δὲ καὶ τὴν Παλλάδα Φαληροὶ κάκειθεν πάλιν συνεισήγαγον μετὰ φωτὸς μετὰ πάσης εὐκοσμίας; ll. 75-76: the cosmetes παρέπεμψε δὲ καὶ τὴν Παλλάδα Φαληροὶ κά[κειθεν συνεισή]γαγεν μετὰ φω[τὸς]. During the procession hegheteria, a mix of figs, were eaten: Sourvinou-Inwood 2011, 140, 179. The nomophylakes attended the procession (at least in the Hellenistic period): Philoc. 328 F 64b: οἱ δὲ νομοφύλακες στροφίοις λευκοῖς ἐχρῶντο, καὶ ἐν ταῖς θεαῖς ἐπὶ Θρόνων ἐκάθητο καταντικρὺ τῶν ἐννέα ἀρχόντων, καὶ τῇ Παλλάδι τὴν πομπὴν ἐκόσμου, ὅτε κομίζοιτο τὸ ξόανον ἐπὶ τὴν θάλασσαν. Cf. Poll. 8, 94: νομοφύλακες ἐστεφάνωνται μὲν στροφίῳ λευκῷ, τὴν δὲ πομπὴν πέμπουσι τῇ θεῷ, τοῖς δὲ προέδροις ἐν ἐκκλησίαις συγκαθίζουσιν, διακωλύοντες ἐπιχειροτονεῖν ὅσα μὴ συμφέρει. Bettinetti 2001, 151, denies the existence of a ritual bath, but see, correctly, Sourvinou-Inwood 2011, 161 n. 97. Some other scholars argue that the statue was washed on the acropolis (Robertson 1996, Hollinshead 2015), or that the statue brought to the sea was the Palladion and that the peplos only was washed (Burkert 1970, followed by Brulé 1987): this reconstruction is disproven by Nagy 1991, though linking the procession to the Phaleron with the evacuation of Athens: contra, Sourvinou-Inwood 2011; Christopoulos 1992; Parker 1996, 307-08. Photius (Lex. Καλλυντήρια καὶ Πλυντήρια) states that in the year following the death of Aglauros the holy clothes had not been washed by anyone: this shows that Aglauros too was somehow involved in the rite: Sourvinou-Inwood 2011, 144.

¹⁹ The ritual bath was the repetition of Eumolpos’ katapontismòs: Apoll. 3.15.4; E. 349 Nauck. The ritual formula of the mysteries was also used by Cabria, in order to invite soldiers to the sea, during the battle fought between Naxos and Paros in 376, in the same days of the celebration of the Eleusinian mysteries (Ephor. FGrHist 70 F 80; Polyain. 3.11.2).

²⁰ Phot. Lex. s.v. Καλλυντήρια καὶ Πλυντήρια. Sourvinou-Inwood 2011, 193-94, argues that the Plynteria lasted two days, the procession coming back on Thargelion 27th, the beginning of the Kallynteria, but IG II² 1006 seems to speak of the same day. Christopoulos 1992 assumes that the Kallynteria were carried out before the Plynteria and only regarded the cleaning of the temple. In any case, after the ritual bath, the statue was dressed in clean garments, as Hesychius states. On the basis of some integrations to IG I³ 7 it was inferred that the statue was temporarily dressed with a chiton worth two minas: Sourvinou-Inwood 2011, 149, 178.

revoked their curses. The stone where the curses had been carved was thrown into the sea, its contents forever canceled and the stone purified²¹.

Some months later, Alcibiades took advantage of another opportunity to showcase his new, positive image and right his wrongs with the Eleusinian Mysteries. Because of the war and military advice he himself had given, the Spartan king Agis was in control of Northern Attica. Therefore, the pilgrims had to travel to Eleusis by boat, and the traditional ceremony was celebrated with little to no splendor. Alcibiades offered his own soldiers as protection along the way. They led the pilgrims in a safe, decorous, and silent array so that the procession could reach Eleusis by land again, following the traditional fashion. He was then celebrated as a sort of hierophant and mystagogue²². This festival involved a purification rite at the Phaleron, as we have seen, which enhanced the idea of Alcibiades' self-purification and expiation.

It was not by chance nor mistake that Alcibiades arrived at Athens on Thargelion 25th, during the day of purification when the statue of the main Athenian goddess was being cleansed, before the restitution of clean clothes and temple, jewelry and ornaments. Alcibiades, too, required purification before the restitution of his goods and full rights. This coincidence served to underline his new attitude: like the goddess he was impure but, as a victorious general, he would soon be cleansed and become a new patron of Athens²³. Thargelion 25th was an opportune day to return to Athens, although his enemies spread a negative interpretation of the choice of date.

A later incident might help prove this interpretation. Alcibiades' return, as Xenophon narrates it, seems to have been taken into consideration by the protagonist of later events, Demetrius Poliorcetes. Plutarch says that Demetrios arrived for the first time at Piraeus on Thargelion 26th 307, precisely one hundred years after Alcibiades. However, he came the day after the first day of the Plynteria—the day after the date Alcibiades had chosen—and surely not by chance. Demetrius chose the day when the purification was over and the goddess, no longer veiled, was presented in all her splendour. He, too, sought an epiphany akin to that of the goddess, like Alcibiades, but on a more appropriate day of the Plynteria. Indeed, the suggestion was that he did not require purification²⁴. Demetrius too waited for some time before going ashore, announcing democracy and negotiating with the Athenians from his ship; according to Plutarch, he then went to Megara, tried to go to Patrae, freed Munichia from the Macedonian garrison and finally entered the city and spoke in the *ecclesia*. Diodorus says that he first went to Athens and then to Megara: this reconstruction is more interesting because, in this case, he might have spoken in the last *ecclesia* of Thargelion, which was held on the 29th, just as Alcibiades seems to have done. Demetrius' more arrogant arrival in a better day seems to mark a difference, probably on the basis of Xenophon's account and in order to avoid criticism. None of his actions was a coincidence. This attention to the right

²¹ Plut. *Alc.* 33.3. On the stone see Diod. 13.69.2, who says nothing on the Plynteria.

²² Xen. *Hell.* 1.4.20; Plut. *Alc.* 34.3-6. Verdegem 2001 considers this incident the peak of his glory but also the beginning of his downfall, since the envy of his enemies prevailed from then onwards.

²³ Stuttard 2018, 258-59, though in a novelistic tone, is right in considering the Plynteria a day of rest for the city, awaiting renewal: "So it was with a real sense of renewal that, within days of his arrival, Alcibiades found himself first in the agora".

²⁴ Plut. *Dem.* 8.5. Sourvinou-Inwood 2011, 141, argues that this happened in the second day of the festival, and that the statue was still under purification. However, comparison with Demetrius' arrival allows us to rule that out. Rose 2018, 266, recalling Alcibiades' return, underlines Demetrius' choice of a more appropriate day, saying that "the synchronism of Demetrius' triumphant arrival and the celebration of the Plynteria forged a connection between Demetrius and the patron goddess of the city".

moment to approach Athens might support the idea that Alcibiades, too, had carefully planned his return date, choosing the moment that best suited him: in his case, the period of purification, in an appropriate low profile.

Scholars have often compared some famous, contemporary tragedies with Alcibiades’ exile and return, although stretching the texts at times to fit their needs²⁵. It cannot be denied that the problem of calling back a banished citizen, a courageous and effective general, in a moment of great peril, which is the plot of the *Philoctetes*, perfectly suits the political climate of 409 (the date of the tragedy), when Alcibiades’ return had already been decided but not yet enacted. The next year, Euripides’ *Orestes* was presented with the story of Orestes’ return and acquittal by Athenian judges: it was the tragedy of a hero charged with a “sacred” crime. The *Phoenician Women* also treated the theme of exile and return, possibly alluding to Alcibiades’ situation²⁶. We could add another drama to this list, though from a different point of view, *Iphigeneia in Tauris*. This play narrates the journey of Orestes and Pilades to Tauris and their encounter with Iphigeneia, now a priestess of a local goddess whose statue Orestes had to steal, on orders from Apollo, to be purified from his sins. After the recognition, most of the plot consists of the planning of their flight from Tauris and the deceit of the local king Thoas: Iphigeneia told him she had to go to the sea and purify the statue and the Greek prisoners who had touched it, as the sea “washes away all evils” (1188-1233). Once at the seashore, they managed to escape and the tragedy ends with Athena ordering Orestes to Athens. The statue of the local goddess is said to be of heavenly origin: this detail surely reminded the Athenian audience of the most important statue of Athena dedicated on the Acropolis, likewise fallen from heaven²⁷. And the statue purified by the sea must have also recalled the Plynteria festival²⁸. Moreover, Orestes, too, required purification. Alcibiades’ well-orchestrated return seems to be in harmony with a cleansing of recent, tragic inspiration. The drama, dated around 417-412²⁹, tells a similar story to that of Alcibiades’ return and purification: as a final consideration, we might wonder if this play suggested Alcibiades’ supporters a similar return to Athens, employing purification and a statue of a goddess fallen from the heavens.

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²⁵ Bearzot 2008; Vickers 2008. Bibliography in Saïd 2019, who underestimates the search for contemporary allusions in tragedies and carries scepticism much too far.

²⁶ Bearzot 1999 sees in this tragedy a special homage to Thrasiboulos, one of the promoters of Alcibiades’ return.

²⁷ Eur. *Iph. T.* 87-88; on the Athenian statue, Paus. 1.26.6.

²⁸ The tragedy recounts the aition of the cult of Artemis Tauropolos at Halai, as the statue was then brought in Euboea. This cult is also attested at Amphipolis, where it was probably introduced by Athenian colonists, particularly by their oecist Hagnon: Mari 2012. He was of the deme of Stiria, which was close to Halai and Brauron, where Iphigeneia settles at the end of the drama. Interestingly, this was also the deme of Trasiboulos, one of the democratic supporters of Alcibiades’.

²⁹ Many similarities invite comparison with *Helen* (412 B.C.): recent discussion in Parker 2016, lxxvi-lxxxx; Hall 2013, xxx-xxx; Kiriakou 2006, 41.

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