

Isocrates and the Rhetorical Creation of Europe:

The Medium as Message

I. Introduction: Overview

The idea that Isocrates helped create the concept of transnationalism that fostered Europe both as an idea and as an eventual political union is common fare in rhetorical studies. De Romilly (1992) writes that “Isocrates was perhaps the first in antiquity to focus his political theories on the idea of Europe” (p. 2). Isocrates anticipated “the idea of Europe” (Hariman, 2004, p. 231) and used the words *Europen* and *Europes* 13 times in his essays. But, to date, critical exploration of Isocrates’ role in developing the idea of Europe has primarily dealt with the content of his works – with his eloquent and relentless focus on panhellenism and the related conflict between Europe and Asia. This paper, however, will focus on medium rather than message. It will focus on Isocrates’ pioneering use of a new medium – written documents/*syggrammata* – and the role that the new rhetorical medium played in forming Europe.

The most famous passage in the Isocratean canon, the so-called Hymn to Logos (Jaeger, 1944/1971), which first appeared in *Nicoles* (5-9) and was repeated in *Antidosis* (253-257), holds that speech/logos is a civic and political unifier, by means of which “we have come together and founded cities and made laws and invented arts” (*Nicoles* 6). Yet before Isocrates, who was “the first individual who could be termed a ‘writer’ in the modern sense of the term” (Lentz, 1989), logos and its community-building powers

traveled primarily orally: Cities, alliances, arts, and laws were built through face-to-face communication. Isocrates expanded logos to the tangible, transportable text and used it to preach his message of panhellenism to distant leaders including Archidamus of Sparta, Dionysius of Syracuse, and Philip of Macedonia. Isocrates “indicates that his works are to be understood as being sent out or even published throughout the Greek-speaking and -reading world” (Too, 1995, p. 127).

Marshall McLuhan’s (1964) famous dictum that “the medium is the message” (p. 23) denotes the idea that a pervasive medium’s cultural and neurological impacts far outweigh the importance of the content that it conveys. Writing, as McLuhan (1964) has further noted, helps build broad common cultures and, through the printing press, leads to nationalism. Not only did Isocrates’ new medium bolster panhellenism by geographically and chronologically extending the community-building powers of logos, it transformed the human mind, catalyzing such culture-shaping disciplines as ethics, law, philosophy, and more (Havelock, 1982). As Havelock (1982), Ong (1982), and other scholars of orality and literacy have noted, brain capacity previously devoted to memory in oral cultures now was liberated for more extensive forays into what Socrates called the examined life. As Haskins (2004) puts it, “The critical eye now dominates the easily seduced ear” (p. 23).

A generation ago, structuralist critics dissected texts into *histoire*, *narration*, and *récit* (Genette, 1972) – or, in Rimmon-Kenan’s (1983) terminology, *story*, *narration*, and *text*. Heretofore, scholarly accounts of Isocrates’ formative role in the idea of Europe have focused on *histoire*/story/content. Ideally, the contribution of this paper will be to

show the importance of Isocrates' *récit*/text/new medium in helping to establish the idea and reality of Europe.

II. The Concept of Europe in the Greece of Isocrates

Isocrates was born in Athens in 436 BCE. The son of a financially successful flute-maker, he became a logographer – a writer of speeches for Athenian litigants – then opened a school that, in the words of Jaeger, "has exercised a far greater influence on the educational methods of humanism than any other Greek or Roman teacher..."

(1944/1971, p. 46). Isocrates lived and taught in the Athens of Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle and died at age 98, shortly after writing the essay *Panathenaicus* and a letter to Philip of Macedonia.

Regarding the genesis of Europe, Meier (2012), in *A Culture of Freedom: Ancient Greece and the Origins of Europe*, poses a question that must be addressed in this paper. "Where does Europe begin?" he asks. "Where, indeed, does anything ever begin?" (p. 3). Throughout the work, Meier cautiously traces the origins of Europe to ancient Greece, and he concludes that, although "[t]here are no hard-and-fast rules about where to locate historical ruptures" (p. 46), "[w]ithout the Greeks, Eurasia would never – and certainly not permanently – have been divided into two separate continents" (p. 21). Sacks (1995) notes that by the eighth century BCE there was a rough understanding that Europe and Asia "were two different continents, separated by the Aegean sea" – but that the Greek word *Europe* and its derivatives primarily referred to central Greece (p. 94).

An early sense of being European may have been fueled by a perception of otherness, of being not-Asian. In the fourth century BCE, for example, Aristotle, in

Politics, holds that Asians “lack spirit” (1327b) and are “servile” (1285a) in comparison with the Greeks. Modern histories often cast the seminal battles of Marathon, Thermopylae, and Salamis not just as battles between Greece and Persia but between two cultures, West and East, Europe and Asia. The subtitle of Lloyd’s *Marathon* (1973) is *The Story of Civilizations on Collision Course*. The subtitle of Bradford’s *Thermopylae* (1993) is *The Battle for the West*. The subtitle of Strauss’ *The Battle of Salamis* (2004) is *The Naval Encounter That Saved Greece – and Western Civilization*. Meier (2012) asserts that in the wake of these fifth century BCE battles, “the Greeks began to conceive of themselves in opposition both to the barbarians and to Asia... [T]he contrast between the Greeks and Persians was increasingly being perceived as a contrast between Europe and Asia” (p. 36). For an educated Greek individual in the time of Isocrates, according to Jaeger (1939/1973), a map “of the surface of the earth was divided into two roughly equal parts, Europe and Asia” (p. 158). As we shall see, however, such a map probably guessed at the northwestern reaches of Europe. Isocrates himself writes of “[a]ll the world which lies beneath the firmament being divided into two parts, the one called Asia [*Asias*], the other Europe [*Europes*]” (*Panegyricus*, 179).

Isocrates’ use of the word *Europe* and derivatives is revealing. The *Thesaurus Linguae Graecae* database indicates that he used *Europen* or *Europes* 13 times in his essays. Although he seemed to use the word to indicate the Greek city-states and their surroundings (*Panegyricus* 117, 176, 179; *To Philip* 151), often in contrast to Asia (*Helen* 67; *Panegyricus* 149; *Archidamus* 54), in *Panathenaicus* Isocrates does seem to distinguish between Greece/Hellas and Europe:

And so it resulted from the policy which we pursued that Hellas [*Hellada*] waxed great, Europe [*Europen*] became stronger than Asia, and, furthermore, the Hellenes who were in straitened circumstances received cities and lands, while the barbarians who were wont to be insolent were expelled from their own territory and humbled in their pride.... (47)

“[E]ven if it is still imprecise and uncertain,” De Romilly (1992) concludes, “this very manner of speech is a first step towards our modern notions of Europe” (p. 4).

Barry Cunliffe’s book *The Extraordinary Voyage of Pytheas the Greek* (2002) documents the scant knowledge Isocrates and his contemporaries had about the Europe beyond Greece and the familiar Mediterranean ports. Pytheas was a fourth century BCE Greek explorer who left an account, now lost, of a land and sea exploration that involved a journey into terra incognita: probably across the neck of the Iberian peninsula and a circumnavigation, with frequent stops and land-based explorations, of what is now Great Britain. In approximately 330 BCE – eight years after Isocrates’ death – Pytheas became “the first Greek to travel ... to the limits of the inhabited world and to publish a sober description of what he saw” (p. viii). At that time, the “familiar world was largely restricted to the Mediterranean and Black Sea fringes and the rivers of Egypt and Mesopotamia” (p. 35). The “north Atlantic shore” was “shrouded in mystery” (p. vii), in part because a hostile Carthage largely controlled the Strait of Gibraltar from 500 to 250 BCE (p. 53). With some of the tin necessary for bronze being imported from Britain, the Greeks knew of mysterious lands to the far northwest, but, in the time of Isocrates, those lands were “beyond the known world” (p. 18). In short, much of the landmass of Europe was unknown to Isocrates and his contemporaries.

III. Proto-Europeanism: Isocrates and Panhellenism

Throughout his essays, Isocrates worked toward a panhellenic confederacy. “His own political writings, read throughout Greece, gave him greater influence upon popular opinion than belonged to any other literary man of the time,” declares Jebb (1876), “and he used this influence principally to enforce one idea” (p. 13). That idea, of course, was panhellenic unity. Citing the example of an idealized past, Isocrates reminds his readers that “our ancestors will be seen to have preserved without ceasing the spirit of concord towards the Hellenes...” (*Panathenaicus*, 42). Isocrates, writes Ober (2004), “proposed to reconcile two senses of ‘we’ available to his Athenian audience – ‘we the few and good’ and ‘we the *demos*’ – with a third, much broader conception of ‘we the Hellenes’” (p. 23). Of Isocrates’ dual loyalties to Athens and to a larger Greece, Norlin (1928/1991) concludes:

Love of Athens is the one passion of his dispassionate nature; and second only to this is his love of Hellas. Or rather, both of these feelings are blended into a single passion – a worship of Hellenism as a way of life, a saving religion of which he conceives Athens to be the central shrine.... (pp. ix-x)

In *To Philip*, Isocrates asserts that “throughout my whole life I have constantly employed such powers as I possess” to foster panhellenic unity in the face of the threat from Persia (130). Later, in *To the Rulers of the Mytilenaeans*, he declares, “I have myself composed more discourses on behalf of the freedom and independence of the Greeks than all those together who have worn smooth the floor of our platforms” (7).

According to Too (1995), Isocrates is “the author who more than any other sets out and effects an apparently *panhellenic programme*” (p. 138). Similarly, Hariman (2004) concludes, “Isocrates was a *proleptic* thinker. He worked out ... the idea of Europe” (p. 231).

In championing Isocrates as the first effective advocate for panhellenism and consequent European identity, however, both Isocrates himself and modern critics have, logically, focused on the content of his essays: He focused on “*subjects* wider and nobler than the concerns of any single city” (Jebb, 1876, p. 43). His “one *fundamental preoccupation* [was] the ideal of pan-hellenic unity” (Marrou, 1956/1982, p. 87).

Isocrates was “perhaps the first in antiquity to focus *his political theories* on the idea of Europe” (De Romilly, 1992, p. 2). Isocrates “adopts the old *theme* of pan-Hellenism in order to criticize the contemporary historical situation” (Haskins, 2004, p. 125).

(Emphasis added to preceding quotations.) Such terms as *subjects*, *theories*, and *theme*, of course, focus on the content – the panhellenic message – of his essays. As McLuhan (1964) maintains, “[I]t is only too typical that the ‘content’ of any medium blinds us to the character of the medium” (p. 24).

Rather than addressing the content of Isocrates’ essays, however, this paper addresses the medium of that persistent panhellenic message and that medium’s role in developing panhellenism and the concept of Europe as a geographic and cultural entity. Structuralist critics, among others, have long dissected communications into categories such as *histoire*, *narration*, and *récit* (Genette, 1972) – or, in Rimmon-Kenan’s (1983) terminology, *story* (the content), *narration* (the act of telling), and *text* (the discernible artifact). Heretofore, studies of Isocrates’ role in panhellenism and the concept of Europe

have generally addressed *histoire*/story. Ideally, the contribution of this paper will be to show the importance of Isocrates' *récit*/text – his new medium of the written essay – in helping to establish the idea and reality of Europe.

Classical scholars have generally attributed to Isocrates the development, within Western civilization, of distributed documents in general and the critical essay in particular. Isocrates' own introduction to *Antidosis* sets forth his confident realization that he is escaping the confinements of the oral culture of Athens and Greece:

If the discourse which is now about to be read [*anagnosthesesthai*] had been like the speeches which are produced either for the law-courts or for oratorical display, I should not, I suppose, have prefaced it by any explanation. Since, however, it is novel and different in character, it is necessary to begin by setting forth the reasons why I chose to write [*graphein*] a discourse so unlike any other.... (1)

Antidosis, thus, is something new and different: It is not a speaker-delivered oration destined for law courts or the Assembly. Rather, the discourse adopts a new medium for a new audience: It is a tangible text to be read (*anagnosthesesthai*) by readers anywhere. Later in the essay (12), in fact, Isocrates cautions his new audience not to tire themselves by reading the long essay in one sitting.

Just as he refers to readers in his introduction to *Antidosis*, Isocrates – via the verb *graphein*, to write – refers to himself as something new: a writer. Isocrates, maintains Lentz (1989), is “the first individual who could be termed a ‘writer’ in the modern sense of the term” (p. 123). “Isokratic prose was meant to be read rather than to be spoken,” Jebb (1876) concludes. “This is the basis of its character, distinguishing it from the earlier

rhetorical prose, and fitting it to influence the literary prose of the modern world” (p. 426). Echoing Jebb and Lentz, Too (1995) holds that “Isocrates is the ancient author who more than any other establishes writing as a medium of political expression and activity...” (p. 114). Perhaps fearing this new competition for his own chosen oral medium, Isocrates’ contemporary Alcidas (van Hook, 1919) attacked Isocrates as one of “certain so-called Sophists [who] are vainglorious and puffed up with pride because they have practised the writing of speeches” (p. 91).

IV. The Impact of Isocrates’ New Medium

As a medium, Isocrates’ writings took the form of *syggrammata* (*Antidosis* 14, 33); Liddell and Scott (1889), in their standard Greek lexicon, define *syggramma* (plural, *syggrammata*) as “a writing, a written paper” (p. 753). Isocrates also used the term *biblion* (*To Philip*, 21), which Liddell and Scott (1889) define as “a paper, scroll, letter” (p. 150). The *récit/text* of this tangible new medium helped establish the idea and reality of Europe in three ways: It expanded the spatial potential of logos; it expanded the temporal potential of logos; and, as a pervasive new print medium, it altered human nature in ways conducive, in the opinion of McLuhan and other scholars of orality and literacy, to nation-building.

The portability of Isocrates’ new medium enabled his panhellenic message to be studied by contemporaries throughout Greece. In spatial terms, it expanded the sphere of reception. For example, Isocrates directed essays – understood to be read by others (Jebb, 1876, p. 426; Too, 1995, p. 150) – to Nicocles of Cyprus, Philip of Macedonia, Dionysius of Syracuse, Archidamus of Sparta, and others. Isocrates’ panhellenic message, in

Haskins' (2004) words, thus “exceeds the spacio-temporal limits defined by the law courts, the Assembly, and the festival, the three explicit institutions of rhetorical practice in the Athenian democracy” (p. 72). Too (1995) reviews Isocrates' repeated efforts to cast himself as a modern Agamemnon, a uniter of the Greek city-states, and she concludes:

Isocrates' literary career is to be seen as modelling itself upon Agamemnon's military enterprise.... At stake in this self-characterisation is the claim to define Greek identity through language, for Isocrates' rhetorical and linguistic programme assumes a political agenda, arrogating to itself the right to determine the *logos* which defines the Greek community. (pp. 138, 139)

Isocrates' *syggrammata*, unlike their oral counterparts, were “intended for written circulation” (Morgan, 2004, p. 148).

Beyond spatial boundaries, Isocrates' new medium expanded temporal boundaries in several senses. For example, written compositions that were not scheduled for a particular Assembly or court session allowed a more flexible composition process. T. Poulakos (1997) holds that “one of Isocrates' most important contributions to the history of rhetoric [was] the gift of time” (p. 70):

With time on its side, eloquence would have a chance to develop its intrinsic qualities even as it continued to cater to an external situation.... [T]he new spaciousness of public deliberation ... became affable to ethical considerations. (pp. 70, 71-72)

This “gift of time” increased writers' ability to revise and refine their messages. Isocrates himself “turned into a writing orator whose very compositions functioned as arguments

for producing, studying and practicing rhetoric in the written mode,” J. Poulakos (2004, p. 79) writes. Indeed, Isocrates discusses revising early drafts of his essays in *Panathenaicus* and *To Philip*. Yet Isocrates’ gift of time included more: Readers also received the gift. No longer dependent on the speaker, a reader could pause as often as he or she wished to ponder the words of the writer. Again, in *Antidosis*, Isocrates urges readers not to read the essay in one sitting (12). Isocrates’ new medium afforded his audiences more time to consider the merits of his panhellenic message. Isocrates, in Too’s (1995) estimation, “replaced the earlier politics of the voice by a politics of the written word” (p. 150).

The gift of time bestowed by Isocrates’ new medium also encompasses the spread of Greek philosophy and rhetoric throughout the later Roman Empire as well as the re-emergence of classical texts from the so-called Dark Ages of the fifth to 15th centuries. In *A History of Western Philosophy* (1945), Bertrand Russell notes that Greek culture was a powerful formative influence on Rome. Of rhetoric in particular, Kennedy (1972) concludes that the “rhetoric seen in Latin literature is largely Greek” (p. 4).

Regarding the role of Isocrates’ new medium in preserving Greek and Roman culture during the Dark Ages, Muir (2005) finds it appropriate that “[t]he first classical text to be translated from the Greek into English was Isocrates’ *To Nicocles*” (p. 183). In *The Classical Tradition*, Gilbert Highet (1959) makes much of the influence of those recovered classical texts in reviving the idea of Europe:

But much of [classical learning] was covered by wave after wave of barbarism; silted over; buried; and forgotten. Europe slipped backwards, backwards, almost into savagery. When the civilization of the west began to

rise again and remake itself, it did so largely through rediscovering the buried culture of Greece and Rome. Great systems of thought, profound and skilful works of art, do not perish unless their *material vehicle* is utterly destroyed....

What happened after the Dark Ages was that the mind of Europe was reawakened and converted and stimulated by the rediscovery of classical civilization. (p. 1, emphasis added).

Writing, of course, is not only more portable than speech; it also is more durable. One key idea preserved by Isocrates' new medium was his own radical belief that nations are built on shared cultural ties rather than shared blood ties (*Panegyricus*, 50). The new medium, thus, not only helped to develop the idea of Europe: Centuries later, it helped to revive and infuse the idea.

Finally, Isocrates' new medium helped transform human consciousness in ways conducive to change and the exploration of new ideas, including nationhood and, perhaps, international alliances. Havelock (1986), Ong (1982), and other scholars of orality and literacy have held that members of oral cultures devote such quantities of intellectual energy and neurological storage capacity to memorizing cultural history and norms that little ability or inclination remains for analytical thought. In fact, Thomas (1992) notes that the Greek word for truth, *aletheia*, means the opposite of forgetfulness, *lethe* (p. 115). Havelock (1982) was among the first to assert that oral cultures use speech to preserve cultural norms, thus discouraging the growth of new ideas such as nation-states:

[T]he religion, law, and custom, the ethical and historical consciousness of an oral culture are not in themselves capable of incorporation in visible models. Their

close conservation depends upon strictly verbal description handed down between the generations. Description here passes into prescription. What is done becomes what ought to be done. (p. 127)

Such strictures certainly operated in the Greece of Isocrates: “Oral methods continue[d] to be trusted, just as oral tradition was considered the perfectly normal source for the past at least till the fourth century and to some extent beyond” (Thomas, 1992, p. 89). Ong (1982) thus describes the probable fate of new and complex ideas within a culture that lacked Isocrates’ new medium:

In an oral culture, to think through something in non-formulaic, nonpatterned, non-mnemonic terms, even if it were possible, would be a waste of time, for such thought, once worked through, could never be recovered with any effectiveness, as it could be with the aid of writing. It would not be abiding knowledge but simply a passing thought.... (pp. 35, 73)

McLuhan in particular insists on the link between writing and the birth of nationalism. In his landmark *Understanding Media* (1964), he titled a key chapter “The Printed Word: Architect of Nationalism,” and he asserts:

The hotting-up of the medium of writing to repeatable print intensity led to nationalism.... Our western values [are] built on the written word.... [A] single generation of alphabetical literacy suffices in Africa today, as in Gaul two thousand years ago, to release the individual ... from the tribal web.... It can be argued, then, that the phonetic alphabet, alone, is the technology that has been the

means of creating “civilized man” – the separate individuals equal before a written code of law. (pp. 37, 85, 86)

In a later interview, McLuhan (*Playboy*, 1969) declared, “Our own Western time-space concepts derive from the environment created by the discovery of phonetic writing, as does our entire concept of Western civilization” (§ 33).

V. Conclusion

Certainly a case could be made that Isocrates used, in addition to *story* and *text*, the third aspect of narratives – *narration* – to indirectly advance the idea of Europe. Because his medium of the written essay was new, Isocrates paused frequently in his narratives to explain to students and other readers why he was doing what he was doing. We already, for example, have read his explanation of his new medium in the first lines of *Antidosis* and have noted his emphasis on revising successive drafts. According to Jaeger (1944/1971), Isocrates “often seized an opportunity to break off the thread of his argument, and to explain what he was saying, how he was saying it, and why” (p. 55). “Isocrates’ orations,” Morgan (2004) explains, “are both individual arguments set in a historical context and rhetorical modes meant to be emulated by his students” (p. 126). Because Isocrates urged his students to address topics that embraced more than the narrow interests of an individual city-state, he thus used both *story* and *narration* to advance panhellenic ideals. As he wrote in *Antidosis*, “[W]hat discourse could have a nobler or a greater theme than one which summons the Hellenes ... to be of one mind among themselves?” (77).

The purpose of this paper, however, has been to focus on the third aspect of narratives: *text*. Isocrates' new medium allowed his redefinition and expansion of the concept of community to overcome space and time. Furthermore, his new medium helped introduce to the human intellect capacities conducive to building culturally united nations and even continents. In this case, medium indeed was the message in McLuhan's sense – and yet it was more. In Isocrates' essays, the medium enhanced the message it contained.

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