

Between Narrative and Interpretation: Writing History in the Ancient World

Unit 3: Thucydides

Thucydides is arguably the most important historian surviving from the classical period. He was the first pragmatic historian and a great step forward in the development of Greek historiography. His method, style of writing and attention to detail has made him a favourite and an example for historians ever since.

Before continuing with this unit, it is strongly suggested that you familiarise yourself with the events of the Peloponnesian War. A good introduction is Osborne, R. Classical Greece, 500-323, OUP 2000, p.187-195 [Available from NetLibrary: <http://www.netlibrary.com/>]

Life

Thucydides was an Athenian of the upper classes born around 460-455 BCE and died around 400 BCE. His family was very active in Athenian politics in the 5th century, particularly the first half. Prosopographical evidence suggests that Thucydides was a blood relation to the general Kimon, the victor of Eurymedon (OCD s.v. Cimon, <http://www.oxfordreference.com/views/ENTRY.html?subview=Main&entry=t111.e1577>) and Thucydides, the son of Melesias, the main adversary to Perikles (OCD s.v. Thucydides (1)

<http://www.oxfordreference.com/views/ENTRY.html?subview=Main&entry=t111.e6426>). Thucydides was involved in politics himself and was general during the Archidamian War (OCD s.v. Archidamian War <http://www.oxfordreference.com/views/ENTRY.html?subview=Main&entry=t111.e686>).

In 424 BCE, during his service as general, he lost Amphipolis (OCD s.v. <http://www.oxfordreference.com/views/ENTRY.html?subview=Main&entry=t111.e375>) to the Spartan general Brasidas (OCD s.v. Brasidas

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). The loss of Amphipolis was a great blow to Athens at the time and Thucydides was exiled for his inability to defend the city. His exile probably lasted until the end of the Peloponnesian War (404 BCE) but he died shortly afterwards. During his exile, Thucydides was based in Thrace, near Amphipolis, where he had familial connections and a stake in the precious metal mines there (Thucydides 4.105.1, for the text, see Perseus DL: <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/cgi-bin/ptext?lookup=Thuc.+4.105.1>).

As a member of the Athenian upper class and a politician in the making, it is certain that Thucydides had had a thorough rhetorical and philosophical education. Given his familial connections with Kimon, it is probable that he belonged to the oligarchic party in Athens, although throughout his *History*, he exhibits great admiration for Perikles and his administration.

The History of the Peloponnesian War

One of the most important aspects of studying Thucydides and his work is the understanding of the fact that the Thucydides *History* is incomplete. Thucydides died before completing his *History*, even in draft form. The work ends abruptly in the middle of a sentence in the coverage for the year 410 BCE.

The problem of Thucydides' work being incomplete is greater than the lack of coverage for the last years of the war. It is apparent from reading the text and scholarly opinion agrees unanimously on this that Thucydides rewrote and redrafted his *History* until it reached a place of completion, historical and literary, that was acceptable to him.

The *History* can be divided in five parts. The first part (Book 1) is the introduction to the war, including a brief summary of the events of the Pentekontaetia (OCD s.v. Pentekontaetia

<http://www.oxfordreference.com/views/ENTRY.html?subview=Main&entry=t111.e4848>

). The second part covers the Archidamian War, 431-421 BCE (Thucydides 2.1-5.24). The third part is the history of the years between the Peace of Nikias (421 BCE) and the

Sicilian Expedition (Thucydides 5.25-116). The fourth part, covered in Books 6 and 7, is the history of the Sicilian Expedition (COCCL s.v. Sicilian Expedition <http://www.oxfordreference.com/views/ENTRY.html?subview=Main&entry=t9.e2633>).

The fifth and last part, Book 8, covers the beginning of the Ionian War until 410 BCE.

The five parts of Thucydides' *History* are in different stages of completion. It is generally assumed, based mainly on the compositional details, the references to later episodes in the war and the existence of long speeches (demegoriai) that parts 2 (the Archidamian War) and 4 (the Sicilian Expedition) are complete.

On the other side of the coin, parts 1, 3 and 5 are considered to be incomplete and not in final format. The main reason for the scholarly opinion of their incompleteness is that they contain no speeches (except for the Melian Dialogue which is unique) but contain documents. While these reasons are not fool-proof, since there is evidence from antiquity that there was Thucididean plan to abandon the use of speeches, it is certain that these two parts are sharply different from the other three:

This inconsistency is to be found especially in the speeches, the dialogues and the other rhetorical passages. It was probably while attending to these inconsistencies that he left the work unfinished. Cratippus, his contemporary and the editor of the history as he left it, has recorded this view, and said further that they not only impede the action but also cause annoyance to the audience. It was in realisation of this, he says, that Thucydides included no rhetorical passages in the last parts of this history, although many events took place in Ionian and many at Athens which were the results of public debates and discussions. A comparative examination of the first and eighth books would suggest that they had not been composed according to the same plan or with the same literary power: for the first book contains few actions, and those trivial, and yet abounds in rhetorical passages; whereas the other is concerned with many important events, but is devoid of political speeches. Dionysios of Halikarnassos *On Thucydides* 16.

Translation: Dionysius of Halicarnassus: *The Critical Essays*. Translated by Usher S. Loeb Classical Library. Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press; London, William Heinemann Ltd. 1974.

It is possible, as Wade-Gery suggested (OCD 2nd edition. The text can be found in the first part of OCD³ s.v. Thucydides <http://www.oxfordreference.com/views/ENTRY.html?subview=Main&entry=t111.e6427>

) that parts 3 and 8 were parts of the *History*, where Thucydides intended to experiment with alternative means of historical narration. Such experimentation which may very well be the reason for the inclusion of a dialogue in the *History* (the Melian Dialogue, Thucydides 5.84ff, available from the Perseus DL: <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/cgi-bin/ptext?lookup=Thuc.+5.84.1>).

However, it is certain that part of Thucydides' editing process in his work was to excise repetitive treatments of a subject. Thus, the existence of "doubles", such as the repetition of the tyrannicides story in 1.20 (<http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/cgi-bin/ptext?lookup=Thuc.+1.20.1>) and 6.54-59 (<http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/cgi-bin/ptext?lookup=Thuc.+6.54.1>), enhances the suspicion that parts 1, 3 and 5 were incomplete or at least not fully edited by Thucydides himself.

Further, there are important historical reasons why parts 1, 3 and 5 are considered incomplete beyond literary concerns. An obvious example is the lack of treatment of the Persian involvement in the Peloponnesian War in part 3, where there is independent evidence of Athenian efforts to secure Persian assistance against Sparta.

Scholarship nowadays has moved on to different concerns regarding Thucydides' work (see below ???) but the relative completeness, or incompleteness, of the *History* is part of the necessary background of any discussion of Thucydides as a historian and as an author. The level of detail and the extent of the usage of literary devices in parts 2 and 4 (i.e. the parts considered complete) is considerably larger than that of parts 1, 3 and 5. It is necessary in any discussion of Thucydides' method, content and expressed opinion to keep in mind the differences between the different parts of the *History*. To provide a simple example, it is one of the great complaints of any ancient historian working on the 5th century that Thucydides' coverage of the Pentekontaetia is sadly lacking in detail. Possibly, Thucydides planned to provide greater detail of the building up of Athenian power, as well as provide greater insight into the actions and reactions of the Athenian allies during this important formative period. Consequently, it would be premature to judge Thucydides' method and attention to detail based on Book 1 from a historical point of view.

Method

Thucydides represents a very important step in the development of historiography in his interest and insistence on recording events and opinions truthfully and exactly. His method is sharply different from that of Herodotos and is very near the modern understanding of historiography:

XXI. On the whole, however, the conclusions I have drawn from the proofs quoted may, I believe, safely be relied on. Assuredly they will not be disturbed either by the lays of a poet displaying the exaggeration of his craft, or by the compositions of the chroniclers that are attractive at truth's expense; the subjects they treat of being out of the reach of evidence, and time having robbed most of them of historical value by enthroning them in the region of legend. Turning from these, we can rest satisfied with having proceeded upon the clearest data, and having arrived at conclusions as exact as can be expected in matters of such antiquity. [2] To come to this war; despite the known disposition of the actors in a struggle to overrate its importance, and when it is over to return to their admiration of earlier events, yet an examination of the facts will show that it was much greater than the wars which preceded it. XXII. With reference to the speeches in this history, some were delivered before the war began, others while it was going on; some I heard myself, others I got from various quarters; it was in all cases difficult to carry them word for word in one's memory, so my habit has been to make the speakers say what was in my opinion demanded of them by the various occasions, of course adhering as closely as possible to the general sense of what they really said. [2] And with reference to the narrative of events, far from permitting myself to derive it from the first source that came to hand, I did not even trust my own impressions, but it rests partly on what I saw myself, partly on what others saw for me, the accuracy of the report being always tried by the most severe and detailed tests possible. [3] My conclusions have cost me some labour from the want of coincidence between accounts of the same occurrences by different eye-witnesses, arising sometimes from imperfect memory, sometimes from undue partiality for one side or the other. [4] The absence of romance in my history will, I fear, detract somewhat from its interest; but if it be judged useful by those inquirers who desire an exact knowledge of the past as an aid to the interpretation of the future, which in the course of human things must resemble if it does not reflect it, I shall be content. In fine, I have written my work, not as an essay which is to win the applause of the moment, but as a possession for all time. Thucydides 1.21-2

Between Narrative and Interpretation: *Thucydides*

Translation: Thucydides. *The Peloponnesian War*. London, J. M. Dent; New York, E. P. Dutton. 1910. (Perseus DL: <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/cgi-bin/ptext?lookup=Thuc.+1.21.1> & <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/cgi-bin/ptext?lookup=Thuc.+1.22.1>).

Thucydides' statement of method is quite succinct and brief, particularly when compared to those of later historians. Ignoring for the moment, Thucydides' method regarding the speeches in his *History* (**on this see below ???**), his method regarding the narrative of events is very different from that proposed by Herodotos.

Thucydides, unlike Herodotos and even more unlike Hekataios and the logographers, writes the history not of past events but of the contemporary reality. He himself admits that he started writing his *History* at the beginning of the war, although it is safe to assume that the greater part was composed after his exile:

Thucydides, an Athenian, wrote the history of the war between the Peloponnesians and the Athenians, beginning at the moment that it broke out, and believing that it would be a great war, and more worthy of relation than any that had preceded it. Thucydides 1.1

Translation:

Thucydides. *The Peloponnesian War*. London, J. M. Dent; New York, E. P. Dutton. 1910. (Perseus DL: <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/cgi-bin/ptext?lookup=Thuc.+1.1.1>).

The fact that he recorded contemporary events gave Thucydides the opportunity to use autopsy on a greater part of his *History* than Herodotos was able. Where Herodotos could only count upon autopsy for his cultural and geographical descriptions, Thucydides could depend upon his own experience of actual events, either in Athens or elsewhere, for his account of the war. Thucydides' own experience and autopsy is rather important for his account of events in Athens before the beginning of the Peloponnesian War and particularly in the first few years of the Archidamian War, when he was probably in Athens and attending meetings of the Assembly.

Further, Thucydides had the opportunity to interview eye-witnesses during the course of the war. This use of eye-witness accounts is different than the use of eye-witnesses in Herodotos, since less time had elapsed between the events and the recounting of the account to the historian. Consequently, Thucydides, in comparison to Herodotos, would have access to a greater level of detail from his eye-witnesses. In addition to the above, Thucydides would have access to a greater number of eye-witnesses than Herodotos, thus increasing the possibility of preserving greater detail through multiple perspectives.

Thucydides' use of eye-witnesses was rather thorough as he informs us himself. Moreover, especially after his exile in 424 BCE, Thucydides had the opportunity to interview witnesses from both sides of the war. Thus, not only do we achieve a glimpse into the Spartan view of the Peloponnesian War but at times Thucydides manages to reveal the inner workings of the Peloponnesian League and even the popular sentiment at Sparta:

XLI. Upon the arrival of the men the Athenians determined to keep them in prison until the peace, and if the Peloponnesians invaded their country in the interval, to bring them out and put them to death. [2] Meanwhile the defence of Pylos was not forgotten; the Messenians from Naupactus sent to their old country, to which Pylos formerly belonged, some of the likeliest of their number, and began a series of incursions into Laconia, which their common dialect rendered most destructive. [3] **The Lacedaemonians, hitherto without experience of incursions or a warfare of the kind, finding the Helots deserting, and fearing the march of revolution in their country, began to be seriously uneasy, and in spite of their unwillingness to betray this to the Athenians began to send envoys to Athens, and tried to recover Pylos and the prisoners.** [4] The Athenians, however, kept grasping at more, and dismissed envoy after envoy without their having effected anything. Such was the history of the affair of Pylos. Thucydides 4.41

Translation: Thucydides. *The Peloponnesian War*. London, J. M. Dent; New York, E. P. Dutton. 1910. (Perseus DL: <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/cgi-bin/ptext?lookup=Thuc.+4.41.1>).

Thucydides also used documents as sources of information, specifically inscriptions and texts of treaties. Modern scholars have generally considered the transcription of a document into Thucydides' text as a sign of the incompleteness of the particular part of

the *History*. Beyond that issue, however, the fact that documents were used by Thucydides as sources of information shows yet another step in the development of historiography from history based on memory to history based on recorded fact. For the historian of the fifth century, unlike the philologist or the historiographer, greater inclusion of documents in Thucydides would be a blessing, since modern methodology tends to rely with greater trust upon documentary than upon literary sources.

To an extent the use of documents by Thucydides provides the most accurate test for the historian's accuracy of recorded account. Some of the documents that Thucydides quotes have survived, even if only in fragments. The best example is the Athenian treaty with Argos, Mantinea and Elis (420 BCE):

XLVII. The Athenians, Argives, Mantineans, and Eleans, acting for themselves and the allies in their respective empires, made a treaty for a hundred years, to be without fraud or hurt by land and by sea. [2] 1. It shall not be lawful to carry on war, either for the Argives, Eleans, Mantineans, and their allies, against the Athenians, or the allies in the Athenian empire; or for the Athenians and their allies against the Argives, Eleans, Mantineans, or their allies, in any way or means whatsoever. The Athenians, Argives, Eleans, and Mantineans shall be allies for a hundred years upon the terms following:-
- [3] 2. If an enemy invade the country of the Athenians, the Argives, Eleans, and Mantineans shall go to the relief of Athens, according as the Athenians may require by message, in such way as they most effectually can, to the best of their power. But if the invader be gone after plundering the territory, the offending state shall be the enemy of the Argives, Mantineans, Eleans, and Athenians, and war shall be made against it by all these cities; and no one of the cities shall be able to make peace with that state, except all the above cities agree to do so. [4] 3. Likewise the Athenians shall go to the relief of Argos, Mantinea, and Elis, if an enemy invade the country of Elis, Mantinea, or Argos, according as the above cities may require by message, in such way as they most effectually can, to the best of their power. But if the invader be gone after plundering the territory, the state offending shall be the enemy of the Athenians, Argives, Mantineans, and Eleans, and war shall be made against it by all these cities, and peace may not be made with that state except all the above cities agree to it. [5] 4. No armed force shall be allowed to pass for hostile purposes through the country of the powers contracting, or of the allies in their respective empires, or to go by sea, except all the cities--that is to say, Athens, Argos, Mantinea, and Elis--vote for such passage. [6] 5. The relieving troops shall be maintained by the city sending them for thirty days from their arrival in the city that has required them, and upon their return in

the same way; if their services be desired for a longer period the city that sent for them shall maintain them, at the rate of three Aeginetan obols per day for a heavy-armed soldier, archer, or light soldier, and an Aeginetan drachma for a trooper. [7] 6. The city sending for the troops shall have the command when the war is in its own country; but in case of the cities resolving upon a joint expedition the command shall be equally divided among all the cities. [8] 7. The treaty shall be sworn to by the Athenians for themselves and their allies, by the Argives, Mantineans, Eleans, and their allies, by each state individually. Each shall swear the oath most binding in his country over full-grown victims; the oath being as follows: 'I will stand by the alliance and its articles, justly, innocently, and sincerely, and I will not transgress the same in any way or means whatsoever.' [9] The oath shall be taken at Athens by the Senate and the magistrates, the Prytanes administering it; at Argos by the Senate, the Eighty, and the Artynae, the Eighty administering it; at Mantinea by the Demiurgi, the Senate, and the other magistrates, the Theori and Polemarchs administering it; at Elis by the Demiurgi, the magistrates, and the Six Hundred, the Demiurgi and the Thesmophylaces administering it. [10] The oaths shall be renewed by the Athenians going to Elis, Mantinea, and Argos thirty days before the Olympic games; by the Argives, Mantineans, and Eleans going to Athens ten days before the great feast of the Panathenaea. [11] The articles of the treaty, the oaths, and the alliance shall be inscribed on a stone pillar by the Athenians in the citadel, by the Argives in the market-place, in the temple of Apollo; by the Mantineans in the temple of Zeus, in the market-place; and a brazen pillar shall be erected jointly by them at the Olympic games now at hand. [12] Should the above cities see good to make any addition to these articles, whatever all the above cities shall agree upon, after consulting together, shall be binding. Thucydides 5.47

Translation: Thucydides. *The Peloponnesian War*. London, J. M. Dent; New York, E. P. Dutton. 1910. (Perseus DL: <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/cgi-bin/ptext?lookup=Thuc.+5.47.1>)

The text as provided by Thucydides is very close to the original, whose inscription survives: IG I3 83 (you can view the Greek text at the Packard Humanities Institute Greek Inscriptions database: <http://epigraphy.packhum.org/inscriptions/>).

Beyond the practical issues of the accuracy of Thucydides' methodology, the most important aspect of it is that where Herodotos entrusted upon his audience the choice of truth, Thucydides takes upon himself to choose as well as combine accounts in order to present the reader with the "truth" of what happened. Thucydides, like Herodotos, is very

much aware of the potential prejudices of an account, since he makes the point regarding witness statements. Unlike Herodotos, Thucydides is less sensitive regarding the potential distortion of record by the historian himself.

It is improbable that Thucydides did not consider this issue or did not have cognizance that his own opinions shaped the record he presented to his audience. Thucydides' preference of the historian's, rather than the audience's, intellect as the most effective tool of discerning the "truth" of events was a conscious choice:

XX. Having now given the result of my inquiries into early times, I grant that there will be a difficulty in believing every particular detail. The way that most men deal with traditions, even traditions of their own country, is to receive them all alike as they are delivered, without applying any critical test whatever. [2] The general Athenian public fancy that Hipparchus was tyrant when he fell by the hands of Harmodius and Aristogiton; not knowing that Hippias, the eldest of the sons of Pisistratus, was really supreme, and that Hipparchus and Thessalus were his brothers; and that Harmodius and Aristogiton suspecting, on the very day, nay at the very moment fixed on for the deed, that information had been conveyed to Hippias by their accomplices, concluded that he had been warned, and did not attack him, yet, not liking to be apprehended and risk their lives for nothing, fell upon Hipparchus near the temple of the daughters of Leos, and slew him as he was arranging the Panathenaic procession. [3] There are many other unfounded ideas current among the rest of the Hellenes, even on matters of contemporary history which have not been obscured by time. For instance, there is the notion that the Lacedaemonian kings have two votes each, the fact being that they have only one; and that there is a company of Pitane, there being simply no such thing. So little pains do the vulgar take in the investigation of truth, accepting readily the first story that comes to hand. Thucydides 1.20

Translation: Thucydides. *The Peloponnesian War*. London, J. M. Dent; New York, E. P. Dutton. 1910. (Perseus DL: <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/cgi-bin/ptext?lookup=Thuc.+1.20.1>)

In effect, Thucydides has advanced the role of the historian from that of provider of information to that of educator. For the modern scholar, who is interested in events rather than the development of historiography, Thucydides' method, while infinitely more familiar than Herodotos' is actually less useful. The loss of documents in conjunction

with the loss of alternative historical accounts forces the modern student of the fifth century to accept in many cases Thucydides' opinion as one's own. Discovering Thucydides' prejudices and how they have affected his account has been anything but easy for modern scholarship.

One of the most discussed and interesting aspects of Thucydides' method is the inclusion of long speeches in the *History*. Thucydides himself in his statement of method makes clear that the speeches in the *History* are not transcription of actual speeches given:

“XXII. With reference to the speeches in this history, some were delivered before the war began, others while it was going on; some I heard myself, others I got from various quarters; it was in all cases difficult to carry them word for word in one's memory, so my habit has been to make the speakers say what was in my opinion demanded of them by the various occasions, of course adhering as closely as possible to the general sense of what they really said.” (Thucydides 1.22). For translation details **see above**

Clearly Thucydides claims to have used the recollections either of himself or of others to recreate what was delivered under various circumstances before and during the war. However, he also makes clear that he has moulded these words of others in order to reflect that he himself thought was appropriate for any given time and situation. Unlike documents or indeed the narrative of the war-actions, the speeches are as much fiction as reality. The speeches effect a sense of drama in the *History* that the majority of the narrative avoids. In this, Thucydides is revealed as more of a literary author than a historical, at least by modern standards.

The exact composition date of several of the speeches has been debated by scholars. Composition dating can be a futile endeavour but there are instances that it is clear from the speech itself that either it was written considerably later than the time it was supposedly delivered or it was extensively reviewed at a later time. Perikles' Funeral Speech (Thucydides 2.35ff, Perseus DL: <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/cgi-bin/ptext?lookup=Thuc.+2.35.1>). Possibly the clearest indication of later composition or review is in the following speech by Perikles, where Thucydides appears to have had knowledge of the end of the war:

LXIV. But you must not be seduced by citizens like these nor be angry with me,--who, if I voted for war, only did as you did yourselves,--in spite of the enemy having invaded your country and done what you could be certain that he would do, if you refused to comply with his demands; and although besides what we counted for, the plague has come upon us--the only point indeed at which our calculation has been at fault. It is this, I know, that has had a large share in making me more unpopular than I should otherwise have been,--quite undeservedly, unless you are also prepared to give me the credit of any success with which chance may present you. [2] Besides, the hand of Heaven must be borne with resignation, that of the enemy with fortitude; this was the old way at Athens, and do not you prevent it being so still. [3] **Remember, too, that if your country has the greatest name in all the world, it is because she never bent before disaster; because she has expended more life and effort in war than any other city, and has won for herself a power greater than any hitherto known, the memory of which will descend to the latest posterity; even if now, in obedience to the general law of decay, we should ever be forced to yield, still it will be remembered that we held rule over more Hellenes than any other Hellenic state, that we sustained the greatest wars against their united or separate powers, and inhabited a city unrivalled by any other in resources or magnitude.** [4] These glories may incur the censure of the slow and unambitious; but in the breast of energy they will awake emulation, and in those who must remain without them an envious regret. [5] Hatred and unpopularity at the moment have fallen to the lot of all who have aspired to rule others; but where odium must be incurred, true wisdom incurs it for the highest objects. Hatred also is shortlived; but that which makes the splendor of the present and the glory of the future remains for ever unforgotten. [6] Make your decision, therefore, for glory then and honor now, and attain both objects by instant and zealous effort: do not send heralds to Lacedaemon, and do not betray any sign of being oppressed by your present sufferings, since they whose minds are least sensitive to calamity, and whose hands are most quick to meet it, are the greatest men and the greatest communities.' Thucydides 2.64

Translation: Thucydides. *The Peloponnesian War*. London, J. M. Dent; New York, E. P. Dutton. 1910. (Perseus DL: <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/cgi-bin/ptext?lookup=Thuc.+2.64.1>)

The speeches in Thucydides are admittedly literary masterpieces exhibiting knowledge of rhetoric and the current philosophical trends of the time. From the point of view of the historian, however, it is difficult to reconcile the pragmatic and detailed record of war-actions in the narrative with the literary composition of the speeches. The fact that

Thucydides admits to the speeches being his own creation as much as record of what was said is an instant red flag as to their potential use as historical evidence. After all, in the simplest of terms, what Thucydides thought was appropriate for a speech at any given time in the war was not necessarily what the original speaker or audience thought was appropriate.

Thucydides experimented with literary types and styles in his work. Probably the most interesting occasion from a literary point of view, as much as from the historical regarding the understanding of imperialism by Thucydides and some of his contemporaries, is the Melian Dialogue (Thucydides 5.84-114, Perseus DL: <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/cgi-bin/ptext?lookup=Thuc.+5.84.1>). For the modern student of the classics, dialogues are part of Greek literature as much as epic or tragedy. The Melian Dialogue was composed before the massive use of the dialectic format by the philosophers in the 4th century, such as Plato. For Thucydides it was an experiment in a different type of speech-making and like later authors, Thucydides used dialogue in order to illuminate and provide liveliness for a theme that would have been difficult to muster in narrative format.

Thucydides' Prejudice

Thucydides was prejudiced on many issues and those prejudices and opinions of what “really” happened or which were the “true” motivations of leaders or peoples colour his *History* and often are the reason for a partial, rather than an impartial, coverage of events. The most obvious example of Thucydides' prejudice influencing the recording of events in his *History* is his treatment of Kleon and the other post-Periklean politicians.

XXXVI. Upon the arrival of the prisoners with Salaethus, the Athenians at once put the latter to death, although he offered, among other things, to procure the withdrawal of the Peloponnesians from Plataea, which was still under siege; [2] and after deliberating as to what they should do with the former, in the fury of the moment determined to put to death not only the prisoners at Athens, but the whole adult male population of Mitylene, and to make slaves of the women and children. It was remarked that Mitylene had

revolted without being, like the rest, subjected to the empire; and what above all swelled the wrath of the Athenians was the fact of the Peloponnesian fleet having ventured over to Ionia to her support, a fact which was held to argue a long-meditated rebellion. [3] They accordingly sent a trireme to communicate the decree to Paches, commanding him to lose no time in despatching the Mitylenians. [4] The morrow brought repentance with it and reflection on the horrid cruelty of a decree, which condemned a whole city to the fate merited only by the guilty. [5] This was no sooner perceived by the Mitylenian ambassadors at Athens and their Athenian supporters, than they moved the authorities to put the question again to the vote; which they the more easily consented to do, as they themselves plainly saw that most of the citizens wished some one to give them an opportunity for reconsidering the matter. [6] An assembly was therefore at once called, and after much expression of opinion upon both sides, **Cleon, son of Cleaenetus, the same who had carried the former motion of putting the Mitylenians to death, the most violent man at Athens, and at that time by far the most powerful with the commons,** came forward again and spoke as follows:-- Thucydides 3.36

Translation: Thucydides. *The Peloponnesian War*. London, J. M. Dent; New York, E. P. Dutton. 1910. (Perseus DL: <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/cgi-bin/ptext?lookup=Thuc.+3.36.1>)

The death of Perikles gave rise to a new generation of politicians in Athens, or at least that is what Thucydides would have us believe. This new generation, the so-called demagogues, are represented as uncouth, violent and with no aims for the betterment of the state. Between Thucydides and Aristophanes, who also disliked the new politicians with a vengeance, particularly Kleon, post-Periklean Athenian politics becomes a mire of violence, rabid imperialism and warring egos.

No politician after Perikles escapes unscathed. Even moderate Nikias, who sued for peace in 421 BCE and valiantly tried to stop the Athenians from invading Sicily, is portrayed as weak and certainly not talented enough to stand against the charismatic Alkibiades. Kleon, however, remains in Thucydides' *History* the archetype of the villainous demagogue. In the Mytilenian Debate, he comes across as amoral, especially in his most famous words in Thucydides: "Your empire is a tyranny".

(37) 'I have remarked again and again that a democracy cannot manage an empire, but never more than now, when I see you regretting your

condemnation of the Mytilenaeans. Having no fear or suspicion of one another in daily life, you deal with your allies upon the same principle, and you do not consider that whenever you yield to them out of pity or are misled by their specious tales, you are guilty of a weakness dangerous to yourselves, and receive no thanks from them. You should remember that your empire is a despotism exercised over unwilling subjects, who are always conspiring against you; they do not obey in return for any kindness which you do them to your own injury, but in so far as you are their masters; they have no love of you, but they are held down by force. Besides, what can be more detestable than to be perpetually changing our minds? We forget that a state in which the laws, though imperfect, are inviolable, is better off than one in which the laws are good but ineffective. Dullness and modesty are a more useful combination than cleverness and licence; and the more simple sort generally make better citizens than the more astute. For the latter desire to be thought wiser than the laws; they want to be always getting their own way in public discussions; they think that they can nowhere have a finer opportunity of displaying their intelligence, and their folly generally ends in the ruin of their country; whereas the others, mistrusting their own capacity, admit that the laws are wiser than themselves: they do not pretend to criticise the arguments of a great speaker; and being impartial judges, not ambitious rivals, they hit the mark. That is the spirit in which we should act; not suffering ourselves to be so excited by our own cleverness in a war of wits as to advise the Athenian people contrary to our own better judgment. *Thucydides* 3.37

Translation: *Thucydides, translated into English, to which is prefixed an essay on inscriptions and a note on the geography of Thucydides*, by Benjamin Jowett. Second edition. Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1900. (Peitho's Web: <http://www.classicpersuasion.org/pw/thucydides/jthucbk3rv2.htm>)

Kleon's appears suddenly in Thucydides at the time of the Mytilenian revolt without any mention of him having participated in politics in a meaningful way before that. Later in conduct during the Pylos campaign, particularly in his attitude towards Demosthenes and his unwillingness to take part in battle until he is pressed publicly to do so, Thucydides accuses Kleon with one of the gravest charges a Greek could allude: cowardice.

We cannot know whether Kleon was truly uncouth and violent or the Thucididean and Aristophanic accusations are nothing more than the feeble complaints of an entrenched upper class against the newly ascendant political representatives of the nouveau riche.

Certainly we cannot ascertain the truthfulness of any claim relating to Kleon's bravery beyond the obvious point of his death in battle.

What is certain, however, is that Thucydides manages to misrepresent Kleon's career in his *History*. Kleon had appeared in the Athenian political scene before the affair of Mytilene, since there is evidence that he was active against Perikles while the latter was still alive:

The Lacedaemonians, for their part, feeling sure that if they could once remove him, they might be at what terms they pleased with the Athenians, sent them word that they should expel the "Pollution" with which Pericles on the mother's side was tainted, as Thucydides tells us. But the issue proved quite contrary to what those who sent the message expected; instead of bringing Pericles under suspicion and reproach, they raised him into yet greater credit and esteem with the citizens, as a man whom their enemies most hated and feared. In the same way, also, before Archidamus, who was at the head of the Peloponnesians, made his invasion into Attica, he told the Athenians beforehand, that if Archidamus, while he laid waste the rest of the country, should forbear and spare his estate, either on the ground of friendship or right of hospitality that was betwixt them, or on purpose to give his enemies an occasion of traducing him; that then he did freely bestow upon the state all his land and the buildings upon it for the public use. The Lacedaemonians, therefore, and their allies, with a great army, invaded the Athenian territories, under the conduct of King Archidamus, and laying waste the country, marched on as far as Acharnae, and there pitched their camp, presuming that the Athenians would never endure that, but would come out and fight them for their country's and their honour's sake. But Pericles looked upon it as dangerous to engage in battle, to the risk of the city

itself, against sixty thousand men-at-arms of Peloponnesians and Boeotians; for so many they were in number that made the inroad at first; and he endeavoured to appease those who were desirous to fight, and were grieved and discontented to see how things went, and gave them good words, saying, that "trees, when they are lopped and cut, grow up again in a short time, but men, being once lost, cannot easily be recovered." He did not convene the people into an assembly, for fear lest they should force him to act against his judgment; but, like a skilful steersman or pilot of a ship, who, when a sudden squall comes on, out at sea, makes all his arrangements, sees that all is tight and fast, and then follows the dictates of his skill, and minds the business of the ship, taking no notice of the tears and entreaties of the sea-sick and fearful passengers, so he, having shut up the city gates, and placed guards at all posts for security, followed his own reason and judgment, little regarding those that

cried out against him and were angry at his management, although there were a great many of his friends that urged him with requests, and many

of his enemies threatened and accused him for doing as he did, and many made songs and lampoons upon him, which were sung about the town to his disgrace, reproaching him with the cowardly exercise of his office of general, and the tame abandonment of everything to the enemy's hands. Cleon, also, already was among his assailants, making use of the feeling against him as a step to the leadership of the people, as appears in the anapaestic verses of Hermippus-

"Satyr-king, instead of swords,
Will you always handle words?
Very brave indeed we find them,
But a Teles lurks behind them.

"Yet to gnash your teeth you're seen,
When the little dagger keen,
Whetted every day anew,
Of sharp Cleon touches you." Plutarch *Pericles* 33

Translation: John Dryden (ICA: <http://classics.mit.edu/Plutarch/pericles.html>)

More importantly, Thucydides at no time refers to the efforts by Kleon, and his associates, to reform Athenian finances in the mid-420s. The Periklean strategy as outlined by Thucydides at the beginning of the war was based to an extent upon the resources of Athens itself but to a larger extent on the contributions of the allies:

While the Peloponnesians were gathering at the Isthmus, and were still on their way, but before they entered Attica, Pericles the son of Xanthippus, who was one of the ten Athenian generals, knowing that the invasion was inevitable, and suspecting that Archidamus in wasting the country might very likely spare his lands, either out of courtesy and because he happened to be his friend, or by the order of the Lacedaemonian authorities (who had already attempted to raise a prejudice against him⁶ when they demanded the expulsion of the polluted family, and might take this further means of injuring

him in the eyes of the Athenians), openly declared in the assembly that Archidamus was his friend; but was not so to the injury of the state, and that supposing the enemy did not destroy his lands and buildings like the rest, he would make a present of them to the public; and he desired that the Athenians would have no suspicion of him on that account. As to the general situation, he repeated his previous advice; they must prepare for war and bring their property from the country into the city; they must defend their walls but not go out to battle; they should also equip for service the fleet in which lay their strength. Their allies should be kept well in hand, for their power depended on the revenues which they derived from them; military successes were generally gained by a wise policy and command of money. **The state of their finances was encouraging; they had on an average six hundred talents of tribute coming in annually from their allies, to say nothing of their other revenue; and there were still remaining in the Acropolis six thousand talents of coined silver. (The whole amount had once been as much as nine thousand seven hundred talents, but from this had to be deducted a sum of three thousand seven hundred expended on various buildings, such as the Propylaea of the Acropolis, and also on the siege of Potidaea.) Moreover there was uncoined gold and silver in the form of private and public offerings, sacred vessels used in processions and games, the Persian spoil and other things of the like nature, worth at least five hundred talents more. There were also at their disposal, besides what they had in the Acropolis, considerable treasures in various temples. If they were reduced to the last extremity they could even take off the plates of gold with which the image of the goddess was overlaid; these, as he pointed out, weighed forty talents, and were of refined gold, which was all removeable. They might use this treasure in self-defence, but they were bound to replace all that they had taken. By this estimate of their wealth he strove to encourage them.** He added that they had thirteen thousand hoplites, besides the sixteen thousand who occupied the fortresses or who manned the walls of the city. For this was the number engaged on garrison duty at the beginning of the war, whenever the enemy invaded Attica; they were made up of the elder and younger men, and of such metics as bore heavy arms. The Phaleric wall extended four miles from Phalerum to the city walls: the portion of the city wall which was guarded was somewhat less than five miles; that between the Long Wall and the Phaleric requiring no guard. The Long Walls running down to the Piraeus were rather more than four and a half miles in length; the outer only was guarded. The whole circuit of the Piraeus and of Munychia was not quite seven miles, of which half required a guard. The Athenian cavalry, so Pericles pointed out, numbered twelve hundred, including mounted archers; the foot-archers, sixteen hundred; of triremes fit for service the city had three hundred.--The forces of various kinds which Athens possessed at the commencement of the war, when the first Peloponnesian invasion was impending, cannot be estimated at

less.--To these Pericles added other arguments, such as he was fond of using, which were intended to prove to the Athenians that victory was certain. Thucydides 2.13

Translation: *Thucydides, translated into English, to which is prefixed an essay on inscriptions and a note on the geography of Thucydides*, by Benjamin Jowett. Second edition. Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1900. (Peitho's Web: <http://www.classicpersuasion.org/pw/thucydides/jthucbk2rv2.htm>)

Yet epigraphical evidence from the first few years of the Peloponnesian War suggests that the amounts spent in the siege of Potidaia and the suppression of the Mytilenian revolt had been heavy blows to Athenian finances and money reserves (On this see ML 72 and commentary. Available as a pdf file in the folder for this unit titled: ML 72).

Thucydides is certainly cognizant of financial problems in Athens at the time of the Mytilenian revolt:

The Athenians, being in want of money to carry on the siege, raised among themselves for the first time a property-tax of two hundred talents, and sent out twelve ships to collect tribute among the allies, under the command of Lysicles and four others. He sailed to various places and exacted tribute; but as he was going up from Myus in Caria, through the plain of the Maeander, he was attacked at the hill of Sandius by the Carians and the Samians of Anaea, and, with a great part of his army, perished. Thucydides 3.19

Translation: *Thucydides, translated into English, to which is prefixed an essay on inscriptions and a note on the geography of Thucydides*, by Benjamin Jowett. Second edition. Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1900. (Peitho's Web: <http://www.classicpersuasion.org/pw/thucydides/jthucbk3rv2.htm>)

Barely half a decade into the war, it must have been obvious in Athens, and presumably to Thucydides as well, that the Periklean strategy at least on the financial front was not working. It was Kleon and his associates that composed and enacted the financial measures that gave Athens the ability to go on with the war. Kleon is mocked by Aristophanes concerning his interest and proposals concerning tribute arrangements, and one would also expect internal Athenian taxation arrangements, such as the introduction

of the *eisphora*, mentioned by Thucydides above but not attributed to any specific politician:

LEADER OF THE CHORUS

Strike, strike the villain, who has spread confusion amongst the ranks of the Knights, this public robber, this yawning gulf of plunder, this devouring Charybdis, this villain, this villain, this villain! I cannot say the word too often, for he is a villain a thousand times a day. Come, strike, drive, hurl him over and crush him to pieces; hate him as we hate him: stun him with your blows and your shouts. And beware lest he escape you; he knows the way Eucrates took straight to a bran sack for concealment.

CLEON

Oh! veteran Heliasts, brotherhood of the three obols, whom I fostered by bawling at random, help me; I am being beaten to death by rebels.

LEADER OF THE CHORUS

And justly too; you devour the public funds that all should share in; you treat the treasury officials like the fruit of the fig tree, squeezing them to find which are still green or more or less ripe; and, when you find a simple and timid one, you force him to come from the Chersonese, then you seize him by the middle, throttle him by the neck, while you twist his shoulder back; he falls and you devour him. Besides, you know very well how to select from among the citizens those who are as meek as lambs, rich, without guile and loathers of lawsuits.

CLEON

Eh! what! Knights, are you helping them? But, if I am beaten, it is in your cause, for I was going to propose to erect a statue in the city in memory of your bravery.

LEADER OF THE CHORUS

Oh! the impostor! the dull varlet! See! he treats us like old dotards and crawls at our feet to deceive us; but the cunning wherein his power lies shall this time recoil on himself; he trips up himself by resorting to such artifices.

CLEON

Oh citizens! oh people! see how these brutes are bursting my belly.

LEADER OF THE CHORUS

What shouts! but it's this very bawling that incessantly upsets the city!

SAUSAGE-SELLER

I can shout too-and so loud that you will flee with fear.

LEADER OF THE CHORUS

If you shout louder than he does I will strike up the triumphal hymn; if you surpass him in impudence the cake is ours.

CLEON

I denounce this fellow; he has had tasty stews exported from Athens for the Spartan fleet.

SAUSAGE-SELLER

And I denounce him; he runs into the Prytaneum with an empty belly and comes out with it full.

DEMOSTHENES

And by Zeus! he carries off bread, meat, and fish, which is forbidden. Pericles himself never had this right.

A screaming match now ensues, each line more raucous than the last. The rapidity of the dialogue likewise increases.

CLEON

You are travelling the right road to get killed.

SAUSAGE-SELLER

I'll bawl three times as loud as you.

CLEON

I will deafen you with my yells.

SAUSAGE-SELLER

And I you with my bellowing.

CLEON

I shall calumniate you, if you become a Strategus.

SAUSAGE-SELLER

Dog, I will lay your back open with the lash.

CLEON

I will make you drop your arrogance,

SAUSAGE-SELLER

I will baffle your machinations.

CLEON

Dare to look me in the face!

SAUSAGE-SELLER

I too was brought up in the market-place.

CLEON

I will cut you to shreds if you whisper a word.

SAUSAGE-SELLER

If you open your mouth, I'll shut it with shit.

CLEON

I admit I'm a thief; that's more than you do.

SAUSAGE-SELLER

By our Hermes of the market-place, if caught in the act, why, I perjure myself before those who saw me.

CLEON

These are my own special tricks. I will denounce you to the Prytanes as the owner of sacred tripe, that has not paid tithe.

CHORUS *singing*

Oh! you scoundrel! you impudent bawler! everything is filled with your daring, all Attica, the Assembly, the Treasury, the decrees, the tribunals. As a furious torrent you have overthrown our city; your outcries have deafened Athens and, posted upon a high rock, you have lain in wait for the tribute moneys as the fisherman does for the tunny-fish.

CLEON *somewhat less loudly*

I know your tricks; it's an old plot resoled.

SAUSAGE-SELLER

If you know naught of soling, I understand nothing of sausages; you, who cut bad leather on the slant to make it look stout and deceive the country yokels. They had not worn it a day before it had stretched some two spans.

DEMOSTHENES

That's the very trick he played on me; both my neighbours and my friends laughed heartily at me, and before I reached Pergasae I was swimming in my shoes.

CHORUS *singing*

Have you not always shown that blatant impudence, which is the sole strength of our orators? You push it so far, that you, the head of the State, dare to milk the purses of the opulent aliens and, at sight of you, the son of Hippodamus melts into tears. But here is another man who gives me pleasure, for he is a much greater rascal than you; he will overthrow you; 'tis easy to see, that he will beat you in roguery, in brazenness and in clever turns. Come, you, who have been brought up among the class which to-day gives us all our great men, show us that a liberal education is mere tomfoolery. Aristophanes *Knights* 247-334

Translation: ICA <http://classics.mit.edu/Aristophanes/knights.html>

Sausage-Seller

[1030] "Son of Erechtheus, beware of this Cerberus that enslaves free men; he fawns upon you with his tail when you are dining, but he is lying in wait to devour your dishes should you turn your head an instant; at night he sneaks into the kitchen and, true dog that he is, licks up with one lap of his tongue both your dishes and ... the islands."

Demos

[1035] By god, Glanis, you speak better than your brother.

Cleon

Condescend again to hear me and then judge:

"A woman in sacred Athens will be delivered of a lion, who shall fight for the people against clouds of gnats with the same ferocity as if he were defending his whelps; care ye for him, [1040] erect wooden walls around him and towers of brass."

Do you understand that?

Demos

Not the least bit in the world.

Cleon

The god tells you here to look after me, for I am your lion.

Demos

How! You have become a lion and I never knew a thing about it?

Sausage-Seller

[1045] There is only one thing which he purposely keeps from you; he does not say what this wall of wood and brass is in which Apollo warns you to keep and guard him.

Demos

What does the god mean, then?

Sausage-Seller

He advises you to fit him into a five-holed wooden collar.

Demos

[1050] Hah! I think that oracle is about to be fulfilled.

Cleon

Do not believe it; these are but jealous crows, that caw against me; but never cease to cherish your good hawk; never forget that he brought you those Lacedaemonian fish, loaded with chains. *Aristophanes Knights* 1030-1048
Translation: Aristophanes. *Knights*. The Complete Greek Drama, vol. 2. Eugene O'Neill, Jr. New York. Random House. 1938. (Perseus DL: <http://perseus.mpiwg-berlin.mpg.de/cgi-bin/ptext?lookup=Aristoph.+Kn.+1014>).

Kleon and his party immediately after the resolution of the Mutilenian affair started a campaign of restructuring Athenian finances and specifically the tribute arrangements. Kleonymos, probably a member of Kleon's party and a known demagogue in his own right, was the proposer of the decree regarding tribute collection in 426 BCE (for a translation see Dillon, M. & Garland, L. *Ancient Greece : Social and Historical Documents from Archaic Times to the Death of Socrates (C.800-399 B.C.)* 2Nd Ed. London, 2000, Document 9.14, p.264-5. Available from NetLibrary: www.netlibrary.com)

Kleon's son-in-law, Thoudippos, was the proposer of the decree that changed the tribute arrangements for the allies in 425 BCE (see Dillon, M. & Garland, L. *Ancient Greece : Social and Historical Documents from Archaic Times to the Death of Socrates (C.800-399 B.C.)* 2Nd Ed. London, 2000, Document 9.15, p.265-7. Available from NetLibrary: www.netlibrary.com)

Thucydides does not even mention any changes in the tribute arrangements for the allies and certainly does not attach any worthwhile propositions regarding finances or indeed anything at all to Kleon and the other demagogues. In effect without the survival of inscriptional documents regarding the actions of the demagogues, particularly Kleon and his party, the modern understanding of Athenian politics in the 420s and the course of Athenian strategy in the same period, would be hopelessly flawed.

Thucydides and his times

Thucydides was highly educated during a period of intellectual revolution in Athens. From the middle of the fifth century onwards, Athens had become the intellectual centre of the Greek world with philosophers, sophists and other intellectuals flocking to it and providing courses, lectures and guidance for students. The intellectual climate of the times, particularly the new tendency towards expertise and revolutionary ideas of the sophists, influenced Thucydides greatly.

The tendency towards specialisation that was fully realised in the fourth century was already active in the fifth century, particularly in fields like medicine. The spread of medicine as a science and the proliferation of medical writings was a major influence on the way of thinking for well-educated members of the upper class that would otherwise not be in contact with such a specialised science. Thucydides' knowledge and reliance upon medicine as a science and particularly the tendency to place great importance upon description of illness that became a principle of method under the Hippocratic school is obvious in his description of the plague in Athens:

(47) Such was the order of the funeral celebrated in this winter, with the end of which ended the first year of the Peloponnesian War. As soon as summer returned, the Peloponnesian army, comprising as before two-thirds of the force of each confederate state, under the command of the Lacedaemonian king Archidamus, the son of Zeuxidamus, invaded Attica, where they established themselves and ravaged the country. They had not been there many days when the plague broke out at Athens for the first time. A similar disorder is said to have previously smitten many places, particularly Lemnos, but there is no record of such a pestilence occurring elsewhere, or of so great a destruction of human life. For a while physicians, in ignorance of the nature of the disease, sought to apply remedies; but it was in vain, and they themselves were among the first victims, because they oftenest came into contact with it. No human art was of any avail, and as to supplications in temples, enquiries of oracles, and the like, they were utterly useless, and at last men were overpowered by the calamity and gave them all up.

(48) The disease is said to have begun south of Egypt in Aethiopia; thence it descended into Egypt and Libya, and after spreading over the greater part of the Persian empire, suddenly fell upon Athens. It first attacked the inhabitants of the Piraeus, and it was supposed that the Peloponnesians had poisoned the cisterns, no conduits having as yet been made there. It afterwards reached the upper city, and then the mortality became far greater. As to its probable origin

or the causes which might or could have produced such a disturbance of nature, every man, whether a physician or not, will give his own opinion. But I shall describe its actual course, and the symptoms by which any one who knows them beforehand may recognise the disorder should it ever reappear. For I was myself attacked, and witnessed the sufferings of others.

(49) The season was admitted to have been remarkably free from ordinary sickness; and if anybody was already ill of any other disease, it was absorbed in this. Many who were in perfect health, all in a moment, and without any apparent reason, were seized with violent heats in the head and with redness and inflammation of the eyes. Internally the throat and the tongue were quickly suffused with blood, and the breath became unnatural and fetid. There followed sneezing and hoarseness; in a short time the disorder, accompanied by a violent cough, reached the chest; then fastening lower down, it would move the stomach and bring on all the vomits of bile to which physicians have ever given names; and they were very distressing. An ineffectual retching producing violent convulsions attacked most of the sufferers; some as soon as the previous symptoms had abated, others not until long afterwards. The body externally was not so very hot to the touch, nor yet pale; it was of a livid colour inclining to red, and breaking out in pustules and ulcers. But the internal fever was intense; the sufferers could not bear to have on them even the finest linen garment; they insisted on being naked, and there was nothing which they longed for more eagerly than to throw themselves into cold water. And many of those who had no one to look after them actually plunged into the cisterns, for they were tormented by unceasing thirst, which was not in the least assuaged whether they drank little or much. They could not sleep; a restlessness which was intolerable never left them. While the disease was at its height the body, instead of wasting away, held out amid these sufferings in a marvellous manner, and either they died on the seventh or ninth day, not of weakness, for their strength was not exhausted, but of internal fever, which was the end of most; or, if they survived, then the disease descended into the bowels and there produced violent ulceration; severe diarrhoea at the same time set in, and at a later stage caused exhaustion, which finally with few exceptions carried them off. For the disorder which had originally settled in the head passed gradually through the whole body, and, if a person got over the worst, would often seize the extremities and leave its mark, attacking the privy parts and the fingers and the toes; and some escaped with the loss of these, some with the loss of their eyes. Some again had no sooner recovered than they were seized with a forgetfulness of all things and knew neither themselves nor their friends.

(50) The general character of the malady no words can describe, and the fury with which it fastened upon each sufferer was too much for human nature to endure. There was one circumstance in particular which distinguished it from ordinary diseases. The birds and animals which feed on human flesh, although so many bodies were lying unburied, either never came near them,

or died if they touched them. This was proved by a remarkable disappearance of the birds of prey, which were not to be seen either about the bodies or anywhere else; while in the case of the dogs the result was even more obvious, because they live with man.

(51) Such was the general nature of the disease: I omit many strange peculiarities which characterised individual cases. None of the ordinary sicknesses attacked any one while it lasted, or, if they did, they ended in the plague. Some of the sufferers died from want of care, others equally who were receiving the greatest attention. No single remedy could be deemed a specific; for that which did good to one did harm to another. No constitution was of itself strong enough to resist or weak enough to escape the attacks; the disease carried off all alike and defied every mode of treatment. Most appalling was the despondency which seized upon any one who felt himself sickening; for he instantly abandoned his mind to despair and, instead of holding out, absolutely threw away his chance of life. Appalling too was the rapidity with which men caught the infection; dying like sheep if they attended on one another; and this was the principal cause of mortality. When they were afraid to visit one another, the sufferers died in their solitude, so that many houses were empty because there had been no one left to take care of the sick; or if they ventured they perished, especially those who aspired to heroism. For they went to see their friends without thought of themselves and were ashamed to leave them, at a time when the very relations of the dying were at last growing weary and ceased even to make lamentations, overwhelmed by the vastness of the calamity. But whatever instances there may have been of such devotion, more often the sick and the dying were tended by the pitying care of those who had recovered, because they knew the course of the disease and were themselves free from apprehension. For no one was ever attacked a second time, or not with a fatal result. All men congratulated them, and they themselves, in the excess of their joy at the moment, had an innocent fancy that they could not die of any other sickness.

(52) The crowding of the people out of the country into the city aggravated the misery; and the newly-arrived suffered most. For, having no houses of their own, but inhabiting in the height of summer stifling huts, the mortality among them was dreadful, and they perished in wild disorder. The dead lay as they had died, one upon another, while others hardly alive wallowed in the streets and crawled about every fountain craving for water. The temples in which they lodged were full of the corpses of those who died in them; for the violence of the calamity was such that men, not knowing where to turn, grew reckless of all law, human and divine. The customs which had hitherto been observed at funerals were universally violated, and they buried their dead each one as best he could. Many, having no proper appliances, because the deaths in their household had been so numerous already, lost all shame in the burial of the dead. When one man had raised a funeral pile, others would come, and throwing on their dead first, set fire to it; or when some other

corpse was already burning, before they could be stopped, would throw their own dead upon it and depart.

(53) There were other and worse forms of lawlessness which the plague introduced at Athens. Men who had hitherto concealed what they took pleasure in, now grew bolder. For, seeing the sudden change,--how the rich died in a moment, and those who had nothing immediately inherited their property,--they reflected that life and riches were alike transitory, and they resolved to enjoy themselves while they could, and to think only of pleasure. Who would be willing to sacrifice himself to the law of honour when he knew not whether he would ever live to be held in honour? The pleasure of the moment and any sort of thing which conduced to it took the place both of honour and of expediency. No fear of Gods or law of man deterred a criminal. Those who saw all perishing alike, thought that the worship or neglect of the Gods made no difference. For offences against human law no punishment was to be feared; no one would live long enough to be called to account. Already a far heavier sentence had been passed and was hanging over a man's head; before that fell, why should he not take a little pleasure?

(54) Such was the grievous calamity which now afflicted the Athenians; within the walls their people were dying, and without, their country was being ravaged. In their troubles they naturally called to mind a verse which the elder men among them declared to have been current long ago:

A Dorian war will come and a plague with it.'

There was a dispute about the precise expression; some saying that *limos*, a famine, and not *loimos*, a plague, was the original word. Nevertheless, as might have been expected, for men's memories reflected their sufferings, the argument in favour of *loimos* prevailed at the time. But if ever in future years another Dorian war arises which happens to be accompanied by a famine, they will probably repeat the verse in the other form. The answer of the oracle to the Lacedaemonians when the God was asked 'whether they should go to war or not,' and he replied 'that if they fought with all their might, they would conquer, and that he himself would take their part,' was not forgotten by those who had heard of it, and they quite imagined that they were witnessing the fulfilment of his words. The disease certainly did set in immediately after the invasion of the Peloponnesians, and did not spread into Peloponnesus in any degree worth speaking of, while Athens felt its ravages most severely, and next to Athens the places which were most populous. Such was the history of the plague. Thucydides 2.47-54

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Thucydides' description of the plague is both scientific and dramatic. The first part is a detailed description of the symptoms of the disease helped by personal autopsy, since Thucydides was in Athens at the time and himself contracted the plague. The second part of the account is dramatic as far as the social, economic and religious effects of the plague are concerned. Keeping in mind Thucydides' knowledge of medical method in identifying symptoms and then describing the effects, the influence of this medical methodology upon Thucydides' description of events and causation is easier to identify, such as in his judgement of the stasis in Corcyra:

(82) For not long afterwards nearly the whole Hellenic world was in commotion; in every city the chiefs of the democracy and of the oligarchy were struggling, the one to bring in the Athenians, the other the Lacedaemonians. Now in time of peace, men would have had no excuse for introducing either, and no desire to do so; but, when they were at war, the introduction of a foreign alliance on one side or the other to the hurt of their enemies and the advantage of themselves was easily effected by the dissatisfied party. And revolution brought upon the cities of Hellas many terrible calamities, such as have been and always will be while human nature remains the same, but which are more or less aggravated and differ in character with every new combination of circumstances. In peace and prosperity both states and individuals are actuated by higher motives, because they do not fall under the dominion of imperious necessities; but war, which takes away the comfortable provision of daily life, is a hard master and tends to assimilate men's characters to their conditions.

When troubles had once begun in the cities, those who followed carried the revolutionary spirit further and further, and determined to outdo the report of all who had preceded them by the ingenuity of their enterprises and the atrocity of their revenges. The meaning of words had no longer the same relation to things, but was changed by them as they thought proper. Reckless daring was held to be loyal courage; prudent delay was the excuse of a coward; moderation was the disguise of unmanly weakness; to know everything was to do nothing. Frantic energy was the true quality of a man. A conspirator who wanted to be safe was a recreant in disguise. The lover of violence was always trusted, and his opponent suspected. He who succeeded in a plot was deemed knowing, but a still greater master in craft was he who detected one. On the other hand, he who plotted from the first to have nothing to do with plots was a breaker up of parties and a poltroon who was afraid of the enemy. In a word, he who could outstrip another in a bad action was applauded, and so was he who encouraged to evil one who had no idea of it. The tie of party was stronger than the tie of blood, because a partisan was more ready to dare without asking why. (For party associations are not based

upon any established law, nor do they seek the public good; they are formed in defiance of the laws and from self-interest.) The seal of good faith was not divine law, but fellowship in crime. If an enemy when he was in the ascendant offered fair words, the opposite party received them not in a generous spirit, but by a jealous watchfulness of his actions. Revenge was dearer than self-preservation. Any agreements sworn to by either party, when they could do nothing else, were binding as long as both were powerless. But he who on a favourable opportunity first took courage, and struck at his enemy when he saw him off his guard, had greater pleasure in a perfidious than he would have had in an open act of revenge; he congratulated himself that he had taken the safer course, and also that he had overreached his enemy and gained the prize of superior ability. In general the dishonest more easily gain credit for cleverness than the simple for goodness; men take a pride in the one, but are ashamed of the other.

The cause of all these evils was the love of power, originating in avarice and ambition, and the party-spirit which is engendered by them when men are fairly embarked in a contest. For the leaders on either side used specious names, the one party professing to uphold the constitutional equality of the many, the other the wisdom of an aristocracy, while they made the public interests, to which in name they were devoted, in reality their prize. Striving in every way to overcome each other, they committed the most monstrous crimes; yet even these were surpassed by the magnitude of their revenges which they pursued to the very utmost, neither party observing any definite limits either of justice or public expediency, but both alike making the caprice of the moment their law. Either by the help of an unrighteous sentence, or grasping power with the strong hand, they were eager to satiate the impatience of party-spirit. Neither faction cared for religion; but any fair pretence which succeeded in effecting some odious purpose was greatly lauded. And the citizens who were of neither party fell a prey to both; either they were disliked because they held aloof, or men were jealous of their surviving.

(83) Thus revolution gave birth to every form of wickedness in Hellas. The simplicity which is so large an element in a noble nature was laughed to scorn and disappeared. An attitude of perfidious antagonism everywhere prevailed; for there was no word binding enough, nor oath terrible enough to reconcile enemies. Each man was strong only in the conviction that nothing was secure; he must look to his own safety, and could not afford to trust others. Inferior intellects generally succeeded best. For, aware of their own deficiencies, and fearing the capacity of their opponents, for whom they were no match in powers of speech, and whose subtle wits were likely to anticipate them in contriving evil, they struck boldly and at once. But the cleverer sort, presuming in their arrogance that they would be aware in time, and disdaining to act when they could think, were taken off their guard and easily destroyed.

(84) Now in Corcyra most of these deeds were perpetrated, and for the first time. There was every crime which men could commit in revenge who had been governed not wisely, but tyrannically, and now had the oppressor at their mercy. There were the dishonest designs of others who were longing to be relieved from their habitual poverty, and were naturally animated by a passionate desire for their neighbour's goods; and there were crimes of another class which men commit, not from covetousness, but from the enmity which equals foster towards one another until they are carried away by their blind rage into the extremes of pitiless cruelty. At such a time the life of the city was all in disorder, and human nature, which is always ready to transgress the laws, having now trampled them underfoot, delighted to show that her passions were ungovernable, that she was stronger than justice, and the enemy of everything above her. If malignity had not exercised a fatal power, how could any one have preferred revenge to piety, and gain to innocence? But, when men are retaliating upon others, they are reckless of the future, and do not hesitate to annul those common laws of humanity to which every individual trusts for his own hope of deliverance should he ever be overtaken by calamity; they forget that in their own hour of need they will look for them in vain. *Thucydides* 3.82-84

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The other great influence upon Thucydides were the new human-oriented philosophies that flourished in the fifth century with the sophistic movement being the most prominent (for a quick introduction to the sophists, see OCD³ s.v. sophists: <http://www.oxfordreference.com/views/ENTRY.html?subview=Main&entry=t111.e5994>). The influence of a sophistic education can be detected in Thucydides' speeches and his causation of events but probably the most powerful testimony of the influence of the sophists as an intellectual movement upon the *History* is Thucydides' attitude to religion. Thucydides' own religious beliefs are not of interest in this case, merely how his attitude to religion influences the student's view of the Peloponnesian War and of society, Athenian and other, of the time (on this see Hornblower, Simon 'The Religious Dimension to the Peloponnesian War, or, What Thucydides Does Not Tell Us' *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology*, Vol. 94 (1992), pp. 169-197 JSTOR: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/311424>).

Possibly the most powerful example of how Thucydides' views on religion and his insistence on excising it from his *History* influences the account he provides is the Sicilian Expedition and particularly in its religious aspect. During the preparations for the Sicilian Expedition, a great religious scandal broke out in Athens starting with the Hermokopidai affair and culminating the trials for the desecration of the Mysteries.

(27) While they were in the midst of their preparations, the Hermae or square stone figures carved after the ancient Athenian fashion, and standing everywhere at the doorways both of temples and private houses, in one night had nearly all of them throughout the city their faces mutilated. The offenders were not known, but great rewards were publicly offered for their detection, and a decree was passed that any one, whether citizen, stranger, or slave, might without fear of punishment disclose this or any other profanation of which he was cognisant. The Athenians took the matter greatly to heart--it seemed to them ominous of the fate of the expedition; and they ascribed it to conspirators who wanted to effect a revolution and to overthrow the democracy.

(28) Certain metics and servants gave information, not indeed about the Hermae, but about the mutilation of other statues which had shortly before been perpetrated by some young men in a drunken frolic: they also said that the mysteries were repeatedly profaned by the celebration of them in private houses, and of this impiety they accused, among others, Alcibiades. A party who were jealous of his influence over the people, which interfered with the permanent establishment of their own, thinking that if they could get rid of him they would be supreme, took up and exaggerated the charges against him, clamorously insisting that both the mutilation of the Hermae and the profanation of the mysteries were part of a conspiracy against the democracy, and that he was at the bottom of the whole affair. In proof they alleged the excesses of his ordinary life, which were unbecoming in the citizen of a free state.

(29) He strove then and there to clear himself of the charges, and also offered to be tried before he sailed (for all was now ready), in order that, if he were guilty, he might be punished, and if acquitted, might retain his command. He adjured his countrymen to listen to no calumnies which might be propagated against him in his absence; and he protested that they would be wiser in not sending a man who had so serious an imputation hanging over him on a command so important. But his enemies feared that if the trial took place at once he would have the support of the army; and that the people would be lenient, and would not forget that he had induced the Argives and some Mantineans to join in the expedition. They therefore exerted themselves to postpone the trial. To this end they suborned fresh speakers, who proposed that he should sail now and not delay the expedition, but should return and stand his trial within a certain number of days. Their intention was that he

should be recalled and tried when they had stirred up a stronger feeling against him, which they could better do in his absence. So it was decided that Alcibiades should sail. Thucydides 6.27-29

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Thucydides' treatment of the Hermokopidai and Mysteries affairs is brief and intensely political with little heed of the religious dimension of the issue or how that would influence the ordinary Athenian's view of the expedition at the time or later (for a more common viewpoint on these affairs, see Andokides *On the Mysteries*. Available from the Perseus DL (Berlin mirror): <http://perseus.mpiwg-berlin.mpg.de/cgi-bin/ptext?lookup=Andoc.+1+1>).

Thucydides' own views on religion and particularly about belief among the people is nowhere more obvious than in his criticism of Nikias for his handling of the situation after the eclipse in Syracuse:

(50) Meanwhile Gylippus and Sicanus returned to Syracuse. Sicanus had not succeeded in his design upon Agrigentum; for while he was at Gela on his way the party inclined to friendship with the Syracusans had been driven out. But Gylippus brought back a large army, together with the hoplites who had been sent in merchant-vessels from Peloponnesus in the spring, and had come by way of Libya to Selinus. They had been driven to Libya by stress of weather, and the Cyrenaeans had given them two triremes and pilots. On their voyage they had made common cause with the Evesperitae, who were besieged by the Libyans. After defeating the Libyans they sailed on to Neapolis, a Carthaginian factory which is the nearest point to Sicily, the passage taking two days and a night only; thence they crossed and came to Selinus. On their arrival, the Syracusans immediately prepared to renew their attack upon the Athenians, both by land and sea. And the Athenian generals, seeing that their enemy had been reinforced by a new army, and that their own affairs, instead of improving, were daily growing worse in every respect, and being especially troubled by the sickness of their troops, repented that they had not gone before. Even Nicias now no longer objected, but only made the condition that there should be no open voting. So, maintaining such secrecy as they could, they gave orders for the departure of the expedition; the men were to prepare themselves against a given signal. The preparations were made and they were on the point of sailing, when the moon, being just

then at the full, was eclipsed. **The mass of the army was greatly moved, and called upon the generals to remain. Nicias himself, who was too much under the influence of divination and such like, refused even to discuss the question of their removal until they had remained thrice nine days, as the soothsayers prescribed.** This was the reason why the departure of the Athenians was finally delayed. *Thucydides 7.50*

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After the Athenian defeat in Sicily and the destruction of the armada, even the anger and disappointment of the Athenian demos is slanted against religious belief:

THE news was brought to Athens, but the Athenians could not believe that the armament had been so completely annihilated, although they had the positive assurances of the very soldiers who had escaped from the scene of action. At last they knew the truth; and then they were furious with the orators who had joined in promoting the expedition--as if they had not voted it themselves--and with the soothsayers, and prophets, and all who by the influence of religion had at the time inspired them with the belief that they would conquer Sicily. *Thucydides 8.1*

Translation: *Thucydides, translated into English, to which is prefixed an essay on inscriptions and a note on the geography of Thucydides*, by Benjamin Jowett. Second edition. Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1900. (Peitho's Web: <http://www.classicpersuasion.org/pw/thucydides/jthucbk8rv2.htm>).

Thucydides from the beginning of his account of the expedition has an intensely political and very anti-religious view of events. In a way, he presents the Athenian decision more like a fit of collective madness than a political decision by a responsible political body. However, the most important aspect of Thucydides' presentation of events and particularly of the religious aspect is how it deceives the modern student.

From a religious point of view, the Sicilian Expedition is a standard case of hubris (for a quick introduction to the concept of hubris, see OCD³ s.v. hubris: <http://www.oxfordreference.com/views/ENTRY.html?subview=Main&entry=t111.e3172>). The Athenians are arrogant not merely in their desire to conquer Sicily but more

importantly in how they ignore a major issue regarding their relationship with the gods. The fact that after a major religious scandal affecting not one but two deities, both of them necessary for the well-being of the city, the Athenian decision to continue with the expedition was not merely hubristic but by Greek religious standards plainly idiotic.

To compound the issue, the message of the gods is clear when the eclipse happens, which by religious convention is a sign from above and the tradition on eclipses provides a given response, which in turn becomes the doom of the Athenian troops. From a religious, rather than an irreligious like the Thucydidean, viewpoint, the Sicilian disaster was a disaster from heaven.

Thucydides' summary judgement of the Athenian populace as irresponsible and unwilling to accept their own responsibility is that of uncommon rather than common belief. In his pursuit to condemn the radical post-Periklean democracy as unsuitable as a constitution and to highlight the fickle nature of the demos as a political body, Thucydides ignores and obscures from the student's eyes the religious dimension of the issue. In this, Thucydides does us a disservice, since Greek religion at the time was deeply embedded in all aspects of life and in ignoring the religious dimension of the Sicilian Expedition and its aftermath, Thucydides robs the modern student of antiquity of important and vital information about Greek culture.

Suggested reading:

- a. Bosworth A. B. 'The Historical Context of Thucydides' Funeral Oration' *The Journal of Hellenic Studies*, Vol. 120. (2000), pp.1-16. JSTOR: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/632478>
- b. Garrity Thomas F. 'Thucydides 1.22.1: Content and Form in the Speeches' *The American Journal of Philology*, Vol. 119, No. 3.(Autumn, 1998), pp. 361-384. JSTOR: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1561676>
- c. Connor, W. Robert *Thucydides* 1984 Princeton pp.20-51. Available from ACLS via Athens: <http://hdl.handle.net/2027/heb.01431>
2. Gribble, David 'Narrator Interventions in Thucydides' *The Journal of Hellenic Studies*, Vol. 118, (1998), pp. 41-67. JSTOR: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/632230>

3. Marincola, J. M. 'Thucydides 1. 22. 2' *Classical Philology*, Vol. 84, No. 3 (Jul., 1989), pp. 216-223. JSTOR: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/269375>
4. Chernick, Steven 'Historical Manipulation in Thucydides?' *The Classical World*, Vol. 65, No. 4 (Dec., 1971), pp. 126-130. JSTOR: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4347611>
5. Alker, Hayward R., Jr. 'The Dialectical Logic of Thucydides' Melian Dialogue' *The American Political Science Review*, Vol. 82, No. 3 (Sep., 1988), pp. 805-820. JSTOR: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1962492>
6. Heath, Malcolm 'Justice in Thucydides' Athenian Speeches' *Historia: Zeitschrift für Alte Geschichte*, Vol. 39, No. 4 (1990), pp. 385-400. JSTOR: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4436163>
7. Taylor, Martha C. 'Implicating the Demos: A Reading of Thucydides on the Rise of the Four Hundred' *The Journal of Hellenic Studies*, Vol. 122, (2002), pp. 91-108. JSTOR: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3246206>
8. Arnold Debnar, Paula 'The Unpersuasive Thebans (Thucydides 3.61-67)' *Phoenix*, Vol. 50, No. 2 (Summer, 1996), pp. 95-110. JSTOR: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1192695>
9. Wilson, John 'What Does Thucydides Claim for His Speeches?' *Phoenix*, Vol. 36, No. 2 (Summer, 1982), pp. 95-103. JSTOR: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1087670>

Short Assignment: How valuable are the speeches in Thucydides to the historian?