



**Θουκυδιδης
(Thucydides)**

**The Beginning of Modern
Historiography**

by

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Thucydides and the Peloponnesian War

The Beginning of Modern Historiography: Thucydides and *The Peloponnesian War*

Introduction

Since being invited to become a member of the Atheneum Society just over a year ago, I have heard a number of good papers. One that was particularly meaningful to me—both because of the person who delivered it and the topic it covered—was the paper last winter by Dr. J. Brooks Major, which I think he called, *cum grano salis*, or “With a Grain of Salt.” His topic was objectivity, or the lack thereof, in the writing of history, and he made special reference to a paper given by the famed historian Charles Beard in 1935, “That Noble Dream.” Brooks’ paper fascinated me: it traced the idea of the “noble dream” of objectivity in historiography and stressed the necessary subjectivity that will be present when any person (trained historian or novice) starts the difficult but necessary process of weeding through facts and accounts in order to piece together something that will pass for an accurate record of an important event.

Following that paper, I was moved to do two things: one trivial, the second a little more serious. The first was to offer, during the portion of the meeting set aside for remarks, my favorite description of the act of writing history, which seemed to fit quite well with the paper that Major presented. That description is from the postmodern novelist, Tom Robbins, in his book, *Another Roadside Attraction*. Robbins writes:

"Hardly a pure science, history is closer to animal husbandry than it is to mathematics, in that it involves selective breeding. The principal difference between the husbandryman and the historian is that the former breeds sheep or cows or such, and the latter breeds (assumed) facts. The husbandryman uses his skills to enrich the future; the historian uses his to enrich the past. Both are usually up to their ankles in bulls[~]t

While the task (or science, or art) of writing history may not be quite that open to subjectivity, it is clear that the prejudices and preferences of the writer will be reflected in the final narrative product. Two authors can give accurate accounts of a complicated event, and, if their interests are varied, and the parts of the story they choose to tell and the way which they choose to tell it differ in significant ways, the stories will be quite different.

The second, more serious, thing that I was moved to do after that paper was to return to my office, brush off some old volumes I had stashed away from graduate school, and take a fresh look at what many historians consider to be the beginning of historiography: the writings in the 5th century B.C.E. by the Greek authors Herodotus and Thucydides. The respected historian of the Ancient Near East, Samuel Noah Kramer, would argue that “history begins at Sumer,” sometime around the beginning of the second millennium BCE. However, the narratives from Sumer and Akkad in that period have far more in common with *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* by Homer, dating from sometime early in the first millennium BCE, than

they do with modern history. Fantastic myth is interwoven with credible story lines and most reasonable readers will read those ancient Mesopotamian stories *cum grano salis*, even though they were not written in Latin.

With Herodotus, but even more with Thucydides, an early attempt is made at telling a true story, a story that describes important events as they actually happened. If some American historians in the early 20th century held to the "noble dream" of objectivity, it may be that they inherited that dream from a Greek author who lived 24 centuries earlier.

A Brief Biography

Thucydides, an Athenian, must have been born sometime around 460 BCE. By the year 424 BCE he was old enough to hold the position of στρατηγος (Greek for "military leader," comparable to "general"). Not only did he record the history of *The Peloponnesian War* (which is the title of his work), he was also a participant in that war. From 431 to 404 BCE, the two most powerful Hellenic city-states, Athens and Sparta, were at war, each accompanied by its respective allies. The war ended with the defeat of the Athenian fleet. Thucydides described the war as a single, continuous event, even though it was separated into two distinct phases by the "Peace of Nicias" from 421 to 419, which included a brief alliance between the two enemies. The peace and the alliance were ultimately dissolved and the fighting resumed.ⁱ

Thucydides coverage of the war is incomplete. Although he lived beyond the conclusion of the war in 404, his record ends, rather abruptly, in 411 with the destruction of an Athenian expedition. In fact, his ending is so sudden, he seems to stop in mid-sentence. The last line is: "Accordingly he went first to Ephesus and offered sacrifice to Artemis...; then nothing."ⁱⁱ The historian of ancient Greece, W. Robert Connor suggests: "Thucydides' history has no conclusion; half way through the account of the twenty-first year of the war, in the middle of a paragraph, at a semicolon, it abruptly stops."ⁱⁱⁱ

At the outset of the war, Thucydides was in Athens and remained there through the outbreak of the plague, which extended into the war's second year. He suffered from the plague and was one of the relatively few survivors.^{iv} Upon recovery he entered the war about which he would write. Later, in 424, Thucydides was one of two στρατηγοι responsible for the protection of Thrace. As he, himself, records, he was unable to come to the assistance of Eucles in time to prevent the Spartan Brasidas from taking Amphipolis.^v For his failure, he was exiled from Athens for the remainder of the war. Perhaps this self-deprecating admission provides testimony to Thucydides' commitment to truth, even when the truth is not flattering. However, as an exile, he was able to travel widely and through that travel he came into contact with many of the sources for his history of the war.^{vi}

Thucydides' Purpose for Writing

According to Thucydides, his intention for writing was to preserve an accurate record of the important events of his own time—not just the myths and stories and various versions of what happened, as Herodotus and other writers had done before. Because of that, he was

unable, for the most part, to examine ancient history, as well as much of the recent past.^{vii} While he offered occasional digressions that include surveys of past periods,^{viii} he dismissed his predecessors who were "inclined to accept the first story they hear," even to the point of "accept[ing] all stories of ancient times in an uncritical way."^{ix}

Poets, according to Thucydides, "exaggerate the importance of their themes..." and prose chroniclers "are less interested in telling the truth than in catching the attention of their public."^x (I would suggest at this point that those assertions are true, not only of poets and prose chroniclers in the 5th century BCE, but also of many historians and other story-tellers in our own age.) His distaste for that kind of historiography is apparent. So, he chose to adopt a different approach as well as different subject matter. He would sort through the stories, try to find the facts, and would stick to the period he knew: his own contemporary world.

While his subject matter was contemporary, the audience Thucydides envisioned was not. Unlike the other writers (whom he dismissed as relatively unimportant), he declared this his writing was not designed to "meet the taste of the immediate public, but...to last forever."^{xi} Those are his own words (or, his words translated into English). Precisely what end this careful preservation of history would serve is less explicit, but given Thucydides' understanding of war and its causes, as well as his view of human nature, it seems likely that he may have intended to inform future generations about conditions that might exist in their own time. J. A. S. Evans suggests that what Thucydides meant by this (i.e., that it would serve to enlighten men in the future) "is less important than what later writers thought he meant."^{xii} Here is another kind of subjectivity: not of the author, but on the part of the reader.

When trying to determine the accuracy and veracity of his account, it is important to ask: exactly when did Thucydides begin to write? Did he decide upon his task and set to work at the outbreak of the war as he asserted,^{xiii} or was he a "retrospective prophet...looking backward while pretending to look forward," as suggested by F. F. Adcock?^{xiv} If Thucydides was able to realize the significance of the impending war and launched his record at the beginning, as he claimed, then his stature as a visionary cannot be denied. A number of modern historians are convinced that he did just that. Part of the evidence is that the work seems to be written in "stages, with [a number of]...false starts and revisions..."^{xv} That seems to suggest that it was written as events unfolded rather than as a reflection on the events once the war could be viewed as a whole.

Thucydides' Resources for Writing History

In an examination of Thucydides' approach to the writing of history, at least two influences should be considered. First, the influence of his predecessors in historical writing and second, the nature and quality of the raw material available to him as he produced his own narrative history. Because of a common interest in war and the proximity of their periods—both the periods they covered and the periods in which they lived—Herodotus and Thucydides are often compared. Normally, it is noted that there exists a striking difference between their bodies of work. Thomas B. Macaulay asserts that "[t]he history of Thucydides differs from that of Herodotus as a portrait differs from the representation of an imaginary scene;...in the

former case, the archetype is given; in the latter, it is created.^{xvi} He seems to suggest that the writing of Thucydides, is history, while the writing of Herodotus is closer to fiction.

One of the chief sources for both Herodotus and Thucydides was the personal interview. Despite that shared source, there was an obvious difference in the way in which they used those interviews. Herodotus provided for his readers a variety of accounts from different perspectives and occasionally (but not always) offered editorial comments about their credibility. By contrast, Thucydides usually reported only the version he thought most credible and then disposed of the workshop debris—the leftover tales and bits of narrative that did not make the cut. Herodotus seemed to be doing something different with his history: he was trying to preserve a variety of stories and versions of stories, regardless of their accuracy.^{xvii} Thucydides was trying to demonstrate, in a reliable fashion, what really happened. He had little, if any, interest in preserving stories that bore no resemblance to the truth.

Because of his concern for accuracy and reliability, Thucydides favored his own eyewitness accounts of events. But even when he was using firsthand information, he tempered his initial impressions with what others saw.^{xviii} The one major departure from this eyewitness material (either his own account, or the accounts of other eyewitnesses), was the way in which Thucydides reported speeches. In regard to speeches, he seemed to be willing to trust his own ability to analyze the context and to reconstruct (or recreate) what speakers had to say under the circumstances. (I will have more to say about his creativity in regard to speeches a little later in the paper.)

Thucydides also liked archaeological evidence. An illustration of this is his attempt to determine the size of Mycenae, based on its ruins and remains. Even so, he admitted that the examination of ruins was not a good way to determine the size and the worth of a town.^{xix} In the case of Mycenae, it was all he had. He also based his understanding of the different locations of the growth of cities on archaeology—at least to some degree—suggesting that ancient cities were built farther inland due to piracy, but later, because of commerce, walled cities were built along the coast.^{xx} He even used the graves that were opened on Delos to compare the way in which the bodies were buried with contemporary methods, and suggested (based on that evidence) that the island had been colonized by Carians.^{xxi}

Thucydides was creative in the way he used sources not only in his capacity as an editor to select, but also in the way he organized. One of the artistic stylings he employed was his careful positioning of digressions—namely, the *Archaelogia*, the *Pentecontaetia*, the first an episode involving Pausanias and Themistocles, and the latter a second introduction to his work. Despite his insistence on accuracy and reliability, Thucydides was not simply listing events in chronological order: his theme and his understanding of the human psyche, his take on causality, on human nature, and on war, led him to insert his historical digressions and editorial comments in a creative fashion.

Thucydides and War

One of the ways in which Thucydides differed from his predecessor, Herodotus (and the differences are significant and numerous), was in his understanding of the causes of war. Both Herodotus and Thucydides set out to report the reasons (Greek – αιτιαι) for their respective wars. In this regard, Herodotus may have been more of a literalist than Thucydides. For Herodotus, the causes for war were the stated causes (he didn't seem to take them *cum grano salis*). His view seems to have been that there were tangible, logical, and relatively easy to discern reasons for nations going to war with other nations. For Thucydides, however, the causes were a little more complicated. He believed that the stated causes were often "trumped up" and that some were merely excuses to go to war (sound familiar?). Even when the reasons were less contrived and more compelling, they were usually not the obvious ones. That does not mean that Thucydides opposed war. Instead, he believed that imperialism and expansionism were inherent to humankind and that war was primarily a matter of politics.^{xxii} He may have been centuries ahead of his time.

Despite their differences, both Herodotus and Thucydides have characters in their stories who declare that it is foolish to prefer war to peace and that war should only come from necessity. Thucydides may have viewed war as essentially unavoidable and was, perhaps, willing to glorify it a bit more than Herodotus. In comparing the two Greek historians' understanding of war, J. Cobet suggests that:

In [Thucydides'] analysis, the Peloponnesian War appears as the inevitable consequence of a certain mechanism of power, the springs of which are embedded in the Archaeolog[ia]. This mechanism operates...through a combination of impulses toward economic progress, which is...a means of gaining security and power. War is the most important [means] in this process and the highest expression of the general force inherent in this evolution.^{xxiii}

While Thucydides considered himself to be much more historically reliable than his slightly older contemporary, Herodotus, it is clear that his views on the reasons for and inevitability of war would ultimately influence the way he told his story. Objectivity (which is what many historians seek, or think they seek, that "noble dream," to quote Beard) would require a more open approach to the role of war in human culture. By the same standard, Herodotus, who refused to glorify war, but refused to look for ulterior motives for engaging in war, would also temper his story based on his assumptions.

Characters and Speeches in Thucydides

Despite his attempt to portray an historically accurate record, character development was important in Thucydides' writing. One of the most important ways in which these characters were revealed to the reader was through speeches. Most modern historians would be a bit uncomfortable with his approach to the recording of those speeches:

Thucydides stated:

I have found it difficult to remember the precise words used in the speeches which

I listened to myself and my various informants have experienced the same difficulty; so my method has been, while keeping as closely as possible to the general sense of the words that were actually used, to make the speakers say what, in my opinion, was called for by each situation.^{xxiv}

That approach would certainly not be acceptable as a proper historical method for recording the text offered by speakers in our own time. If one admits to writing, not the words that were spoken, but the words that should have been offered, given the context and circumstances, that becomes historical fiction, not history. However, having said that, I would also add that making up the words that should have been said is only slightly more deceptive than carefully selecting from among the words that were spoken in order to create a particular impression. Editing, for most historians, is an acceptable practice, while the art of creative writing is not.

The speeches in Thucydides' body of work seem to have functioned on several levels. First, in ancient Greek thought, words were almost as important as action. Political speeches were important historical material and, given Thucydides' interest in the rational element of the actions of his contemporaries, he must have wanted to offer an account of the mental processes that led to particular actions.^{xxv}

But he also used the speeches for aesthetic value. Stephen Usher, a historian interested in the historians of ancient Greece and Rome, suggested that Thucydides' primary reason for including long speeches was essentially a concern for style. He said that, even though Thucydides abandoned "romance and myth" in his historical method, in order to create a more accurate record of events, he did not "abandon all pretension to literary artistry."^{xxvi} Thucydides may have been an historian, but he was also a writer—and writers are almost always interested in the way the story is told, the narrative features, and not just the content.

Thucydides also used speeches for the purpose of character development. His depiction of Pericles is a good example. Thucydides clearly believes that Pericles represented the best that Athens had to offer. He demonstrates that valor and effective leadership not only through narrative action—describing the way in which Pericles function as a leader—but also through two major speeches: the first, a reply to an ultimatum from a Spartan leader,^{xxvii} and the second a funeral oration.^{xxviii} Thucydides trusted the leadership offered by Pericles and made it clear in his narrative, particularly through the speeches, that Athens was safe in his hands.

By contrast, Thucydides used the speeches of one of Pericles successors, a man named Alcibiades, to demonstrate the worst of Athenian character, particularly for a leader. In his actions, and in his speeches, Alcibiades is shown to place self-interest above the interest of his nation. He appears to be petty—jealous of the fact he was left out of the negotiations for peace, led instead by Nicias (and named for him). Earlier, Alcibiades' family had business dealings with Sparta (managing Spartan interests in Athens) and he wanted to assume that role again when the time came. As soon as he saw an opening—that relations between

Athens and Sparta were strained and that the Peace of Nicias was fragile, he made every effort to bring the peace to an end. While Pericles was concerned for the good of Athens, Alcibiades was consumed by self-interest.

That may be an accurate reading of these two leaders. Reading Thucydides' account at face value would lead one to believe that was so. But, when you acknowledge that these characters are revealed primarily through their speeches, and that Thucydides had already admitted to a lack of memory about the wording of speeches *and* a willingness to make up the words that should have been said, given the circumstances, you see just how subjective the writing of history can be. We do not know the character of either of these leaders. What we know is Thucydides' understanding of their character. When one reads the speeches in *The Peloponnesian War*, it might be helpful, once again, to read *cum grano salis*.

Conclusion

As one examines the themes, concerns, and methods of Thucydides, it appears that, rather than simply recording an objective, straight-forward report of events, the historian of the Peloponnesian War had an agenda. By use of historical development, selection of material and events, redaction of sources, character development, and creative license (particularly in regard to speeches), the writer leads us on a journey through the war as he viewed it, not as it actually happened.

In the final analysis, isn't that the way all writers write? You may have heard the apocryphal story of a gathering to celebrate the anniversary of a Civil War battle, some years after the war ended. A number of former Confederate soldiers were seated on the battlefield, listening to their fellow veterans relive the battle. One particularly vivid (and creative) recollection ended with much applause and many tears. One emotional veteran who had been wounded in the battle in question, turned to his neighbor and said, "Wasn't that wonderful. Oh, I wish I had been there."

When we hear the history of our own times, i am afraid we are often led to say exactly the same thing. Thank you.

- i John H. Finley, *Thucydides* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1942), 204-206.
- ii Thucydides *Peloponnesian War* 8.109.
- iii W. Robert Connor, *Thucydides* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1984), 231.
- iv Thucydides *Peloponnesian War* 2.47-51.
- v *Ibid.*, 4.104-106.
- vi Michael Grant, *Readings in the Classical Historians* (New York: Scribner's, 1992), 61.
- vii Thucydides *Peloponnesian War* 1.1, 20-21.
- viii E.g, the *Archaeologia* and the *Pentecontaetia*.
- ix *Ibid.*, 1.20.
- x *Ibid.*, 1.21
- xi *Ibid.*, 1.20.
- xii J. A. S. Evans, "Father of History or Father of Lies: The Reputation of Herodotus," in *Herodotus: The Histories*, ed. Walter Blanco and Jennifer Tolbert Roberts (New York: W. W. Norton, 1992), 375.
- xiii Thucydides *Peloponnesian War* 1.1.
- xiv F. F. Adcock, *Thucydides and His History* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1963), 109.
- xv Jacqueline de Romilly, *Thucydides and Athenian Imperialism*, trans. Philip Thody (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1963), 3.
- xvi Thomas B. Macaulay, "The Purpose and Method of History," in *Herodotus: The Histories*, ed. Walter Blanco and Jennifer Tolbert Roberts (New York: W. W. Norton, 1992), 288.
- xvii E.g., he states that he is telling stories so that they "shall not fade with time." Herodotus *The Histories* 1.1-6.
- xviii Thucydides *Peloponnesian War* 1.22.
- xix *Ibid.*, 1.10.
- xx *Ibid.*
- xxi *Ibid.* 1.7-8.
- xxii Evans, *Father of History*, 376.
- xxiii J. Cobet, "Herodotus and Thucydides on War," in *Past Perspectives: Studies in Greek and Roman Historical Writing*, ed. I. S. Moxon, J. D. Smart, and A. J. Woodman (London: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 8.
- xxiv Thucydides *Peloponnesian War* 1.22.
- xxv Stephen Usher, "Thucydides," in *The Historians of Greece and Rome* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1969), 45.
- xxvi *Ibid.*, 46.
- xxvii Thucydides *The Peloponnesian War* 1.140-144.
- xxviii *Ibid.* 2.35-46.