THUCYDIDES

Man's Place in History



H.-P. Stahl

THUCYDIDES

Man's Place in History

H.-P. Stahl



The Classical Press of Wales

First German edition published in 1966
First published in hardback in 2003
Paperback edition 2009

The Classical Press of Wales
15 Rosehill Terrace, Swansea SA1 6JN
Tel: +44 (0)1792 458397
Fax: +44 (0)1792 464067
www.classicalpressofwales.co.uk

Distributor in the United States of America
ISD, LLC
70 Enterprise Dr., Suite 2, Bristol, CT 06010
Tel: +1 (860) 584–6546
www.isdistribution.com

© 2009 The author

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission of the publisher.

ISBN 978–1–905125–32–6

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

CONTENTS

		Page
	Preface	vii
1.	The question (Book 6.53–61)	1
2.	Retrospective (the state of Thucydidean studies; methodology)	13
3.	Projections and prospects (Book 1)	37
4.	Prelude to war (Book 2.2–6)	65
5.	Plan and reality (Book 2)	75
6.	Endpoints of series of events (Book 3.2–85)	103
7.	Recurring structural elements of event sequences (Books 3.94–114; 4.2–5.14)	129
8.	Behaviour in the extreme situation (Book 5.84–113)	159
9.	Speeches vs course of events in Books 6 and 7: attitudes–perceptions–responses	173
10.	Literary detail and historical crisis point: the Sicilian Books	189
	Bibliography	223
	Index rerum	237
	Index nominum	241
	Index verborum graecorum	244
	Index locorum	245

PREFACE

It is with mixed feelings that one returns to a book written long ago, and written in a language one has hardly used in more recent publications. Should the literature be updated? That, it quickly turns out, amounts to rewriting references without necessarily improving contents. Is the book's thesis perhaps outdated? To my surprise I found that this is not the case. (Which was not to deny that numerous revisions would help streamline the original.) The intellectual setting which places Thucydides outside the narrow national perspectives of many interpreters is still valid today—as is the thematic concentration on man's self-inflicted sufferings. And the new final chapter, on the Athenian Expedition in Sicily, confirms my earlier findings that planning and outcome are leading categories employed in the historian's investigation, and also that narrative detail can lead us to the critical core of Thucydides' work.

My heart-felt thanks go to all who have helped to bring about this English edition. Dr David Seward provided a lucid and smooth basic translation of the unrevised original. Ms Jana Adamitis, with her usual skill and scrutiny, performed the final copy-editing. In between, she and Mr Benjamin Haller alternated in keeping an eye on my revisions. Ms Karen Hoover drew the maps which go with Chapter 10.

Special thanks go to my publisher, fellow Vergilian scholar and friend, Dr Anton Powell. He not only suggested publication in English but, in his subtle and unobtrusive ways, nudged me on to actually going ahead with the undertaking.

The German edition was inscribed 'Hermann Kleinknecht zum Gedächtnis'. There are few today who have met the lively classicist. May this edition once more help to keep his memory alive.

Hans-Peter Stahl
Pittsburgh, PA, USA
29 April 2002

Return to Table of Contents

1

THE QUESTION
Book 6.53–61

In the summer of 415 BC the city of Athens is in an uproar. A series of arrests sweeps over the city. The surface reason for the arrests is a scandal that has arisen in the weeks preceding the Sicilian expedition: unidentified perpetrators have mutilated many of the Hermes figures displayed in the city. In addition, there are rumors concerning parodies of the Mysteries that are said to have taken place at night in the private homes of certain influential people (Thuc. 6.27).

This can certainly be interpreted as a bad omen for the Sicilian campaign, a reason not to treat the subject too lightly. An additional interpretation is current: the people sense revolt and conspiracy aimed at dissolving their sovereignty (27.3), and they are being encouraged in this suspicion by certain determined demagogues (28.2). Here we touch upon the deeper, emotional root of the general unrest.

Among the accused is one of the three generals chosen for the Sicilian undertaking. Because the leaders of the people fear his influence in the army (and indeed among the people themselves), they let him leave with the expedition (29.3). However, they do so with the intention of later recalling him and taking him to court at a time when he will be isolated.

The leaders use the interim to their advantage. While the fleet is operating in Sicilian waters, at home denunciations and arrests are multiplied (53.2). The people are co-operative. The merest utterance of suspicion justifies—sometimes irrespective of the low reputation of the informant and the public respectability of the suspect—intervention and an investigation, the first step of which is the arrest of the suspect.

What has led to this order-threatening mass hysteria?

> For the people knew by hearsay that the tyranny of Peisistratos and his sons had become oppressive towards the end and that, moreover, it had not been themselves [the Athenians] and Harmodios [i.e. the 'tyrannicide' and Athenian national hero] who had overthrown it, but rather the Spartans [i.e. their current enemies]—and therefore they lived in constant fear and became suspicious at every turn. (53.3)

Return to Table of Contents

At this point the historian interrupts his report of the chaotic situation in Athens to begin the famous excursus on the tyranny and its downfall. He introduces this passage with the explanatory[1] conjunction 'for', although, in view of the fact that the events he is about to describe occurred over a century earlier, the sense of the conjunction is not immediately clear.

The first sentence, which topples from their pedestals two national heroes, is already provocative, at least for Athenian sentiments.

> For the daring act (!) of Aristogeiton and Harmodios was undertaken as a result of a love affair (!), by a more detailed account of which I shall prove that neither the others nor the Athenians themselves (!) give an at all (!) accurate account of their own (!) tyrants and of the events. (54.1)

The—untranslatable—accumulation of negatives, the fact of a 'love affair' as the cause of a revolt against the tyranny, the choice of the word 'daring act' (τόλμημα in Thucydidean usage approaches the nuance of 'over-boldness'), the climactic 'nor the Athenians themselves' (who surely should know best), the (in Thucydides rare) 'I (ἐγώ) shall prove'—all this shows an emphasis which points (better: is intended to point) to a strong involvement on the part of the writer; that is, this is evidently a point of particular interest to our author.

What is the basis for this involvement? Is it merely, as has been suggested, the pride of one who 'knows better (more exactly)' than everyone else?

This would in any case be a possible, though in our view a naive, motive. Thucydides is after all the first author who programmatically announces his intention to achieve 'accuracy' in his account of events (1.22.2), and the complaint about the Athenians' failure to give an at all 'accurate' account is literally raised in the sentence quoted above. In addition, it is precisely this excursus which historians and philologists have again and again praised as a model of Thucydides' scientific precision.

The question is whether 'accuracy for its own sake' (or 'correction of existing misconceptions') is a sufficient category for understanding the passage, or whether the style of presentation suggests an opening for an additional point of view. To answer this question we must turn to the excursus itself.

It begins with a correction without which the story would be incomprehensible: it was not Hipparchos—as is commonly assumed—but Hippias who, as the eldest son, succeeded Peisistratos on the tyrant's throne. The younger brother Hipparchos sought without success to win the favors of a young man named Harmodios. In so doing, he hurt Harmodios' lover Aristogeiton, a citizen of the middle class.

Aristogeiton's immediate (!) reaction (out of jealousy and fear of Hipparchos' power) was to overthrow the tyranny—'so far as this was

Return to Table of Contents

possible for a man of his standing' (54.3). That is, by emphasizing the disproportion between the power of the tyrant's brother and the scant means of a 'middle-class' citizen, Thucydides from the beginning stresses the absurd nature of the undertaking. At the same time he shows in a psychologically convincing way how the *private* motive of jealousy, because it cannot be satisfactorily dealt with in the private sphere, becomes a dangerous *political* factor. The fact that this transformation occurs in the absence of calm consideration (that is, without weighing the possible consequences), is emphasized in the characterization of Aristogeiton's reaction as spontaneous (εὐθύς, 54.3).

On the other hand, Hipparchos' reaction—it is characteristic of this author that he gives the reactions and motives of both sides at significant points in his presentation—is to aim in the *opposite* direction. After a second failure to win the young man's favor, he decides upon damaging him *privately*, that is, he seeks to avoid the open use of the political power so feared by Aristogeiton (54.4).

There is a certain balance of motives here. The 'tyrannicide', who acts out of jealousy, is no better than Hipparchos, whose vanity is wounded by the refusal of his advances.

Hipparchos' reaction is problematic. Why does the tyrant's brother seek satisfaction on the private level, when (in accordance with the Athenian concept of tyrannical behavior) he might well use force?

It is at this point that the second correction of contemporary misconceptions begins, and it takes the form (since it requires proof if it is to be convincing) of an excursus within the excursus: the notion that the tyrants 'ruled by force' and were unpopular is *false*.

On the contrary, this family of tyrants was guided in its undertakings by 'virtue and reason' (54.5: two words of very high praise which Thucydides bestows on very few people). The effects of this comportment were a blessing for the citizenry: low taxes, a rich building program for the beautification of the city, successful military campaigning abroad, and respect for religious practices. The tyrants did not even abrogate existing laws in their own interest: they only saw to it that a member of their family was always in one of the annual offices (54.5–6).

The answer, then, to the question posed above, is that Hipparchos would *in no way* have abused his official power because such an abuse would have interfered with and derogated from his family's governing principles (and therefore from their prestige). Aristogeiton's fear (and therefore his first, spontaneous reaction) arose from a false perception of the situation.

Taking the passage as a whole—and in this light the correction proves to be part of the narrative—we get the impression of a political community

which, before the intervention of the 'tyrannicides', was enjoying the blessings of domestic peace and order. At the same time, we get a picture which is in contrast to the Athens of 415.[2]

Thucydides is even able to support two of his assertions with archaeological evidence. An inscription on the altar of the Pythian Apollo bears witness both to the construction projects of the tyrant family and to its holding of Athenian magistracies (54.7).

The mention of the inscription leads to the identification of Hippias (eldest son of the tyrant Peisistratos) as the tyrant (i.e. it serves as evidence for the first correction of current opinion at the beginning of the excursus).

This is an important passage (55.1–3) insofar as Thucydides, conscious of his method as a convincing form of argumentation, applies a conclusion based on probability as a means of guaranteeing the truth—three times[3] in a row.

It should be noted here that the historian himself (on the basis of personal information) is anyway 'more accurately' informed than others (εἰδὼς…ἀκριβέστερον ἄλλων…, 55.1), i.e. he would not require these pieces of evidence for his own satisfaction. But for the sake of the general verifiability of his account, he is interested in evidence which is independent of his own person (γνοίη δ' ἄν τις καὶ αὐτῷ τούτῳ). In this way, the εἰκός, as applied to the past by the historian himself, becomes a means of leaving the realm of subjectivity.

Now the thesis that Hippias (not Hipparchos) was Peisistratos' successor is made probable by three considerations. First, there is the above-mentioned altar and the stele 'On the Injustice of the Tyrants': both inscriptions mention children of Hippias only, not of his brothers Hipparchos and Thessalos. This permits the conclusion that Hippias married first and was consequently the eldest. Second, on the same stele Hippias is mentioned directly after his father. This permits conclusions about his relative age and succession to his father's throne. Third, on the day of Hipparchos' murder Hippias could scarcely have reacted so quickly and effectively had he just at that moment taken power rather than having long since been accustomed to exercising it.

'But Hipparchos, known for his unhappy fate, also acquired the reputation among posterity of having been tyrant' (55.4). After refuting the misconception of his contemporaries, the historian—I would suggest this as an obvious interpretation of the sentence—adds a psychological explanation for how it came about: an assassination carried out against anyone but the tyrant himself is inexplicable to the patriotic consciousness (which has no room for private motives). As a consequence the murder-victim

Return to Table of Contents

becomes the tyrant and his brother the victim's successor: the gate to the myth of the two national-liberation heroes has been opened.

We return to the narrative of the excursus. The rebuffed Hipparchos impugns the honor of Harmodios' sister; the young man's resultant affliction spurs his lover on still further; now both are eager for action; the circle of conspirators is kept small for the sake of security: they hope for spontaneous assistance from their fellow citizens on the day of 'liberation' (we shall often see that 'hope', in Thucydides' view, is a weak element in any plan—56.1–3).

At the appointed time—the Panathenaea festival has been selected because one might carry weapons on that day without arousing suspicion—Harmodios and Aristogeiton see a fellow conspirator conversing familiarly with the tyrant ('but then Hippias was well accessible to all', adds the author, highlighting once again—just before the catastrophe—the peaceful domestic situation). The pair become frightened and imagine that they have been betrayed and are 'as good as arrested' (57.2).

Their reaction is consistent with an emotional response: if the political goal is now out of reach, they will at least—in a kind of substitution[4]—satisfy the original, private vendetta. Finding Hipparchos at the Leokoreion, they 'fall upon him immediately without reflection and in the height of passion—the one of jealousy, the other of wounded pride—they stab him to death' (57.3).

Let us observe the points of emphasis. Even at the most dramatic moment, the author cannot refrain from viewing the deed itself exclusively in the light of its irrational motives. The hoped-for popular uprising does not materialize. Moreover, the tyrant, responding rapidly, succeeds that same day in disarming the remainder of the conspirators (Harmodios had been killed immediately after the assassination and Aristogeiton captured shortly thereafter).

> In such fashion Harmodios and Aristogeiton arrived at the beginning of their plot because of lovers' grief—and at their unreasonable daring because of fear which arose at the moment of crisis. (59.1)

The beginning and end of the episode look to each other. A spontaneous, ill-considered reaction leads to the plan to overthrow the tyranny; spontaneous (εὐθύς at 57.3 repeats εὐθύς of 54.3), ill-considered action which abandons its plan leads to the deed. Both conception and execution take place under the sign of fear and erotic excitement (54.3–57.2–3). The 'daring act' (τόλμημα, 54.1) of the beginning is given an edge in the 'unreasonable daring' of the writer's concluding judgment (ἡ ἀλόγιστος τόλμα, 59.1; for the negative significance of this, cf. 3.82.4).

Return to Table of Contents

A foolish undertaking thus ends in pitiful failure. And yet this is only one side of the issue. The cross-over from the private to the public sphere, once accomplished (by the creation of a group of conspirators), cannot be undone: the attempted assassination and consequent exposure of the opposition must have an effect on the tyrant's behavior.

This is the other[5] side, and it brings about precisely the opposite of what the 'freedom fighters' had intended. From that time on, the tyranny becomes more oppressive for all the citizens because the tyrant is no longer sure of his personal security, which had been the guarantor of the aforementioned (54.5–6) liberal policies.

> But for the Athenians, the tyranny became harsher after this (μετὰ τοῦτο, 59.2; cf. μετὰ ταῦτα, 59.3), and Hippias, already more in fear, *killed many citizens* and at the same time looked abroad for some security for himself in the event of a sudden change in the situation. (59.2)

As has already been pointed out, this is the climax of the narrative: a foolish act arising from a private motive results in the destruction of the balance of an entire commonwealth. Now the reader also understands why Thucydides gave so full an account of the peaceful aspect of the tyranny. The narrative yields a gruesome result: murder (out of foolishness) begets multiple murders (out of fear).

Could the meaning of the whole excursus be contained in this result?

The author's points of emphasis—which highlight the tragic effects on the citizenry of what he considers a foolish assault—surely point beyond the opening perspective of merely setting straight for its own sake the record of contemporary misconceptions. For this reason scholars have attempted to give the excursus a broader significance by seeing it as parallel to the situation in Athens in 415 (when the similarly ill-advised and hasty recall of the general Alcibiades, according to this view, likewise leads to great misfortune for Athens).

However, this analogy does not seem entirely satisfactory because the presumed result of Alcibiades' recall (i.e. the failure of the Sicilian expedition) lies too far beyond the situation in which Thucydides has placed the excursus. Besides, an analogy could not account for the causal function of the excursus (γάρ, 54.1).

Finally, mere parallelism would devalue the unique and—to judge by Thucydides' presentation—paradigmatic value of the excursus to a simple, repetitive schema, and it would, at least at this point, be hasty to infer such a schema.

Before giving our own interpretation, let us first continue our examination of the historian's report. For the fact that the tyrant looks for

Return to Table of Contents

refuge abroad only *after* the attempted assassination (μετὰ ταῦτα, 59.3) Thucydides is once more in a position to offer proof: Hippias married his daughter Archedike to a son of the tyrant of Lampsacus (in comparison to Athens an insignificant town: '…he, an Athenian, to a Lampsacan!', 59.3). The implication is that an Athenian tyrant at the peak of his power would never have condescended to this (we can leave aside the consideration that the Lampsacan tyrant enjoyed great influence with the king of Persia).

As proof, the author cites the inscription on Archedike's tombstone at Lampsacus. Further evidence for this foreign connection is the fact that the tyrant did visit Lampsacus, among other places, after his fall from power (59.4).

A summary mention—the climax of the narrative (59.1–2) is now behind us—of Hippias' attempt two decades later to regain his rule in conjunction with the Persian invasion brings the excursus to a close (59.4).

The next sentence (60.1) picks up the situation in 415 with a statement nearly identical to that contained in the last sentence before the excursus (53.3):

> Thinking of these things, and recalling what they knew of them by hearsay [that is, trapped in the un-corrected, false conception of the events narrated in the excursus], the Athenian people at that time [= 415] were harsh (χαλεπός: in 53.3 this word was used of the tyranny in its last stages, then translated as 'oppressive') and suspicious of those accused of profaning the Mysteries, and it seemed to them that it had all been done for the purpose of an oligarchic or tyrannical conspiracy.

The fact that the situation has not changed in any way since the beginning of the excursus must raise the question: what is the reader supposed to have learned from it that can add to his understanding of the situation in the year 415?

In order to answer this question, let us summarize the points emphasized by Thucydides in the excursus:

1. The Athenians live in ignorance of their own history (emphasized stylistically; this case, we may now add, seemed to the historian so typical that—in another context—he used it as one of two examples for the general indifference of human beings towards the search for truth: 1.20.2–3).
2. (a) The famous 'tyrannicide' was a foolish case of private revenge; moreover, (b) the victim had never been tyrant.
3. The rule of the Athenian tyrants was peaceful and beneficial to the city (along with 2b, confirmed by epigraphic evidence; use of conclusions based on probability; insight into the origin of the legend about the tyrannicide).

4. Hippias' rule became oppressive only when he (after the murder of his brother) began to fear for his own safety (confirmed by epigraphic evidence).

The notion current at Athens, on the other hand, is that the freedom fighters[6] Harmodios and Aristogeiton rebelled against the oppressive tyranny and murdered the tyrant. But the tyrant's brother took power immediately and the final liberation had to come from abroad.[7] It is upon this picture that the Athenian people's chronic fear of tyrannical ambitions is based.

And this gives us the key to the interpretation of the excursus: the national legend rests upon an *historical falsehood*; it states that the (supposed) tyrant was killed *because* his regime was oppressive rather than allowing the murder to be the cause of the regime's harshness. In other words, *cause and effect have traded places*. The act of murder (arising from private, purely emotional motives), which destroyed the domestic peace of the city, becomes in the myth a (morally justified) act of liberation for that same city. And that is not all.

It is precisely this *false myth* which becomes *in its turn*—a hundred years after the fact!—*a concrete political factor*, in that it excites the people's fear of tyranny to such a degree that *again* the domestic peace of the city is destroyed and the very order of Athenian society is threatened. The *demos* demonstrates behavior of the kind that its imagination ascribes to the tyrant himself (cf. our observation on the author's use of the word χαλεπός). We have thus discovered the causal function of the excursus:[8] while making a correction, Thucydides shows historical *misconception as a direct cause* of action which has jumped the rails of rational control.

The unavoidable question that arises is, what is the way out of such a situation?

To begin with, we should notice that Thucydides describes the climax of the chaotic situation only after the excursus:[9] the anger of the people (ὀργιζομένων, 60.2, reminiscent of the ὀργή of Harmodios and Aristogeiton, e.g. 57.3) increases daily in the degree of its savagery (ἐς τὸ ἀγριώτερον, 60.2), and more and more (respectable) people are taken to prison.

At last one of the prisoners comes forward—in return for amnesty (though he 'seemed the guiltiest of all'!)—to denounce the 'guilty parties' (in the mutilation of the herms), even though the reliability of his information remained questionable. 'For opinion is divided, but clear proof no one could provide (τὸ σαφές), neither then nor later, of who the culprits were' (60.2). The narrative becomes lively enough for the author to include a report in indirect discourse. '…the people gladly seized upon the, as they

Return to Table of Contents

believed, reliable information (once again τὸ σαφές, 60.4)…' The men accused by the informer are killed (those who have escaped are condemned *in absentia* and a reward is offered to anyone who will kill them), the others are set free.

'And under these circumstances it was *unclear whether those executed had been punished unjustly, but the rest of the city was clearly benefited in the present situation*' (60.5). The people behave in precisely the same way in the matter of the profanation of the Mysteries. Because they believed themselves in the case of the herms 'in possession of the clear truth (τὸ σαφές)' (61.1), they were in the case of the profanation of the Mysteries (of which Alcibiades, among others, had been accused) even quicker to assume an antidemocratic conspiracy. A Spartan army which happens (ἔτυχε, 61.2) to appear at the isthmus (and in reality is on its way to Boeotia) is seen as an acute external threat. It is immediately and loudly assumed that it is approaching at the behest of Alcibiades (61.2). Simultaneously, suspicions about Alcibiades' friends in Argos lead to the return of the Argive hostages (at the time in Athenian custody) to Argos *for execution*.[10] All of these factors result in the recall of Alcibiades (for whom the death sentence is planned in Athens, 61.4, 7).

We have sketched the events so far beyond the climax of the domestic situation in order to show how here, too, Thucydides takes into account unfortunate effects upon those who otherwise have no part in the events (the 300 Argive hostages). He adds this fact (irrelevant for the situation of Athens of that time, but significant of the people's wrath and its consequences) using τότε (we would translate emphatically, 'it was at that time also that the Athenians delivered…', 61.3).

Before concluding, there is still something to say about the supposed 'clarity' (τὸ σαφές).

We encounter the word three times in rapid succession (60.2, 4; 61.1). In the first instance the author explains that clarity about the truth of the accusations made by the informant proved at the time (as well as later) unattainable. In both of the other instances, he emphasizes that the Athenians only *believed* that they had clarity.

This word—just as the question of 'accuracy' (τὸ ἀκριβές) at the beginning of the excursus, taken together with the problem of human indifference vis-à-vis the truth—once again leads back to those sections of the first book, where Thucydides is discussing the goal and method of his work. In the concluding sentence of his program (1.22.4) Thucydides states that he wishes for readers who desire *clarity* (τὸ σαφές) concerning 'what happened and concerning what—in accordance with the human condition[11]—will again be such and similar'.

Through this triple reference to key concepts in the Thucydidean program, the entire section with which we have dealt up to this point acquires special significance.

In his own search for unambiguous clarity—in which he employs only the most reliable means available—the historian discovers that the actions of human nature (if we may apply a higher category of his program to the present problem) are guided by merely supposed clarity; the result is behavior which is no longer under rational control and so causes the death or suffering of those afflicted.

If we return to the beginning of the excursus (the historical ignorance of human beings and in this case especially of the Athenians) with this finding in mind, we can no longer understand the vigorous emphasis (54.1) as that of an enlightened know-it-all, but rather as at most an expression of regret—arising from insight into the *de facto* inevitability of what appears from rational hindsight to have been avoidable.

The events described at the end (61.1), surrounding the revenge for the profanation of the Mysteries, are secondary to our central theme insofar as Thucydides clearly says that the Athenians in this case were behaving in a manner analogous to their settling of the affair of the mutilation of the herms.[12]

The decisive statement is of course (we are once again taking up the question of a way out of such an emotionally charged situation) that the city was undeniably benefited by the informant's dubious declarations—in all of which the problem of justice must be left aside.[13]

In the context dealt with, this is the last of the Athenian domestic situations presented to the reader, and the manner in which this situation came about fits appropriately into the chain of events. Emotions excited by an historical falsehood are calmed by an only supposedly clear perception; in other words, *the devastating effects of a case of ignorance are here neutralized only by further ignorance*.

If our interpretation has come close to grasping the picture which in this case occurs to Thucydides from his insight into history, then another question arises. Is this picture the rule or an exception in the normal progress of human affairs? That is, what are the boundaries within which by its very actions human nature—to use one aspect of his characteristic category—defines itself in the author's view?

Notes

* Foreign quotations have as a rule been translated into English. Where required, the foreign quotation has been inserted into the text itself. All translations from

Return to Table of Contents

the Greek are the author's.

[1] γάρ may be used to introduce a digression; its causal function does not thereby automatically disappear: see below, n. 8.

[2] It must be mentioned that interpreters who have wished to see in Thucydides support for a particular type of constitution have, on the basis of this passage, seen fit to state an affinity for tyranny. In so doing they have overlooked the fact that the author is speaking not of tyranny in general, but of this particular family of tyrants (οὗτοι, 54.5), and that his praise is expressed for the peaceful domestic situation maintained by these tyrants—a point which one would like to observe when contemplating Thucydides' position on constitutional questions.

[3] We can with good conscience speak of a conclusion based on probability in all three cases since the variation of expression ('probably', 'not improbably', 'it seems to me') arises only from stylistic considerations.

[4] Cf. 1.20.2: βουλόμενοι δὲ πρὶν ξυλληφθῆναι δράσαντές τι καὶ κινδυνεῦσαι.

[5] Thucydides contrasts private fate and public effect using μέν-δέ, 59.1–2.

[6] As for the evidence outside the present text, cf. especially Scol. Campbell 893–896 = Athenaeus 15.695.10–13, which ascribes to the tyrannicides the success of their undertaking, and *IG* 1.77.

[7] Cf. Herodotus 6.123.

[8] A parallel excursus which reaches into the more distant past in order to *provide the cause of* a situation in the more recent past and is likewise introduced with γάρ can be found in the *Pentecontaetia* (1.89.1 ff.): the description of the rise of Athenian power (1.89 ff.) gives the cause of current Spartan fears (1.88). In this case as well—as in the Peisistratid excursus—the causal function is fulfilled by way of a correction (Thucydides mentions both themes: 1.97.2). Neither passage (1.89.1, 6.54.1) is discussed by Denniston (*The Greek Particles*, Oxford, 1959[2]).

[9] It is clear from a comparison with Andocides 1 (e.g. 36, 48) that Thucydides' description (which, compared with his normal presentation, must count as rather lively) is actually quite reserved.

[10] There is a certain horrible irony in this, for the Argive hostages (on suspicion of pro-Spartan leanings) had originally been brought to Athens by *Alcibiades himself* (5.84.1).

[11] For τὸ ἀνθρώπινον see below, p. 28 f.

[12] Of course this does not mean that we should overlook the extensive consequences of these condemnations (the betrayal of Alcibiades); only that Thucydides sees the decision to recall Alcibiades as having an accessory character in terms of its coming about.

[13] It scarcely needs to be pointed out that the same viewpoint is present in this judgment as in the presumed 'Praise of Tyranny' (cf. above, n. 2), namely, 'preservation (or restoration) of domestic peace'.

Return to Table of Contents

Return to Table of Contents

2

RETROSPECTIVE
The State of Thucydidean Studies; Methodology

It would be a project rewarding in itself to consider the modern literature on Thucydides from the perspective of the history of scholarship. Preoccupation with the 'first *scientific* historian', as Thucydides has often been called, has time and again stimulated modern scholars to compare, or even identify, their own position with that of the 'founder' of the historical discipline. In the latter instance there is sometimes a tendency to use Thucydides as the star witness for one's own case: '…in his conception of what is required of a writer of history he is nearer to the twentieth century AD than he is to the fifth BC'.[1]

As surprising as such a judgment may be in its pointed formulation, it is not alone in its general tendency. The characteristics—variously marked in individual instances—which lend the ancient historian such a modern air are easy to enumerate: the (theoretically often conceded) unconditional love of truth; his awareness of problems of methodology; the high value he sets upon the individual fact (closely connected to his insistence on precision); his presumed readiness to recognize universal laws as operative in events; his consistently executed precision in chronology; and, not least, his insistence upon a strict, *immanent* causality (for which he is often contrasted with his 'religious' predecessor Herodotus, who thus serves as a foil for Thucydides).

At the same time these several aspects make it transparent to which concept of the historian's task Thucydides' work would seem most to approximate. The entrance of *positivist* methodology into the humanities could scarcely leave unnoticed the efforts of an author whose methodical effort seemed primarily to strive for ascertaining the historical facts.

The fact that the positivist concept of knowledge (with its well-known principle of objectivity as *scientific*[2] objectivity) has been applied also to Thucydides is not in itself very important for the aspects to be considered in the present work. However, to the extent that, under the influence of this method of inquiry, assumptions have been made also concerning the

Return to Table of Contents

intention of the work and even the personal attitudes of its author, this line of interpretation deserves our full attention. Of additional importance is the fact that its influence, though seldom explicitly stated or (because of its complexity) even fully consciously applied, extends into the modern picture of Thucydides.

Near the turn of the nineteenth century Thucydides was already being discussed under the rubric 'The *Science* of History'.[3] Shortly thereafter, Cornford (1907) came forward with his book, *Thucydides Mythistoricus*, and claimed for the ancient historian a position diametrically opposed to the positivist one.[4] In his view Thucydides knows no causality at all,[5] has no developed sense of economic affairs,[6] and is deeply influenced by Aeschylus; Thucydides is supposed to have retained the tragedian's moral element, but abandoned his theology[7] and replaced it with 'supernatural powers'. In Cornford's view Thucydidean hope becomes the goddess Ἐλπίς, chance becomes the goddess Τύχη, Alcibiades becomes Ἀπάτη (and Ὕβρις). In short, Cornford was at pains to ascribe to Thucydides all the mythical powers the historian must have been proud to have overcome.

I mention this odd work in the present context only because it incited later positivist criticism. Cochrane's book (*Thucydides and the Science of History*)[8] may serve as an example here because it most clearly expresses the tendencies we are about to discuss.

First, Thucydides is once again allowed his awareness of causality, and an emphatically *immanent*[9] causality at that; Cochrane claims to see the influence of fifth-century atomist philosophy[10] and points out its aversion to traditional religious ideas. This is the cardinal point for the equation—unhistorical but in accord with Comte's famous schema—of Thucydides' attitude with the anti-metaphysical mind set[11] of his positivist interpreter.[12]

Significant for the further development of the scholarly view of Thucydides is that, by means of the reasoning just described, the Thucydidean concept of knowledge is shown to be *scientific*.

Already Littré,[13] writing in 1839, had pointed out the stylistic similarity between Thucydides and the Hippocratic Corpus. Cochrane expands this correspondence into the area of methodology—within limits an entirely justified view[14]—as well as to the goal of the work. The latter is possible for Cochrane only because he understands the process of reception as analogous to modern development. He writes that Thucydides' work represents 'an attempt to apply to the study of social life the methods which Hippocrates employed in the art of healing', and is an 'exact (!) parallel to the attempts of modern *scientific* historians to apply *evolutionary* canons of interpretation derived from *Darwinian* science'.[15]

Return to Table of Contents

I know of scarcely any passage in the modern secondary literature on Thucydides in which there is so frank an admission of nineteenth-century influence. The reference to Darwin's evolutionary theory shows what is basically at issue here: transference of the modern idea of progress (inclusive of all its complex associations) to Thucydides. It is a small step from here to conceive of the entire process which the historian describes—the course of the war—or even of the decline of a single political community—as parallel to the medical categories of a disease.[16] Thus it seems only consistent that Thucydides be equated with the 'healing' Hippocrates and, so to speak, become the physician at the bedside of ailing society:

> In the case of Thucydides…something akin to the *positive faith* of the modern scientist is needed to explain the note of calm *assurance* with which he commends his "Histories"…as a possession for ever. …it is perfectly evident that he has *no doubt* in the value and the *usefulness* of his own work.[17]

My intention is to go to the root of the utilitarian interpretation of this statement from Thucydides' program (1.22.4: that his work is a possession for ever). It has long been established that the interpretation aiming at usefulness, in the sense of practical applicability, rests upon faulty translation.[18]

However, that the aspect of utility has been supported by importation of a category alien to this work and by analogy to modern intellectual history, is a largely unconscious, but for that reason all the more weighty, presupposition.[19]

The consequences for interpretation are of several kinds. The most common is that Thucydides believed (in accordance with the physician's intention) he was able to help humanity by teaching a lesson with his work.[20] The interpretation sees as the foundation of this teaching the 'recognition'—which Thucydides is supposed to have adapted chiefly from contemporary medicine,[21] but also from the sophists and philosophers[22]—that human nature is a *constant*[23] whose actions (it would be more apposite to say: reactions) are generally predictable. With this prognostic skill, transferred from medicine to politics, Thucydides is supposed to have aimed at equipping his statesman-reader with the ability to predict and steer future developments[24] (possibly even to improve human nature, despite the dark qualities which Thucydides ascribes to it).[25]

Together with the work's prognostic intention arises the question of how to calculate probability, since the reactions of human nature can be predicted in approximate terms only, never with complete certainty.[26] Because the εἰκός concept is so significant for Thucydides' contemporaries—both in medicine and in the rhetoric of the sophists[27]—it is usually

Return to Table of Contents

assumed that Thucydides himself (especially since he often lets his speakers argue on the basis of what is εἰκός) employs this method of arguing as a reliable instrument for gauging *future* events:

> …the various speakers in the *History* are constantly predicting the *probable* outcome of policies and the future course of events. Now to Thucydides the supreme requisite of a politician is his πρόγνωσις…and the *History* itself is, in essence, a *manual for future statesmen*, instructing them in the outcome of conditions destined to be repeated. Inevitably, therefore, he attributes to his speakers these same methods of deducing the typical results of given circumstances.[28]

One may call it 'a manual for future statesmen', 'Breviarium für den künftigen Politiker' ('breviary for the future politician'),[29] 'Techne für den Politikos',[30] 'rational zu handhabendes Werkzeug' for the 'politischen Menschen',[31] or even claim that Thucydides' work is intended to provide political insight 'whose rationality is to unlock a more *secure future*'.[32]

All such interpretations—even when they do not expressly begin from the positivist thesis—share the assumption that Thucydides, on principle, considered the forces at work in political events rationally comprehensible and therefore was able to pursue a more or less practical goal with his work.

However, an attempt to learn precisely what useful lessons the historian has to offer the statesman meets either with no answer at all or the response that the basic universal laws 'perhaps can hardly be defined precisely';[33] occasionally one encounters a more or less acceptable selection of quotes from the work itself, especially from the speeches.[34]

But let us—in the context of the problem posed by the recent image of Thucydides—assume that human nature is a predictable entity, one that can be pressed into service for statesmanly planning;[35] another important factor producing uncertainty for the supposed prognostic intention of the work comes into play. This is the role of chance, or more generally, the possibly blind course of events (which, of course, does not depend upon human nature alone). If Thucydides is to have written his work for politicians, for him as well as for his 'era of rationalism', τύχη must indeed have been 'a stumbling-block'.[36]

One way of allowing for this 'stumbling' is to place Thucydides among those contemporary philosophers who were optimistic on this point. Besides Thrasymachus (fr. 1) and Critias (fr. 21), Democritus' fr. 119 is a favorite citation:

> Human beings have formed an image of τύχη as an excuse for their own thoughtlessness; for only to a small extent does τύχη fight against reason: most things in life are set straight by shrewd intelligence.[37]

Quite apart from the fact that these passages likewise consider and attempt to render rationally comprehensible only *one* of the two destabilizing factors,[38] it seems worthwhile to pose the question whether Thucydides' attitude toward the course of events can really be sketched as follows:

> …the deeper the insight into things, the more clearly the rationally comprehensible moments appear; Thucydides demands that these moments be observed not only by the hindsight of the historian, but also by the foresight of the statesman.[39]

In my opinion, such an interpretation is possible only if one either underestimates[40] the role of chance in a single chain of events or takes the position that each individual chance-influenced episode, looking at the war as a whole, contributes little or nothing to the total outcome.[41]

Both alternatives have in common the fact that they assign to the statesman the responsibility (and the opportunity) to include in his plans sufficient contingency (reserve) factors to allow for the unexpected:

> It is also true that Thucydides' tendency to understand τύχη as the remainder of what is calculable only confirms his basic practical motif: the remainder itself becomes an item in the equation.[42]

In this way both destabilizing factors seem to have been neutralized: human nature is seen as a 'constant'; chance is eliminated by allowing a sufficient 'margin for error in the equation'. What previously appeared to be a game of chance with two unknown quantities in play has been reduced to a system composed of manipulable factors.

And—one would like to ask—what has become of the tragic element (often cited, but not accommodated by such a system) in the work? We are told that it resides in the 'catastrophic course of events παρ᾽ ἐλπίδα'[43]—which evidently is to be avoided in the future.[44]

It might thus appear that nothing stands in the way of a 'successful probability computation' for the statesman. It is likely, however, that this appearance is deceptive. Let us leave aside the fact that the statesman is given no criterion for checking a pressing situation against the probable course it will take. One would still like to raise the question: does not this 'catastrophic course of events παρ᾽ ἐλπίδα' indicate a real problem for the author, precisely the one to which access is not gained through such optimistic interpretation; and further, does an area beyond the sphere of politics not open up behind this problem?

The complex of problems reviewed up to this point clearly places Thucydides in the framework of a *political* task. In my opinion it is quite right and makes sense to see Thucydides, from the point of view of the existing

Return to Table of Contents

tradition of the historical discipline, as the inventor of political history.[45] For a philologist, however, the question must arise whether a writer (I use the word advisedly) would, at a time when prose was beginning to compete with poetry,—one scarcely need point out the deliberate individuality of Thucydidean prose—not have intended his work to be read with more far-reaching aspects in mind. Nor need I mention that, even when tragedy, the pre-eminent poetry of his time, wears a political costume, the political aspect of the work is not necessarily the ultimate one.[46]

It is remarkable that philologists—German philologists in particular—have contributed decisively to an analysis of Thucydides' work primarily along political (and thus usually practical) lines. The explanation for this will take us on a—perhaps surprising—detour.

Since the publication of Ullrich's *Beiträge zur Erklärung des Thukydides* in 1845/6, there has existed in the field of Classics the so-called 'Thucydidean Question'. In 1899 Ed. Meyer was already lamenting that it was 'not a good sign for the efficiency of the philological discipline'[47] that this problem had not yet been solved.

The problem as raised by Ullrich comes down to this: the work as we have it is not a unit but rather—I concentrate here only on the most important points—consists of two drafts or designs, written at different times, which the author did not have time to integrate consistently with one another. According to Ullrich, the first part consists of Books 1 to 4 (middle) and was written soon after the end of the Archidamian War (421); the later part consists of the remaining Books and reworkings of certain passages of the earlier part and was composed soon after the collapse of Athens (404).

The effects of the 'Thucydidean Question' become relevant to our point of view with Schwartz's (1919) work on Thucydides. This book has often been credited with lending fresh momentum to Ullrich's thesis, which by then had already undergone several attempts at modification: 'Schwartz for the first time raised this question decisively to the level of a problem of intellectual development'.[48]

But what at first sight might present itself as fruitful innovation proved fateful in the long run, particularly since Thucydidean studies have to this day not managed to free themselves from this book.

Schwartz understood the compositional layers in the work as 'stages in the development of Thucydides the historiographer who attempted to wrestle with the great historical *experiences of his time* by shaping them and at the same time himself'.[49] Schwartz's fatal step—Stenzel discreetly hints at this already in 1926[50]—was in understanding Thucydides' 'contemporary experiences' on the basis of his (i.e. Schwartz's) own time.

Return to Table of Contents

In itself, a current political interpretation is not a rarity (it might speak for the author's objective reserve in his work). In his book *Thucydides and the World War*,[51] Lord tries, on the basis of the Peloponnesian War, to make predictions about the further course of World War II.[52] In the introduction to his 1925 book Abbott openly admits that World War I provided some stimulus for his work.[53] The historian Gomme sees in a more recent quarter-century of European history the fulfillment of Thucydides' hope that his work would be a κτῆμα εἰς αἰεί.[54]

In Schwartz's work the contemporary interpretation turns up in scientific garb.[55] Terms such as 'Retraktation', 'Doppelfassungen', 'Herausgeber' and the labeling of certain features as 'Früh' and 'Spät' criteria (some of which already belonged to his predecessors' tool-kits) at first give the impression of strict objectivity and a method appropriate to the subject.[56] But it is precisely this method which disguises the content of Schwartz's argumentation.

For instance, when the reader unexpectedly discovers, instead of the question raised by Thucydides about the causes of the war, a discussion of Pericles' war-'guilt', and when Spartan fear of Athens' rising power (1.23.6, 88) is referred to as Sparta's 'jealousy',[57] we have a right to doubt the objectivity of such an interpretation.

The most momentous of Schwartz's 'doublets' occur in the great tetrad of speeches which Thucydides sets in Sparta before the outbreak of the war. Schwartz ascribes the speech of the Corinthians urging war and that of the Spartan king Archidamus warning against it to Thucydides' early stage. The speech of the Spartan ephor Sthenelaidas precipitating the decision to go to war, and that of the Athenians warning against war, Schwartz assigns to the late period (after the fall of Athens). According to Schwartz, the latter pair precludes the former and was to have replaced it in the final version of the work.[58]

The historian's 'development' which results from this—arbitrary, from a literary perspective—distortion of the text is clear. The 'war-guilt' is transferred from Corinth to Sparta's 'jealousy'; Athens (and, along with her, Pericles) is exonerated. 'Die geschichtliche Darstellung ist zur Apologie geworden' ('Historiography has turned into *apologia*.').[59]

The consequence of this spiritual biography of Thucydides probably represents the severest possible blow to the intellectual honesty of the man who made the struggle for unadulterated truth his life's work, a task of whose difficulty he was well aware (1.22). The historian is demoted from his *sine ira et studio* attitude to one of Athenian partisanship. In the words of Schwartz, after Thucydides' return from exile he became 'a *patriot again*' who now attacked Sparta with 'a *passion* which transposed itself into the *political* realm'.[60] In this way political partisanship is vigorously set in the biographical system.

According to Schwartz, the above-mentioned speech of the Athenians (which arrogantly tramples upon all that is just) is a plea on the part of the historian for Athens. It follows in his view that the Melian Dialogue, a model of Athenian brutality and similar in its argumentation to the earlier speech, must contain 'a barrage of attacks' on Sparta.[61] It is only logical, then, that Schwartz's Thucydides at last finds himself trapped into a 'bis zur antimoralischen Paradoxie gesteigerte Verteidigung der attischen Machtpolitik' ('a defence, raised to the point of anti-moral paradox, of Athenian power politics').[62]

The difficulties encountered by de Romilly in her book *Thucydide et l'impérialisme athénien*[63] (published around the beginning of World War II) may serve as an indication of the influence of Schwartz's politicizing interpretation upon later decades in precisely this context. Because she does not consider justified the anti-moral reading of the speech of the Athenians, she is at pains to distance the speech from both the related Melian Dialogue and the cruel behavior of a wantonly aggressive Athens. She does this by seeking to draw the speech close to the '*générosité*' of Periclean Athens as presented in the Funeral Oration.[64]

This would make Thucydides from a rigorous into a moderate defender of Periclean imperialism, i.e. still partisan in essence. De Romilly—unlike Schwartz, who seems never to have become conscious of the problem—sees the fateful implication of this reasoning and attempts to deal with it in the following way:

> Ce détachement d'homme de *science*, où se fonde l'*impartialité* de Thucydide, lui permet de comprendre, et par suite de *justifier*, mais *sans parti pris* comme sans illusions. ('The detachment of the man of science, on which the *impartiality* of Thucydides bases itself, allows him to understand, and, consequently, to *justify*, but *without taking sides* and without illusions.')[65]

By pointing out deliberate correlations and cross-references,[66] Schwartz's successors applied themselves methodically to understanding the text, which he had left in a shambles, increasingly as a unit. However, the reference to present-day politics, once vigorously foregrounded, remained largely intact—or became even more pronounced—in interpretations of the *content* of the work.

Pohlenz has Thucydides criticizing all those who after the war condemned the old imperialism:

> …wenn kleine Seelen sich nicht entblödeten, den Mann zu schelten, der Athen…für alle Zeit einen Platz in der Weltgeschichte gesichert hatte, so drängte es ihn, nicht nur zu zeigen, daß die Spartaner ihre Macht genau so rücksichtslos mißbraucht…hätten… ('…if small minds were not intelligent

Return to Table of Contents