CAMBRIDGE TEXTS IN THE
HISTORY OF POLITICAL THOUGHT

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THUCYDIDES
*The War of the Peloponnesians and
the Athenians*

CAMBRIDGE TEXTS IN THE
HISTORY OF POLITICAL THOUGHT

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THUCYDIDES

The War of the Peloponnesians and the Athenians

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CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-84774-2 - Thucydides: The War of the Peloponnesians and the Athenians
Edited and Translated by Jeremy Mynott
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Preface

Thucydides is a foundational author in the history of political thought.
He stands at the very start of reflective thinking about politics in the
western tradition and that in itself gives his voice a great freshness, force
and originality. But it also presents us with some immediate problems
of understanding, since the sort of distinctions we now make between
political science, political theory, political history and the study of inter-
national relations did not exist in his day, though he has on occasion been
claimed as the originator of each of these modern 'subjects'.

One key aim of this series is to present each author and text in their
proper cultural and historical context and to avoid importing into our
understanding of them anachronistic concepts derived from later devel-
opments and theories. I have tried to take this objective seriously in
various ways. First, and perhaps controversially, I have not called the
text by its traditional title, 'The Peloponnesian War', which is not a title
we have any evidence Thucydides himself used and which was seen to
be one-sided even in his own time.[1] Secondly, in structuring the work I
have given precedence to the internal divisions by years and campaigning
seasons that Thucydides chose to employ rather than the conventional
division into 'books', which was again a later addition (though I have
retained the latter as background headings for ease of cross-reference
within the text and to the secondary literature).[2] These two tactics are
intended to help prevent us projecting false assumptions on to the work
even before we start reading it.

[1] See introduction, p. xxvii.
[2] See further in the preamble to the synopsis of contents, p. 614.

Preface

I have also tried to be wary of at least one form of 'over-translating', that is the uncritical use of terms drawn from later political discourse that may be inappropriate for Greece in the fifth century BC. Words and phrases like 'political party', 'revolution', 'counter-revolution' and 'civil war' come to mind all too readily in the wish to make the text familiar to us and lend a superficial relevance to the passages in question. These terms have their uses, but it is very easy to import with them associations that are misleading. Even such apparently universal concepts as 'fairness', 'human rights', 'morality' and 'conscience' have a history of their own and rarely if ever have exact equivalents in the language of this period. In fact one more often finds a deeper sense of relevance precisely in reflecting on such differences than in drawing easy parallels, just as learning a foreign language can make one much more self-conscious about one's own.

In addition, there is a strong temptation to slip into paraphrase in decoding some of Thucydides' more complex sentences and ideas in order to provide a smoothness and immediate accessibility that is all too often lacking in the original. In the interests of authenticity I have tried where possible to give readers a sense of such difficulties. In the same spirit I have included an extended glossary to explain some of the key Greek terms (see pp. 628–38) and have often commented in footnotes to the text on difficult or contestable points of translation to try and draw the reader in to the problems and be continuously aware that this is indeed a translation, and therefore an interpretation of a kind. I offer a longer discussion of such issues in the introduction (especially in the section subtitled 'Translation and interpretation', pp. xxxiv–xxxviii).

I have otherwise included all the standard reference features associated with this series in terms of biographical sketches, chronologies, synopses and a section on bibliography and further reading. I have also added two appendixes, one listing the small deviations from the standard Greek text that I have adopted on the recommendations of various authorities, and the other presenting a series of translated extracts from other ancient authors to illustrate reactions to Thucydides in the ancient world itself.

I gratefully acknowledge the crucial advice and support of various people in completing this work. First, the series editors themselves, Quentin Skinner and Raymond Geuss, who were a great inspiration to me in my earlier professional career and whose invaluable attentions I have now experienced first-hand from the other side of the desk, so to speak. Richard Fisher, the person responsible for managing this series at the Press so successfully for most of its life, has been unfailing in his intelligent

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and good-natured support, as have my editor, Elizabeth Friend-Smith, and the other Press staff who have worked on this title.

I am grateful to the Jowett Copyright Trustees for a grant towards the cost of producing the maps, which seemed a necessary feature for this particular edition in the series. The maps have all been drawn especially for this volume by David Cox, using the most recent satellite images where relevant. Maps 1–4 are based on the maps he produced for the *Cambridge Ancient History*, volume V (second edition, 1992) and other maps are either drawn afresh or based on the sources acknowledged in the footnotes. I am grateful to him for his patience and ingenuity in finding practical solutions to the many problems involved.

At an early stage in the project I circulated sample versions to help me establish a voice (or as it turned out a range of voices) in which to tackle this demanding work and I was much helped then by the comments received from Pat and John Easterling, Tom Griffiths, Richard Winton, Quentin Skinner and Raymond Geuss. At later stages I have been further assisted in specific ways by Pat Easterling, Simon Hornblower, Paul Cartledge, William Shepherd, Terence Ball, Kinch Hoekstra, Anthony Bowen and Malcolm Schofield, all of whom have been very generous with their time and advice.

It has also been a pleasure to exchange experiences with another labourer in the same vineyard, Martin Hammond. It so turned out, as our author might have said, that there were by chance two translators of Thucydides working concurrently, one for Oxford University Press and one for Cambridge University Press, and living about five miles apart in rural Suffolk, quite unknown to each other for a long time. Martin won this particular University Book Race by a country mile since I was only on book VI when his own excellent translation was published, but it was very cheering and instructive for me to be able to discuss our common problems with him when we finally met.

By far my largest debt is to Geoffrey Hawthorn, who for many years taught a celebrated course on Thucydides in Cambridge, attended by just the kind of students I hope my edition might reach, and who by another happy chance has been writing his own, very original, work on Thucydides as a political thinker[1] while I have been doing this translation. He has read every word of my drafts (some of them several times!) and has made the most subtle and perceptive comments on the whole thing, both in detail

[1] *Thucydides on Politics: back to the present* (Cambridge University Press, 2014).

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and in general. He has also given me much needed encouragement and
stimulation in our innumerable conversations about Thucydides during
the long span of this work and has greatly enriched my sense of why
Thucydides remains an important author to read today.

Finally, I must thank Pauline Hire, my former colleague at Cambridge
University Press, who before this book was ever conceived met with me
over several summer and winter seasons in our two-person Greek reading
group to go through the whole text of Thucydides, translating to each
other in turn in various moods of perplexity, rumination and excitement.
I would never have had the enthusiasm for this project without that
experience.

30 November 2012

Introduction

Approaches

Thucydides is the author of one of the earliest and most influential works
in the history of political thought. His subject was the conflict we now
call the 'Peloponnesian War', the great war between Athens and Sparta
and their respective allies, which lasted from 431 to 404 BC (with a break
in the middle) and ended with the defeat of Athens and the dissolution
of the Athenian empire. Thucydides saw this as a momentous and his-
toric conflict, on an unprecedented scale, and he states his ambition of
producing a full and objective account that will be 'a possession for all
time'. His book does indeed contain a very detailed record of the events
of the war, which includes such famous set-pieces as Pericles' Funeral
Speech, the plague in Athens, the civil disorder in Corcyra, the debates
on imperialism over Mytilene and Melos, and the disastrous failure of
the Athenian expedition to Sicily. But through these narratives he also
presents a sustained and sophisticated study of political power itself – its
exercise and effects, its agents and victims, and the arguments through
which it is justified and deployed.

This was a new kind of history – rationalistic in its purpose, self-
conscious and explicit in its methodology – and Thucydides himself was
very concerned to distinguish it from the work of his predecessors. But
it would be anachronistic to classify his 'history' too narrowly. It was
conceived in a fifth-century BC milieu of still emergent literary forms
in drama, rhetoric, logic, physics and philosophy as well as in history
(all these names of 'subjects' are derived from Greek words), and at a
time when literacy was rare. Thucydides' work draws on most of these

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other genres (as well as on the earlier model of Homer's oral epic) and we
do well to approach it free from the particular assumptions we bring to
historical texts in our own culture.

His book enjoyed an immediate celebrity in the ancient world:
Xenophon and other historians sought to continue and complete it, Plato
was moved to respond to it, Demosthenes aspired to emulate its rhetoric,
while later literary critics such as Cicero, Quintilian and Dionysius treated
it as a paradigm of style to be variously admired or avoided. Today, it
remains a classic in Greek literature and historical writing; it is also, and
increasingly, read as a text in politics, international relations and political
theory, whose students will find in Thucydides striking contemporary
resonances and 'relevance' (but may need warnings about direct applica-
tions or easy analogies).

This edition therefore finds a natural place in the series Cambridge
Texts in the History of Political Thought, which takes a broad view of
what constitutes a text in political theory. It is part of the editorial purpose
of the series to demonstrate that it may be anachronistic to impose our
own categories on texts produced in different times and cultures, and
that we need to be sensitive to the different kinds of interest that may be
taken in them. In modern terms, Thucydides' work is usually hailed as
the first real 'history' in the western tradition (after due acknowledgement
to Herodotus as a predecessor), though interestingly Thucydides himself
didn't actually refer to it as a *historia* (as Herodotus did his work). But
it was evident from the start that it was intended to be read as a work
in political theory, if not *of* political theory. Hobbes makes the point
very nicely in the Preface to his own translation of Thucydides (the first
translation of Thucydides into English directly from the Greek and still
one of the best):

> For the principal and proper work of history being to instruct and
> enable men, by the knowledge of actions past, to bear themselves
> prudently in the present and providently towards the future: there
> is not extant any other (merely human) that doth more naturally
> and fully perform it, than this of my author. It is true, that there be
> many excellent and profitable histories written since: and in some of
> them there be inserted very wise discourses, both of manners and
> policy. But being discourses inserted, and not of the contexture of the
> narration, they indeed commend the knowledge of the writer, but not
> the history itself: the nature whereof is merely narrative. In others,
> there be subtle conjectures at the secret aims and inward cogitations

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of such as fall under their pen; which is also none of the least virtues
in a history, where conjecture is thoroughly grounded, not forced to
serve the purpose of the writer in adorning his style, or manifesting
his subtlety in conjecturing. But these conjectures cannot often be
certain, unless withal so evident, that the narration itself may be
sufficient to suggest the same also to the reader. But Thucydides is
one, who, though he never digress to read a lecture, moral or political,
upon his own text, nor enter into men's hearts further than the acts
themselves evidently guide him: is yet accounted the most politic
historiographer that ever writ. The reason whereof I take to be this.
He filleth his narrations with that choice of matter, and ordereth
them with that judgment, and with such perspicuity and efficacy
expresseth himself, that, as Plutarch saith, he maketh his auditor a
spectator.

Hobbes' comment suggests a further point. Thucydides achieves his
effects and purposes through a very detailed, 'thick' description of the war
he has taken as his subject. He does have occasional authorial asides and,
more especially, he does have the key participants explain in their speeches
their view of the overall situation and their motivation for their own
actions (indeed their speeches are very significant 'actions' in themselves);
but for the most part he lets the narrative speak for itself. That is, he tends
to address the general through the particular. And that is a characteristic
not only of history but also of epic and drama, which were the most familiar
literary forms of his day, and of the novel, which is one of the most familiar
forms of ours. Some commentators have even suggested that Thucydides'
'history' should be read as a kind of tragic drama, the tragedy of power.[1]
That would be to overemphasise just this one aspect and so pigeon-hole
the work in another limiting way. But it does make a point. Perhaps
we should think of these literary forms as a kind of continuum, which
might have at one end of it philosophy, dealing with the most general
considerations and expressed in a largely abstract way, and at the other end
literature and history, with their emphasis on particular lived experience.
Works of political theory, as we now usually understand it, would on
this model cluster close to philosophy at one end of the continuum;
but works at the other end, whether fiction or non-fiction, may still be
important *in* or *for* political theory through the issues they embody and the
reflections they prompt. Would not Sophocles' *Antigone*, Shakespeare's
Julius Caesar, Tolstoy's *War and Peace* and Gibbons' *Decline and Fall* all

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[1] For example, F. M. Cornford, *Thucydides Mythistoricus* (Edward Arnold, 1907).

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qualify, in their different ways, under this larger rubric? And does this not enrich as well as enlarge our conception of the subject? My suggestion at any rate is that we take seriously the form in which Thucydides chose to write and that we find his political thought in the densely textured detail of his work as well as in the more explicit generalising comments embedded within it.

If we read his work this way we can see that Thucydides does indeed contribute in important and distinctive ways to many of the central issues of political theory as we now conceive it. Among the themes explored in his history are:

- The nature of *political judgements* – the circumstances in which they are conceived, the kinds of calculations that underlie them, and the assessments we should make of them from different standpoints in the later course of events. For example, Thucydides gives us a fascinating picture in his first two books of the crucial judgements made by the key participants on each side as they contemplate the possibility of war and decide whether to commit to it. Pericles is a central character here, as revealed through his own speeches and decisions and the reactions to these of others, on both sides; it has indeed been suggested that the whole of the rest of the work is effectively a vindication of Pericles' initial 'foresight' (*pronoia*).[1] And in later books the expressed political judgements of other major figures like Cleon, Brasidas, Nicias, Hermocrates and Alcibiades are also partly constitutive of the broader action of the war as Thucydides portrays it and equally in need of complex interpretation.
- Closely connected are the different kinds of *persuasion and influence* available to such agents in advocating their chosen policies. These include the role of rhetoric and argument, which may take on a different kind of importance in a predominantly oral culture; the forms of public pressure and support that can be exerted through established institutions in the different kinds of polity; and the relative importance of individuals, social classes, ruling groups and international relationships in reaching decisions.
- We are thereby led to reflect on the characteristic decision-making *processes* in each case and on the comparative strengths and weaknesses

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[1] See J. H. Finley, *Thucydides*, pp. 203 and 308, an example discussed in the much subtler analysis by G. P. Hawthorn in 'Pericles' Unreason' in R. Bourke and R. Geuss (eds.), *Political Judgement* (Cambridge University Press, 2009), pp. 203–28.

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of the different political *constitutions*, especially in Athens and Sparta.
The principal characters offer some explicit thoughts on this: Cleon, for
example, roundly declares that a democracy is incapable of running an
empire (III 37); and the Corinthians criticise the Spartans for being so
constitutionally rigid and inward-looking as to be incapable of external
initiatives (I 68–71); while Thucydides himself compares and contrasts
the national characteristics of Syracuse, Sparta and Athens (VIII 96.5).

- There are dramatic illustrations too of what happens when such estab-
lished political procedures and conventions break down, as in the kinds
of *internal conflict* within states that Thucydides describes as *stasis*. We
are shown how one kind of breakdown can lead to or be mirrored in
another, most famously in the case of Corcyra at III 82–84, as the
political disintegration is matched by a social, psychological and even
linguistic disintegration. There is also a brilliant vignette of 'the rule of
terror' in Athens at VIII 66, which shows how insecurity can breed a
deadly combination of distrust and confusion.

- The speeches and debates provide many examples of the explicit *justifi-
cations* the different participants offer for their political choices, includ-
ing what we would think of as 'moral' justifications, which compare the
competing claims of self-interest and such other-regarding virtues as
justice, respect and compassion; or, more interestingly perhaps, which
represent these as conflicts between different forms of self-interest.
The dramatic debates over Mytilene (III 37–48) and Melos (V 85–113)
are an especially good source for these kinds of arguments, but such
conflicts are in fact pervasive throughout the text and serve to connect
it with the larger philosophical discussions going on in Greek society at
that time. They raise important questions too about how far the moral
and political concepts of this culture can be mapped on to those of our
own.

- More generally, we are given very rich material for reflection – though
in the form, I am suggesting, of specific historical illustration not formal
argument or general theory – on the confused but dynamic interplay
of *reasons, causes and motives* in the explanation of behaviour, both of
individuals and of states; and we are continually reminded of the extent
to which the actual outcomes are also the product of what Thucydides
portrays as the inexorable forces of 'chance and necessity'.

And on all these issues we have the further challenge of interpreting not
only what the agents in the action do and say but also how Thucydides

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himself may be assessing what they so reveal. It is dangerously easy to move between these two different levels of interpretation without realising it. Even Hobbes, whose warning remarks on interpretation I quoted admiringly above, cannot resist going on to say:

> For his opinion touching the government of the state, it is manifest that he least of all liked democracy. And on divers occasions he noteth the emulation and contention of the demagogues for reputation and glory of wit; with their crossing of each other's counsels, to the damage of the public; inconsistency of resolutions, caused by the diversity of ends and power of rhetoric in the orators; and the desperate actions undertaken upon the flattering advice of such as desired to attain, or to hold what they had attained, of authority and sway among the common people. Nor doth it appear that he magnifieth anywhere the authority of *the few*: among whom, he saith, everyone desired to be the chief; and they that are undervalued, bear it with less patience than in a democracy; whereupon sedition followeth, and dissolution of government. He praiseth the government of Athens, when it was mixed of *the few* and *the many*; but more he commendeth it, both when Peisistratus reigned (saving that it was a usurped power), and when in the beginning of this war it was democratical in name, but in effect monarchical under Pericles.[1]

In fact it is hard enough to say just what moral and political stance Pericles or Cleon or Alcibiades took, either as historical figures or as agents in Thucydides' history; but the question whether or to what extent Thucydides himself was a moralist is both a different and deeper one.

Context

Most of Thucydides' work is devoted to a close description of the Peloponnesian War, but he begins with an account of its prehistory and immediate causes. Book I is devoted to these preliminaries, though it does not follow one continuous chronological sequence. He first has a section on the early history of Greece (I 2–9), to explain how it evolved from a collection of separate and often quarrelling city-states to a point where the

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[1] The two Hobbes quotations come from his prefatory notes, 'To the Readers' and 'Of the Life and History of Thucydides'.

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Greeks were able to unite sufficiently[1] to resist two major invasions from
Persia (in 490 and 480/79). Sparta and Athens had by then emerged as
the principal powers in Greece: the first a formidable militaristic society
based in the Peloponnese in southern Greece, conservative in its instincts,
austere in its culture, and traditionally excelling in a form of land warfare
based on heavy infantry; the second a naval power based in Attica, with a
network of mercantile and colonial relationships throughout the Aegean
and Mediterranean, more outward-looking and enterprising, and more
democratic in its institutions.[2] Both were crucial to the Greek successes
against Persia, but their interests then diverged and eventually they came
into conflict with each other. Thucydides emphasises the importance of
this conflict – in its length, its scale and its sufferings – as compared
to all earlier wars (I 23) and goes on to describe the specific grievances
and disputes that precipitated it (I 23–88). He then returns to the earlier
history to explain what he regards as the deeper causes of the war in the
period of about fifty years after the end of the Persian Wars (I 89–118).
He identifies two key and related factors: first the growth of Athenian
power as their 'Delian League', originally founded in 478 to maintain and
finance the protection of Greece against Persia, steadily developed into
an empire which instead served Athens' own interests more directly; and
secondly the Spartan response to this, which was first one of apprehen-
sion, converted by stages into alarm and then aggression.

  That at any rate is the broad outline of Thucydides' account. Later
historians have minutely examined this version of events, as they have
his whole history, and have found much to challenge. The fact remains,
however, that Thucydides is himself the main source for most of what
we know about the period he covers, in particular the war itself, so
much criticism necessarily takes the form of discussions of the internal
consistency of his work and its claims.[3] And there is considerable scope for

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[1] But no more than sufficiently: in fact only about thirty states (out of some 1,000) joined
the Greek League against Persia, but these did include the key states of Athens, Sparta,
Corinth and Aegina.

[2] Thucydides puts some vivid (if self-interested) comparisons of the political character of
Athens and Sparta into the mouths both of a Corinthian delegation trying to urge the
Spartans into the war (I 69–71) and of Pericles giving his encomium on Athens in the
'Funeral Speech' (II 39). See also VIII 96.5.

[3] Archaeology and epigraphy provide a check at some points (for example through surviving
public inscriptions), but there are no other extended, contemporary literary sources (see
VIII 66.1n). On the inscriptional evidence, see Gomme I, pp. 30–5 and Hornblower I, p.
95 and II, pp. 93–107.

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this – not surprisingly, since his history is so long, complex and detailed and was itself composed over a period of some thirty years starting, as he tells us, at the very outbreak of war in 431. But without Thucydides we should know very little about this period at all and it may be worth reflecting, in counterfactual spirit, what view we would then have of fifth-century Greece as a whole or of Athens and Sparta.[1]

Indeed, we should know little about Thucydides himself, either. The few hard biographical facts we have derive from brief mentions in his own book: at II 48 he tells us he can accurately describe the symptoms of the plague that struck Athens (in 430) because he contracted it himself; at IV 104–7 he refers to himself (in the third person) as the general deputed to try to save Amphipolis from Brasidas' advance in 424/3 (he fails but does secure nearby Eion) – and we learn that his father's name is Olorus and that he has mining interests and political connections in Thrace; and then at V 26 in his 'second preface' he reports in a matter-of-fact way that he was exiled from Athens for twenty years after Amphipolis and so had the opportunity to observe events 'from both sides' and the leisure to reflect on them. And that is all. Everything else is inference and conjecture. Reasonable inferences are that he was born to an aristocratic Athenian family in about 460 (which allows him to be over thirty when he was made a general in 424/23), travelled widely during his exile (especially to the Peloponnese) and died back at Athens after returning there in 404 at the end of the war. The conjectures come mainly from the work of much later biographers such as Marcellinus[2] who needed a story to tell and are very unreliable witnesses, though some of the anecdotes they retail are certainly intriguing (for example, that Thucydides was murdered at the end of the war and that his daughter salvaged the book and put it together).

Thucydides therefore has only a very minor and rather inglorious role as an actual *agent* in his own work, a fact that might argue either way about his impartiality and objectivity. He can scarcely have exaggerated his role, but might he have misrepresented it? Speaking as an *author*, on the other hand, he does make some large claims for his originality and importance. He is very aware of his predecessors and he comments at I

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[1] Thucydides himself has a characteristic speculation about how the later reputation of cities depends on the physical evidence about them available to us (I 10).

[2] A shadowy figure, possibly seventh-century AD. This 'Life' seems in fact to be a composite work, binding together various other unreliable fragments of biography. For some excerpts see appendix 2, pp. 601–6.

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97 that he is writing about the earlier period between the Persian Wars and his own principal subject, the Peloponnesian War, partly to fill the gap they have left. He is thinking here of Hellanicus (whom he mentions by name[1]) and more particularly Herodotus (whom he doesn't, but who is the more important figure by far for us[2]).

Herodotus (*c*.485–425) was the author of *The Histories*, an expansive, very readable but not wholly reliable account of the peoples and places of the known ancient world, centred on and celebrating the victories of the Greeks in the wars against Persia. Herodotus called his book a *historia* ('enquiry'), and it begins as follows (rendered rather literally):

> This is a presentation of the enquiry of Herodotus of Halicarnassus, so that human events of the past do not become erased by time and that the great and wondrous achievements displayed by the Greeks and the barbarians, and especially their reasons for fighting each other, do not go unrecognised.

This is the first surviving work of 'history' we have in the west and it deserves that name. Herodotus was eager to preserve a record of what was by then already a fading memory of the Greek heroics against Persia, and to do so he travelled widely, interviewed many informants and compiled an elaborate account of his findings and speculations. He liked a good story, however, and was not always concerned to sift fact from fancy, or tradition from truth; and of course he dealt with many events for which there were no surviving witnesses. Thucydides by contrast was for the most part writing contemporary history and placed great stress on his own more rigorous and objective methods of research, which he sets out explicitly at I 20–22 and which are the basis of his claim to be writing a new kind of history, to be distinguished from the work of poets and chroniclers and also, by implication, from that of Herodotus.[3]

> From the evidence I have presented, however, one would not go wrong in supposing that events were very much as I have set them

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[1] Hellanicus was a fifth-century compiler of prose 'chronicles' and genealogies, of which only fragments now remain and our knowledge of all these predecessors of Thucydides except Herodotus is very limited.

[2] Herodotus is in fact enjoying a great vogue as a historian now, admired for his skills as a raconteur, his engaging curiosity about human social life (including sex, cultural practices and religion) and his willingness to identify his sources, even where he does not agree with them.

[3] At I 20.3 he pointedly mentions two 'mistakes' in previous histories, both of which are committed by Herodotus.

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out; and no one should prefer rather to believe the songs of the poets, who exaggerate things for artistic purposes, or the writings of the chroniclers, which are composed more to make good listening than to represent the truth, being impossible to check and having most of them won a place over time in the imaginary realm of fable. My findings, however, you can regard as derived from the clearest evidence available for material of this antiquity . . .

As to the events of the war themselves, however, I resolved not to rely in my writing on what I learned from chance sources or even on my own impressions, but both in the cases where I was present myself and in those where I depended on others I investigated every detail with the utmost concern for accuracy. This was a laborious process of research, because eyewitnesses at the various events reported the same things differently, depending on which side they favoured and on their powers of memory. Perhaps the absence of the element of fable in my work may make it seem less easy on the ear; but it will have served its purpose well enough if it is judged useful by those who want to have a clear view of what happened in the past and what – the human condition being what it is – can be expected to happen again some time in the future in similar or much the same ways. It is composed to be a possession for all time and not just a performance-piece for the moment.

There has been a huge amount of scholarly discussion about how far Thucydides himself actually observes these more demanding standards, but as a statement of intent this certainly signals a new kind of project.

Herodotus' *History* was probably 'published' (in the sense of being distributed in written form) between 430 and 425, but it is possible that Thucydides heard parts of it before then in the many public readings Herodotus is supposed to have given.[1] The only other prose models available to Thucydides at this time were a few works of philosophers, 'sophists'[2] and orators and some medical and cosmological treatises; but these were part of an intellectual milieu which will undoubtedly have influenced him and will have helped to create a responsive audience for

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[1] For some anecdotes, see appendix on ancient sources (extracts **28** and **32**).

[2] Itinerant intellectuals and teachers of a wide range of subjects, especially rhetoric and the art of speaking; the root of the word means no more than 'skilled', 'clever' or 'wise' and it may only later have acquired pejorative connotations after Aristophanes made fun of them (notably in *The Clouds*) and Plato attacked them (in various dialogues like the *Protagoras* and *Gorgias*). The word in fact only occurs once in Thucydides (at III 38.7, see Hornblower II, p. 427).

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work of a rationalising, humanistic bent as well as for works of argument and debate, though the latter also had their sources in the dramatised exchanges in epic, tragedy and comedy.[1] It was characteristic of this emerging 'enlightenment' to express the issues in terms of contrasts between such concepts as the human and the divine, convention and nature, appearance and reality, belief and knowledge, speech and action, or justice and a state of nature. There were slogans in the air such as 'man is the measure of all things' (Protagoras) and 'justice is simply the advantage of the stronger' (Thrasymachus), and these could be developed into new and disturbing lines of thought, as may be illustrated from just one longer quotation from an actual protagonist in Thucydides' history, Antiphon:[2]

> Justice, therefore, consists in not violating the customary laws of the city in which one is a citizen. So a person takes most advantage for himself from 'justice' if he respects the importance of the laws when witnesses are present, but follows nature in their absence. For the requirements of the laws are discretionary but the requirements of nature are necessary; and the requirements of the laws are by agreement and not natural, whereas the requirements of nature are natural and not by agreement. Thus, someone who violates the laws avoids shame and punishment if those who have shared in the agreement do not notice him, but not if they do. By contrast, if someone were to violate an innate law of nature (which is impossible) the harm he would suffer is no less if he is seen by no one, and no greater if all see him; for he is harmed not in reputation but in truth.

There are clear resonances of such ideas in some of the debates in Thucydides. But if he was neither wholly original nor alone in his interests, the one thing he did need to do was invent a new form of writing in which to express what was distinctive about his project in order to make it, as he hoped, 'a possession for all time'.

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[1] See the table of dates (pp. xli–xliv) for some of the authors active at around 430. For extracts from the relevant writings see M. Gagarin and P. Woodruff (eds.), *Early Greek Political Thought* in this series, in particular the Hippocratic corpus, Protagoras, Gorgias, Critias, Thrasymachus, Democritus and Antiphon.

[2] DK 87B fr. 44a, lines 6–33. See Thucydides VIII 68 for a character sketch. It is possible, however, that the orator/politician and the sophist of this name were different people.

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Structure and character of the work

To understand the nature of Thucydides' achievement we may need to unthink several of our modern assumptions about composition, texts, books, readers and publication. Fifth-century Greece was still a largely oral culture, and the great works of literature were more often performed and recited than read; indeed the most valued works in their whole cultural heritage – those of Homer– had actually been *composed* orally for the most part, incredible though that may now seem. The capacities of memory and attention this assumes would have been correspondingly very different from ours.

Thucydides himself is quite likely to have dictated his work to one or more amanuenses, a considerable feat in itself, on his part and theirs; and parts of it might well have been read out to audiences – in particular, one imagines, the speeches and the more vivid narrative sections. But it was clearly a crucial fact for him, and part of the originality he claimed, that he *wrote it down*[1] and so made a permanent record that could be studied, discussed and returned to as a trusted reference. Yet the physical characteristics of this 'publication' would seem quite primitive and rebarbative to us, and a considerable constraint on easy reading. The work would probably be inscribed on a series of papyrus rolls and it would be read by holding it in one hand and scrolling across (not down) with the other. There would be about one book of Thucydides per roll, but the 'text' itself would have none of the divisions into books, chapters and sections that we now rely on for ease of reading and reference; these were all added by scholarly editors in the Hellenistic period well over one hundred years later, and we must be careful not to infer his authorial intentions about the structure of the work from such divisions.[2] Even the fine articulations of the text into punctuated sentences and words usually represent later editorial interventions[3]: the original text might well have been

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[1] He uses the verb *sungraphein* with some emphasis in the very first sentence of the book and repeatedly thereafter.

[2] Some early editions in the ancient world divided the work into thirteen 'books' (Marcellinus 58), and our 'chapters' were only included from the late seventeenth century.

[3] For some qualifications, see R. Pfeiffer, *History of Classical Scholarship* I (Oxford University Press, 1968), pp. 178–81.

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and it is certain that both contemporary and later copyists would have introduced errors.

Nor do we know what title if any Thucydides gave his work. The traditional title is *The Peloponnesian War*, but that is of course rather one-sided.[1] I have therefore adopted a title suggested by the opening sentence of the work, *The War of the Peloponnesians and the Athenians*, to avoid projecting a particular interpretation on to it even before one starts reading the text itself. For similar reasons I have also given precedence in the arrangement of the work and the typography of the headings to Thucydides' own divisions by years and campaigning seasons, as against the conventional division of the work into books.[2]

Thucydides tells us that he began the work at the outset of the war; and we can infer from various internal references that he was still writing it in 404 and had already revised parts of it. The narrative breaks off in mid-sentence in the year 411 and was evidently unfinished when he died. Only very short extracts of the text now survive in papyrus fragments (all of them from later copies) or in quotations from other ancient authors, and our modern texts derive from just seven medieval manuscripts (which themselves vary a good deal).

For all these reasons, therefore, we should be wary of the idea of one original master-text, whose authority could be definitely established and which Thucydides would have regarded as his final word. What we have is a long, partially revised and incomplete text, which had a history of its own both in Thucydides' lifetime and thereafter. This is a situation, not uncommon in classical scholarship, that offers scope for many possible reconstructions and then for an infinity of interpretations of those reconstructions; it therefore also argues for a certain open-mindedness and tolerance of doubt.

The text as we have it, though, is a wonderfully rich, original and profound meditation on political power and human nature. It is internally complex, not just in the sense that there are interrelationships between its many parts, but also in containing within it a range of different 'voices' and kinds of text: long narrative accounts of campaigns; vivid reportage of key events such as the great plague and the dramatic battle scenes; speeches by participants that are both part of the action and commentaries upon it; some dialogue and debate; texts of letters and of treaties; occasional

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[1] See V 28.2n, 31.3 and 31.5, and my note on the quotation from Diodorus Siculus in appendix 2, p. 594.
[2] See further the preamble to the synopsis of contents (p. 614).

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authorial asides from Thucydides in his own person; longer political analyses, such as the famous account of civil conflict at Corcyra; and a few biographical sketches and 'obituaries'. The most important actors have their characters quite fully developed and revealed and there are many brilliant vignettes of both major and minor figures in the history.[1] Thucydides does have a very distinctive and recognisable overall style, but there are more variations within this than have always been recognised.

The speeches deserve separate mention since they are rightly regarded as central to the whole work and are themselves quite varied. There is first the formal contrast between those in direct and those in indirect speech (though this may not correspond to the difference we would nowadays expect between verbatim reporting and interpreted summary[2]). Then there are important contextual differences between, for example, free-standing speeches like Pericles' famous Funeral Speech (II 35–46); dialogues (the Melos exchange at V 85–111); decision-making debates at conferences of allies (I 67–77), at an Athenian assembly (III 37–49, VI 9–23), or at a war tribunal (III 53–68); proclamations of heralds (II 2, IV 97–99); a speech delivered via a letter (VII 11–15); battle-field addresses (IV 95 and 126, VI 68, VII 61–68); conversational exchanges (VIII 92.9–11) and grumblings in the ranks (VIII 78). These could be subdivided further by type of speaker (and single or joint), by length, by audience, and so on.[3] And all these differences may have implications for their literary and dramatic effect within the history as well as for their authenticity. At I 22 Thucydides makes one general remark about his practice in composing these speeches, which was intended to clarify this:

> As to what was said in speeches by the various parties either before they went to war or during the actual conflict, it was difficult for me to recall the precise details in the case of those I heard myself, just as it was for those who reported back to me on cases elsewhere. What I have set down is how I think each of them would have expressed what was most appropriate in the particular circumstances, while staying as close as possible to the overall intention of what was actually said.

It is in fact very hard to judge when he might be reporting 'what was actually said' and when inventing 'what was most appropriate', but in the spirit of my cautious remarks above we should perhaps not be too zealous

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[1] See the biographical notes (pp. xlv–liii) for references.
[2] See footnotes on I 22, VII 69.2 and VIII 27.1.
[3] See further the synopsis of speeches (pp. 623–7).

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in seeking to make these precepts wholly consistent with each other or
with his actual practice as it developed. This was an unusually long and
ambitious work, produced over a great length of time, about an ongoing
conflict whose final outcome was uncertain, and in circumstances – both
personal and political – that were themselves changing as he wrote. It
is surely unthinkable that he would not have evolved his principles and
practices and changed his mind to some degree in the course of all this.

Style and language

Thucydides has been famous since antiquity for his extraordinary style.
Dionysius of Halicarnassus memorably remarked, 'the number of people
who can understand the whole of Thucydides can be easily counted, and
there are parts of it not even these can manage without a grammatical
commentary', and most translators would be happy to adopt that as their
epigraph. The text is often articulated in long structures that, unlike
the periodic prose of Demosthenes, Cicero and Gibbon, do not have a
progressive forward movement, to be resolved and completed in their final
cadences. Rather, a whole series of clauses shuffle forward together, each
deliberately fashioned in a different grammatical construction to create
a much more open texture. Within these there are many distortions of
the natural word order to generate particular emphases and effects; and
there are other innovations in (or liberties with) syntax and vocabulary.
The meaning is sometimes highly compressed and, as with poetry, resists
decompression.

Thucydides wrote at an early stage in the development of Greek prose
and was undoubtedly trying to forge an original style for what he rightly
regarded as a new form of enquiry. At its best his prose is a very powerful
and vivid vehicle for this,[1] but often he seems to be straining too hard
for his effects with artificial contrasts, asymmetries and abstractions. In
addition, there are the purely practical uncertainties of knowing which
parts of the text Thucydides himself regarded as finished and which were
only drafts. In the case of some obscure passages, therefore, one can never
be quite sure whether one is dealing with clumsy expression, unrevised

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[1] Macaulay commented on the retreat from Syracuse in book VII, 'Is it or is it not the finest
thing you ever read in your life?' and he described book VII as a whole as the best prose
composition he had ever read: 'It is the *ne plus ultra* of human art.' Letter to Thomas
Flower Ellis, 25 August 1835, in *The Letters of Thomas Babington Macaulay*, ed. T. Pinney
(Cambridge University Press, 1976), vol. 3, p. 154.

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draft, unreliable textual transmission, overwrought stylistic innovation or deliberate ambiguity. The translator has to make choices and the reader in English should be made aware of these where possible.

It is therefore worth looking in advance at a few examples of his distinctive stylistic features:[1]

1. Vocabulary. Thucydides liked to experiment and innovate, quite often using terms that are very rare or that he even seems to have invented himself, though since they are usually compound words made up of familiar elements it is easy to see what they mean in context.[2] More interestingly, he sometimes uses poetic terms derived from Homer or from tragedy for special effects (IV 97.3, V 29.3, VII 74.1 and 80.3) or possibly to assist in characterisation (IV 85.1, 108.3); and he very often displays a preference for using abstract nouns as subjects in contexts where we might have expected human subjects, which makes one wonder about the notions of agency and explanation implied.

One must remember, of course, that Thucydides was not the only one experimenting at this time, and that a large proportion of ancient literature, which might have furnished us with more precedents, is now lost to us.[3] And the meanings even of familiar words may have been more fluid at this time, when there were no dictionaries or sources of linguistic authority to appeal to or to fix them. It is easy to over-interpret Thucydides in places by assuming that he was entirely consistent in making subtle distinctions between different words with similar meanings.[4]

2. Word order. Thucydides' manipulations of word order are possible in Greek because, unlike English, it is a highly inflected language in which the word forms (in particular the word endings) tell you what grammatical part they play in the sentence, so that for example the object of the verb can be put before its subject and still be recognised as an object. We do this in English to some degree ('bananas I cannot stand!'), but Thucydides takes it a great deal further, with adjectives or prepositions separated from their nouns and main verbs postponed for many clauses. A happy

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[1] There are very good detailed treatments of Thucydides' style in the introductions to K. J. Dover (ed.), *Thucydides VII* and J. S. Rusten (ed.), *Thucydides II*. See also J. D. Denniston, *Greek Prose Style*, and the various ancient sources quoted in appendix 2.

[2] For example: IV 80.1 'to cause distress besides and against', IV 85.1 'out-sending', IV 112.2 'up-hauling'. See also VI 99.2n.

[3] For example, we have only 7 of the 81 plays Aeschylus is supposed to have written, 7 out of 123 in the case of Sophocles, 19 out of 92 for Euripides, 11 out of 44 for Aristophanes and just 1 complete play out of 105 for Menander.

[4] See, for example, my notes on *aitia/prophasis* at I 23.4 and on *deos/phobos* at I 33.3.