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978-1-107-01920-1 - Thucydides and the Modern World: Reception, Reinterpretation and Influence from the Renaissance to the Present

Edited by Katherine Harloe and Neville Morley

Excerpt

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CHAPTER I

*Introduction: the modern reception of Thucydides**Katherine Harloe and Neville Morley*

Reinhart Koselleck opens his classic discussion of *historia magistra vitae* and its fate in the modern era with an anecdote recounted by Friedrich von Raumer, who was secretary to the Prussian Chancellor in 1811:

During counsel in Charlottenburg, Oelssen [Section Head in the Ministry of Finance] animatedly defended the preparation of a quantity of paper money so that debts could be paid. All argument to the contrary failing, I said with immense audacity (knowing my man): ‘But Privy Councillor, do you not remember that Thucydides tells of the evils that followed from the circulation of too much paper money in Athens?’ ‘This experience,’ he concurred, ‘is certainly of great importance’ – and in this way he allowed himself to be persuaded in order that he might retain the appearance of learning.¹

The crucial point, as anyone familiar with the economic structures of classical antiquity would know, is that Thucydides could have said no such thing, because paper money was unknown to the Athenians. For Koselleck, this episode encapsulates a particular moment in the development of the traditional conception of history as a source of lessons and *exempla* for the present, emphasising its power, its capacity for manipulation and its impending obsolescence: ‘Raumer placed his colleagues in a seemingly continuous sphere of experience, but one that he himself treated with irony. The scene demonstrates the continuing role of history as the teacher of life, while also demonstrating how questionable this role had become.’² Raumer’s trick depended not only on Oelssen’s unquestioning belief in the existence of fundamental continuities between past and present, so that Athenian history could be assumed to offer valid lessons for Prussian policy, but also on his acceptance of the authority of the supposed source for these lessons. The name of Thucydides has the power to persuade, even or especially to persuade those with little or no direct knowledge of his work,

¹ Koselleck 2004: 26. ² Ibid.: 27.

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and even when that name is invoked to support positions with no obvious connection to anything that Thucydides himself ever wrote.

As Koselleck's article shows, the traditional basis for taking ancient writers as authorities and treating the events they described as exemplary was already being thoroughly undermined by the date of this discussion of fiscal policy. From the second half of the eighteenth century, the past was increasingly perceived in terms of its difference from the present, in economic, political, social, cultural and spiritual terms. The more that the present was conceived in terms of 'modernity', through implicit or explicit contrast with antiquity, the less relevant the past, even or especially the classical past, appeared to be to present concerns. In Koselleck's terminology, there was an ever-widening gap between the 'space of experience' and the 'horizon of expectation' – even one's own experiences were felt to be of decreasing use as a guide to decisions about future actions, let alone the experience extracted from accounts of the more distant past. The idea of history as *magistra vitae*, the teacher of life, thus rapidly came to seem entirely implausible and unhelpful. The nature of contemporary society and its likely future development needed to be understood through the study of present conditions, applying the methodology of the natural sciences to the study of society and testing ideas against present reality rather than relying on ancient examples and authorities. This did not imply that the past was never of any interest for such analysis – although some theorists of modernity, especially in the economic field, did take that view – but it was approached from a new perspective, understood in terms of a more or less fundamental contrast with the present. The study of classical antiquity, and to a lesser extent the medieval period, served as a means of defining and understanding the nature of modernity through the study of difference and change: deploying knowledge of ancient Greece and Rome in order to throw the distinctive features of the modern world into sharp relief (whether for purposes of celebration or critique), or incorporating it into grander schemes of world-historical development within which modernity could be situated and interpreted.³ Historical sources described a world that was different from the present; the events they recounted might be informative and illuminating, but they could scarcely be exemplary.

Raumer's anecdote captures perfectly the period of transition at the birth of modernity, when some recognised the existence of this gulf between past and present and were able to use their superior understanding to manipulate others who still believed in the relevance of classical knowledge.

³ See generally Morley 2008.

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Johannes Süssmann's chapter in this volume fleshes out the story of this intellectual transformation, linking it in particular to the impact of the French Revolution and its aftermath on ideas of history and its usefulness. However, it is interesting, and slightly surprising, that the ancient historian thus offered by Koselleck as the emblem of *historia magistra vitae* should have been Thucydides. Certainly he fits the template of an ancient authority; indeed, as the chapters in this collection show, he has been treated as an authority of the highest standing by a remarkable range of thinkers, in support of a bewildering number of different positions. However, he had never been an especially important figure in the exemplary tradition; other ancient historians were far more widely read and cited in the centuries after the Renaissance. Further, when Thucydides was considered, he was not necessarily treated as a source of exemplary events or individuals; he was just as frequently read as a perceptive analyst of politics and society, revealing the underlying principles that governed relations between people and between states. Livy, Polybius or Plutarch would, it appears, have been far more obvious candidates to represent the essence of *historia magistra vitae* – and, indeed, one might wonder whether what Raumer offered Oelssen was not exemplary history in the strong sense, an account of an event from which one drew lessons about correct action, but rather the (alleged) opinion of an authoritative analyst of the workings of society. Certainly this way of reading Thucydides and of valuing his contribution to human knowledge seems to have been the main reason why his work did not suffer the catastrophic decline in interest over the course of the nineteenth century that one might have expected, from Koselleck's account, as a result of the collapse of *historia magistra vitae*; on the contrary, his influence became significantly stronger and more pervasive, in several different fields of intellectual enquiry.

The tentative nature of many of these statements about how Thucydides was read reflects the state of the subject: the history of the modern reception of Thucydides and his work has as yet received only brief and partial treatment, in an insightful but inevitably schematic encyclopedia article by Stefan Meineke and in a small number of articles on specific themes by scholars like Marianne Pade, Simon Hornblower and Francisco Murari Pires.⁴ Detailed studies within the field of classics, looking at the

⁴ Meineke 2003; Pade 1985, 2003, 2006; Hornblower 2011; Murari Pires 2006, 2007; see also several of the chapters in Rusten 2009, and relevant entries in the bibliography of that work. There has also been a colloquium on the subject in Toulouse in 2008, organised by Pascal Payen, Valérie Fromentin and Sophie Gotteland; the proceedings have been published in Fromentin *et al.* 2010, and

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narrative and rhetorical structures of Thucydides' work, its relation to contemporary science and its place in the development of classical historiography, are entirely unknown to those working on relevant material in other disciplines; conversely, debates on the place of Thucydides' ideas in the development of international relations, the one area where there has been extensive debate on his continuing influence, are largely unknown to classicists, concentrate on a single theme and generally abstract Thucydides from any historical context.⁵ The aim of the 2007 workshops in Bristol, Oxford and Cambridge, where the majority of the contributions to this volume were first delivered, was not only to develop the study of the reception of Thucydides by different authors and in different disciplines and contexts, but also to identify more general issues and lines of enquiry for understanding the whole phenomenon of *Thucydidism* in the modern world. Our aim in this introductory chapter is to provide some general context for the other chapters by summarising the current state of knowledge of Thucydides' reception since the Renaissance, but also to explore some more general questions about the particular dynamics of the reading and reinterpretation of Thucydides' work, and how this subject should be studied in future.

LANDMARKS IN THE POST-RENAISSANCE RECEPTION OF THUCYDIDES

Alongside Plato and Demosthenes, Thucydides formed one of the most important prose authors on the Byzantine school curriculum.⁶ It is no surprise, therefore, to find that there was considerable interest in him amongst early Renaissance humanists. His text is connected with the names of at least two prominent Italian teachers of the first half of the fifteenth century: Francesco Filelfo (1398–1481), who had studied in Constantinople for some seven years in the 1420s, lectured on Thucydides during the first year of his appointment in Florence (1429–33), while an eyewitness account and a surviving manuscript attest to *The Peloponnesian War* being read in the Mantuan school of Vittorino da Feltre in the 1430s.⁷ Similar testimony survives for the later decades of the *quattrocento*: John Argyropoulos, who was resident in Rome for much of the 1470s and 1480s, is said to have

videos of some papers can be viewed at www.canal-u.fr/themes/lettres_arts_langues_et_civilisations/lettres_classiques_langue_et_litterature_francaise/lettres_classiques (accessed 3 November 2010).

⁵ Cf. Welch 2003, calling for a moratorium on IR theorists reading Thucydides, and Ruback in press.

⁶ Wilson 1983: 19–27. ⁷ Wilson 1992: 35–6, 49.

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lectured on Thucydides in the Vatican, and Janus Lascaris chose him (along with Sophocles) as the subject of his teaching during his second year (1493) in the Florentine chair of Greek.⁸

The desirability of a translation was clearly felt from very early on. Nigel Wilson reports that Roberto de' Rossi, who had learned Greek from Manuel Chrysoloras in the 1390s, conceded its urgency and announced his intention to provide one at the beginning of the 1400s.⁹ Leonardo Bruni resisted a similar request to produce a translation: 'Do you not realise how many sleepless nights would be needed to produce such a work?'¹⁰ But non-Greek speakers (the majority at this, as at every date) had to wait until Lorenzo Valla's translation of 1452 for a Latin rendering. Humanists of the early *quattrocento* continued to absorb their Greek history from Plutarch and the orators, not Thucydides and Herodotus. Valla's translation, which was commissioned by Pope Nicholas V as part of his efforts to produce a complete library of ancient learning, forms a major landmark in the western European reception of Thucydides.¹¹ It is important both as a historical achievement in itself and because, working from a manuscript that is now lost, Valla preserved a number of important readings that have been adopted by modern editors.¹² Another important moment came at the end of the century, with Aldus Manutius' printing of the full Greek text in 1502. Vernacular translations followed, often using Valla's Latin rather than the Greek text as their basis, as Claude de Seyssel's 1527 French version did; meanwhile, the first appearance of Thucydides in English, Thomas Nicolls' *The hystory writtome by Thucidides the Athenyan of the warre, whiche was betwene the Peloponesians and the Athenyans* in 1550, was taken from neither Latin nor Greek but from Seyssel's French.¹³ The first complete translation of Thucydides into a modern language that was based substantially on the Greek was Thomas Hobbes's work of 1629; another landmark in the modern reception of Thucydides, for the quality of the translation (still regarded by many as unsurpassed), for the influence of Thucydides on his translator's political philosophy, and for the influence of Hobbes's interpretation on subsequent readings of Thucydides' work.

Valla's and Aldus' efforts undoubtedly allowed for a wider dissemination of Thucydides' work and ideas than had previously been the case. The evidence overall would nevertheless suggest that *The Peloponnesian War*

⁸ Ibid.: 84, 88, 98. See too Hoekstra's discussion of Niccoli and Bruni in this volume.

⁹ Ibid.: 13–14; see too Manetti 1951: 52–5. ¹⁰ See Hoekstra in this volume.

¹¹ See generally Pade 1985; Klee 1990. ¹² Wilson 1992: 71–2.

¹³ Thucydides 1527, 1550. Pade 2003 offers an overview of translations and commentaries.

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did not rapidly approach the self-evidently important status it was to enjoy from the nineteenth century onwards. Peter Burke's quantitative analysis of the popularity of ancient historians in the period 1450–1700 places *The Peloponnesian War* only fifteenth in a list of twenty works ranked according to the appearance of editions and translations during the sixteenth century, slipping to seventeenth place for the next hundred years.¹⁴ This is well behind not only Sallust, Livy and Tacitus, but also Curtius, Florus, Josephus, Plutarch and Xenophon, and marginally behind Herodotus. While it is generally true that Latin authors were read more widely than Greek ones during these centuries, the constant presence of Plutarch in and around the top ten shows that this is not a sufficient explanation. The figures cannot be taken completely at face value; as Burke notes, there is an obvious risk of bias if an author's reception was shaped by a single dominant edition. This certainly happened in the case of Casaubon's 1609 edition of Polybius; the fact that this was so widely distributed, and faced so little competition, helps to explain why that historian ranked below Thucydides and indeed below Eutropius in Burke's analysis despite his acknowledged importance as a source of information about Roman politics and imperialism. It is known that 1,225 copies of one French translation of Thucydides were printed in 1527, significantly more than the typical edition even of a Latin author, which might suggest that his ranking is similarly misleading.¹⁵ On the other hand, the importance of Polybius as a point of reference in histories and political treatises from the late sixteenth century onwards is unmistakable, even if he remained to some extent a 'historian's historian', clearly showing that his lowly position in terms of the number of editions and translations misrepresents his importance. There was no dominant single edition for Thucydides comparable to Casaubon's Polybius, and the overall impression is that references to him in other works are relatively scarce.

Reasons for this relative neglect are not hard to surmise. The basic linguistic challenges presented by Thucydides' text, complained about by translators such as Valla and Seyssel, were surely in part to blame. Such writers seized upon those passages in ancient authorities that confirmed their complaints, with both Valla and Seyssel citing Cicero's observation that 'those famous speeches contain so many dark and cryptic passages that they can scarcely be understood' ('Ipsae illae contiones ita multas habent obscuras abditasque sententias vix ut intellegantur', *Orat.* ix.30–1), and commenting on the detailed stylistic criticisms levelled at Thucydides by

¹⁴ Burke 1966, using the data provided in his table 2.¹⁵ *Ibid.*: 136; 143–5 on Polybius.

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Dionysius of Halicarnassus.¹⁶ Further factors militated against the use of Thucydides as an author for instruction in schools and universities. The predominant early modern view of the purpose of studying the classical historians was twofold: their texts were held to contain valuable lessons in practical conduct, but also to furnish models of appropriate rhetorical style. The wealth of moral and prudential lessons to be extracted from Thucydides' text was never in doubt (indeed, the much-quoted dictum of Dionysius of Halicarnassus that history is 'philosophy teaching by examples' has a strong Thucydidean pedigree). Nevertheless, from antiquity onwards there existed an equally strong tradition of criticism of Thucydides' style as uneven, compressed to the point of obscurity, and harsh and artificial in its over-addiction to Gorgianic figures. These difficulties may have contributed to a view of him as an unsuitable author for school instruction in Greek, although some school editions (mainly epitomes of the speeches) survive from the sixteenth century.¹⁷ Erasmus may serve as an example of the doubts of educators: Thucydides is mentioned just twice in his *De duplici copia verborum ac rerum*, as an example of *hypotyposis* (vivid description), named last in a list of ancient authors who offer accounts of plagues, and of *dialogismos* (characterisation through direct speech), as one of the historians who includes speeches in his work.¹⁸ In *De ratione studii*, Erasmus' immensely influential prescriptions for the grammar school curriculum, it is Lucian, Demosthenes and Herodotus who are the recommended Greek prose authors, and Thucydides is not mentioned at all.

The case of Thucydides therefore serves as a warning of the need to distinguish between different constituencies of readers in the early modern period. Growing interest within sections of the intellectual and scholarly elite did not necessarily translate into a demand for the widely used school editions that were bread and butter to many printers. More importantly, unlike most other ancient historians, Thucydides' work was rarely read solely as a narrative account of past events or a source of *exempla*. So long as the function of history was held to be 'philosophy teaching by examples', authors such as Polybius and Plutarch, whose philosophical lessons were easier to deduce and whose language did not present such formidable

¹⁶ Other less-than-wholly enthusiastic comments could be found in the *Brutus* (29–31, 287–8), a dialogue in some vogue following its discovery, in a single manuscript, in 1422. See Reynolds 1953: 471–2.

¹⁷ See e.g. Stephanus 1571 – which, interestingly, given the later reception of Thucydides, includes all the speeches *except* for the Melian dialogue and one other. Pade 2003: 119, 171–4.

¹⁸ Erasmus 1978: 580, 586.

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problems, continued to hold the field. Thomas Hobbes's 'most politick historiographer that ever writ' was treated more as a philosopher and analyst of society, as someone who not only recorded events but sought to understand them and hence to understand human behaviour more generally.¹⁹ Hobbes himself, in the introduction to his translation, implied that this reputation might appear surprising, given the absence either of explicit commentary or of overt politicking in the text, and concluded that the answer lay in the understanding and judgement that determined Thucydides' selection and presentation of material and so made his reader into a true spectator of events. As Kinch Hoekstra shows in his chapter, early modern theorists of politics and the relations between states were interested in Thucydides' ideas on the subject, and had no difficulty in reading his account of the Peloponnesian War as embodying an interpretation of political behaviour rather than simply narrating what happened. The advice of the Spanish ambassador to Queen Mary in 1554, that she should read his gift of a French translation of Thucydides to see what counsel he offers on how to deal with rebels, might, perhaps, be assimilated to the tradition of exemplary history, though the emphasis is on Thucydides' guidance on political behaviour (probably with reference to the Mytilene debate) rather than on the events he describes.²⁰ For Gentili, Grotius, Bacon and other political thinkers, however, and still more Hobbes, it was Thucydides' ideas about the causes of war and the ethics of pre-emptive assault, embedded in his narrative but separable from it, that were of greatest interest. It is certainly true that, compared with nineteenth-century commentators, they had less interest in the differences between past and present societies – but that was not because they considered or assumed those societies to be identical, but because they believed themselves (and Thucydides) to have identified consistent, timeless principles in the behaviour of people and states. Thucydides' analysis was of interest not because there were no differences between fifth-century Greece and sixteenth-century Europe, but because he was studying the same things that they were, in a similar manner, simply in a different context.

This is also the main reason why Thucydides did not suffer the catastrophic decline in interest that one might have expected, from Koselleck's account, as a result of the collapse of *historia magistra vitae* at the beginning of the nineteenth century; on the contrary, his influence became significantly stronger and more pervasive, in several different fields of enquiry, from the latter half of the eighteenth. Not only were new editions of

¹⁹ Hobbes 1629: vii. ²⁰ Hoekstra in this volume.

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Thucydides produced (16 appeared in the course of the century, 11 of these in the period 1750–99), but his name began to recur in various areas of political and cultural discourse. Several of the contributions to this volume examine aspects of this shift, which was nothing less than the transformation of Thucydides into the complex character he presents today. Within the universities, attention to Thucydides increased as the study of history began to emerge from the shadow of rhetoric and establish itself as an autonomous discipline. Here, as Süßmann's and Morley's contrasting discussions explore, Thucydides' image as a historian changed as his stock rose among writers who sought models not for the life of public affairs but for the study and writing of history itself. Especially in Germany, he was read increasingly not only as an unimpeachable source for the history of classical Greece but as the founder of critical historiography (in contrast to the credulity of Herodotus) and even, according to some nineteenth-century writers, the inventor of 'history as science'.²¹ Süßmann notes that Schlegel rejected Thucydides as embodying (like other classical historians) the idea that history was art, not science or philosophy, but this was a minority view. In most cases, Thucydides' claims about the trustworthiness and utility of his own historiographical practices were understood as substantive methodological precepts; both those statements and his actual practice, not least his style and disposition, were identified as essentially modern, anticipating contemporary historiography or even, in the view of writers such as Wilhelm Roscher, indicating the direction in which contemporary historiography still needed to develop.²² The intimate association between Thucydides and Leopold von Ranke – who wrote his doctoral dissertation on Thucydides, adapted the famous 'as it really was' ('wie es eigentlich gewesen') phrase from him and regularly cited him as an inspiration, and was in turn frequently compared to Thucydides by his admirers – put the Greek historian at the heart of the German historical revolution of the nineteenth century. For good and ill; the twentieth-century reaction against the positivism and narrow political focus of Ranke's followers led to a reaction against a Thucydides conceived in similar terms, and in more recent discussions of the philosophy and practice of history he appears more as a significant absence than an influential presence. Nevertheless, there are echoes both of Thucydides' status as a figure of historiographical authority and of his reputation as a proto-Rankean in Marshall Sahlins' decision to develop his cultural and anthropological approach to history

²¹ Murari Pires 2006; Muhlack 2011.²² See Morley in this volume.

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through a critical rereading and rewriting of the *History of the Peloponnesian War* – and to offer this as *Apologies to Thucydides*.²³

Within politics and political theory, meanwhile, Thucydides' place in contemporary discussions was cemented by two developments. First, as Urbinati and Potter discuss in their chapters, the French and American revolutions and nineteenth-century movements towards democracy in other countries gave a new impetus to attempts to understand ancient political forms. Understanding Thucydides' master-narrative of the rise and fall of Athenian democracy, a political and cultural system which was now increasingly seen as a positive model rather than an awful warning, became a matter of urgent contemporary relevance, and often a foil for the ideological debates of the day. Thucydides' own views on democracy in general and his home city in particular can be construed equally well as ambivalent or obscure; in contrast to Plato, say, his authority could therefore be co-opted to support a variety of positions, both pro- and anti-democratic. Thucydides' work might be presented either as an unimpeachable, utterly objective and apolitical record of events that eschewed all commentary on them (George Grote's preferred approach to employing him in the service of democracy) or as an incisive analysis of political behaviour, if not a devastating critique of the flaws of democracy or of society in general. Secondly, the influence of Hobbes and his explicit debt to Thucydides enshrined the latter as the founding father of a distinctive tradition of thought on relations between states and the nature of the world order. As the chapters by Forde and Lebow show, in whatever manner 'realism' has been understood as a political principle or theoretical standpoint, Thucydides is invariably cited as a realist – if not, along with Machiavelli and Hobbes, as *the* realist (whether or not qualified as a 'classical' realist in contrast to modern varieties).²⁴ The confrontation of the two great power blocs of Athens and Sparta, marked by radically different ways of life, spoke to the world of the Cold War – but the transformation of that world into a less stable, multipolar one then stimulated a return to Thucydides rather than the reverse, as Lebow discusses in his chapter. The development in recent decades of neoconservative ideas in opposition to well-established realist theories of international relations did not involve any rejection of Thucydides but simply a limited reinterpretation, focusing on what his work suggests, or can be made to suggest, of the potential for imperial power to succeed in dominating the world. Irving Kristol, the godfather of the neocons, claimed Thucydides' *Peloponnesian War* as the favourite

²³ Sahlin 2005.²⁴ See also Lebow 2003.