

Cambridge University Press  
978-1-107-03916-2 - Thucydides on Politics: Back to the Present  
Geoffrey Hawthorn  
Frontmatter  
[More information](#)

---

## Thucydides on Politics

Thucydides famously declared his work to be ‘a possession for all time’, and so it has proved to be, as each age and generation has seen new things to admire in it and take from it. In the last hundred years, Thucydides has been interpreted and invoked in support of many different positions in politics, political theory and international relations. Geoffrey Hawthorn offers a new and highly original reading, one that sees him as neither simply an ancestor nor a colleague but as an unsurpassed guide to a deeper realism about politics. In this account, Thucydides emerges as sensitive to the non-rational and the limits of human agency; sceptical about political speech; resistant to easy generalisations or theoretical reductions; and opposed to any practical, moral or constitutional closure in politics.

The book will be of interest to students of politics and classics.

GEOFFREY HAWTHORN is Professor Emeritus of international politics, University of Cambridge.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-03916-2 - Thucydides on Politics: Back to the Present

Geoffrey Hawthorn

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

---

Cambridge University Press  
978-1-107-03916-2 - Thucydides on Politics: Back to the Present  
Geoffrey Hawthorn  
Frontmatter  
[More information](#)

---

# Thucydides on Politics

*Back to the Present*

---

Geoffrey Hawthorn



CAMBRIDGE  
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Cambridge University Press  
978-1-107-03916-2 - Thucydides on Politics: Back to the Present  
Geoffrey Hawthorn  
Frontmatter  
[More information](#)

---

**CAMBRIDGE**  
UNIVERSITY PRESS

University Printing House, Cambridge CB2 8BS, United Kingdom

Published in the United States of America by Cambridge University Press, New York  
Cambridge University Press is part of the University of Cambridge.

It furthers the University's mission by disseminating knowledge in the pursuit of education, learning and research at the highest international levels of excellence.

[www.cambridge.org](http://www.cambridge.org)

Information on this title: [www.cambridge.org/9781107612006](http://www.cambridge.org/9781107612006)

© Geoffrey Hawthorn 2014

This publication is in copyright. Subject to statutory exception and to the provisions of relevant collective licensing agreements, no reproduction of any part may take place without the written permission of Cambridge University Press.

First published 2014

Printed in the United Kingdom by Clays, St Ives plc

*A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library*

ISBN 978-1-107-03916-2 Hardback

ISBN 978-1-107-61200-6 Paperback

Cambridge University Press has no responsibility for the persistence or accuracy of URLs for external or third-party internet websites referred to in this publication, and does not guarantee that any content on such websites is, or will remain, accurate or appropriate.

Cambridge University Press  
978-1-107-03916-2 - Thucydides on Politics: Back to the Present  
Geoffrey Hawthorn  
Frontmatter  
[More information](#)

---

For Nell and in memory of Bernard Williams

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-03916-2 - Thucydides on Politics: Back to the Present

Geoffrey Hawthorn

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

---

## Contents

---

<i>Preface and acknowledgements</i>	<i>page</i> ix
<i>Chronology 545–323 BC</i>	xiii
<i>List of maps</i>	xvii
<i>Maps</i>	xix
1 The text	1
2 Writing power: Athens in Greece 478–435	19
3 Explaining the war: stated reasons 435–432	28
4 Explaining the war: true reasons 432	39
5 Judgements 431–430	51
6 Absent strategies 430–428	68
7 Speech and other events 428–427	84
8 Meaning and opportunity 426–424	102
9 Necessities 424	116
10 Interests 423–421	131
11 Emotion in deed 420–416	148
12 Purposes and decisions 415	165
13 Character and circumstance 414–413	184
14 One war 413–411	202
15 Back to the present	230
Synopsis of the text by book and year	241
<i>Further reading</i>	247
<i>References</i>	249
<i>Index</i>	263
	vii

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-03916-2 - Thucydides on Politics: Back to the Present

Geoffrey Hawthorn

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

---



## Preface and acknowledgements

---

Thucydides' account of 'the war of the Peloponnesians and the Athenians, how they waged it against each other' between 431 and 411 BC, has never been easy to read. At the end of the first century BC, in the earliest comments on the text that survive, Dionysius of Halicarnassus said that those who could master its Greek 'are easily counted'. Lorenzo Valla, presenting his translation into Latin to the Pope in 1452, explained that the eight books into which it had come to be divided, 'these eight towns, just so that you know this, my Imperator, for perhaps you know not what sort of towns you ordered me to take, are situated in the loftiest regions, in craggy mountains, and defy missiles, battering rams, ladders, trenches and the mines of sappers'. Thucydides knew, and made no apology. '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.'

Yet it stops suddenly, in mid-sentence, seven years before the war had ended (though there are insertions that Thucydides could only have made, if it was he who made them, when it had). And its style apart, the text is unusual. No one had written as he did, and no one was to do so in the same way again. It is more than a chronicle, recalls epic, has elements of tragedy and is intended to be of use; but Thucydides' few conclusions do not convince and he does not say what its use might be. It falls across all our genres and is diminished when assigned to any.

Its subject though is clear. It is politics: men (all men) seeking power over others, using it to pursue ends that are sometimes clear, sometimes not, never being sure what the outcomes will be. We habitually write politics as history, science or theory, and many have been tempted to read Thucydides in one or other of these ways. But this is not how he writes. He presents politics as they were practised, neither writing

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-03916-2 - Thucydides on Politics: Back to the Present

Geoffrey Hawthorn

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

## x Preface and acknowledgements

beyond what his subjects could see or drawing readers into conspiracies of hindsight. He has no conceptual ambition, favours no one kind of explanation, harbours no *telos*, evinces no one opinion, and is neither a cynic nor a moralist. In his grasp of the non-rational and the limits of human agency, his ability to see all sides and his disinclination to arrive at any conclusions, he is not so much an ancestor of the present-day study of politics and international relations (let alone the study of present-day politics and international relations) as an ancient who offers a critical purchase on the ancestries we have. He allows one to see that politics is rarely admirable but always unavoidable, owes less to reason than we might suppose and allows no practical, moral or constitutional closure.

Unlike Thucydides himself and many of those who have written about him since the First World War, I fall at Polybius' insistence (and Clarendon's after him) that one should not write about high politics or war without having known them, and I am not a classicist. This aside, it may seem idle to offer yet another book on a text on which there are so many, impertinent to offer conclusions on a text one of whose more remarkable qualities is to offer almost none of its own. But I read it in ways that others do not, and have been unable to resist writing for those who might like to think again about it as well as for those who do not know it. To do justice to all that has been said would require a different and much longer book; the 'reception' of Thucydides, as of much else from the time, has become an academic speciality in itself. I can at best allude to other readings, which I do towards the end of Chapter 1, the start of Chapters 9 and 15, and in notes throughout. I end with thoughts on its interest now.

The story is crucial; one's understanding expands in the course of it, and I raise questions of an interpretive kind as they seem to me to arise. In no case is the moment I choose the only one at which they do so. Questions of power, interest, strategy, opportunity and decision, not to mention those of necessity and contingency, present themselves throughout; emotion, reason and judgement are always in play; the mismatch between word and deed pervades the text; and at no point can it be said that character does not matter. But the narrative would have been diverted if I had considered each whenever it arises and drained if I had considered them all at once.

For those unfamiliar with the text, I provide a synopsis at the end; some might like to look at this first. And because the story can be bewildering without a ready frame in which to set it, I start with a few maps and a short list of relevant happenings in and around Greece at the time. Everything else that a non-classicist might need in order to decide for him- or herself – a sensitive and accessible translation of the text, notes

on its more problematic or contentious parts, full synopses, a glossary of terms, a list of characters and many detailed maps, together with an excellent introduction, a range of ancient opinions and a full index of names and topics – are provided in Jeremy Mynott’s authoritative edition for *Cambridge Texts in the History of Political Thought*, which I use throughout. In my notes, *TWPA* refers to Mynott, *HCT* to the commentary by Arthur Gomme, Antony Andrewes and Kenneth Dover and *CT* to that by Simon Hornblower; I say more on the commentaries in a note on reading at the end. I describe Thucydides’ account as ‘the text’, reserving ‘book’ for one or other of the eight into which the text has been divided, and cite the passages I quote or refer to by book, chapter and section (as in 1.1.1). I leave my references to other texts, ancient and early modern, to be pursued in standard editions. The ‘Hellenes’, as they had come to think of themselves, did not refer to their political entities in the singular; I follow convention in using ‘Sparta’ and ‘Spartans’ etc. interchangeably to refer to the political community at issue, which will sometimes be large (‘Athens’), sometimes small (‘Plataea’) and frequently in question (‘Thrace’). I despair of consistency in rendering Greek names and only hope that my decisions do not offend. All dates are BC except where obviously not.

My acknowledgements are many. To the undergraduates reading Politics at Cambridge in the 2000s who found themselves taking a course on Thucydides, not all of whom will have known that it was their enthusiasms, curiosities and sheer intelligence that prompted me to think about writing and to whom I apologise for having been less clear at the time than I may be now; to the colleagues who tolerated my eccentricity and presented me with a copy of the Holkham bust of the man (he has since sat staring at me), in particular to Glen Rangwala, who shared the teaching, to Helen Thompson, whose collusion in the conceit that Thucydides was among us made academic hard times less so, and to Joy Labern, who made them human; to the often spellbinding qualities of the classical scholarship on Thucydides; to the memory of Frank Walbank, whose question on an early sketch (‘where’s the argument?’) haunted me throughout; to Neville Morley for inviting me to join his project on the reception of Thucydides; to Richard Fisher, Elizabeth Friend-Smith, Maartje Scheltens, Chloe Dawson, Gillian Dadd, Christina Sariannidou and their colleagues at the Cambridge University Press and the Press’s three acute and constructive readers; to Gloria Carnevali, Paul Cartledge, Stefan Collini, Mark Fisher, Kinch Hoekstra, Polly Low, Derin McLeod, Gillian Moore, Paul Seabright, Helen Thompson and John Thompson for being so ready to take time to read a draft, point to obscurities, correct mistakes and suggest improvements; and to Ronald

Cambridge University Press  
978-1-107-03916-2 - Thucydides on Politics: Back to the Present  
Geoffrey Hawthorn  
Frontmatter  
[More information](#)

---

xii Preface and acknowledgements

Vance and Douglas Hyland for the cover image. My greatest debt is to Jeremy Mynott, who was preparing his edition as I was writing and without whose constant encouragement, generosity and advice – linguistic, literary, analytical and editorial – I really could not have done what I have; I thank the Press for permission to quote from his translation and use maps from his edition. My longer debts are to Bernard Williams, who has given my unformed intuitions what shape they have, and to Gloria, who has done so much for one man in her life by living so gaily and so long with this other.

*Cambridge*

## Chronology 545–323 BC

---

This situates the events that Thucydides considers. I summarise what he does in a synopsis of his text at pp. 241–6.

545–510	‘Tyranny’ in Athens
c.513	Persia invades Europe
507	Political reform in Athens: beginnings of democracy
506	Spartan invasion of Athens collapses
c.505	Sparta forms Peloponnesian ‘league’
490	First Persian invasion of Greece: Greeks defeat Persians at Marathon
481	Greek request for support against Persia from Syracuse
480–479	Second Persian invasion of Greece: Persians defeat Greeks at Thermopylae; Greeks defeat Persians at Salamis, Plataea and Mycale
478	Athens forms Delian ‘league’, which becomes dominion or ‘empire’
c.466	Death of Pausanias (Spartan); flight of Themistocles (Athenian)
466–461	Civil war in Syracuse; democracy proclaimed 463
465–456	Helot revolt at Sparta
465–460	Thucydides born
460–446	‘First Peloponnesian war’: conflicts between Sparta and allies and Athens and allies; ends with ‘thirty-year peace’
460–429	‘Age of Pericles’ at Athens
459–454(?)	Athenian expeditions to Cyprus and Egypt
454	Treasury of Delian league transferred to Athens
451	Thirty-year peace between Sparta and Argos
449(?)	‘Peace of Callias’ between Athens and Persia
448(?)	Accession of Perdiccas II (Macedonia)
444–433	Foundation of Thurii; Athenian treaties with Leontini and Rhegion

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-03916-2 - Thucydides on Politics: Back to the Present

Geoffrey Hawthorn

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

xiv	Chronology 545–323 BC
441–439	Revolt of Samos (from Athens) and surrender
c.437	Athenian expedition to Black Sea
437–436	Foundation of Amphipolis
435	Dispute between Corinth and Corcyra over Epidamnos
433	Athenian alliance with Corcyra; battle of Sybota
433–432	Renewal of Athens' treaties with Leontini and Rhegion
432–430	Revolt of Potidaea and surrender
432	Meetings at Sparta
431	Theban attack on Plataea
	Peloponnesian invasion of Attica
	Athenians sail round Peloponnese
430	Plague at Athens
	Peloponnesian invasion of Attica
	Athenian expedition to Peloponnese
	Phormio (Athenian) dispatched to Naupactos
429–427	Siege of Plataea
429	Phormio defeats Cnemus (Spartan)
428	Peloponnesian invasion of Attica
	Revolt of Mytilene, to 427
427	Peloponnesian invasion of Attica
	Internal war at Corcyra
	Athenian expedition to Sicily, to 424
	Plague again at Athens
426	Demosthenes (Athenian) in western Greece
	Nicias (Athenian) attempts to take Melos
425	Peloponnesian invasion of Attica
	Athenian capture of Spartans at Pylos; Athenians refuse
	Spartan offer of peace; Athens reassesses tribute from
	dominion
424	Athenians unsuccessfully intervene in Megara; fail in
	Boeotia
	Brasidas (Spartan) captures Acanthos, Amphipolis and
	Torone
	Thucydides goes into exile
	Conference of Siceliot states at Gela
423(?)	Athens renews peace with Persia
	Truce (to 422) between Athens and Sparta
422	Cleon (Athenian) retakes Torone; he and Brasidas die
	at Amphipolis
	Athenian envoys in Sicily and Italy

## Chronology 545–323 BC

xv

- 421 'Peace of Nicias' and fifty-year alliance between Athens and Sparta  
 Destruction of Scione
- 420–419 Intense politicking between Peloponnesian states, Boeotia and Athens
- 418 Sparta defeats Argives and Athenians at battle of Mantinea  
 Fifty-year alliance between Sparta and Argos
- 417 End of oligarchy in Argos, renewed alliance between Argos and Athens
- c.416 Tissaphernes becomes Persian satrap at Sardis  
 Athens takes Melos
- 415–413 Athenians in Sicily
- 415 Alcibiades (Athenian) flees to Sparta
- 414 Athenians land in Laconia
- 413 Spartans occupy Deceleia; renew war  
 Perdiccas II dies
- 412–411 Revolts of Athenian subject states  
 Treaties between Sparta and Persia
- 411 Coup in Athens: rule of 400 and then '5,000'  
 End of Thucydides' text  
 Athenian naval victories in the Hellespont
- 410 Athenian naval victory over Sparta and Persian land force at Cyzicus (Black Sea); Athens rejects Spartan offer of peace  
 Democracy restored at Athens
- 409 Hannibal (Carthaginian) destroys Selinus and Himera in Sicily
- 408 Athenians retake Byzantium
- 407 Alcibiades returns to Athens
- 406 Athenians defeated at Notium; Alcibiades withdraws;  
 Athenian victory at Arginusae  
 Hannibal takes Acragas (Sicily)
- 405 Athenians conclusively defeated at Aegospotamoi (Hellespont)  
 Dionysius succeeds at Syracuse; makes peace with Carthage
- 405–404 Siege of Athens
- 404(?) Death of Thucydides
- 404–403 Peace between Sparta and Athens; 'Thirty tyrants' rule Athens until democracy restored under Sparta's aegis
- 404–371 Spartan hegemony in Greece

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-03916-2 - Thucydides on Politics: Back to the Present

Geoffrey Hawthorn

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

---

xvi      Chronology 545–323 BC

371–362	Theban hegemony in Greece
359	Accession of Philip II (Macedonia)
338	Philip II defeats Athenian and Theban force; controls Greece
336–323	Accession, dominion and death of Alexander III (Macedonia)



## Maps

---

1 Greece and the Aegean	<i>page</i> xx
2 Peloponnese and central Greece	xxii
3 Western Anatolia and the Hellespont	xxiii
4 Sicily and southern Italy	xxiv

Based on maps previously published in Jeremy Mynott, *Thucydides: The War of the Peloponnesians and the Athenians*, Cambridge University Press, 2013. © Cambridge University Press 2013, reproduced with permission.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-03916-2 - Thucydides on Politics: Back to the Present

Geoffrey Hawthorn

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

---

Cambridge University Press  
978-1-107-03916-2 - Thucydides on Politics: Back to the Present  
Geoffrey Hawthorn  
Frontmatter  
[More information](#)

---

## Maps

---



Map 1. Greece and the Aegean

Cambridge University Press  
978-1-107-03916-2 - Thucydides on Politics: Back to the Present  
Geoffrey Hawthorn  
Frontmatter  
[More information](#)





Map 2. Peloponnese and central Greece



Map 3. Western Anatolia and the Hellespont



Map 4. Sicily and southern Italy