

## Thucydides: “*Ktema Es Aei*”

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Thucydides the Athenian, chronicler of the Peloponnesian War of 431 to 404 BC, is widely regarded as a pioneer of the historical method. Thucydides has been traditionally compared with his generational predecessor, Herodotus of Halicarnassus. He himself alluded to the inadequacies of Herodotus, the acclaimed “father of history,” while establishing his own purposes and methods. Thucydides praises his own work for its truthfulness, accuracy, and professionalism vis-à-vis previous works, which he considered to have been embellished for the consumption of a vulgar public, and filled with stories within which human and divine deeds were intertwined, and events were embroidered to make a better impression. His own work is meant to be an analytical treatise exclusively concerned with the factual course of Peloponnesian War and its origins.

As such, Thucydides’ work merits study. This paper will focus upon his explanation of the origins of the Hellenic civil war; examining not only the conclusions that he drew, but the concept of undertaking the analysis in the first place. Of particular interest is the author’s premise that Sparta, out of fear and jealousy, chose to undertake a pre-emptive war in order to stem

the tide of Athenian power and expansion. Thucydides' first book, in its methods of inquiry and presentation can be considered to be generally reflective of the work as a whole and will thus serve as the focal point of discussion. The interpretations of his work by modern scholars and political theorists will also be discussed.

The *History of the Peloponnesian War* is perhaps the only instance in which the actual *history* is as central a matter, if not more so, than the *war* itself. As M.I. Finley notes, the Peloponnesian War, "lives on not so much for anything that happened [...], but because of the man who wrote its history. [...] No other war, or for that matter other historical subject, is so much the product of its reporter."<sup>1</sup> Finley's praise is for the novel historiographic principles that Thucydides employed in his coverage of the war; particularly the extent to which he concentrated on factual occurrence and dispensed with the use of legendary embellishments. No divine interplay, no myths or mentions of the supernatural play a role his documentation of events. The result is perhaps the first purely historical treatise. The lack of any mythological or romantic elements is a conscious sacrifice, and Thucydides himself proudly acknowledges their omission. His undertaking is specifically meant to serve as a break from the traditions of oral poets and mythmakers intent on satisfying an immediate audience. His words are meant to be "judged useful by those who want to understand clearly the events which happened in the past. [His] work is not a piece of writing designed to meet the needs of an immediate public, but was done to last for ever" (1.22).\* As such, the historian dedicated himself to a new level of historical study, concerned not only with inquiry, but with transmitting information as accurately as possible, and pre-

senting an analytical interpretation of events. Thucydides refers to his thoroughness, emphasizes his factual reporting and cites his efforts to preserve good judgment and avoid personal biases, either from his own experiences or from those of the eyewitnesses whom he questions.

He was, however, limited by the constraints of the world in which he lived: lack of documentation, limited mobility and limited access to resources. As a result, he was forced to rely on common sense, deduction and the assumption of motive as intrinsic tools in his narration of the Peloponnesian War.<sup>2</sup> This method is particularly obvious in his frequent use of speeches. The orations composed by Thucydides offer a convenient 'inner' perspective on particular events, both by providing a second-person narrative, and by giving the allusion of credibility. Thucydides himself, however, confesses that owing to the passage of time and degree of difference in interpretation and allegiance, his method had been, "while keeping as closely as possible to the general sense of the words used, to make the speakers say what [...] was called for by each situation" (22.1). The result, however, is that they reflect not only Thucydides' interpretation of the war, but his construction of it. Consequently, it is presumed that the war will unfold along rational lines- something that cannot always be expected in human affairs. Ignoring or overlooking the illogical, his account then becomes a rationalistic documentation. This is an inherently desirable trait; but one that may lack accuracy- a professed trademark of his undertaking. As Finley further observes, if the speakers "did not always say what was called for, then, insofar as Thucydides attributed such sentiments to them, he could not have been 'keeping as closely as possible to the general sense of the words

used’.”<sup>3</sup> He goes on to note that as ambitious and difficult as the task of recording the speeches may have been, Thucydides became progressively less concerned with their accuracy. Instead, he was focused on:

“his search for the mainsprings of political behaviour, his struggle to escape from the tyranny of the concrete and the unique, to understand and then to communicate the real and the universal, [this] would have been the driving force in the direction that he took.”<sup>4</sup>

One may presume that this open declaration of his methods is evidence of his intended precision, yet even without an intentional bias, the chances of misrepresentation are high. There is no significant evidence, however, that could be used to cross-reference Thucydides, who effectively holds a monopoly over our understanding of the events of the Peloponnesian conflict. Few documents or physical evidence are available, and Thucydides, unlike Herodotus, did not name his informants and witnesses. Nevertheless, despite some suspicion, there appears to be no substantial evidence to disprove his account to any large extent, and so he remains, as the only source available, innocent until proven guilty.

Compared with his predecessor Herodotus, Thucydides’ achievements are significant. His was the first truly scholarly text, intended for such purposes. While both historians wrote for the preservation of deeds and events, their products varied considerably. Herodotus’ narrative was divergent, offering ample information on geography, cultures, ethnography, and

other points of interest throughout his account of the Persian Wars. His account, although groundbreaking in itself, has been as often linked to Homer as Thucydides, and thus, he correctly stands as an evolutionary median between the two. With the former, he shares above all the calling of an oral entertainer, exhibited in a fascination with gods and heroes, and of a moralistic theme of moderation meant to forestall divine jealousy of human deeds.

As a historian, Herodotus painted the history of the Persian invasion with thick strokes, going to great lengths in an effort to gather information and offer an instructive glimpse of foreign lands and peoples. Despite his broad interests, which many see in a negative light, he presented a relatively unbiased account of the achievements of both Greeks and barbarians,<sup>6</sup> and demonstrated considerable perseverance in his pursuit of information, the sources of which he duly recorded in passing. Herodotus clearly possessed a sense of objectivity, often presenting multiple versions of events (often highlighting the improbability of a particular claim) in an effort to allow the reader to arrive at his own conclusions. This vagueness is particularly criticized by Thucydides, whose own history is a focused product of his study, researched and processed into a final form.

Thucydides thus confined himself to a strict chronological description of the war between Athens and Sparta and their respective allies, as well as the political implications that the war may have carried. His was a sober account of events, a rare instance in the written tradition up until the Enlightenment. "Like the best Hippocratic writings, Thucydides' *History* unfolds without gods or oracles or omens. This was perhaps his greatest

break from Herodotus.”<sup>5</sup>

A further distinguishing feature is the chronological limitations placed upon each of the two historians. Herodotus' inquiry is into past events, where possibilities of reference and research were increasingly limited and skewed by the failings of human memory and interpretation. Thucydides, on the other hand, “was a contemporary of, and for a time, a direct participant in, his war.”<sup>6</sup> If Vietnam was the first television war, then Thucydides' *Histories* were the first contemporary, journalistic account.

The narrative of the Peloponnesian War established a broader conception of realist power politics and of human nature. Thucydides' grasp of not only the historical method, but also of the role and nature of power in international relations, has led many to consider him a founder of the realist school of politics. His method fits the theory, propounded by Michael Howard, that in the majority of instances, the causes of wars lie in the “perceptions of statesmen of the growth of hostile power and fears for the restriction, if not extinction, of their own.”<sup>7</sup> Although it is perhaps anachronistic to project such general patterns onto Thucydides' understanding of the war, a similar model of elite anxiety is definitely present in his account. If not exhibited by the Spartan leadership, it is at least shown by the Corinthians. Thucydides had “uncovered the general law of the dynamics of international relations [...] provided by the differential growth of power among states. This fundamental idea [...] can be identified as the theory of hegemonic war.”<sup>8</sup>

Hegemonic wars occur in the event of a disruption to the balance of the international system by economic and technological changes, which af-

fect the vital interests of states, upsetting the existent political hierarchy. The subsequent alteration to the international structure because of conflict is a common phenomenon, frequently jeopardizing the position of the great powers involved and allowing the possibility of systemic change, as indeed occurred with the mutual exhaustion of both Athens and Sparta by the end of the conflict. Robert Gilpin argues that Thucydides' greatness as an analyst lies in his grasp of the power struggle between the belligerents. The disproportionate growth of one state led to the instability of the state system, disrupting the status quo and eventually resulting in hegemonic confrontation between the two powers and their growing alliances. This expanded bipolarization and the resulting political zero-sum game allowed minute events to trigger a major conflict.<sup>9</sup> As Joseph Nye Jr. points out, however, Gilpin's theory does "not specify whether the nation in decline or the challenger is likely to start the war, nor what the consequences will be," a point central to the ongoing effort to establish if not a particular cause, then at least a main aggressor in the Peloponnesian War.<sup>10</sup>

Herodotus and Thucydides alike concerned themselves with the causes of the wars. Herodotus examined in a broad sense the nature of the conflict between the East and the West, accentuating the cultural and ideological struggle of tyrannical Persia and democratic Hellas (read Athens). Thucydides' history, however, was a more thorough examination of the origins of the war. Beyond simple description, there is an analytical process evident in the first book of Thucydides' *History*, which reflects his method throughout the entirety of the work. "Thucydides was the man who first attempted a serious analysis [...], not only for the Peloponnesian War, but for

any war.” He “sorted out the essential from the causal, the primary causes from the more immediate grievances and pretexts.”<sup>11</sup> The affairs of Epidamnus, Corcyra and Corinth, Potidaea, and Megara all influenced the escalation of tensions between the opposing camps of the Peloponnesian and Delian Leagues. Thucydides concludes, however, that what ultimately “made the war inevitable was the growth of Athenian power and the fear which this caused in Sparta” (1.23). Such a conclusion, although not exceptionally sophisticated from a modern perspective, expresses the earlier mentioned understanding of the roles of power and politics that the historian exhibited in his work.

Thucydides’ comprehension of power and foreign relations and their manifestation in the outbreak of the Hellenic civil war is important to the evolution of the study of history. His emphasis on causation is central to any understanding of the history of the Peloponnesian War. As with many other conflicts, the start of the war was apparent, but its origins were more ambiguous. Here too, although they cannot be entirely dismissed as insignificant, the motives Thucydides presents have sometimes been considered to be misleading or disproportionate in scale and meaning. As demonstrated by Thucydides himself in his discussion of the debate at Sparta (1.66-88), the Spartans did not appear fearful of the supposed rapid growth of Athenian power. They were, on the contrary, criticized for their passivity and encouraged to go to war by and on behalf of their allies. The Spartans pushed for military action only after being persuaded by their allies of Athenian aggression. Even still, “the Spartan King Archidamus, a man who had a reputation for both intelligence and moderation” advised patience and caution; seem-

ingly unlikely responses in the face of overwhelmingly powerful adversaries. Although Archidamus did advocate the pursuit of new allies and a gradual mobilization in an effort to match those of the Athenians, he postulated that time would be on the side of the Spartans in their attempts to restore the balance of power.

There is no further mention of a direct threat to Sparta either, as Archidamus states that despite delaying war, Sparta should not "calmly allow [the Athenians] to injure [their] allies" (1.82). His opponent in the debate, and an advocate for immediate action, Sthenelaidas, although equating Athenian conflicts with Spartan allies as an attack on Sparta itself, also appeals not to "allow any aggression against [their] allies" (1.86), rather than expressing any fear for the existence of Sparta in the shadows of an increasingly powerful Athenian hegemon. Thucydides, however, sums up the debates by concluding, nevertheless, that the Spartans opted for war not out of consideration for their allies but because "they were afraid of the further growth of Athenian power, seeing as they did, that already the greater part of Hellas was under the control of Athens" (1.88). This assurance comes despite contradictory accusations made by the Corinthians against Sparta earlier in the debate:<sup>12</sup>

"you do nothing in the early stages to prevent an enemy's expansion; you wait until your enemy has doubled his strength. [...] The Persians [...] came from the ends of the earth and got as far as the Peloponnese before you were able to put up a proper force into the field to meet them. The Athenians, unlike the Persians, live close

to you, yet you still appear not to notice them” (1.69).

These words are certainly not those of a supposedly fearful and jealous Sparta, eager and prepared to strike down Athenian imperialism.

Upon considering the theory that Thucydides had revised his work later and inserted the theory of Spartan fears of Athenian dominance in Greece Finley remarks that, in any case, “Spartan fear of Athens is notably absent” prior to the beginning of the war.<sup>13</sup> Donald Kagan explores the issue further. He decisively refutes the view held by other historians that the root of the war lay in economic issues such as the maritime trade rivalries between Corinth and Athens, or the possibility of racial and ideological causes, such as the enmity between Dorians and Ionians or the political rivalry between oligarchs and democrats. Like Thucydides, he concludes that the cause was simply one of power politics, although the effects of chance played an important part. Yet he challenges the conclusions of Thucydides. Thucydides gave consideration to both the remote and immediate causes of the war, ultimately favouring the former; the Spartan fear of Athenian power.

Kagan disputes this. He argues that Athenian power in fact did not grow between the years 445 and 435. Furthermore, as mentioned previously, the Spartans gave no indication of being fearful of Athens. Kagan thus maintains that it must have been the episodes of the relatively minor disputes over Corcyra and Potidaea that were the prime catalysts for war although, as he remarks, the Corinthians could not have succeeded in persuading the Spartans to go to war had there been no history of conflict between the two

*poleis*.. Although tensions had always existed in the diplomatic relations between the two great powers, there was no particular instability.

“On the contrary, the settlement of 466/5, which was carefully adhered to by both sides, promised a greater stability than had been possible before. One may believe that the growing power of Athens and Sparta’s fear of it made the First Peloponnesian War [478-460] inevitable, but hardly the second [431-404].”<sup>14</sup>

Instead, Kagan highlights the conflict between Athens and Corinth, drawing particularly on the Corcyrean dispute, whereupon the interests of both states, and the poor decisions made by their leaders allowed tensions to escalate and their respective allies to become involved. He treads carefully, however, and admits that a “perfectly ordinary civil war in a remote and unimportant town on the fringes of the civilized world could hardly have led to a great war *ex nihilo*.”<sup>15</sup> Amongst other factors, there had been a great degree of distrust between Athens and Sparta, “the organizational weakness of the Spartan alliance, which permitted a power of the second magnitude to drag the hegemonal power into a dangerous war for its own interests,” and “the machinery of diplomacy too rudimentary to preserve peace in times of crisis.”<sup>16</sup> Ultimately, Kagan places the greatest degree of responsibility on the shoulders of Corinth for its handling of the Corcyran dispute, its willingness to risk war because of presumed Athenian neutrality, and its confidence in the strength of the Spartan alliance in the event of war. The Spartans, in turn, were guilty of succumbing to Corinthian blackmail, and refusing to

seek arbitration. Finally, the Athenians must be blamed for their arrogance and harshness towards Potidaea and Megara, inspiring further opposition to their imperialistic policies.

Unlike Kagan, Terry Buckley is inclined to persist in the traditional notion that responsibility should be assigned to the two great powers. Among those who hold this view, there are two major schools of thought. The first, represented by scholars such as P.J. Rhodes and Simon Hornblower, hold the Athenians responsible, blaming the war on the aggressive Athenian imperialism evident in the alliance with Corcyra, the treatment of Potidaea, and the Megarian Decree.<sup>‡</sup> The opposing school, represented by G.E.M. de Ste. Croix, considers Sparta to be the aggressor, fearful and envious of the Athenian Empire and intent on destroying it and restoring its own primacy in Hellas.<sup>17</sup> Ultimately, however, the statesmen of both powers exhibited poor judgment and a lack of foresight, failing to anticipate both the length and scale of the war, as well as its disastrous effects on all of Greece.<sup>18</sup>

Thucydides' presentation of the origins of the war between the Athenians and Lacedaemonians provides an excellent example of his analytical methods, his understanding of political dialogue, and his emphasis on the machinations of inter-state politics. If Herodotus was the first to create the art of the historian, Thucydides was the first to employ a rational historical method, and to establish history as a discipline and a science in its own right.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> M.I. Finley, 'Introduction' to *The History of the Peloponnesian War*, Thucydides. Trans. Rex Warner. (London: Penguin, 1972), 9.

\* Citations from Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War* (translated by Rex Warner), will be referenced directly in the text in brackets.

<sup>2</sup> Terry Buckley, *Aspects of Greek History 750-323 B.C.; A Source-Based Approach*. (London: Routledge, 1996), 26.

<sup>3</sup> Finley, 'Introduction' to *The History of the Peloponnesian War*, Thucydides, 26.

<sup>4</sup> Finley, 'Introduction' to *The History of the Peloponnesian War*, Thucydides, 28.

^ Although clearly maintaining an admiration for the principles of Athenian democracy vis-à-vis Persian dictatorship.

<sup>5</sup> Finley, 'Introduction' to *The History of the Peloponnesian War*, Thucydides, 20.

<sup>6</sup> Finley, 'Introduction' to *The History of the Peloponnesian War*, Thucydides, 16.

<sup>7</sup> Michael Howard, *The Causes of Wars*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1983), 18.

<sup>8</sup> Robert Gilpin, "The Theory of Hegemonic War," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*; "The Origin and Prevention of Major War". vol. 18, no. 4, Spring, 1988.

<sup>9</sup> Gilpin, "The Theory of Hegemonic War," 592-596.

<sup>10</sup> Joseph S. Nye Jr., "Old Wars and Future Wars: Causation and Prevention,"

*Journal of Interdisciplinary History*; “*The Origin and Prevention of Major Wars*” vol. 18, no. 4, (Spring, 1988), 586.

<sup>11</sup> Finley, ‘Introduction’ to *The History of the Peloponnesian War*, Thucydides, 23.

<sup>12</sup> Gregory Crane, “The Fear and Pursuit of Risk: Corinth on Athens, Sparta and the Peloponnesians,” *Transactions of the American Philological Association*, vol. 122. (1992), 230.

<sup>13</sup> Finley, ‘Introduction’ to *The History of the Peloponnesian War*, Thucydides, 23.

<sup>14</sup> Donald Kagan, *The Outbreak of the Peloponnesian War*. (New York: Cornell University Press, 1969), 346.

<sup>15</sup> Kagan, *Outbreak of the Peloponnesian War*, 353.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

‡ In the first two cases, Athens involved herself in military action against the Corinthian colonies, and in the third, placing economic sanctions against Megara- a Spartan ally. Although each situation may be considered as an act of self-interest if not self-defense, its rashness, harshness and tactlessness instigated the Peloponnesian League and certainly produced opposition to Athenian imperial transgressions, had they not already been present beforehand.

<sup>17</sup> Buckley, *Aspects of Greek History*, 311-331.

<sup>18</sup> Kagan, *Outbreak of the Peloponnesian War*, 354-356.

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