

‘Thucydides consciously avoids using the term *historia* to describe his account of the Peloponnesian War but in many ways we see his work as the best example of history writing from the ancient world’. Discuss.

There is not a single passage, nor sentence in Thucydides’ history of the Peloponnesian war where he offers the reader any insight into what he thinks history is actually about. M.I. Finley aptly noted¹ for Thucydides, and indeed in the context of his contemporary world, that questions concerning the nature and object of history were scarcely relevant for the simple reason that historiography was still in its infancy. Yet here we have a work whose primacy in and continuing influence on Western historiography cannot be understated, and whose meticulousness and asceticism are seen to have never been surpassed by another in antiquity. Preceded only by Herodotus, whose belief in the supernatural as a form of causation and his frequent (albeit interesting) digressions starkly set him apart from Thucydides, the origins of the singular nature of Thucydides’ work must be sought elsewhere; in the philosophy and politics that were fast becoming a defining feature of the contemporary world in which he lived.

The extremely powerful level of intellect and philosophical insight that flows from Thucydides’ work and by which we most clearly distinguish him from his contemporaries (and successors, for that matter) cannot be understood outside the context of what the German philosopher Hegel first termed “The Greek Enlightenment”². Hegel termed it so because of the resemblance it bears to the 18th century enlightenment that took place in Europe, where religion, politics and morality were all forced under the microscope of secular reason³. The Greek enlightenment to which Hegel refers was really the sophistic movement of the late 5th century BC. The sophists of Thucydides’ time practiced an austere and unrelenting rationalism which they had no hesitation in extending to the morals, laws and politics of their contemporary world. Indeed, many of the sophists teachings were centred around rhetoric and persuasion, and therefore elaborated on concepts such as antithesis and

¹ Finley, M. I. "Introduction." History of the Peloponnesian War. By Thucydides. Trans. Rex Warner. Harmondsworth, Eng.: Penguin, 1972. N. pag. Print.

² Zagorin, Perez. Thucydides: An Introduction for the Common Reader. Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 2005. Print.

³ Zagorin, Perez.

antilogy⁴ and their use in the art of speech. Such devices as taught by the sophists are both frequent and prominent features of Thucydides' recounting and use of speeches in his history. For example the recurrence of human nature in justifying the forming and retaining of the Athenian empire in several Athenian speeches, such as that of Alcibiades in 415 concerning the Sicilian expedition, where he openly states that a clear motivation for the conquest of Sicily was that it would surely make the Athenians "the masters of Hellas" (6.18). That Thucydides had accepted these teachings and sought to apply and weave them into his work seems more the case than these ideas having passively seeped into the discourse through their employment by the speakers themselves (who no doubt were aware of them). For the structure and order of the speeches delivered in Thucydides' history are often so conveniently contrasting⁵ or too perfectly prefigure the events that follow them. W.P. Wallace said of the speeches in book one that they are all so "*patently Thucydidean both in manner and in expression*"⁶, citing Jacqueline De Romilly's "*Histoire et raison chez Thucydides*" wherein she shows that the speeches of the first books "*matter are as Thucydidean as their form*"⁷. There is no doubt here that, despite there being no sure way of knowing whom and what directly or indirectly influenced Thucydides, he is applying to his work these canons of philosophy, though he accomplishes it with slightly more subtlety than is typical of the Sophists.

The ascetic qualities of the teachings of the Sophists as well as those regimented and meticulous qualities of the Hippocratics have also made broader and more general inroads into Thucydides' work by way of influencing its exacting and painstaking nature. There are however, aspects of Sophistic teachings such as their denial of the existence of any absolute truths that seemingly do not ring true in Thucydides; whose devotion to his own fervent search for 'the truth' is not only explicitly stated at the outset but implicitly and continually boasted by the sheer tenacity of his study.

⁴ The argument of both sides of a question, often calling on human nature (*to anthroponon*), likelihood, notions of expediency and the possible intervention of chance to prove a point

⁵ Such as those delivered respectively by the Spartans and the Athenian embassy in the debates at Sparta in book one

⁶ Wallace, W.P. "Thucydides." *Phoenix* 18.4 (1964): 251-61. JSTOR. Web.

⁷ Wallace, W.P.

In modern scholarship, Thucydides has been praised by many⁸ for embodying an early form of the philosophy of realism. Perhaps to understand the nature and level of Thucydides' place in Western historiography it is important to examine the philosophical ideas that have been projected and speculated upon his work posthumously as well as those that exerted their influence during his lifetime. Friedrich Nietzsche and Thomas Hobbes were the first to praise Thucydides' association with realism, with Nietzsche offering Thucydides' up as "the cure for Platonism". Thucydides' realism takes its hold in both his narrative and speeches in the form of a complete lack of self-deception when it comes to human affairs and human nature. Thucydides has always been renowned for his staunch austerity but the realism in his work reflects more than an ability to 'stick to the truth', but also a phenomenal insight not only into the workings but the significance and influence of power politics in his contemporary world. Though realism was by no means a self-aware or developed school of philosophy whilst Thucydides was alive, his work's close ties with it can be explained by the attitudes of his contemporary age. In Classical Greece war and violence were much less veiled and shadowed affairs as they are for the modern developed world, our conception of war and violence is almost always indirectly filtered through the veils and layers of news reports, the romanticised portrayals of violence and suffering that we see on a day to day basis. Witnessing violence and dissent as a result of political unrest was a much more regular feature of society in Classical Greece than for the average inhabitant of the developed world today. Thucydides' realism can therefore be seen as a product of his time because for him there was much less a superficial layer through which to pierce to attain the incisive realistic view he is so widely praised for having achieved. This is not to disparage the incredible directness and clarity of Thucydides' work, but rather to comment that to project too fervently our modern philosophies on Thucydides may aggrandise our understanding of what it is he has achieved.

Perhaps it is striking to the modern reader that Thucydides' extreme skepticism extends beyond the unreliability of eyewitness testimony and difficulty of reproducing speeches to the supernatural, despite him having lived in a society where he would have been in frequent contact with Greek notions of spirituality and religious practices. As conscious and striking a

⁸ Notably Thomas Hobbes and Friedrich Nietzsche, but Thucydides' realism has also received interest from scholars of international politics such as Hans Morgenthau and E.H. Carr, who praise him for his "grasp of the amorality of an anarchic international system of sovereign states like that of Classical Greece"

diversion this is from Herodotus' history, by Thucydides' time (as we have seen with the Sophists), this 'anachronism' we see as typical of his work had already been shared by a long line of skeptic and rationalist thinkers who were wholly dissatisfied with the moral teachings of Greek religion and myth. It is important I think, to note as M.I. Finley has that while Thucydides (his intellectual contemporaries not excluded) is largely dismissive of the poets and their myths, his pessimism does not extend to the actual "historical" facts of the mythological tales themselves⁹, but rather the moral parables which they seek to impart. For example, Hellen, the supposed mythological ancestor of the Greeks appears as a bona fide historical figure and perhaps even more surprisingly, Thucydides quotes the so-called "Homeric Hymn to Apollo" as evidence for ancient rites on the island of Delos as well as for a biography of Homer himself. The tenuous foundation these few and similar myths provided for Greek lessons on morality and humanity could not stand for Thucydides and his contemporaries. These myths were the bedrock for the commonplace beliefs and values in their world, which were for them far too deeply invested in a system whose facts were scarcely, if not at all verifiable¹⁰. This belief in other areas of thought stimulated a variety of fantastic excursions into the new rational world of empirical observation and critical examination of moral values; the devoted medicinal treatises of the anonymous Hippocratics come to mind. Although many of these works in other areas of intellectualism will surely have come into contact with and inevitably influenced Thucydides as a moralist and a thinker, it is not from these roots that the *impulse* to write such a history stemmed¹¹.

The Greeks were deeply attached to their past, as we have seen through the divine importance they placed on mythical tradition. Yet these traditions were embedded in "time immemorial"¹² and therefore provided a certain sense of continuity from the obscured oblivion of forgotten time and the Greeks' present day. Unlike history, these myths required no precise chronological dating, for by placing them in the unintelligible dimness of distant time their increasing distance from the ever progressing present had no effect on their potency or importance to society; these myths had achieved immortality by ambiguity. It

⁹ Finley, M.I.

¹⁰ Thucydides' 'Archeology' is one of his several excursions into the past that, although not meant for this reason, extensively exposes the tenuousness and unreliability of myth as a source in itself, let alone one from which moral parables can be extracted

¹¹ Finley, M.I.

¹² Finley, M.I.

seems then that the ancient Greeks had no need for a history of their past to divine their origins or from which to learn new lessons, for epic poetry and tragedy alone sufficed in this; it is not therefore from such simple roots of necessity out of absence that Thucydides' history emerged. The great classicist M.I. Finley has argued instead that origins for the unprecedented singularity of Thucydides' history lie in the political sphere. While the flourishing and intense development of rationalist philosophy coincided with Thucydides' time in Athens, Finley draws our attention to the relatively recent birth of the democratic Greek city-state. He argues that as it was contemporaneously recognised as a new system it was equally natural and exceedingly apparent that opposition against it should and did exist. The Persian Wars had shown the Greeks the success of such political operation and by this point it was surely regarded as the highest form of social activity in contemporary Greek society. An enquiry into the past, into the trials and tribulations of the city-state system struggling for primacy amidst an array of highly competent competitors, along with enquiries into the fields of science, psychology, ethics and philosophy was therefore surely a natural response to this realisation that a successful political system had been installed in Greek civilisation.

Thucydides' position amongst the historians of antiquity is unrivalled and that is undisputed. The reasons for such a status are varied, and our conception of the man and his achievements has been shaped as much by our modern values and ideas as his work was shaped by his contemporary intellectual landscape. How Thucydides emerged with a work of the standard that it is can be in part attributed to the intellectual developments taking place in his epoch but also to the political climate into which he was born and raised. Of course, in recognising the origins of his work in this way we neglect the traits of personal character that may well have played major roles in shaping the nature of his work, but unfortunately it is on this score that we can never be certain of Thucydides.

Works Cited

- Connor, W.R. "A Post Modernist Thucydides?" *The Classical Journal* 72.4 (1977): 289-98. JSTOR. Web.
- Sahlins, Marshall. *Apologies to Thucydides: Understanding History as Culture and Vice Versa*. Chicago: U of Chicago, 2004. Print.
- Shanske, Daniel. *Thucydides and the Philosophical Origins of History*. New York: Cambridge UP, 2007. Print.

Svoboda, Michael. "Thucydides: An Introduction for the Common Reader by Perez Zagorin. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005. 190 Xvi Pp." *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 37.2 (2007): 203-07. Web.

Thucydides, Rex Warner, and M. I. Finley. *History of the Peloponnesian War*. Harmondsworth, Eng.: Penguin, 1972. Print.

Wallace, W.P. "Thucydides." *Phoenix* 18.4 (1964): 251-61. JSTOR. Web.

Zagorin, Perez. *Thucydides: An Introduction for the Common Reader*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 2005. Print.

Finley, M. I. "Introduction." *History of the Peloponnesian War*. By Thucydides. Trans. Rex Warner. Harmondsworth, Eng.: Penguin, 1972. N. pag. Print.

his masterful four-volume history of the war into a single book oriented at. Thucydides's History of the Peloponnesian War. The thinking man's guide. by Bryon Greenwald. other accounts of this war? What does Kagan's broader, more inclusive timeframe. Was the real cause of. Thucydides, author of the History of the Peloponnesian War. (Image. from wikipedia.org.) History-scope and definition. History (from Greek ἱστορία - historia, meaning "inquiry, knowledge acquired by investigation") is the study of the human past, with special attention to the written record. Scholars who write about history are called historians. 400 BC) is credited with having first approached history with a well-developed historical method in his work the History of the Peloponnesian War. For the quality of his timeless written work, Sima Qian is posthumously known as the Father of Chinese Historiography. More recently, the field of digital history has begun to address ways of using computer technology to pose new questions to historical data and generate digital scholarship. Peloponnesian War. (431-404 BCE) The war between Athens and Sparta that in which Sparta won, but left Greece as a whole weak and ready to fall to its neighbors to the north. Aristotle. (384-322 bc), Greek philosopher and scientist. A student of Plato and tutor to Alexander the Great, he founded a school (the Lyceum) outside Athens. He is one of the most influential thinkers in the history of Western thought. His surviving works cover a vast range of subjects, including logic, ethics, metaphysics, politics, natural science, and physics. Socrates. was born in 400b.c.e. Two epic poems written by Homer describing parts of the Trojan War. Greek. Ionic. along with Doric & Corinthian, distinct style of Hellenistic architecture, more ornate than Doric, but less than Corinthian. Doric. Indeed, while reading his History of the Peloponnesian War, it is not hard to see how so many theorists have appropriated his work as an example of the everlasting realist qualities inherent in politics. Recently however, certain scholars have begun to doubt the realist commandeering of this ancient writing. Welch (2003), Garst (1989), and others have argued that Thucydides has been hijacked and used as a mouthpiece to express and justify views that he not only didn't imply in his work, but may have outright disagreed with. However, scholars such as Gilpin (1984), who argues that the history i