

The Father of History and the Great Historian

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Two of the most famous and celebrated historians of ancient times are Herodotus of Halicarnassus and Thucydides of Athens. They were both Greeks and were contemporaries of each other and yet wrote about different periods of time; Herodotus on the Persian Wars and Thucydides on the Peloponnesian Wars. Both men felt that their works were of great importance—Herodotus’ history existing “...to prevent the traces of human events from being erased by time, and to preserve the fame of the important and remarkable achievements produced by both Greeks and non-Greeks...”¹ and Thucydides’ to be “...a possession for all time.”² Both authors touch on themes that were important to Greeks of the day, including religion and the gods, the state of the polis and its interaction with other poleis and barbarians, Greek attitudes towards each other and outsiders, trust, betrayal, and death. Despite their similarities, both men had striking differences and produced works that are quite distinct; Herodotus’ being rather light-hearted and Thucydides’ carrying with it a deep sense of helplessness, sadness and tragedy.

Purpose and Style

Though contemporaries, Herodotus lived around twenty years before Thucydides, produced his work first and is often considered to be the father of history. In order to complete his work, he traveled throughout Greece, Asia Minor, Scythia, Egypt and perhaps elsewhere, interviewing the people he came across,³ these interviews being his

¹ Herodotus, I.Introduction

² Thucydides, I.22.4

³ Herodotus, I.171

primary means of gathering information. He wrote down first-hand accounts as well as hearsay, and though he strove to relay information that was credible and true⁴, he records multiple versions of events when he can⁵ and often uses his own reason to work out the plausibility of the things he has heard, even making educated guesses when he feels it is necessary.⁶

Thucydides, on the other hand, is much more thorough. He is fiercely interested in the truth of what he relays to us, and has taken great pains to make his history accurate. “My conclusions have cost me some labor from the want of coincidence between accounts of the same occurrences by different eyewitnesses,” he writes, “arising sometimes from imperfect memory, sometimes from undue partiality for one side or the other.”⁷ He even makes a direct reference to Herodotus’ history of the Persian Wars⁸, and seems to chastise Herodotus for his methods of obtaining information. “The way that most men deal with traditions, even traditions of their own country, is to receive them all alike as they are delivered, without applying any critical test whatsoever.” If he is here referring to Herodotus, I believe that he is being a little unfair, for though Herodotus does record things to be fact that are fanciful or unlikely⁹, he applies his own reason to what he recounts in order to make his tale more plausible, though this might not be a sufficient critical test as far as Thucydides is concerned. “So little pains do the vulgar take in the investigation of truth, accepting readily the first story that comes to hand,”¹⁰ he writes, and we can infer that he made it his mission to provide us with only that which passed his

⁴ Herodotus, I.49; I.172; VIII.133

⁵ Herodotus, I.1-5

⁶ Herodotus, I.182; I.214; V.10; I.57

⁷ Thucydides, I.22.3

⁸ Thucydides, I.97.2

⁹ Herodotus, I.84; I.105

¹⁰ Thucydides, I.20.3

own rigorous critical tests. “On the whole, however, the conclusions I have drawn from the proofs quoted may, I believe, safely be relied upon. Assuredly they will not be disturbed either by the verses of a poet displaying the exaggeration of his craft, or by the compositions of the chroniclers that are attractive at truth’s expense; the subjects they treat of being out of the reach of evidence, and time having robbed most of them of historical value by enthroning them in the region of legend. Turning from these, we can rest satisfied with having proceeded upon the clearest data, and having arrived at conclusions as exact as can be expected in matters of such antiquity.”¹¹ Here he makes an obvious jab at Homer, clearly not considering Homer’s tales to be of historical value and is probably making yet another jab at Herodotus, for Herodotus’ work is indeed filled with legends, which is part of the author’s charm. It is because of Thucydides’ meticulous fact-checking and pickiness, however, that he is often considered to be a better historian than the father of history, and this attribution is certainly legitimate.

Herodotus’ Carefree and Thucydides’ Dire Moods

The differing styles of approach to history that the two authors used distinguish the overall mood and scope of each work. As I have described Herodotus’ history as being rather carefree, the author does not feel compelled to instruct the reader with a moral lesson or a warning about the future. Instead he is wholly preoccupied with the stories he recounts at any given time, and often takes off on a long digression in order that the reader might get a flavor for the land and people wherein the story takes place¹², at the

¹¹ Thucydides, I.21.1

¹² Herodotus, IV.42-43; IV.168-198;

expense of continuity of theme and meaning. If Herodotus is buoyant, it is because he genuinely delights in exploring strange people and places and in recording their stories.

Thucydides' history is much more focused. It has a significant moral point, and he admits that his history may be less fun or enticing because of it: "The absence of romance in my history will, I fear, detract somewhat from its interest; but if it be judged useful by those inquirers who desire an exact knowledge of the past as an aid to the understanding of the future, which in the course of human things must resemble if it does not reflect it, I shall be content. In fine, I have written my work, not as an essay which is to win the applause of the moment, but as a possession for all time."¹³ His purpose, therefore, is to give future generations the ability to better understand their own time by studying his time, for it is his belief that it is the nature of man to repeat the follies of previous men.

The mood of his work is best summarized by Thucydides himself: "The Peloponnesian War went on for a very long time and there occurred during it disasters of a kind and number that no other similar period of time could match. Never had so many cities been taken and laid desolate, here by the barbarians, here by the parties contending...; never was there so much banishing and bloodshedding, now on the field of battle, now in political strife."¹⁴ This theme of constant strife, warfare and *stasis* are outcomes of Greek paranoia, distrust and political instability, which can be here demonstrated with a few examples.

When Paches, an Athenian general, was trying to conquer Notium, he tricked Hippias, the commander of the Arcadians, which led to the defeat of Notium. Paches called Hippias to a parley on condition that, if they could not reach an agreement, he was

¹³ Thucydides, 1.22.4

¹⁴ Thucydides, I.23.1-2

to be placed back safe and sound within his fortification. However, when Hippias came out he was seized and Paches put everyone inside the fortification to the sword. Then he returned Hippias to the fortification, safe and sound as he promised, but then slew him there.¹⁵

In a similar act of betrayal and deception, the Corcyraeans persuaded some of the Messenians, their domestic enemies, to come inside their city gates and others to board ships and sail around into the harbor, all under the pretence of putting aside petty squabbles in order to defend themselves against the Peloponnesians. The Peloponnesians retreated when they heard of an advancing Athenian fleet, and when the Corcyraeans saw this, they slew the Messenians inside their gates, and when the ships containing the remainder arrived at the harbor, they slew them as well.¹⁶ Thucydides counts betrayal and deception as one of the hallmarks of revolution, along with death, and he sadly acknowledges that “...success by treachery [wins a man] the prize for superior intelligence.”¹⁷

The darkness of Thucydides’ mood can most easily be seen when he comments long on mass death, trickery and murder, one faction killing another, democrats against oligarchs, polis against polis. “Death thus raged in every shape; and, as usually happens at such times, there was no length to which violence did not go; sons were killed by their fathers, and suppliants were dragged from the altar or slain upon it; while some were even walled up in the temple of Dionysus and died there.”¹⁸ Thucydides does not meditate on Corcyra alone, and points to death and betrayal as being symptoms of a

¹⁵ Thucydides, III.34.3

¹⁶ Thucydides, III.81

¹⁷ Thucydides, III.82.7

¹⁸ Thucydides, III.81.5

greater Greek problem. “Later on, one may say, the whole Hellenic world was convulsed; struggles being everywhere made by popular leaders to bring in the Athenians, and by the oligarchs to introduce the Spartans.”¹⁹

Themes like the dire ones found in Thucydides are not found in Herodotus; at least not to the extent that Thucydides delves into them. Herodotus does indeed recount many great and bloody battles, such as the battles of Salamis²⁰, Marathon²¹ and Thermopylae.²² The difference, however, is that in Herodotus all the Greeks are banded together, putting aside their petty squabbles (or trying to) in order to defend themselves against the great evil, Persia, and therefore the battles between Greeks and Persians are glorious, filled with heroes who do great deeds of valor and, in the end, result in victory, granting the Greeks their freedom. When men who have language, culture and religion in common come together to defeat barbaric enemies that are seen to be less human due to their distance and differences, fighting is glorified, for those who fight do so against a great evil, and so is death, for those who die do not die in vain. But when close neighbors who share so many similarities fight amongst each other, adding to it civil war, treachery and frantic grasps for power, one can't help but feel disillusioned at the whole thing, finding any death a pointless death, and all outcomes of such struggles ultimately not worth the struggle itself. It is easy, therefore, to see why Thucydides' history is more somber. Thucydides lived through the Peloponnesian War, was a general himself, and knew many of the key players personally. “I lived through the whole of it,” he writes, “being at an age to comprehend events, and giving my attention to them in order to know the exact

¹⁹ Thucydides, III.82.1

²⁰ Herodotus, VIII.70-95

²¹ Herodotus, VI.112-117

²² Herodotus, VII.138-239

truth about them.”²³ It is hard to remain jubilant and carefree when recounting the destruction and death of much of what you hold to be dear, including the disintegration of that unique aspect of Greek life—the polis.

The Importance of Freedom and Independence amongst Greek Poleis

One of the main aspects of Herodotus’ histories is the conflict between the Persians and the Greek city-states. In order to maintain their freedom, the Greeks banded together under a coalition and defended themselves against the Persians. Herodotus describes the Greeks as so in love with their freedom that they were ready to kill or be killed in order to defend it, and often uses his characters to speak glowingly about their resolve and bravery.²⁴ The Persians recognized that the cooperation of all the Greek city-states would make conquering the Greeks much more difficult and so therefore took steps to persuade certain Greek poleis to join the Persian ranks as mercenaries. Though the Greek city-states were individually governed, a common loyalty, based upon language, religion and culture, was assumed, which is why, after the defeat of the Persians, it was considered to be very shameful indeed to belong to a polis that had “medized”; that is, joined the Persians during the Persian Wars.

One of the driving forces behind hostilities during the Peloponnesian Wars in Thucydides’ account was this still vibrant desire by individual Greek poleis to remain self-governed and independent, and their feeling of betrayal by Athens for turning the Delian League, which was supposed to exist simply as a means for quick communication

²³ Thucydides, V.26.5

²⁴ Herodotus, VIII.143

and unity amongst the Greeks in time of need, into Athens' personal empire, as evidenced by Athens forcing poleis that decided to leave the league back into it.²⁵

“In short,” said Hermocrates to the Camarinaeans when talking about Athens and her desire for an empire, “in the struggle against the Persian, the Athenians did not fight for the liberty of the Hellenes, or the Hellenes for their own liberty, but the former to make their countrymen serve them instead of him, the latter to change one master for another, wiser indeed than the first, but wiser for evil.”²⁶

It was completely unacceptable for one Greek polis to rule over any other, and it was thought to be distinguished for a polis to be independent rather than subjugated.²⁷ The primary argument Sparta and the Peloponnesian League (which was specifically formed to combat Athens and her empire, the former Delian League, in order that Greek poleis might retain their freedom) made against Athens was that Greek city-states must remain independent.²⁸

“Let us also reflect,” said the Corinthian ambassadors at Sparta when making an argument for declaring war upon Athens, “that if it was merely a number of disputes of territory between rival neighbors, it might be borne; but here we have in Athens an enemy that is a match for our whole coalition [the Peloponnesian League], and more than a match for any of its members; so that unless as a body and as individual nationalities and individual cities we make a unanimous stand against her, she will easily conquer us divided and city by city.”²⁹ Here the Corinthians admit that they must combat Athens as a body, but also explicitly reiterate that at the same time the Greek poleis would retain their

²⁵ Thucydides, I.98.4; I.100.2; I.114.3

²⁶ Thucydides, VI.76.4

²⁷ Thucydides, III.38-39

²⁸ Thucydides, I.139.1; I.139.3

²⁹ Thucydides, I.122.2

independence as individual nationalities and cities. The Corinthians insist that they would all prove to be cowards and degenerate sons if they can't stop "...the establishment in Hellas of a tyrant state," for "...in individual states we think it our duty to put down sole rulers."³⁰

The Athenians, in turn, use freedom and independence as arguments against the Spartans, signifying that these qualities were dear to them as well. Though Pericles, the great general, orator and politician of Athens who insisted upon war against Sparta and her allies, repeatedly affirmed that Athens had a right to her empire, he says, in response to Spartan demands, that the Athenians "...will leave the cities [of the Delian League] independent, if independent we found them when we made the treaty, and when the Spartans grant to their cities an independence not involving subservience to Spartan interest, but to such as each severally may desire;..."³¹ One of their arguments on why they deserve to have an empire directly appeals to the Greek sense of independence, for in Camarina the Athenians said, "...[We] got rid of the empire and the supremacy of the Spartans, who had no right to give orders to us more than we to them..."³² and though Sparta did not exact tribute from her allies, she did "...secure their subservience to her interests by establishing oligarchies among them."³³

Probably the best demonstration of the Greek polis' determination for independence and freedom can be seen in the account of Melos. Melos desired to remain neutral, neither for nor against Athens or Sparta, but due to the fact that Melos was an island and Athens was a naval power, the Athenians could not let this abide. They came

³⁰ Thucydides, I.122.3

³¹ Thucydides, I.144.2

³² Thucydides, VI.82.3

³³ Thucydides, I.19

to Melos and threatened to destroy her unless she became their tributary ally, and when the Melians argued that what they were doing wasn't right (appealing to the Greek value of independence and freedom), the Athenians responded that "...right, as the world goes, is only in question with equals in power, while the strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must.³⁴ ...[Y]ou will not think it dishonorable to submit to the greatest city in Hellas, when it makes you the moderate offer of becoming its tributary ally, without ceasing to enjoy the country that belongs to you; nor when you have the choice given to you between war and security, will you be so blinded as to choose the worse."³⁵ And yet the Melians chose destruction, or put their faith in vain hope of salvation, rather than to be subjugated or to be inflicted with the dishonor of becoming a tributary ally subject to another polis.

"We will not," responded the Melians, "in a moment deprive of freedom a city that has been inhabited these seven hundred years;..."³⁶ and here they hold firm to their convictions, placing faith in the gods and in Sparta, but also arguing that they have the right to be free and independent, and therefore will not submit to Athens' demands.

On the Importance of Gods between the Two Authors

In times of duress, the Greeks often turned to the gods, as the Melians did, and religion plays an important role in both Herodotus' and Thucydides' histories. Herodotus often points to the gods as an underlying cause for events that occur in human history. Sickness

³⁴ Thucydides, V.89

³⁵ Thucydides, V.111.4

³⁶ Thucydides, V.112.2

and injuries,³⁷ dreams,³⁸ weather,³⁹ outcomes in battle,⁴⁰ biological abnormalities,⁴¹ the miraculous⁴²—all of these have supernatural causes, and Herodotus himself rarely distinguishes events of a miraculous sort from those that are perfectly natural.

Thucydides takes a drastically different approach. Using the Athenians as a mouthpiece during their debate with the Melians, Thucydides comments on the gods, probably giving us his own opinion of them: "...[T]he vulgar...turn to the invisible, to prophecies and oracles, and other such inventions that delude men with hopes to their destruction."⁴³ Here Thucydides calls them inventions, but the Athenians themselves do not seem to think that they are. Indeed, most of the Greeks habitually turn to the gods in order to plan for war and peace. The Epidamnians⁴⁴ and Spartans⁴⁵ asked the oracle at Delphi for advice before making decisions, and often did as they were instructed. The Corinthians, when arguing for war against Athens, appealed to religion, saying that "...the god has commanded it and promised to be with us... You will not be the first to break a treaty which the god, in advising us to go to war, judges to be violated already..."⁴⁶ Even the Athenians, who, according to Thucydides, snubbed the gods at Melos, often displayed their own religious beliefs. When Cylon, an Athenian Olympic athlete, tried to seize power in Athens, he was taken out of the temple along with his followers and slain, which brought a curse. The Athenians banished those who killed Cylon and his followers, afraid that the curse would be upon their own city. Pericles was,

³⁷ Herodotus, I.19.22; I.174

³⁸ Herodotus, I.34.43-44

³⁹ Herodotus, I.87

⁴⁰ Herodotus, I.91

⁴¹ Herodotus, 105

⁴² Herodotus, I.158-160

⁴³ Thucydides, V.103.2

⁴⁴ Thucydides, I.23.1-2

⁴⁵ Thucydides, I.103.2; I.118.3

⁴⁶ Thucydides, I.123.1-2

in fact, related on his mother's side to one of these cursed Athenians, which was actually brought up by the Spartans when looking for excuses to go to war.⁴⁷

Indeed, two of the eleven conditions of peace in the treaty written up by the Spartans and Athenians were religious in nature:

- “Regarding the national temples, there shall be a free passage by land and by sea to all who wish it, to sacrifice, travel, consult, and attend the oracle games, according to the customs of their countries.
- The temple and shrine of Apollo at Delphi and the Delphians shall be governed by their own laws, taxed by their own state, and judged by their own judges, the land and the people, according to the customs of their country.”⁴⁸

In the same conversation with the Melians, the Athenians declare their belief in the existence of gods by saying, “Of the gods we believe, and of men we know, that by a necessary law of their nature they rule wherever they can....Thus as far as the gods are concerned, we have no fear and no reason to fear that we shall be at a disadvantage.”⁴⁹

The major difference concerning religion between Herodotus and Thucydides is that Herodotus seems to believe in the gods as a natural part of Greek existence, and that their interaction with humanity is no more surprising than the happenings of wind or rain. Herodotus writes from a perspective that their existence is common knowledge, as is their meddling in human affairs, and so to attribute an event to the gods is hardly out of line. Thucydides, on the other hand, gives every event a human cause, and only refers to the

⁴⁷ Thucydides, I.127.1; I.128.1-2

⁴⁸ Thucydides, V.18.2

⁴⁹ Thucydides, V.105.3

gods when humans appeal to them or use them in order to make decisions, like, for instance, making a decision based on a commandment from an oracle at Delphi. It seems clear to me that while the authors' views on the gods are certainly different, the Greeks' view of the gods in general remained more or less unchanged between the Persian and Peloponnesian Wars.

Both Thucydides and Herodotus produced masterpieces that greatly influenced western civilization and are worthwhile in their own right. Though the two authors told their stories differently and placed importance on different things within their narratives, they compliment each other, one giving us the joy of knowledge and discovery, the other offering a stern warning and diagnosis of human behavior. Both the father of history and the first great historian produced works that fulfilled their desired goals, and they will remain important parts of our culture and our education for many generations to come.