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Thucydides in the Renaissance and Reformation

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Thucydides arrived late to the Renaissance. Once there, he principally spoke to fellow elites about urgent matters of politics and war. Only able to speak through foreign interpreters, he was understood variously and even contradictorily. We will thus encounter a Reformation Thucydides who counselled avoidance of war and cultivation of moral virtue and rhetorical ability; a reason of state Thucydides who sounded the trumpet of war; and Thomas Hobbes's Thucydides, who was critical of both rhetorical politics and military aggression, and illustrates how interpreters were in turn misinterpreted. Of necessity, more figures are excluded than included, and accounts are simplified. For example, the Reformation interpretation of the Peloponnesian War as the punishment of vice is not mere moralism, but a lesson for prudential politics; and those who used Thucydides as a reason-of-state author typically did so in the name of an overarching political morality. The aim, however, is to provide an introduction to a few significant lines of interpretation, concentrating on distinct views of how to approach or understand the text, on what Thucydides is taken to say about some substantive matters, and on the relation between interpretive approach and substantive meaning.

At the approach of the Renaissance, knowledge of ancient Greek was scant in the west of Europe. A scattered few with good scholarly Greek were to be found for a while in Otranto in Lecce, for example, in Robert Grosseteste's Lincolnshire, William of Moerbeke's Viterbo, and papal Avignon. So too in northern Italy in the fourteenth century, where a more or less itinerant Hellenist might provide Greek lessons or manuscript translations. Petrarch, Boccaccio, and others undertook a humanist project of classical recovery of growing proportions, and this involved beginning to learn Greek and promoting its understanding. Petrarch's view of

Thucydides was nonetheless through a dark glass, and he could make out little more than an impression of esteem in his Latin sources. Accordingly, in the catalogue of classical greats in his *Trionfo della Fama*, Petrarch writes briefly if elegantly:

Thucydides I saw, who well discerns
the times and places and gallant deeds,
and on whose blood which field feeds.¹

At the end of the fourteenth century, Manuel Chrysoloras arrived from Constantinople and set up in Florence as a teacher of Greek. Influential statesmen and scholars gathered to learn, including those who went on to read Thucydides, such as Pier Paolo Vergerio the Elder and Leonardo Bruni, who draws on Thucydides especially as a literary model.² Bruni (c. 1370-1444) resisted pressure to translate Thucydides, but held him in especially high regard. Bruni's expression of admiration for Thucydides, whom he was able to apprehend thanks to Chrysoloras, illustrates how intertwined could be Renaissance dependence on and contempt for Byzantine learning. Although Procopius tried to imitate Thucydides' speeches, writes Bruni, he is 'as far from the majesty of Thucydides as Thersites is distant from the beauty and power of Achilles'.³

¹ Tucidide vid'io, che ben distingue
i tempi e' luoghi e l'opere leggiadre
e di che sangue qual campo s'impingue. (Petrarca 1996: 450.)

All translations are my own, except I follow that by Rolfe for Gentili 1933 unless noted. Passages from Thucydides are translated from the respective Renaissance translations, in an attempt to retain the inherent interpretation. I begin with Petrarch (1304-1374) as a matter of convention, though one may question or complicate the idea that he is the founder or father of Renaissance humanism. See e.g. Witt 2000, esp. 230-91.

² See Daub 1996; Klee 1990: 23-58.

³ Letter of 1443 to Francesco Barbaro, in Griggio 1986, pp. 49-50. It is difficult to understand how his enthusiasm for Thucydides, already expressed in a letter to Pietro Emiliani (or Miani) of late 1407 (dated to October or November of 1407 in Luiso 1980: 38), is consistent with his dismissive attitude toward translating Thucydides in a letter of 17 December of that year, when he writes to Niccolò Niccoli that such effort should instead be directed to more morally improving ends (ibid:

A translation of Thucydides into the common language of European letters was finally accomplished by Lorenzo Valla for Pope Nicholas V in 1452. Valla (c. 1407-1457) wrote in his preface to the pope that undertaking the translation into Latin was like being a soldier sent to conquer the most forbidding province of the Greek world for the Roman empire.⁴ Thucydides' history remained daunting in Valla's Latin, but the translation garnered readers from across Europe. Valla's glorious presentation manuscript to the pope seems to have been intended primarily for an audience of one, but his translation eventually had a wide impact. A couple of dozen extant manuscript copies reveal that many were made for other patrons and potentates; and a version was eventually printed around 1483 and many times thereafter.

Translations into other languages were made from the Latin.⁵ So it was that Claude de Seyssel (c. 1450-1520) produced the first complete vernacular version of Thucydides, which he presented to King Louis XII in a lavish illuminated manuscript somewhere between 1512 and 1514. This too was intended primarily for a readership of the one person at the top of the relevant hierarchy. The exclusivity of the manuscript presented surely increased its value, and was also a way to protect the work's sensitive military and political counsel.⁶ Seyssel tells the French king that he is providing this history that the king may 'better understand how you might conduct the regime and government of your realm ... as well in times of peace as in times of war'; and he makes clear that the king can apprehend this teaching 'not so much from the narration of this history ... as from the profundity and excellence of the orations and harangues ... which contain universal teaching of all great matters, and the whole art and effectiveness of eloquence'.⁷ Seyssel urged his royal reader to focus on the speeches to glean essential precepts and to learn the art of persuasion.

42). Perhaps his pious refusal was fortified by reluctance to undertake an enormous task for which he was underprepared.

⁴ See the codex reproduced in Chambers 2008: 1-2.

⁵ For a catalogue, see Pade 2003.

⁶ Paris, BnF MS fr. 17211. See Boone 2007: 85-105.

⁷ Paris, BnF MS fr. 17211, fol. 3^r, 4^v.

A few years later, Philipp Melanchthon (1497-1560), who was to become Martin Luther's right-hand man and heir of the Lutheran movement, arrived in Wittenberg to take up the professorship of Greek. It is little known, and perhaps surprising, that the devout Melanchthon initiated the most substantial school of Thucydides interpretation in the Renaissance. Melanchthon lectured on Thucydides, and may have been responsible for a 1520 publication of the Greek text of the speech of Diodotus (3.42-58).⁸ He published a Latin translation of the Corcyrean stasis (3.81.4-3.84.2) in 1542, which was frequently reprinted thereafter. Melanchthon, the most influential teacher of rhetoric in the first half of the sixteenth century, provided rough translations of thirty-four of the speeches from Thucydides for use by his students, along with the encomium of Themistocles from 1.138.3 and another version of the Corcyrean stasis; these were published together after Melanchthon's death by his son-in-law, Caspar Peucer, in 1562. In his dedicatory epistle, Peucer notes that the wise read Thucydides not so much for the contest of arms as for the contest of wisdom and justice versus sophistry and injustice.⁹

And Melanchthon himself consistently reads in this way, combining rhetorical and moral lessons. The figures of the Peloponnesian war are divided into the ranks of the bad and the good. Cleon, Alcibiades, Sthenelaidas and others are ranked among the ambitious, turbulent, fickle, seditious, and sycophantic. Diodotus and Nicias are put forward for praise as just, moderate, defenders of public tranquillity, and opponents of unnecessary war. Significantly, Melanchthon places Pericles in the former camp: along with Alcibiades, he is the consummate example of *polupragmosunē* (understood as meddlesomeness, activism, interventionism), that 'great and pernicious vice that displeases God and multiplies the troubles of human life', and induced them to destroy Greece.¹⁰

⁸ Klee 1990: 134-5.

⁹ Peucer in Melanchthon 1562, sig. *2^r.

¹⁰ Letter of January 1545, no addressee specified (Melanchthon 1642, col. 193). See Melanchthon 1550: 98 and Melanchthon 1582: 485-7.

Melanchthon was the main force of Lutheran eirenicism during his life, working to minimise the roiling confessional strife within Lutheranism and between Lutherans and Catholics, Calvinists, Zwinglians, and others. His moralised reading of Thucydides is bolstered by his interpretation of the entire war between the Athenians and Peloponnesians as a civil war. ‘As Thucydides says, in sedition are all forms of evil things ... : this can be seen in the civil war of the Greeks, which is called the Peloponnesian, and which was full of the saddest examples [*exempla*]. Many cities were utterly obliterated, many citizens killed, and with natural affection extinguished, relatives carried out savagery against each other. With such horrible punishments did God manifest his wrath against Idols and lusts.’¹¹ Melanchthon finds in Thucydides a narrative that parallels contemporary conflict in Germany, and that confirms the retributive power of a just God.

Of the several other important Lutheran figures who interpreted Thucydides similarly, I will mention just one. David Chytraeus (1531-1600) went to study with Melanchthon in 1544. Chytraeus went on to teach at Rostock from 1551, where he became a pillar of the Lutheran church and worked to reorganise that university on the model of Wittenberg. A series of successively augmented editions of his lectures on Thucydides appeared from 1562 to 1594. These manifest a particular concern with an integrated chronology, as part of a religious account of human history that synchronised the classical with the biblical. The actions, principles, and characters of classical Greeks are not separate from but subject to the true scriptural standards. Following in Melanchthon’s footsteps, he takes the side of Diodotus against Cleon, the Melians against the Athenians, and Nicias against Alcibiades. Chytraeus also presents Pericles as an example of vicious obstinacy, and Alcibiades as a vainglorious fool, excoriating them for leading their commonwealth to disaster by indulging in unnecessary war.¹²

¹¹ Melanchthon 1559: 181. See also e.g. Melanchthon 1564: 209.

¹² See Chytraeus 1567: 9, 356-70, 379-82.

Chytraeus applies such moral interpretation and direction to both individual and political comportment. So he writes in the *Chronologia* of 1563 that Thucydides provides ‘many counsels about life and about actions done prudently or rightly, which this part of Philosophy, which is called Moral or Ethical or Political, delivers; he illustrates it not only with orations and the most serious maxims [*sententiae*], but also with remarkable counsels and the Examples of consequences, which much more effectively than bare precepts move and compel the minds of men. For a HISTORY written wisely, is truly a possession for all time, as Thucydides names it, a lasting thesaurus of examples.’¹³ Chytraeus argues that Thucydides effectively describes the contemporary tumults in Germany, and that his illustration of ‘how to govern a Republic or Empire wisely’ is still applicable.¹⁴

‘The whole history of this war is an extraordinary assembly, both of the wrath of God and the punishments of the unjust desires and the horrors of the wicked’, Chytraeus writes, ‘and of many counsels and Rules for living life rightly and properly. Civil war, which the Greek commonwealths waged among themselves, entirely overturned not only Athens but the power and virtue of all Greece.’¹⁵ He blames the pride and obstinacy of Pericles for the war and its attendant disasters, and like other Lutherans focuses on the war being unnecessary and thus unjustified. He goes on to say that ‘Alcibiades from blind and juvenile ambition and shallowness (*levitas*) later brings the war to Sicily and restarts it in Greece’.¹⁶ Chytraeus concludes that ‘these examples admonish us about the causes of horrible wars, and to avoid calamities, and not to initiate wars, at least about any non-necessary matters’. He here invokes as a general rule a precept of Melanchthon’s, not to do something unless there is something necessary to do; and he says that this and similar precepts, and indeed the wisest rules of life, are to be found in the speeches of Thucydides—where they are

¹³ Chytraeus 1563, sigs. K8^v-L1^r. Despite my translation here, ‘exempla’ are not mere examples, but edifying tales or anecdotes of exemplary behaviours. Collections of exempla constituted a popular medieval genre (see Tubach 1969 and the *Thesaurus Exemplorum Medii Aevi*).

¹⁴ Chytraeus 1563, sig. K8^v.

¹⁵ Chytraeus 1563, sig. L1^v.

¹⁶ Chytraeus 1563, sig. L2^r.

more vigorous and numerous than in the many arguments of the philosophers.¹⁷ The Lutheran Thucydideans emphasise the imprudence of aggression and expansion, coupled with a moral and a religious lesson against avarice and prideful ambition. This is a message that can be found in maxims that may be extracted from Thucydides, but the moral is also to be found in the story itself, and how those who lived in accordance with wicked maxims were cast down. As Chytraeus argues, Thucydides does not provide his political wisdom only in orations and precepts, but by illustrating the *euentus*, the outcomes or consequences of actions and counsels.¹⁸

The Lutherans' reformed rivals showed that they too could find high-minded principles in Thucydides, though with varying degrees of punctiliousness in interpreting quoted precepts in light of the arc of the history. The Calvinist Innocent Gentillet (c.1532-1588) is a good example. In his *Anti-Machiavel*, he denounces what he calls the tyranny besetting France—not of the king, but of the Italian and Italianising courtiers, advisors, and officials.¹⁹ It is difficult to determine whether Gentillet is an absolutist as he claims, and truly repudiates the monarchomachs' argument for a right of resistance²⁰; or someone of essentially monarchomach ideas who is trying a more subtle strategy; or above all a moderate Calvinist concerned to work out a solution with the *politiques* such that Calvinists and moderate Catholics can control the situation and live together.²¹ His approach is to extract what he presents as Machiavelli's political maxims, which pretend to be of general applicability, and to show that the Florentine's recommendations have in fact led to disaster. History, as for the Lutherans, reliably demonstrates the fall of the wicked.

¹⁷ Chytraeus 1563, sig. L2^r.

¹⁸ Chytraeus 1563, sig. L1^r.

¹⁹ Gentillet 1576 (*Discours, sur les moyens de bien gouverner et maintenir en bonne paix vn Royaume ou autre Principauté...Contre Nicolas Machiauel Florentin*).

²⁰ So d'Andrea 1970.

²¹ Presumably under the leadership of François, duc d'Alençon, to whom the work is dedicated. D'Andrea (1970: 411 n. 33) notes: 'Gentillet obtained permission from the Genevan authorities to publish the *Discours* on October 21, 1575, after the book had been examined by Beza'.

Gentillet tries to show that action in accordance with Machiavellian maxims brings about failure, even on a proper reading of Machiavelli's favourite, Livy. He puts two Greek historians, Thucydides and Xenophon, in the category of those who can also be relied on to test Machiavelli's teaching.²² A salient deployment of Thucydides comes in refuting the maxim that the Prince should not observe faith when it would be disadvantageous.²³ Gentillet provides an extended reading from Book 1 of Thucydides, arguing that the disastrous Peloponnesian War was due to the Corcyreans and the Athenians interpreting a treaty inequitably and unreasonably, despite the equitable and reasonable interpretation offered by the Corinthians and Lacedaemonians. The Corcyreans were thereby destroyed and the Athenians defeated.²⁴ So it is that 'perfidy brings ruin on the perfidious'.²⁵ Gentillet's readers cannot take solace in a corollary that their enemies will destroy themselves, however, for they threaten to destroy France before then with civil war and all manner of wickedness. He first calls his readers to better reading: Machiavelli does draw on some authoritative historians (though hardly at all on Thucydides), but distorts their sense, failing to treat them fully or apply them correctly.²⁶ Read properly, the exemplary ancient historians are supposed to demonstrate the falsity of wicked principles. On the basis of these historical claims, he calls his readers to action, saying that if they do not drive Machiavellian government out of France, they will be guilty before God of many murders and massacres, and convicted and attainted of impiety, atheism, and tyranny.²⁷

This call to resist tyranny in order not to be guilty of it is echoed in the most famous of the monarchomach texts, the 1579 *Vindiciae, contra tyrannos*. The author

²² They are on the short list of those 'qui sont tous bien authentiques & approuuez, & qui par vne prescription de temps immemorial, ont gagné la reputation d'estre bons tesmoins & sans reproche' (Gentillet 1576: 12-13). Machiavelli himself seems to have had only a cursory or mediated acquaintance with Thucydides.

²³ Gentillet 1576: 437 (Maxim 21).

²⁴ Gentillet 1576: 463-5.

²⁵ Gentillet 1576: 453.

²⁶ Gentillet 1576: 6-7.

²⁷ Gentillet 1576: 10.

(or authors) also invoke the righteous authority of the Corinthians from Book 1 as they call for help. ‘Hence Thucydides says: “Tyrants are not only those who reduce others into servitude; much more so are those who are able to keep such violence in check but do not do it ...” And he is right.’²⁸ More activist than their Lutheran counterparts, these authors maintain that those who do not intervene are at least complicit in tyranny.

These Calvinist authors are themselves guilty of a strongly motivated reading that depends on extracting what suits them and ignoring what does not. Gentillet denounces Machiavelli’s misreadings, but distorts both Machiavelli and the ancient sources that are supposed to confute him, including Thucydides.²⁹ Some Calvinists are keen to peddle maxims of state of their own, and are as cavalier as anyone in plundering the ancient texts for opinions conformable to their own outlook. Julius Wilhelm Zinzgref, for instance, who quotes the same passage from the Corinthians’ speech as the author of the *Vindiciae*,³⁰ repeatedly extracts moralistic one-liners from

²⁸ ‘Brutus’ 1579: 232-3, referring to Thucydides 1.69.1. Compare Hobbes’s more accurate ‘For not he that bringeth into slavery, but he that being able to hinder it, neglects the same, is most truly said to doe it’ (Thucydides 1629: 36). Importing the idea of tyranny into this passage fits the purposes of the *Vindiciae* well, but may be based on more than rhetorical convenience or the tight conceptual connection between tyrannising and enslaving: it may be influenced by the Corinthians’ characterisation in their second speech at Sparta (1.122.3 and 1.124.3), and did have precedents, as in the translation by Francesco Soldo di Strozzi (Thucydides [1545]: 33), relied on e.g. by Nannini 1557: 8. The language of ‘violence’ is interpolated, bringing out the character of tyranny and the stakes of resistance against it.

²⁹ For example, see the strained use of Thucydides in the rebuttal of Maxim 23 at Gentillet 1576: 502.

³⁰ Zinzgref 1619, sig. Bb1^r, the call for intervention becoming legible in the immediate context of its citation. In 1618, the nobles of Bohemia rebelled against the new Catholic king, Ferdinand, a conflict generally understood as the beginning of the Thirty Years’ War. In the following year, the Calvinist Frederick V, head of the Palatinate (the Electoral Palatinate of the Rhine, a territory of the Holy Roman Empire) and of the Protestant Union, accepted their offer of the throne of Bohemia. The Holy Roman Empire, the Catholic League, and above all Spain responded by seizing control of the Palatinate during the next few years. As we will see addressed by Bacon and Hobbes below, this led many in Protestant countries to push for military intervention against Spain and her allies to liberate the Palatinate and contain the Imperial-Spanish threat. His fate dependent on that of the Protestant Palatinate, Zinzgref encourages intervention against encroaching tyranny while also criticising expansionism, e.g. in Zinzgref 2011 [1626]: 51 (apophthegm 112).

Thucydides, with scant attention to how they were embedded in the text. None of these can be called subtle interpretations, but the prize surely goes to his use of Thucydides 5.104, where the Melians reply to the Athenians that as far as fortune goes, they trust that the gods will not favour them less, since they resist as innocent men invaded by the unjust.³¹ This is Zinzgref's authority for the dictum that God gives victory not to the stronger, but to the better. Notoriously, the Athenians overwhelmed the Melians, killing all of the adult males, enslaving the women and children, and then populating the place with their own colonists. So much for judging a maxim by its outcome.

Zinzgref frequently borrowed from another retailer of Thucydidean maxims, Justus Lipsius (1547-1606).³² Lipsius (who by turns professed to be Catholic, Lutheran, and Calvinist) treats Thucydides as an outstanding authority on subjects political, diplomatic, and military. It is generally accepted that Lipsius' favoured historian and political authority is Tacitus, so it is noteworthy that he puts Thucydides at the head of the historians who wrote in Greek, and then places Tacitus in a parallel position for those who wrote in Latin.³³ Although he has a taste for excerpting rather prosaic sayings, Lipsius does not read Thucydides so crudely as do some of his predecessors. For example, rather than routinely cutting a phrase from one of the speakers and telling us that it has the authority of 'Thucydides', he generally distinguishes the speaker—though evidently to mark off those worthy to be authorities (mostly Archidamus, Brasidas, and above all Pericles, 'most prudent Athenian') from those unworthy.³⁴ So Lipsius says that Cleon is 'lying' when he asserts that 'most dangerous to ruling [*Imperio*] are compassion, flattery, and lenity',

³¹ Zinzgref 1619, sig. [F4]^r.

³² In the following, I draw on Hoekstra 2012.

³³ Lipsius 2004: 732-4 (in the notes, printed with the *Politica* from 1590). The two Greeks Lipsius here singles out as superior are Thucydides and Polybius; his Latin list is topped by Tacitus, Sallust, and Livy. He says that Sallust would have been first of the Latin writers, had his work survived entire, and refrains from saying more on the basis that his praise for Sallust is the same that he has supplied for Thucydides. (As the works of Tacitus and Livy are also extant only in part, Sallust seems disqualified from primacy because not *enough* of his work survives.)

³⁴ The reference to Pericles ('prudētissimū Atheniensium') is in Lipsius 2004: 556.

recommending instead ‘calm power’ and forgiveness of the afflicted.³⁵ And he denounces as wicked Euphemus’ doctrine that ‘for a ruling man or city nothing is unjust that is advantageous’, preferring the view of Xenophon and Cicero that the true riches for a prince are virtue and justice.³⁶

When Lipsius does quote ‘Thucydides’, however, this is not always because the historian has spoken in his own voice. So he simply gives Thucydides—rather than Cleon—as the source of the observation that those who are duller generally administer the commonwealth better than those who are sharper.³⁷ That he does not credit Cleon with this maxim may suggest that Lipsius wishes to detach a thought of which he approves from a character of whom he disapproves. Elsewhere, however, he does the same with a quotation from Diodotus.³⁸ It seems he is in each case elevating what he regards as an underlying truth about politics, identifying both political teachings as ‘arcana’ (secrets or hidden doctrines).³⁹ These ‘arcana’ are hardly mysterious or enigmatic, though they may count as paradoxical in the Renaissance sense of being unconventional. Lipsius seems to have something deeper in mind, however, when he says that Thucydides is ‘everywhere secretly instructing, and guiding one’s life and actions’.⁴⁰ Thucydides instructs everywhere, so the teaching is to be found throughout, not only in the precepts, speeches, or authorial pronouncements; and he instructs secretly, thus his instruction is not even reducible to what is stated in the text.

³⁵ Lipsius 2004: 330 (re. Thucydides 3.40.3).

³⁶ Lipsius 2004: 320, referring to the pronouncement in Thucydides 6.85.1 as ‘*Malitioso*’. As usual, Lipsius gives the Greek, his ‘iniustum’ here translating ἄλογον.

³⁷ Lipsius 2004: 356, from Cleon in Thucydides 3.37.3. Others who cite this popular passage include Montaigne, Botero, Gentili, and Hobbes.

³⁸ Cf. Lipsius 2004: 368, citing Thucydides 3.42.6.

³⁹ Jan Waszink (in Lipsius 2004, esp. pp. 88 and 201) argues that Lipsius was a reason-of-state theorist invested in *arcana imperii* who nonetheless eschewed such language to elude its Machiavellian associations. Yet Lipsius does explicitly identify *arcana* of government, though intriguingly solely from Thucydides (cf. also Lipsius 2004: 360, re. Tacitus *about* such *arcana*).

⁴⁰ Lipsius 2004: 732 (‘occulte ubique instruens, actiones vitamque dirigens’).

Lipsius does ultimately allow for the legitimacy of some ‘reason of state’ policies, including kinds of deception, territorial expansion, and preventive attack; but when he draws on Thucydides it is generally for moderate moral counsel. Alberico Gentili (1552-1608) specifically commends Lipsius for authorising preventive military attack, and, unlike Lipsius, he associates this position with Thucydides. (Gentili was publishing *De iure belli* in instalments while Lipsius brought out subsequent editions of his *Politica*; the *De iure belli* was published in complete form in 1598.) The special authority Gentili accords to Thucydides is readily seen in the unfolding of his discussion of prevention, where he considers Cicero’s argument that to accept the principle that one may attack another for fear of attack would lead to the unacceptable result that everyone will always be in danger of attack. To overcome Cicero’s authoritative endorsement of this moderate position, Gentili appeals to the especially valuable opinion of Thucydides, ‘an eminent and wise man’.⁴¹ ‘Yet the reply of the Mytilenians to the Athenians was right’, he writes, quoting Thucydides:

If we seem to any one unjust, because we revolted first, without waiting until we knew clearly whether they would do us any harm, such a man does not consider well; ... since they always have the opportunity of doing harm, we ought to have the privilege of anticipating our defense.⁴²

It may be that all are in greater danger if they understand that anticipation or prevention is legitimate, but it remains the case that if a commonwealth is likely to be harmed and is safer to anticipate than to delay, then they may legitimately anticipate. This is sanctioned by the fundamental right of self-preservation. ‘Defense is in accordance with the law of nature and of God, has the consent of all nations, is born with the world, and is destined to endure so long as the world lasts; and this

⁴¹ Gentili 1933: 2:63/1:100-1.

⁴² Gentili 1933: 2:63/1:101, quoting Thucydides 3.12.2-3 (substituting ‘right’ for ‘reasonable’ in the translation of Gentili’s judgement (‘rectè’)).

no civil nor canon law can annul.⁴³ Already in 1587, Gentili had cited the passage from Thucydides where the Plataeans argue that in attacking the Thebans they were justly avenging an injury, and that ‘by the Law of all Nations it is lawfull to repell an assailing enemy’.⁴⁴ Gentili does not reflect on ‘Thucydides’ presentation of the initial assault as having come about because ‘the *Thebans* foreseeing the Warre, desired to praeoccupate *Plataea*, (which was alwayes at variance with them) whilst there was yet Peace, and the Warre not openly on foot’.⁴⁵ But when he maintains that what this ‘common law of all’ sanctions is not only a right of defence but a right of conquest, he appears to provide a justification for the Theban aggression that had justified the Plataean attack.⁴⁶

Like Lipsius, Gentili cites Thucydides dozens of times on a range of topics. In Thucydides’ text he finds a distinction of war from brigandage, examples of religious motives for war, evidence of the Greek prohibition of killing suppliants, and a delineation of different kinds of alliance; he also appeals to Thucydides when discussing the status of refugees, punishment for seizure of property, the legitimacy of a prince’s defence of the subjects of another prince, illegitimate construals of the terms of an agreement, rights over hostages, burial of the enemy, claims to conquered territory, what is due to captives, whether the adjacent sea is included in a dominion, and more. In many cases, Thucydides is brought in to provide authoritative backup for a stated position. But authorities can disagree, and it is notable that his encomium of Thucydides as an especially weighty authority comes when he uses him as a trump in his argument in favour of anticipatory attack.

By contrast, even in the cold-eyed *De iure praedae* of c.1606, Hugo Grotius (1583-1645) cites Thucydides for the traditional just war position that war is only

⁴³ Gentili 1933: 2:312/1:507. Gentili illustrates this with Pericles’ position that in the name of self-defence it would be licit to melt the gold of the sacred statues for the war effort (Thucydides 2.13.5).

⁴⁴ Gentili 1587: 29, quoting Thucydides 3.56.2 (English of which from Thucydides 1629: 174).

⁴⁵ Thucydides 1629: 82 (2.2.3).

⁴⁶ Gentili 1587: 29.

legitimate in response to an injury.⁴⁷ He also appeals to Thucydides to uphold constraints on just war, in particular the condition that one party may proceed only if the other refuses to reach a judicial settlement of the dispute.⁴⁸ In the *De iure belli ac pacis*, too, Grotius begins with what he takes to be Augustine's definition, asserting that 'a just cause for undertaking a war can be nothing other than injury'.⁴⁹ Whereas in the *De iure praedae* Grotius had relied on Cleon to argue for the *necessity* of punishing the one who has committed injustice, however, by the time of the 1631 edition of the *De iure belli ac pacis* he takes seriously Diodotus' response, that punishment should not be meted out even to a guilty party unless some good will result.⁵⁰ Like most who argue from the requirement of precedent injury, Grotius expands the category or extends beyond it in specific ways. Grotius commends Thucydides for the view that some actions are necessitated by our nature, and thus not to be punished; and stands close to Gentili and others when he emphasises that the natural principle of self-preservation may entail the legitimacy of attack even when it is not a response to an aggressor's injustice.⁵¹

Having let his argument run beyond the opening position that war can only be justified as punishment of injury, Grotius enlists Thucydides to rein it back in. For the prevention of injury to be a just cause, 'imminent, and nearly immediate, danger is required'; I may not anticipate another simply because he arms himself, but may do so if he arms himself with a manifest intention to kill me and I am unable to rely on an authority to protect me.⁵² In support, he lifts the quotation from Cicero that Gentili had used in weighing the question of anticipation.⁵³ But instead of appealing to Thucydides to outrank and countermand Cicero, Grotius enlists

⁴⁷ Grotius [1606], fol. 54^r (ch. 9) where Grotius quotes Thucydides 1.120. I refer to this work as from 1606 as the date when it was likely substantially complete.

⁴⁸ Grotius [1606], fol. 44^v (ch. 8), quoting Thucydides 1.85.2.

⁴⁹ Grotius 1625: 123.

⁵⁰ Compare Grotius [1606], fols. 146^r and 149^v (and Grotius 1625: 399) with Grotius 1631: 289.

⁵¹ Grotius 1625: 420.

⁵² Grotius 1625: 125.

⁵³ Grotius 1625: 126.

Thucydides alongside him as a *critic* of an overly permissive right of anticipation based on fear. Rather than invoking the speech of the Mytilenians in the third book, he offers a passage in Book 1 against acting on the basis of uncertain future threats, and then joins Thucydides in condemning those caught up in the Corcyrean civil war who pre-empted the future misdeeds of others by doing evil themselves.⁵⁴

Grotius explicitly targets Gentili's argument justifying prevention. He objects that 'some propound what is intolerable: that according to the law of nations it is right to take up arms to reduce a growing power which expanding too much could harm us'.⁵⁵ Grotius concedes that such a measure may be expedient, but denies that this expediency justifies. 'Defence against uncertain fear is to be sought from divine providence and from harmless precautions, not from force.'⁵⁶ The Spartans failed to meet this criterion of just war: 'Thucydides holds that the true cause of the Peloponnesian war was the Athenians' growing power and the Lacedaemonians' mistrust.'⁵⁷ Such 'fear of a neighbouring power is not a sufficient cause', however: 'for to be just, defence must be necessary, which it is not unless it is known that the other has not only sufficient power, but also the intention' to attack; and this conviction must amount to a 'moral certainty'.⁵⁸ Although he argues for the legitimacy of some aggressive actions abroad, Grotius demonstrates that the text of Thucydides could be used to articulate and insist on limits to such aggression within the framework of the law of nations, and not only of biblically based natural law. In Grotius we can see the civil lawyer adjudicating between the Reformation Thucydides and the reason of state Thucydides. This deliberate attempt at balance was unusual, however, and the latter Thucydides came to dominate the discussion.

In 1624, while Grotius was writing the *De iure belli ac pacis*, Francis Bacon addressed a manuscript essay to Prince Charles (who became King Charles I the

⁵⁴ Grotius 1625: 126, rendering Thucydides 1.42.2 and 3.82.5.

⁵⁵ Grotius 1625: 136, where the marginal annotation is 'Alb Gent. lib. I.c.14'.

⁵⁶ Grotius 1625: 136.

⁵⁷ Grotius 1625: 467, referring to Thucydides 1.23.6.

⁵⁸ Grotius 1625: 468.

following March), in which he argued that just apprehensions *are* a legitimate ground of war even if one has not suffered an injury. He focuses on the criterion of ‘*iust Feare of the Subuersion of our Ciuill Estate*’ and argues that it has far-reaching implications for his country’s foreign policy.⁵⁹ The validity of this justification means that war must be waged with Spain ‘not for the *Palatinate* onely, but for *England, Scotland, Ireland, our King, our Prince, our Nation, all that we haue*’. To show that a war on foreign soil is tantamount to self-defence, Bacon says that he must prove ‘that a *iust Feare*, (without an Actuall Inuasion or Offence,) is a sufficient Ground of a *War*, and in the Nature of a true *Defensiuē*’.⁶⁰ Integral to that proof is an appeal to the authority of Thucydides.

[I]t is good to heare what time saith. *Thucydides*, in his *Inducement* to his Story of the great *Warre of Peloponnesus*, sets downe in plaine termes, that the true Cause of that *Warre* was; *The ouergrowing Greatnesse of the Athenians, and the feare that the Lacedemonians stood in thereby*; And doth not doubt to call it, *A necessity imposed vpon the Lacedemonians of a Warre*: Which are the Words of a meere *Defensiuē*. Adding, that the other Causes were but specious and Popular.⁶¹

Bacon then quotes at some length from Book 1. Thucydides gives us ‘what time saith’, and although time speaks to both Bacon and Grotius via the same text, the message is antithetical. Bacon takes Thucydides to authorise alignment with the position Gentili had taken and repudiation of traditional positions that still served as important premises for Grotius.

The basic logic of the necessity of prevention, later elaborated in Hobbes’s

⁵⁹ Bacon 1629: 13, 4.

⁶⁰ Bacon 1629: 12. Bacon takes himself to be quoting the criterion ‘*iustus metus qui cadit in constantem virum*’ from Roman private law, extending it from individuals to commonwealths, as civil lawyers had frequently done. For context about the Palatinate and the perceived threat of Spain, see n. 30 above.

⁶¹ Bacon 1629: 13, referring to Thucydides 1.23.6.

discussion of the state of nature, is a logic that is also forcefully conveyed in popular print. John Reynolds, also in 1624, takes the Athenian rather than the Lacedemonian example as warrant for war, urging Parliament to tell old King James ‘that old *Pericles* made the greatnesse of his generositie and courage, to reuiue and flourish on his Tombe, when hee caused the *Athenians* to warre vpon the *Pelloponessians*... Tell him that to transport Warre into *Spaine*, is to auoide and preuent it in *England*’.⁶² As is especially common among those who cite snippets from the text or are taken with an impression of Athenian glory, the conclusion is a call to arms: ‘Wars, Wars, then ye, (with cheerefull hearts and ioyfull soules) let vs prepare our selues for Warrs.’⁶³

When Hobbes was immersed in producing his translation of Thucydides in the mid-1620s, the dominant outlook of the early modern Thucydideans was that of the war party. Given Hobbes’s bellicose reputation, we might expect that he shared the view of Bacon, who was also his employer around this time. In interpretive approach, however, Hobbes sounds more like the Lutheran Thucydideans when he writes in his prefatory note ‘To the Readers’ that ‘the History it selfe’ instructs not by ‘discourses inserted’ but by ‘the contexture of the Narration’.⁶⁴ Hobbes finds Thucydides’ instruction less in the claims made in the speeches or in authorial statements—the nearly exclusive sources for bellicose Thucydideans such as Bacon—but in Thucydides’ account of what *happens* in the course of the history. Thucydides’ teaching, according to Hobbes, is to be found in what is ‘meerely narratiue’.⁶⁵ Hobbes emphasises that Thucydides’ history has a unity as a whole, and should be considered as a single body.⁶⁶ Doing so shows that Thucydides criticises the Athenians ‘by the necessity of the narration, not by any sought digression. So that no word of his, but their own actions do sometimes reproach them... So

⁶² [Reynolds] 1624, sig. B[1]^v.

⁶³ Ibid., sig. B2^r.

⁶⁴ Hobbes, in Thucydides 1629, sig. A3^r. As we saw, the Melanchthonians also looked to Thucydides for authoritative maxims, so in this sense Hobbes goes further in prioritising the narrative. For a more complete version of what follows, see Hoekstra 2016.

⁶⁵ Hobbes, in Thucydides 1629, sig. A3^r.

⁶⁶ Ibid., sig. a4^r.

coherent, perspicuous and perswasie is the whole Narration'.⁶⁷ Hobbes quotes Lipsius' commendation of Thucydides for 'euery where secretly instructing, and directing a mans life and actions'.⁶⁸ Hobbes's own judgement—which also recalls the Lutheran view that the wisdom of Thucydides is revealed in the *euentus* or outcomes—is similar: 'open conueyances of Precepts (which is the Philosophers part) he neuer vseth, as hauing so cleerly set before mens eyes, the wayes and euentus, of good and euill counsels, that the Narration it selfe doth secretly instruct the Reader, and more effectually then possibly can be done by Precept'.⁶⁹ What, then, does Hobbes believe that the events reveal of Thucydides' secret instruction?

Hobbes argues that 'men profit more by looking on aduerse euentus, then on prosperity. Therefore by how much mens miseries doe better instruct, then their good successe, by so much was *Thucydides* more happy in taking his Argument, then *Herodotus* was wise in chusing his'.⁷⁰ The kernel of Thucydides' instruction is what his readers can learn from the 'euentus, of good and euill counsels' and the Athenian actions that result in failure and misery.

Hobbes criticises the Athenian leaders who flattered the people's pride in their commonwealth and thereby drove the Athenians 'headlong into those actions that were to ruine them'.⁷¹ This sets up a parallel between the Athenians' disastrous expedition to Sicily and the proposals by Bacon and other members of the war party to venture against Spain, thus breaking with the more conservative policy of James I in favour of the aggressive adventuring promoted by his son Charles. Pericles tells the Athenians early in the war that they may prevail so long as 'you doe not...striue to enlarge your dominion, and vndergoe other voluntary dangers'; Hobbes comments that '*Thucydides* hath his mind here, upon the Defeat in *Sicily*, which fell out many yeares after the death of *Pericles*'.⁷² Hobbes's Thucydides teaches that the

⁶⁷ Ibid., sigs. a2^v-a3^f.

⁶⁸ Ibid., sig. b1^f. Cf. n. 40, above.

⁶⁹ Ibid., sig. a3^f; see sigs. A3^v and a4^v.

⁷⁰ Hobbes (responding to Dionysius of Halicarnassus) in Thucydides 1629, sig. a3^v.

⁷¹ Ibid., sig. a1^v.

⁷² Ibid.: 78 (Thucydides 1.144.1).

Athenians would have been saved had they continued to follow the more cautious policy of the leader whom Hobbes characterised as a wise monarch (a Pericles markedly different from both the proud, imprudent, and bellicose figure condemned by the Melanchthonians, and the Pericles praised by the likes of Reynolds, who procures safety, glory, and greatness by taking Athens to war). The Athenians instead followed the counsel of Pericles' glory-seeking ward, Alcibiades, and embarked on a devastating expedition abroad. So it is that Thucydides presents Hobbes's readers with the instructive 'euents, of good and euill counsels'.

Gentili and Bacon used Thucydides to justify preventive attack. In his later works, Hobbes proposed an abstract version of this justification in his argument about the state of nature, a condition of war between free individuals or sovereign states. But this abstract argument was the starting point of his philosophy of peace and the preservation of the people. And his edition of Thucydides should be seen as consistent with this end, issuing a vivid warning to and about those who threatened the peace.

Hobbes sees in Thucydides a cautionary history fitted to the politics of his own times, as well as a model for his own actions. Hobbes's position in the 1620s is a precarious one, reflected in his description of those who disagreed when the party for expanding the war had grown powerful in Athens: 'the good men either durst not oppose, or if they did, vndid themselues'.⁷³ He immediately goes on to tell us that Thucydides' own way out of this dilemma was to avoid the usual political arena and focus on the writing of his history.⁷⁴ 'It is therefore no maruell, if he meddled as little as he could, in the businesse of the Common-wealth, but gaue himselfe rather to the obseruation and recording of what was done by those that had the mannaging thereof.'⁷⁵ Hobbes, too, focuses on that history while much of the public and many

⁷³ Hobbes in Thucydides 1629, sig. a1^v.

⁷⁴ Ibid.: Thucydides 'forbore to come into the Assemblies, and propounded to himselfe, a priuate life...' Hobbes immediately goes on to discuss Thucydides' views about 'the gouernment of the State', so he does not take a focus on writing in the context of a private life to preclude writing about public or political matters.

⁷⁵ Ibid., sig. a2^r.

of the powerful, including his patrons, are spoiling for a fight that could lead to England's ruin, and on his understanding of how Thucydides was able to influence the influential without undoing himself.

Reflecting on the demagogues who drove Athens into intervening abroad, and apparently also on the war-mongering politics of the parliaments of the early 1620s, Hobbes writes: 'such men onely swayed the Assemblies, and were esteemed wise and good Common-wealths men, as did put them vpon the most dangerous and desperate enterprizes'.⁷⁶ Reflecting, it seems, on the plight of those like Hobbes himself as well as Thucydides, he observes the risks faced by those who instead gave 'temperate, and discreet aduice'.⁷⁷ In Thucydides, Hobbes found a model of prudent political action through writing. What Hobbes offers to his patrons and proposes to publish is a translation of a work by someone else, about other times, with a helpful apparatus and plenty of encouragement to read the work through and consider the arc of the narrative and what it reveals about the policies that led to the Athenians' miseries and defeat. Hobbes reckons that the way to intervene most effectively in contemporary politics is to let Thucydides speak for himself.

Thucydides was salient in the Renaissance for his moral, prudential, political, and military counsel, though he also figured in assessments of how to write history, in catalogues of rhetorical modes and materials, and in many other discussions. Because of his reputation for a rare truthfulness and discernment, Thucydides spoke with great authority to those at the head of state, though such counsels turned out to be as varied as those of a fractious assembly. The amplitude of Thucydides' text, disparate approaches to reading it, and divergent assumptions about what in it constituted exemplary wisdom or action, all combined to ensure that an inexhaustible work inspired a variety of resourceful interpretations.⁷⁸

⁷⁶ Ibid., sig. a1^v.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Thanks to Mark Fisher and Derin McLeod for excellent comments on an early draft. Alison McQueen and David Plunkett organised a discussion at Stanford University where I benefited from questions and comments from them, Daniela Cammack, Desmond Jagmohan, Josh Ober, and Lucas Stanczyk.

Further reading

Pade 2003 is a meticulous inventory of the editions, translations, and commentaries up to the beginning of the seventeenth century. Accounts of Thucydides in this period are in Cambiano 2000, Pade 2006, Pires 2007, and Iglesias-Zoido 2011; a number of chapters relevant to the period may also be found in Fromentin, Gotteland, and Payen (eds.) 2010 and Lee and Morley (eds.) 2015. Single-author approaches to the broader reception are Meister 2013 and Morley 2014. On the Renaissance use of Thucydides to promote military intervention, see Hoekstra 2012. On the Lutheran Thucydides, see Richards 2013. On Hobbes's Thucydides, see especially Iori 2015, Warren 2015: ch. 5, and Hoekstra 2016.

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