

THUCYDIDES

THE PELOPONNESIAN WAR

THE UNABRIDGED CRAWLEY TRANSLATION

WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY

JOSEPH GAVORSE

CHINA SOCIAL SCIENCES PUBLISHING HOUSE

CHENGCHENG BOOKS LTD.

图书在版编目(CIP)数据

伯罗奔尼撒战争史:英文/(古希腊)修昔底德著. —影印本.

—北京:中国社会科学出版社,1999.12

(西学基本经典·历史学类/西学基本经典工作委员会 编)

ISBN 7-5004-2649-6

I.伯… II.修… III.伯罗奔尼撒战争(前431—前404)—历史—英文

IV.K125

中国版本图书馆CIP数据核字(1999)第68456号

版权总代理:TAO MEDIA INTERNATIONAL

(2790 19th Avenue, Ste. 20, San Francisco, CA 94132 U. S. A.)

西学基本经典·历史学类

西学基本经典工作委员会 编

中国社会科学出版社 出版发行

(北京鼓楼西大街甲158号 邮编100720)

E-mail:5004@Peoplespace.net

诚成图书有限公司制作

中国建筑工业出版社密云印刷厂印刷

新华书店经销

1999年12月第1版 1999年12月第1次印刷

开本880×1230 1/32 印张187.5

历史学类全10册 定价:500.00元

总策划 严平 野夫

项目策划 张自文 任建成

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INTRODUCTION

I

GREECE at the beginning of the 'world war' which is the subject of 'Thucydides' *History* was at the zenith of her material, intellectual and artistic powers. The victories she had won during the preceding sixty years over Persia were the victories of intellect and liberty in the West over materialism and despotism in the East.

Racial, geographical and political barriers had hitherto prevented any concerted action among the rival Greek city-states. The threat of the 'Great King' of the greatest empire of that age was the one force powerful enough to unite them. The positive result of the repulsion of that threat was that it loosened new energy which, in the brief period of two generations, brought to its culmination what Greece, and particularly Athens, had to give to the world. The negative result was that the barriers which had been temporarily swept aside were again raised and to them added another, the economic. The Greek cities did in a limited manner realise that the good of each demanded the good of at least those of like political beliefs. But they could not carry this realisation into the economic field, no more than modern states have been able to do.

During the struggle against Persian encroachment, Sparta had confirmed in the minds of all Greeks the superiority of her land force and had strengthened her leadership of the city-states of Dorian stock. The Peloponnesian League which she headed was a purely defensive one, and it so remained. She was under no internal or external necessity of converting it into an empire. Athens, on the other hand, leader of the city-states of Ionian stock, was led by both internal and external forces to convert her League, the Delian, into an empire. This was a blow at Corinth, which, from her advantageous situation on the isthmus, had up till then been the trade centre of Greece. Athens was even threatening Corinth's

old commerce in the Ionian Sea. The determining factor for peace or war was now economic and was in Corinth's hands.

The struggle into which these antagonisms developed falls into two periods.

The first extended from 457 to 445 B.C. It began with the resistance of Athens, in consolidating her empire, encountered from Sparta, and was concluded by the Peace of Pericles, or the Thirty Years' Truce, under which she was compelled to grant Sparta supremacy by land and to rest content with her maritime empire. The Thirty Years' Peace became one of a scant fifteen, and we enter the second period, which extends from 431 to 404 B.C.

Thucydides' narrative deals in detail with this second period alone. It begins with the Archidamian war, which the struggle, when renewed in 431, was called. In 421 the brilliant Spartan general Brasidas and the Athenian Cleon, 'the two pestles of war,' as Aristophanes terms them, met death on the same battlefield before Amphipolis. This made possible the Peace of Nicias, which was a truce for fifty years. It lasted eight, though Thucydides contends it was at no time more than a peace in name only. Serious fighting broke out again in 413, when Sparta intervened in Athenian expansion in Sicily. At the same time she carried her menace up to the walls of Athens by the investiture of Decelea, which gives its name to this part of the conflict. When Athens failed in Sicily the scene of the struggle shifted to the Ægean Sea. This part is called the Ionic war. Thucydides states (V, 26) he intends to end his history with the fall of Athens in 404. In reality it breaks off abruptly at the end of the year 411. Of the period he intended to cover he left unfinished about one-fourth. It is this twenty-seven-year conflict which has come to be known as the Peloponnesian war.

Why should this petty, inter-urban struggle among the Greek cities have attained such renown? It is not only because the Peloponnesian war has an advantage accorded no other in history: 'It has been recorded by the first and the greatest of all critical historians;' it holds amongst events in Greek history a significance for us equal to that of the Persian wars. Their repulsion of the Persians meant that the Greeks had the opportunity to develop, consolidate and stabilise their

cultures for an indefinite period. Actually, it only saved Greece for a magnificent blossoming in the age of Pericles, and for self-destruction in the Peloponnesian war.

Of the two principal combatants, it left one utterly prostrate, her proud 'Long Walls' down to her port at the Piræus being demolished to the sound of Peloponnesian flutes, the other so exhausted she could only pass to Macedon and thence to Rome the task in which she too in turn failed—a task with which man is still desperately struggling.

II

All that we know certainly of the life of Thucydides is contained in casual allusions to himself which he makes in his life-work. We possess, it is true, three ancient biographical notices of him. But they give no further details we can credit; they consist in large part of the sort of stories which arise in the absence of contemporary records, and contradict each other. One of these is undated and by an anonymous grammarian. Apparently the oldest dates from about the 5th century A.D. and goes under the name of 'Marcellinus.' The other is a short notice in Suidas, the Greek lexicographer who lived some time before 12-13 A.D. There are also three essays on Thucydides by Dionysius of Halicarnassus, who, in the time of Augustus published the most elaborate ancient criticism on his diction and composition. Plutarch (*Cimon*, IV), and Pausanias (I, 23) both refer to him. There are no references to Thucydides' *History* in the works of extant Greek writers of his own age, but Lucian (c. 150 A.D.) preserves a tradition to the effect that Demosthenes had such admiration for it he copied it out eight times.

Modern research has added nothing to our knowledge of Thucydides the man, though it has corroborated his narrative and strengthened the reputation for credibility which his work has almost without exception inspired. The facts about himself which he gives us permit us, however, with reasonable certainty to make inferences which, in more clearly defining his position in the life of his day and setting his work in clearer perspective, will bring him closer to readers of the 20th century.

Thucydides began his history of the 'war between the Peloponnesians and the Athenians,' he informs us in its opening sentence, 'at the moment that it broke out, and believing that it would be a great war, and more worthy of relation than any that had preceded it.' 'I lived through the whole of it,' we learn in Book V, § 26, 'being of an age to comprehend events, and giving my attention to them in order to know the exact truth about them.' Granting a Greek need not have been over twenty-five to have been 'of an age to comprehend events,' we may with reasonable certainty place the year of his birth around 455. The tradition that he was forty in 431 appears to be only another inference from this statement.

There can be little doubt that Thucydides' father was a full Athenian citizen. Otherwise he would not use the official term he does in referring to himself as the 'son of Olorus' (IV, 104). From the fact that his father's name was identical with that of the Thracian prince Olorus (whose daughter Hegesipyle had married Miltiades and given birth to Cimon) and that in Plutarch's day (*c.* 75 A.D.) Thucydides' tomb was to be seen 'amongst the tombs of them of the house and family of Cimon' it has often been assumed that Thucydides was descended from a line of Thracian kings. This assumption is strengthened by the fact that he tells us (IV, 105) he 'possessed the right of working the gold mines in Thrace, and had thus great influence with the inhabitants of the continent.' It is, however, not necessary to prove that his family had princely origin to render quite plausible a belief it was of sufficient wealth and influence to start him in the world with good connections.

We do not know where he was born or where he spent his childhood. Some things about him would perhaps be more easily explained by assuming he spent his childhood in Thrace. He is, in the gravity and excessive restraint of his manner, utterly lacking in lightness and grace, his severely objective point of view an anomaly among Greeks and was for centuries so considered even by them. But even more is this impression conveyed by his singular style. His most ardent admirers have felt compelled to advance various excuses for the occasional clumsiness and obscurity of his Greek.

Whether or not he spent his youth at Athens, he was doubtless there during most of the first seven years of the war and must have heard the speeches of Pericles, the discussions about affairs in Mytilene, Pylos and other places, which he recounts. Certainly he was there in 429 during the plague, of which he suffered, and of which he gives us (II, 47-51) a famous and graphically detailed description. And certainly his work demonstrates that he had spent a sufficient number of his early years in Athens to have had his mind moulded by her intellectual life and to come to know perfectly the men and ideas that were determining her policy.

Socrates was forty years old in 429 when the plague raged in Athens, and down the long walls to Piræus 'dying men lay one upon another . . . half-dead creatures reeled about the streets . . . and gathered round all the fountains was the awful spectacle of men dying like sheep.' (II, 51, 52.) The soul of Plato, seeking out his mother's womb, hovered in that pestilence while Pericles lay dying of it. Anaxagoras, the Voltaire of the day, had done his pioneer work of rationalising Attic thought and had surrendered his body to death, despite the fact he denied the existence of it, as well as of birth. Sophocles was still writing and acting at Athens, though Æschylus had quitted it, disgusted by the excesses of democracy, and had gone to Sicily, where, as the story has it, he met death by an eagle dropping a tortoise on his head. Euripides, at fifty-one, still had twenty years before domestic troubles and the laughter of Aristophanes over his dislike of women drove him away to pass the last few years of his life in Thessaly. Gorgias and Antiphon, too, Thucydides must have known, and Hippocrates, whose home was in Thasos, and Ictinus and Phidias, the creators of the Parthenon.

Even had Thucydides not personally known all these men, he could not, being in Athens, have escaped their influence. Yet none of them, excepting Pericles, does he as much as mention. He was writing a history of the war, and that only. It was part of his predetermined plan rigidly to exclude everyone and everything having no direct bearing on that narrative. He alludes to the newly constructed Parthenon only because it contained the treasury; to the statue of Athena Parthenos, one of the noblest works of Phidias, only because

gold plates with which it was covered could be removed if need be; to the Propylæa only because the cost of building them had reduced money available for prosecution of the war.

The turning point in Thucydides' life came in 424. Besides being a full Athenian citizen, he must, by this time, have attained some influence in social and political life. In this year he was elected one of the generals and was sent with Eucles to guard Athens' interests in 'the regions towards Thrace,' the key to which was Amphipolis, Eucles being in command of land forces, Thucydides of naval. Thucydides' account of this episode and his part in it may be found in Book IV, §§ 103-109. Not, however, until Book V, § 26, do we learn, 'It was also my fate to be an exile from my country for twenty years after my command at Amphipolis; and being present with both parties, and more especially with the Peloponnesians by reason of my exile, I had leisure to observe affairs somewhat particularly.'

Because the gold mines which he had the right to work were in Thrace, it has always been assumed that it was there he spent at least the greater part of his exile. To it we doubtless owe his work as it stands. From the above statement we can assume that he passed some part of his banishment in travel, seeking from the enemies of Athens their versions of events and visiting the sites of different battles. He probably visited Sparta. It is hard to believe that his vivid descriptions of some of the battles in the Peloponnesus and in Sicily could have been written by one who had not personally visited the sites themselves.

Thucydides says that the loss of Amphipolis 'caused great alarm at Athens.' He takes the attitude that in that episode he exerted himself to the full in the prosecution of his duties and that his action called for no defence. If he was guilty of any lapse, and his reticence is due merely to pride or sense of proportion, his manner of treating the episode carries more weight with posterity than self-justification. There is no record that he pleaded any defence at Athens. Marcellinus (§ 55) states that the decree for his banishment charged treachery and was adopted on the motion of Cleon (§ 46), the successor of Pericles, then at the height of his power. It is true that one of the few times Thucydides' objectivity breaks down is when

he writes of Cleon. But that can be explained from the natural antipathy Thucydides, an aristocrat of the Periclean school of democracy, would have toward the policies and methods of a man like Cleon.

If Thucydides' exile was undeserved, as analysis of the few pertinent facts he gives leads us to believe, he was not the first, nor was he to be the last, to meet a like injustice at the hands of his countrymen. The Athenians often so rewarded even their victorious generals, their most gifted statesmen and disinterested philosophers 'disguising the envy they bore to their glory with the name of fear of tyranny.'¹ Indeed, the men of Hellas loved liberty with a vengeance. Aristides, Themistocles, Cimon, Socrates are notable cases in point. Such facts reveal serious defects in Athenian minds and institutions, and it is on them that severe indictments of Athenian culture have been built.

It appears certain that Thucydides lived out his banishment and returned to Athens. He himself, as we have seen, limits it to twenty years. His return, therefore, would fall in 403. Had his fault been considered grave, a special decree would have been necessary to permit his return. This would explain Pausanias' statement (I, 23) that he was recalled on the motion of Oenobius. If no severe accusation had led to his banishment, the general amnesty that followed the capitulation of Athens to Lysander in 404 would have sufficed for him, as it did for all ordinary exiles.

Almost all ancient writers agree that Thucydides met death at the hands of an assassin. Pausanias (I, 23) states he was murdered journeying home from banishment. But it appears from his manner of describing (I, 93) the wall of Themistocles as 'of that thickness which can still be discerned round Piræus' that he returned to Athens and was there after the razing of that wall by Lysander, 404. Marcellinus states (§ 10) that he returned from banishment, died in Athens, and was buried there. Plutarch's version is in *Cimon* IV: 'It is said moreover that he died in a certain place called the Ditchy Forest,'² where he was slain; howbeit that his ashes and bones were carried into the country of Attica, where his

¹ Plutarch *Aristides*.

² Scapte Hyle, in Thrace.

tomb appeareth yet to this day . . . near unto the tomb of Cimon's own sister, called Elpinicé.'

The exact year of his death is as uncertain as that of his birth. Certainly he did not die till after 404, and probably not before 395, the year Conon rebuilt the walls of Athens. Even though this occurred nine years after the razing of the walls, it was an event of such importance that he would probably have mentioned it, had he lived to see it. Another reason for setting the year of his death before 395 is that he does not mention the eruption of *Ætna*, which occurred in 396. Roughly, therefore, the death of Thucydides must be placed around 400 B.C. at an age between fifty-five and sixty-five.

Legend followed him after death. It is said that his daughter saved the unfinished history, and gave it to Xenophon to edit. Diogenes Laertius (II, v. 13) states that 'he secretly got possession of the books of Thucydides, which were previously unknown, and himself published them.' Xenophon did indeed clumsily fit the beginning of his *Hellenica* onto the end of Thucydides' work. Theopompus and Cratippus also set themselves to finishing it. None was equal to the task. The remarkable gifts of Thucydides, both as scientist and artist—and an historian worthy of the name must be both—were not in comparable degree to appear again till five hundred years later in the person of Tacitus.

III

There is a story repeated by ancient writers that, as a boy at the Olympian Games, Thucydides wept on hearing Herodotus reciting from his *History*, and that Herodotus, noticing it, said to the youth's father: 'Olorus, your son's spirit is aflame with a passion for learning.' The son of Olorus undoubtedly did admire the work of 'the father of history'—but not as history. His conception of history was so different from that of all his predecessors, and he himself so conscious of his rôle as pioneer, that he even felt obliged to warn his readers that 'the absence of romance in my history will, I fear, detract from its interest.' Indeed, the distance between the work of Herodotus and that of Thucydides is so great

that scholars have found it difficult to realise that they lived in the same period and wrote for the same readers, and have compared the birth of critical history as springing full-grown from the brain of Thucydides, like Athena from the head of Zeus. Wonderful as his accomplishment was, it was still in many ways but a normal development from one side of Greek thought, the spirit of scientific inquiry.

The merits of Thucydides are that he first applied objective method to the treatment of history, and that, despite the difficulties under which he labored, he succeeded in creating a work which many of the most renowned historians since his day have pronounced unrivaled. In the opinion of Hume 'the first page of Thucydides is the commencement of real history.' Yet Thucydides cannot be considered an historian in the sense in which the term is used in the 20th century. He can be called scientific in intention only. Endowed with an admirably critical spirit he worked under the unsurmountable handicap of having to forge his own tools. The writing of contemporary history was a peculiarly difficult task in Greece in 425 B.C. There were few public documents, and such as there were had to be consulted where they were issued, or copied by some one and brought to the historian. In the absence of a press—men still wrote on papyrus—the historian had to seek out his own correspondents as he could. Besides these disadvantages, Thucydides lacked the equipment of scientific conceptions and systematised knowledge which are now perquisites of the historian.

He himself gives us at the beginning of his work a résumé of his approach and intention, in which is clearly shown how far removed from all his predecessors he is in outlook and temperament. We understand at once that his point of view is purely intellectual, that he has deep insight into and grasp of his subject. We at once feel in him an austere respect for reality. We are led to believe we will find nothing arbitrary or speculative in his work, that we will observe events through a calm, lucid, and impartial mind actuated only by love of absolute truth.

His original intention appears to have been to record only the actual events of the war, as he himself knew them, and from carefully sifted versions of other witnesses. His view

was that facts carry their own judgment, and that after ascertaining them, the only art the historian needs is that of statement so precise and direct that the facts alone convey the full content of their inner significance. He believed in the possibility of ascertaining objective facts and in his own ability objectively to present them. But the historian of contemporary events must reconstruct as well as the historian of the remoter past. The subjective process can never be eliminated from that part of his work. This element Thucydides concealed by his dramatic treatment, and the work of science he had planned became rather a work of art.

No amount of hard, rational thinking, in which Thucydides never relaxed, could efface the influence the study of poetry and philosophy had on him. Yet, if his work contains passages of psychological observation which are reminiscent of the poets, it certainly does not mean that he looked at history from their point of view. There is not a passage in his work from which to infer that he had in mind the psychological principles behind the Attic drama. There is no mysterious, controlling force, no retributive justice, no moral principle in Thucydides. He had no more place in his *History* for gods than he had for women. Except on two or three occasions, there is not even a hint of moral approbation or disapprobation. Besides chance, the only forces Thucydides believes determine human affairs arise from human motives. The lessons to be drawn from him, though they are lessons for generals and statesmen, are not those moral and cathartic ones to be drawn from Attic tragedy.

The influence which the drama had on him is shown in the technical construction of his work, and it is particularly by his employment of two devices that his art can be called dramatic: his use of speeches, and his arrangement and emphasis of events.

Speeches take up almost a fourth of Thucydides' work. Though they form an essential part of it, they can, in style and subject matter, be considered almost as distinct literary productions. They have often been called an education in statecraft. On them rest the philosophical and intellectual interest of the work. Thucydides is solicitous that his use of them should not be misunderstood, and his remarks in this

connection should be read in Book I, § 21. To limit self-projection into them, it appears that he began with the principle of mentioning only effective policies. Nevertheless, Thucydides' own views crept into them, though the extent of this subjective element is concealed by his dramatic presentation. In some ways his use of speeches resembles the use of the chorus in Æschylean drama. They signalise the approach of a crisis in the action as well as summarise and accentuate the forces and motives moulding events.

Thucydides creates drama largely from the skillful manipulation of his material. Keeping himself strictly in the background, irony and pathos arise solely from elements inherent in the events themselves. In this respect the contrast of Pericles' Funeral Oration (II, 38-48) and the plague is noteworthy. But in no place does he use the architecture of drama to fuller purpose than in his narration of the events that usher in the Sicilian disaster. Here the arrogance of the Athenians in the Melian debate, and their subsequent butchery of a people whose sole offense was that they desired to remain neutral, the description of the vast Athenian armament sailing away single file from the Piræus to its doom, and the subsequent butchery of the Athenians themselves, are handled so skillfully that Macaulay called it the '*ne plus ultra* of human art.' Thucydides' account of the Sicilian catastrophe itself John Stuart Mill considered 'the most powerful and affecting piece of narrative perhaps in all literature.'

IV

Thucydides ranks high indeed among historians. Unlike Herodotus, he enjoyed no fame in his own age, nor even immediately after. He wrote, despising contemporary renown, intending that his work be considered, not 'as an essay which is to win the applause of the moment, but as a possession for all time.' And, 'if it be judged useful by those inquirers who desire an exact knowledge of the past, as an aid to the interpretation of the future, which in the course of human things must resemble if it does not reflect it, I shall be content.'

That ambition he achieved. His work remains the first authority for events in Hellas in the years between 431 and

411 B.C. They were events which men now can see of even greater significance than Thucydides believed. In them lay hidden the one real opportunity Greece had to develop her culture till it had attained the strength to dominate succeeding Western civilisations. They frittered away that opportunity in internal struggles that seem to us petty, despicable, and unworthy their intelligence. Thucydides gives us a microscopic picture of how events arose and worked themselves out to the frustration of this potential achievement.

It is futile to speculate on how our civilisation would have been changed had the Greeks been sufficiently conscious of the still greater destiny they might have fulfilled. As it is, the glory of Greece remains still 'that point of light in history.' It still burns. But for the commonality of Western men it was extinguished by the phenomenal growth of Christianity. It is not without reason that the Middle Ages have been called the Dark Ages. They witnessed the triumph of a philosophy of fear and superstition over one of trust and enlightenment. It was again a triumph of repression over expression, of an arbitrary ideal over an eminently human and practical one.

The Christian point of view is sufficiently well known, and need only be placed beside the Greek to contrast its comparative darkness. The attitude of Christianity reflects directly the attitude of the downtrodden and defeated, the attitude of those who could not live. And the philosophy it developed was one of compensation for that defect. The attitude of the Greeks was the attitude of men who faced life frankly, and, accepting it as it is, endeavored to put themselves in harmony with it. It is the attitude of those with an irrepressible will to live.

The philosophy of the Greeks did not impose restrictions on life, did not start with preconceived and preconditioned ideas of what life should be and attempt to regulate it by such abstractions. Life was not an evil thing to the men of Hellas, a thing to be hated and denied for some problematical after-life. Nor was the nature of man evil to them, something to be struggled with, to be hated and denied. There was no 'original sin' obsessing the Greeks. There was among them no sense of sin whatsoever, in the Christian meaning of the word, and no sense of duty. Sin to them was disharmony, disorder,

disease. Duty was living, not denying the challenges of life. The physical and emotional sides of man were, in Greek life, granted places of equal importance with the mental and spiritual. Anger, for instance, was to them ugly. But for them it was also a vice if a man could not be moved to anger by a proper cause, and by proper people. It was a vice if he were not angry in the proper manner, and for the proper length of time.

The philosophy of the Greeks grew out of life itself. It began in a religion that permitted them to feel at home in the world. They did not postulate an external power that was alien to man. Instead of man being made in the image of their god, their gods were indeed made in man's image. Therefore they did not consider that virtue necessitated sacrificing man to any external law. They studied man and the laws of life as they found them. And they realised profoundly, as we have forgotten—to the negation of life—that virtue consists not in denying the nature of man, but in so developing all elements of it into such an efficient, beautiful, and harmonious whole that of his life each creates a work of art.

Despite serious defects in social and political life in Athens, such as the position of women and the slavery upon which her culture rested—which in any form has become to us intolerable in idea and is becoming increasingly impossible in fact—it was Athens that most characteristically developed the Greek point of view and most gloriously demonstrated the marvels it could accomplish in ennobling and beautifying life. It is, therefore, of Athens that we must think in reading Thucydides' *History*. In it is the story of how the life-loving, life-giving culture that was hers was destroyed.

In looking down through the vast space of time which separates us from the events of those years they appear very small and insignificant to us against the imperialistic catastrophes that have since convulsed and are still convulsing the world. Through the telescope of Thucydides' work is brought up to us a picture we readily recognise as, in its political and economic aspects at least, a duplicate of our own. It is merely another painting of man's struggle for a life more full, more free—ininitely pitiable because the means he uses only defeat