

The History of the Peloponnesian War (Barnes & Noble Classics)

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A monumental work unsurpassed for its brilliant description, accuracy, and penetrating insights, Thucydides' History of the Peloponnesian War is a spectacular eyewitness report of the war between Greece's two most powerful city-states, Athens and Sparta, as it unfolded during the fifth century B.C. The first recorded political and moral analysis of a nation's war policies, the History is a tragic story of virtue, ambition, and failed deterrence. All aspects of the conflict—from the battlefield strategies and the political landscape to the peoples' thoughts and feelings as the long war dragged on—are presented in startlingly vivid detail. From the treachery of Alcibiades and the disastrous invasion of Sicily to the plague that devastated Athens and Pericles' famous funeral oration, Thucydides has written more than a mere account of war. His History is nothing less than a classic Greek drama about the rise and fall of Athens. More than two thousand years have passed since the History was written, but its impact on modern politics, military strategy, and foreign relations has been timeless.

Donald Lateiner teaches Greek, Latin, Ancient History and Comparative Folklore in the Humanities-Classics department at Ohio Wesleyan University. His scholarship focuses on Homer and Herodotus, and he has published a book on each. He also researches nonverbal behaviors in ancient literature.

From Donald Lateiner's Introduction to The History of the Peloponnesian War

Though a highly idiosyncratic writer and thinker, like any author Thucydides betrays the influences of the literature and research of his day. Books have traced his connections to contemporary medicine, sophistic rhetoric and argumentation, philosophy, and drama (Cochrane, Finley, Solmsen, Cornford, Hunter, etc.), as well as to his historical predecessor, Herodotus (484-414). Thucydides' polemical historiographical strictures on the methods of historical research and presentation are not necessarily directed against Herodotus, since other authors, in poetry and in prose, treated the same prior events that Herodotus also mentions. For instance, in the case of the comments on the notorious Delian earthquake, the two authors seem to pass each other in the night-oblivious to the specifics that the other has mentioned. But then why is it that Thucydides' speeches rarely refer to any past event not found in Herodotus' text (Hornblower, *A Commentary on Thucydides*, vol. 2, p. 123)? When did Thucydides obtain the text of the Ionian historian? Around 424 or a decade later? Did either or both of these historians publish their histories in chunks rather than as the full text that we have today? Some have argued for independent publication of Thucydides' book 1, or 1 through 5.24 (the events leading to the war and the course of the Ten Years' War) or books 6 and 7 (the Sicilian Expedition, as Athenian sympathizers call it, rather than the Invasion). Thucydides' awareness of his predecessor appears in his inclusions (for example, important battles and pre-battle harangues) and exclusions (such as ominous names). The two historians share many qualities, but they differently characterize prominent individuals and events. Their accounts of pivotal battles differ not least because of Thucydides' superior field experience as Athenian soldier and commander. Thucydides' debt to Herodotus, nevertheless, involves much more than the existence of speeches and battles—for example, inclusions of colonization, myth, and geography (see Pearson, "Thucydides and the Geographical Tradition"). Thucydides never mentions Herodotus by name, although he names the less important fifth-century historian Hellanicus (the citation is isolated, and perhaps to be excised; see Parke, "Citation and Recitation"). Is this a slight to Herodotus or a compliment? In the fifth century, no one memorized prose authors or had a wish to look up a reference. Thucydides, unlike Herodotus, does not cite the poets; as with many of his contributions, he excluded materials that others previously included.

Thucydides shares many of Herodotus' interests. They both focus on military history. They both want to report names of places and people, although the Athenian shows less interest in "coincidences" such as nomen-omen—for example, Hegesistratus, a name that a Spartan king identified as meaningful, when looking for a guide, because it translates as "Leader of the Expedition." Both also suppress names and make explicit or implicit decisions not to specify individuals—for example, the Spartan commander and the five Spartan judges at Plataea (3.52)—and other officers and speakers are left anonymous.

Thucydides is likely to have known several sophists, and his antithetical writing style shows the influence of the Sicilian Gorgias, whose interests included epistemology and rhetoric. He is also likely to have known Sophocles, a general as well as a tragedian. He mentions neither these two nor Socrates, a notorious Attic gadfly of Pericles and the next generation.

Thucydides states his objective in his History for practicing "history." He wants to be useful (1.22) to those interested in how humans behave and in what will happen repeatedly, given certain constants of human nature (compare 3.83). He makes no claim to prophecy, but, clearly, he saw "his" war as the negative exemplar for inter- and intra-state conflict. He sardonically presents orators' high-flown words that often contrast with the facts of historical events that they report, or with their predictions for the future, or with many speakers who decried fancy rhetorics (for example, 1.73; 2.41; 5.89). Nevertheless, the funeral oration that he puts in the mouth of Pericles, at a moment just before plague strikes, surpasses all possible competition in patriotic oratory. The Greeks believed not in historical cyclicity but in patterns of human behavior. Both Plato, the idealist, and Aristotle, the realist, belittle finding any universal message in specific events (see Aristotle's Poetics 9.1451b, with specific reference to what Alcibiades did and said), but Thucydides (and Hobbes in his wake) thought otherwise. Thucydides, like Macchiavelli later, was a historian as well as a political theorist.

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