

# interpretation

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# interpretation

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## HOMERIC HONOR AND THUCYDIDEAN NECESSITY

THOMAS S. ENGEMAN

Commentators on Thucydides generally agree on at least one point: he is exceedingly reluctant to reveal his own thoughts concerning the meaning of the events which he narrates.<sup>1</sup> Thucydides' reticence has naturally led to confusion in understanding his true intention. For example, was Thucydides a supporter of Athenian imperialism, as is often argued, or did he believe that imperial ambition was inevitably prone to a lack of moderation in success and therefore to ultimate disaster? Looking at the Melian dialogue-Sicilian expedition sequence, it is frequently noted that the skillful juxtaposition of the hubristic speeches of the Athenians at Melos and their defeat in Sicily is designed to teach sensible men that ambition and success breed hope, daring, and defeat. As H. D. F. Kitto judged the Athenians' fate in Sicily, "their success had betrayed them."<sup>2</sup>

However, this conclusion seems to be only an inference based upon the dramatic association of the two events. Thucydides himself ascribes the Athenian defeat in Sicily to the absence of an outstanding statesman who could command the steady adherence of a majority of the citizens to a consistent foreign policy (II.65.10-11). (What is more important, this judgment is borne out by a study of the events which caused the Athenian defeat.) If Pericles had lived, the expedition would not have been undertaken; or if Alcibiades had been trusted by the Athenian *demos*, Sicily could have been conquered. Thucydides thus indicates that politics depends upon individuals and conditions, not upon the designs of gods or upon fate.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Cf., for instance, A. W. Gomme, *The Greek Attitude to Poetry and History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1954), pp. 307-8; A. W. Gomme, *More Essays in Greek History and Literature* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1962), pp. 123, 159ff.; Jacqueline DeRomilly, *Thucydides and Athenian Imperialism* (New York; Barnes and Noble, 1963), pp. 58, 103; H. D. F. Kitto, *Poiesis: Structure and Thought* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1966), pp. 307-8; Leo Strauss, *The City and Man* (New York: Rand-McNally, 1964), pp. 144-45.

<sup>2</sup> Kitto, *Poiesis*, p. 336; Strauss, *City and Man*, p. 153.

<sup>3</sup> This is not to deny that there is a connection between the Melian dialogue and the Sicilian defeat. That connection can be seen in the inability of the Athenians at Melos to understand the essential piety of politics. After Pericles' death the Athenian leaders with the best natures, i.e., those capable of rule (Alcibiades), depreciated the pious understanding of right in favor of the natural understanding of right. Therefore they lost the trust of the *demos*, who, when sorely troubled by the magnitude and danger of the Sicilian expedition, naturally turned to the pious Nicias, who was from their point of view perfectly trustworthy. Nicias, of course, was unable to execute the plan conceived by the daring Alcibiades. See Strauss, *City and Man*, pp. 195-209.

The elusiveness of Thucydides can be traced to his singular manner of writing. Kitto has characterized Thucydides as someone who "could say things without saying them."<sup>4</sup> Thucydides (or any one of his characters) can make judgments or speeches which are contradicted by the course of events. A careful reader must compare the events which Thucydides relates with the speeches which he (or any character) makes about those events in order to reveal the deepest reflections of the writer. As Thomas Hobbes says in the "Address to the Readers" of his translation of Thucydides, "But these conjectures [about the meaning of a history] cannot often be certain, unless withal so evident, that the narration itself may be sufficient to suggest the same also to the reader."<sup>5</sup>

### *The Archeology*

The Corinthians at the first Congress at Lacedaemon contrast the Athenian manner and the Spartan manner. Where the Athenians are innovative, swift to desire and attempt, public-spirited, bold, hopeful, and lovers of motion, the Spartans are traditional, slow, self-concerned, cautious, doubtful, and lovers of rest (I.70; cf. VIII.96.5). The Corinthians are describing the characters of the dramatic protagonists Sparta and Athens, whose struggle forms the axis of Thucydides' history.<sup>6</sup> Their struggle, according to Thucydides, is of the greatest importance because these two cities stand at the end of a long period of progress which has made them truly significant. The Greeks, led by Athens and Sparta, now possess a vast quantity of wealth and power that has been stored up during the prior age of progress. The age of progress is also, in one sense, an age of rest; it provides the material needed to wage a "total" war lasting for decades and involving everyone (I.1.1-2, 23.1-4, II.82.1-2, 83.1, 85-87, II.38.2, 62.1). The greatest rest and progress issue in the greatest, not to say the universal, motion of the Peloponnesian War. The war between Athens and her allies and Sparta and her allies is a civil war, a *stasis* in

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<sup>4</sup> Kitto, *Poiesis*, p. 302.

<sup>5</sup> *The English Works of Thomas Hobbes*, ed. Sir William Molesworth (London: John Bohn, 1843), Vol. 8, p. viii. Is Hobbes correct in assuming that Thucydides was perfectly free to choose, arrange, or perhaps invent events, i.e., to say anything he wished through his narrative? Is there not a "historiographic" necessity, the accidental occurrence of events, which limits Thucydides' "logographic" potential? Or, to put the question in a more revealing way, to what extent was Thucydides a scientific historian who wanted only to describe accurately the events that occurred, or to what extent was he concerned with discovering the causes of the events? If, as indeed seems to be the case, he was concerned with the latter, wouldn't that task force him, when necessary, to compromise the simply scientific recitation of the literal and unrevealing facts?

<sup>6</sup> A. W. Gomme, *A Historical Commentary on Thucydides* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1950), Vol. 1, p. 233 (I.71.5); DeRomilly, *Thucydides*, pp. 77-82, 311-13; Strauss, *City and Man*, pp. 148-49.

Greece which leads to the "universal" *stasis* in the individual Greek cities, and the rise of the barbarian powers (III.83.1, II.100.1-2).<sup>7</sup> Thucydides shows the growth, the fruition, and the decline of "Greekness."

The proof of the superiority and significance of modern, or Greek, times and therefore the inferiority and insignificance of ancient times is given in the very beginning of Thucydides' account, the archeology (I.1-23). In the archeology Thucydides characterizes the ancient (or barbarian) style of life as fearful, poor, confused, weak, and lacking in daring while inferring that it was harsh, brutish, and cruel. Ancient times were marked by an almost universal fear; fear of new migrations, of attacks by pirates, and of depredations by one's neighbors (I.2-5). In ancient times men were forced to go armed, to plant only as much as could immediately be used, and to move or flee at a moment's notice.<sup>8</sup>

The weakness of those times is also found in the unreliability of the ancient poets and storytellers, and therefore in ancient wisdom as such.<sup>9</sup> Thucydides directly questions whether Homer, as compared with himself, can be a sufficient witness for anyone (I.9.4, 10.3). Like all poets, Homer magnifies and adorns the events which he recounts; in particular, he adorns the Trojan War (I.10.3). Part of his adornment is his beautification of men's motives. According to the poets, Agamemnon was able to command the Trojan expedition because the kings of Greece felt bound by the oath of Tyndareus to obey him (I.9.1). However, Thucydides' unadorned version, which he has learned from the most reliable sources, demonstrates that Agamemnon's wealth, and hence his power, compelled the loyalty of the other kings. To paraphrase Thucydides, "men are moved not so much by favor as by fear" (I.9.3, 22.4).

The archeology is Thucydides' defense of the modern age and modern wisdom. As such, it reveals three fundamental elements of his intention. His method is to relate the simple truth of events in order that the universal significance of the Peloponnesian War may be revealed in the events themselves. Previous "wise men" had not proceeded as honestly and truthfully. The storytellers, viz., Herodotus, have concocted fables to supplement the literal truth of their account in order to say something universal, while the poets have magnified and adorned the literal in order to make it seem worthy of receiving universal acclaim (I.10.3, 21.1).<sup>10</sup>

Thucydides also claims that because the ancient times were poor and weak, man's political potential (and therefore the true *logos* of man) had not yet fully developed. The wealth of modern times, a product of the progress of the arts, gives man the equipment to develop his full political

<sup>7</sup> Plato, *Republic*, 469b3-471c1.

<sup>8</sup> Gomme, *Commentary*, Vol. 1, pp. 89-90; David Grene, *Greek Political Theory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965), p. 60.

<sup>9</sup> Gomme, *Commentary*, Vol. 1, p. 109 (I.9.4), p. 113 (I.10.3). For an excellent brief discussion of Thucydides' view of the poets and storytellers, see Seth Benardete, *Herodotean Inquiries* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1969), pp. 30, 33.

<sup>10</sup> Benardete, *Herodotean Inquiries*, p. 30.

and spiritual potential. The warfare of the premier "modern" Greek regimes, Sparta and Athens, fully reveals man's political possibilities, while the understanding of that war and its causes represents the pinnacle of human knowledge. Thus, Thucydides establishes his wisdom and his renown on the "ashes of the past," the destruction of Homer's heroic age. That destruction is necessary because men are traditional beings: they will, when at rest and freed from the rigors of warfare, regard ancient events as more worthy of admiration than recent ones (I.21.2). As the descendants of the Achaean heroes would have revered some ancient struggle—perhaps the legendary war between Athens and Thebes—as more significant than the Trojan War, had it not been for Homer, so the generations which follow the Peloponnesian War would return to their admiration of the Trojan War were it not for Thucydides.

Thirdly, the archeology reveals a portion of Thucydides' intention. It does so by the very fact that the demythologizing of the past undermines political regimes founded on traditional mythology. Thucydides' praise or favoritism toward Sparta seems hollow when it is seen in the light of the fullness of his implied attack, or debunking, of all things "Spartan."

In drawing conclusions from the archeology, we rely on our observation that it is one of the few parts of Thucydides' history in which none of the ambiguities between speech and deed complicate its interpretation. Indeed, Thucydides emphasizes that his presentation of the facts about the ancient times is the most accurate possible. "He [the reader] should regard the facts as having been made out with sufficient accuracy, on the basis of the clearest indications, considering that they have to do with ancient times" (I.21.1).<sup>11</sup> One might, like Hobbes, wonder whether Thucydides "best approved of a regal government," but one cannot wonder, it seems, about the reliability of the archeology.<sup>12</sup>

And yet Thucydides does mention in passing in the archeology that some of the peoples of Greece still live in the old, customary manner of the ancients:

and even today in many parts of Hellas life goes on under the old customs, as in the region of the Ozolian Locrians, Aetolians, Acarnanians, and the mainland thereabouts. And these mainlanders' habits of carrying arms ["wearing iron," Hobbes says] is a survival of their old piratical life [I.5.3, 5.1-2, 5.6, 6.6].

Thucydides introduces the possibility that the past may be found in the present. This possibility parallels Benardete's observation about the nature of the Herodotean history: "The surface of the earth presents together all the Hesiodic ages, which are not distinguished so much by what metals they use as by their customs."<sup>13</sup> The archeology is not self-contained—in

<sup>11</sup> Translations follow C. Foster Smith, Loeb Classical Library (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1919), with a few minor exceptions.

<sup>12</sup> Hobbes, "Of the Life and History of Thucydides," Molesworth, *Hobbes*, Vol. 8, p. xvii.

<sup>13</sup> Benardete, *Herodotean Inquiries*, p. 29.

spite of Thucydides' deceptive exhortation to accept it as such. The conclusions which he reaches regarding the weakness, harshness, and rusticity of the past as opposed to the strength, mildness, and artfulness of the present, and his picture of the ignorance and adornment of the past versus the truthfulness and honesty of the present, are open to a reevaluation based on the narrative description of the peoples who live by the old customs.

### *The "Ancient" Acarnanians*

Of the three peoples who are named by Thucydides, and of the others who live in the "mainland thereabouts," i.e., around the Ionian gulf, the Acarnanians are the people most fully revealed by the Thucydidean narrative. They are not only mentioned by name more than twice as often as the Ozolian Locrians and Aetolians combined but are also, as we shall later see, the close friends and allies of the Athenian generals Phormio and Demosthenes. The latter is, we believe, the true and fittingly undramatic Thucydidean man of action.<sup>14</sup> Further following Strauss, we note that the Acarnanians are associated with Demosthenes, a knower of nature (IV.3-4) and that the year in which they figure most prominently in the narrative (the sixth year of the first part of the war) is the only year

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<sup>14</sup> "Thucydides nowhere specifically assesses the ability of Demosthenes or the value of his services to Athens, and the general impression given by the narrative is equivocal. That he believed Demosthenes to have been brave, energetic and enterprising, an inspiring leader of men and normally a good tactician, is perfectly clear, but he apparently also regarded him as inclined to be impetuous and found his strategy occasionally unsound and too optimistic. It may be that Thucydides . . . has designedly chosen to present Demosthenes to his readers with precisely this mixture of approval and disapproval. He seems, however, in some parts of his narrative strangely reluctant to give Demosthenes due credit for the originality and imaginativeness which he undoubtedly showed. These qualities, in the military sphere at least, bore some resemblance to those of Themistocles, which Thucydides praises so warmly" (I.138.2) (H. D. Westlake, *Individuals in Thucydides* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1968], pp. 97-98). Professor Westlake, as he clearly demonstrates, is in factual command of Thucydides' narrative. He notes Thucydides' unjust denigration of Demosthenes (compare Thucydides' striking eulogy on Nicias' death with his silence on Demosthenes' [VII.86], but he cannot adequately account for it. One might suggest that Demosthenes was slighted in Thucydides' account because Thucydides wished to dramatize more clearly the rivalry between the pious Nicias and the daring Alcibiades. Demosthenes' true worth would be discovered by an independent assessment of Demosthenes based on the narrative. Demosthenes learns from his mistake in Aetolia—an expedition undertaken on bad intelligence, in too hopeful and incautious a spirit, and without sufficient military preparation. Having learned the "nature" of moderation, Demosthenes cleverly beats the Spartans at Pylos. The defeat forced the Spartans to sue for peace and thus to recognize the Athenian empire—the end sought by Pericles. After the renewal of the war, brought about by Alcibiades, Demosthenes does not reappear until Sicily, when he nearly saves the expedition and his city through his prudent daring and patriotism.

in Thucydides' account which "almost begins (III.89) and literally ends with the mention of natural phenomena."<sup>15</sup> In addition, while describing the events of that year, events which take place around the Ionian gulf where the old customs are still practiced, Thucydides mentions both Hesiod and Homer by name; this is his only reference to Hesiod in the entire history and the only reference to Homer after the archeology (III.96.1, 104.4). Finally, an indirect proof of the Acarnanians' singular importance can be seen in the following detail: they are the only one of the peoples named in the archeology who practice customs different from those attributed to the ancients by Thucydides. If all the peoples in "the mainland thereabouts" differed from the description in the archeology, Thucydides could never have maintained the "progressive thesis" as the preliminary understanding of his work. By so confusing the levels of his thoughts, Thucydides would have been impolitic in a wholly un-Thucydidean manner.

These observations can only be proved or disproved by a proper interpretation of the events which Thucydides narrates. So let us turn to the events so that "the narration itself may be sufficient to suggest the same also to the reader."

At the beginning of the war the Athenians decided that they needed the friendship of the peoples who lived around the Peloponnese if they were to send fleets to harass the Spartans. The ambassadors sent to the Acarnanians were, however, unsuccessful in establishing friendly relations (II.7.3).

In the second year of the war the Acarnanians asked the Athenians to help them drive the Ampraciots from Amphilocheian Argos, the Amphilocheians having placed themselves under the protection of the Acarnanians. Successfully defeating the Ampraciots, the Athenians settled the Acarnanians and the Amphilocheians in Argos. At this time a treaty was first made between the Athenians and the Acarnanians (II.68).

In the summer of the third year of the war the Ampraciots and the Chaonians, wishing to subdue the whole of Acarnania and detach it from the Athenians (II.80.1-2), persuaded the Spartans to send a fleet and hoplites to aid in the conquest. The Spartans consented to the plan and organized their allies. When this Peloponnesian army arrived, with an accompanying fleet soon expected, the Acarnanians did not join together to defend their major city Stratus, but "each defended his own" (II.81.1). The Stratiots, however, without assistance, cleverly managed to defeat the invaders by ambushing the Chaonians—the barbarians who lacked all semblance of order. The Spartans, quickly recognizing defeat, withdrew. Thucydides accounts in part for the success of the Acarnanians by noting that they were thought best in the use of slings (II.80-82).

That winter the Acarnanians joined Phormio in an unsuccessful attack on the Acarnanian city of Oeniadae, the only Acarnanian city hostile to

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<sup>15</sup> Strauss, *City and Man*, p. 223, n. 83.

Athens (II.102).<sup>16</sup> Oeniadae, it should be noted, had an obvious reason to oppose the Athenians, having been besieged by Pericles during the early rise of the Athenian empire (I.111.3). In the next year the Athenians sent out Phormio's son to take command in the Ionian gulf, for the Acarnanians had specifically asked that a son or a kinsman of Phormio should be sent to succeed him. Phormio's son led another unsuccessful attack on Oeniadae (III.7).

By the sixth year of the war Demosthenes had become general in the Ionian gulf. The first joint expedition of the Athenians and Acarnanians was launched against Leucas, the inveterate enemy of the Acarnanians. In the course of this campaign Demosthenes was unwisely persuaded to attack Aetolia and from there to march on Boeotia. The Acarnanians angrily withdrew from the expedition, which in due course ended disastrously (III.94). Nevertheless, immediately afterwards, when the Athenians were in danger of being entirely driven from the area, the Acarnanians listened to Demosthenes and relieved Naupactus, the Athenian stronghold threatened by the Ampraciot and Spartans (III.102).

Failing to take Naupactus, the Ampraciot, still wishing to capitalize on Demosthenes' defeat, persuaded the Spartans that the conquest of Acarnania would bring all of the continent into their league. With the Spartans' approval and promise of assistance, the Ampraciot invaded Acarnania and secured Olpae, "the place which the Acarnanians had once fortified and used as a common place of justice (*dikasterion*)" (III.105). Fearing the arrival of the Spartans, the Acarnanians divided their army: half watched the Ampraciot while the other half tried to prevent the Spartans from joining them. In addition, they sent for Demosthenes and the Athenian fleet sailing off their coast. The Spartans, however, avoided the Acarnanians' attempts at interdiction and joined the Ampraciot, while Demosthenes with a small force joined the Acarnanians before Olpae. In the ensuing battle, the Athenians and Acarnanians, using an ambush similar to the one used by the Stratians against the Chaonians, defeated the Ampraciot-Spartan force. The Acarnanian generals and Demosthenes then made a peace agreement with the Peloponnesians, allowing them to escape and condemning the remainder of the army, the Ampraciot and the other allies, to almost certain destruction. This

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<sup>16</sup> One should note that while speaking of Oeniadae Thucydides presents a comparatively long disquisition on the natural relationship of earth and water (II.102.2-4). His "observations and speculations" on this subject remind Gomme of Plato's *Critias* (III.A-B) (*Commentary*, Vol. 2, p. 250). Also, Thucydides has a lengthy digression on the mythical origins of Acarnania (II.102.5-6). (In the Third Book, at 104, he presents Homer, interrupting his account of the events in Acarnania [compare III.104, with I.8. for a further identification of ancients and moderns]; while at 96.1, describing events in Aetolia, he puts Hesiod and Demosthenes in the same sentence.) As will be shown more fully below, Thucydides continually associates the present Acarnanians with the mythical, poetic past in order for us to see that there is no difference between them.

stratagem was successful. The Ampraciots, having seen the Peloponnesians escaping, attempted to follow them, were cut off by the Acarnanians, and driven into a neighboring country (III.105-13).

After the defeat of the Ampraciots, the Acarnanians refused to invade Ampracia as the Athenians and Demosthenes desired them to do, for they feared that if the Athenians had Ampracia they would be worse neighbors than their present ones. Instead, after Demosthenes and the Athenians left, they concluded a peace treaty with the Ampracians on very liberal terms (III.114.2-4; cf. IV.92.5).<sup>17</sup>

In the summer of the seventh year of the war the Athenians helped capture Anactorium (a city inimical to the Acarnanians [III.114.3]) and turned it over to the Acarnanians, who settled it with their own people (IV.49). That winter the Acarnanians took part with Demosthenes in an unsuccessful attack on the Boeotian town of Siphae. On the return voyage they tried another unsuccessful attack on part of Sicyonia (IV.77, 101). The Acarnanians come to sight for the last time in Thucydides' history in Sicily, having been persuaded by Demosthenes to accompany him there on his relief expedition (VII.31).

What can be learned from these narrative events and Thucydidean remarks (III.113.6, VII.57.10-11) which deepen the understanding of the "progressive thesis" and hence the deprecation of "ancient" life and wisdom? To answer this question we must further distill the sense of the narrative. First, it appears that the Acarnanians are as unorganized as Thucydides had suggested that the "ancients" were (I.3.1). They lack strong political, military, or religious conventions or laws. Politically, they are not even united under the leadership of a single *polis*. The majority of the Acarnanians live in unwallled villages; they are like an *ethnos*; the inhabitants of each locality are ruled by tyrants who appear to be the obviously superior men (I.5.1). The Acarnanians are therefore analogous to the people of Attica before Theseus gathered them together (II.15.1-2).

As one might expect, the Acarnanians are also weak militarily. Their weakness is caused by their general inability, and apparent unwillingness, to learn the regimented techniques needed for efficient military organization. They are reluctant to assemble for purposes of warfare; once assembled, they are difficult to order for battle. However, weakness in their case cannot be associated with a lack of individual intelligence, skill, or daring. The Acarnanian generals are resourceful and devious. They plan two effective ambushes and share in the "peace" agreement with the Peloponnesians which gives them the opportunity to destroy their neighbors, the Ampraciots. Individually the Acarnanian soldiers are proficient in the use of slings, an open kind of warfare requiring personal skill

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<sup>17</sup> Gomme, *Commentary*, Vol. 2, p. 429: "Amprakia gets off very lightly after her defeat, and Athens got little by the victory of Demosthenes."

and daring, as opposed to the discipline of the galley and phalanx, which necessitates strict obedience to convention.<sup>18</sup>

Finally, Thucydides indicates that the Acarnanians are not excessively pious. In fact, he never shows a single instance of their religious festivals or auspices before campaigns, nor does he mention any Acarnanian temples, nor report oaths sworn to the gods (one certainly would anticipate such oaths to legitimate the treaty with Ampracia; oaths were sworn in each of the three treaties between Sparta and Athens [IV.119, V.18-19, 24]).

In addition to the apparent laxity of the Acarnanian conventions, one is struck by the overall prudence and moderation of their policies. Their prudence is evident in their alliance with Athens and use of Athenian power to maintain and improve their own position—while never allowing the Athenians to become too powerful in the area. But the Acarnanians did not ignore considerations of equity (*dike*) and loyalty in their deliberations. Originally they allied themselves to Athens only after they had come to respect Phormio. This attachment apparently motivated their request that a kinsman of Phormio be sent to replace him (a request which probably also reveals the nature of their own regime). Finally, their affection for Demosthenes and loyalty to Athens led them into the middle of the Athenian disaster in Sicily.

The source of the Acarnanians' moderation can be traced to their temperate anger, or desire for revenge. Thucydides explicitly draws attention to the fact that the stronghold at Olpae was used as a place where the Acarnanians would meet together for "matters of justice." While this may seem to indicate that in peaceful times they acted justly toward one another, we can see that during the course of the war they are hesitant to inflict injury on their own people. Even though they joined in two expeditions with the Athenians against Oeniadae (an Acarnanian city), both campaigns were marked by inactivity and nonengagement (II.102, III.7).<sup>19</sup> On another occasion when anger or revenge might have been expected, the Acarnanians acted in a generous manner by giving liberal peace terms to the quarrelsome Ampraciots, who had invaded them no fewer than three times during the course of the war. Could the Acarnanians have pitied the Ampraciots because of their stupendous defeat (the greatest defeat suffered by any city, in a short

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<sup>18</sup> Occasionally some question is raised as to whether the Acarnanians had a fleet. Since there is no substantial evidence to support the fleet thesis, most commentators agree that they did not; cf. Gomme, *Commentary*, Vol. 2, p. 411. It is clear, however, that they did have a hoplite force (*Commentary*, p. 420 [107.4]). These are probably troops from the larger cities and form exceptions to the almost universal slingers (II.81.8, 82, VII.31.5, 67.2).

<sup>19</sup> Gomme, *Commentary*, Vol. 2, p. 11 (9.4), is wrong when he claims that Oeniadae was always at variance with the rest of Acarnania. The Acarnanians settled their own disagreement and made Oeniade become a member of the alliance (IV.77.2).

time, in the entire war)? Such a motive would be compatible with their desire not to have the Athenians as neighbors (III.113.6). Whatever the reason, it is certainly an example of moderation in success (VIII.24.4-5). Thucydides notes the anger of the Acarnanians on only one occasion, and one is astonished by its mildness. Even though Demosthenes reneged on his promise to the Acarnanians to attack Leucas, their inveterate enemy, the Acarnanians quickly forgot their anger and helped Demosthenes defend Naupactus (III.102.3). The Acarnanians' moderate anger or desire for revenge is particularly striking because of the overriding emphasis Thucydides puts upon this passion in motivating political men, especially in times of *stasis*: "To get revenge on someone was more valued than never to have suffered injury oneself" (III.82.7).<sup>20</sup>

### *Thucydides' Justice*

While the comparative mildness of the Acarnanians is surprising in light of the supposed harshness and cruelty of ancient life described in the archeology, not to mention the savagery of modern political man, it is not the only evidence which suggests that life may actually have been gentler in former times (or under different customs).<sup>21</sup> In a speech designed to assuage the Athenians' desire for revenge against the Mytilenaeans, an otherwise unknown individual named Diodotus makes a sophistical defense of moderation in which he concludes, "Probably in ancient times the penalties prescribed for the greatest offenses were relatively mild, but as transgressions still occurred, in course of time the penalty was seldom less than death" (III.45.3).

Thucydides, through Diodotus, raises the infinite question of the

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<sup>20</sup> The desire for revenge is, according to Thucydides, the strongest and deepest passion found in political man. The first conflict, the conflict which became the expressed cause for the war, issued from the Corinthians' desire to have revenge on Corcyra (I.25). Pericles, in the funeral oration, ennobles anger by saying that the greatest source of honor for citizens is to die seeking revenge upon the enemies of one's city (II.42.4). The ennoblement of anger, i.e., the immortality guaranteed to the spirited defender of the city through the immortality of the city, is the basis of the city's universalism. Such universalism is only possible through an abstraction from the body and its erotic attachments: an abstraction from one's death, children, wife, lover. This abstraction may be consecrated by *nomos* (V.67-69, 72, VII.86.5), or it may be obfuscated by a "public" *eros*—the universal glory and demination of one's city (II.41.4-5, 43.2-4, 44.2-4, I.70.6, VI.16.5). These different ways to public-spiritedness seem to characterize the difference between the Spartans and the Athenians.

<sup>21</sup> Bernardete has pointed out that the word savage (*ωμιον*) occurs thrice in book III and nowhere else. Its usage is instructive and throws light on several facets of Thucydides' account: (1) the Athenians, after their original harsh judgment of the Mytilenaeans, repented, feeling that they had acted savagely (36); (2) in Corcyra, Thucydides says that men acted savagely (82); (3) it was *reported* that the Eurestianians ate raw flesh (94).

relationship of human nature and convention. Diodotus argues that convention, or the legislative art, is "progressive" like the other arts. But the progress of convention is the same as the strengthening of convention: progress equals power. In the archeology, Thucydides showed that convention has the power to change the relation of motion and rest among men (I.18.1, 6-7). It creates rest, generates wealth, and makes possible "Greekness" and the two premier Greek cities, Sparta and Athens. Putting together Diodotus' speech and the archeology, we observe what price men pay for the progress of convention: it leads to an ever greater reliance on convention and consequently a heightened fear of its contravention and removal. This accounts for the increased punitiveness of laws and men which Diodotus mentions and for the overpowering anger generated by the *stasis* at Corcyra.<sup>22</sup> Diodotus, the Athenian, appears as the spokesman for the ancient, Acarnanian mildness. But his mildness is a result of reflection, the reflection (and rest) possible in post-conventional, innovative Athens; the Acarnanians' results from the pre-progressive laxness of their conventions. Human nature is corrupted, but necessarily corrupted by convention; the innocence of both the Athenians and Acarnanians is easily and necessarily lost on the level of political affairs—Sparta and her allies defeat Athens and her allies.

However this may be, the importance of the Acarnanians does not end with testimonials to their gentleness and moderation. As an "ancient" people they are undoubtedly associated with "ancient" wisdom. Thucydides emphasizes this association when he digresses to describe the place where Hesiod died and the purification of Delos, in the section recounting Demosthenes' expeditions around the Ionian gulf. The digression on the purification of Delos includes verses from Homer's *Hymn to Apollo*, which describe a colorful, idyllic festival held long ago on the island of Delos. This romantic scene is the only passage in the whole of the Thucydidean narrative which looks at human affairs peacefully and privately:

At other times, Phoebus, Delos is dearest to your heart, where the Ionians in trailing robes are gathered together with their wives and children in your way; there they delight thee with boxing and dancing and song, making mention of your name, whenever they ordain the contest.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Convention nurtures and rules anger. When convention is removed, as at Corcyra, anger and the desire for revenge are insanely emancipated.

<sup>23</sup> One cannot help observing that Thucydides ends his quotation of the second passage of the *Hymn to Apollo* in mid-sentence. The complete quotation, with the omission underscored, is as follows: "Come now, let Apollo be gracious and Artemis also and farewell, all you maidens. Yet remember me even in after times, whenever some other toil-enduring man, a dweller upon the earth, shall visit this island and ask: 'O maidens, what man is the sweetest of minstrels to you of all who wander hither, and in whom do you take most delight?' Do you make answer, piously and altogether 'The blind man who dwells in rugged Chios'—*whose songs are evermore supreme* (the best" (165-73). Homer, in the contest of poets, proclaims his eternal superiority to all other contenders. Entering the lists somewhat late, Thucydides

Temporarily abandoning his political and military or "war" narrative, Thucydides introduces the ancient Homer to speak of private, sexual, and honor-seeking relations (*eros*).<sup>24</sup> The fact that the only view of peace which is presented in the whole of Thucydides takes place in the past indicates again that the "progress" which produced the greatest motion, the Peloponnesian War, may after all be a regress. Does that progress compensate for the absence of a Homer?<sup>25</sup>

But beyond this, the narrative presence of the Acarnanians further corrects Thucydides' indictment of the past. Thucydides, as we have seen, says that poets are unreliable because they exaggerate and beautify the events they describe (I.10.3).<sup>26</sup> The poets, to take the most important case, claimed that the heroes who served Agamemnon did so to fulfill the oath to Tyndareus. Thucydides corrects that mistaken beautification through his historical research and sober reflection: men are motivated "not so much by favor (or honor) as by fear" (I.9.3). In this light, when Thucydides gives his catalogue of the combatants on the great Sicilian expedition, he naturally reaffirms his unblinking judgment of human things: "they (the allies) chose sides not so much on the ground of right (*dike*) or even kinship to one another but either out of regard for their own advantage or from necessity (*ananke*), according to the circumstances in which they happened to be placed" (VII.57.1; for the entire assembly, see 57-58; compare the *Iliad* II.485-end). And yet when we look down the list of Athenian allies we find near the end the Acarnanians, who came on this long and doubtful venture, as Thucydides himself affirms, not for reasons of advantage or necessity, but out of friendship, good will, and concern. "Some of the Acarnanians served for gain, but the larger portion [were moved] by friendship for Demosthenes and good will toward the Athenians being allies and coming to their aid" (VII.57.10).<sup>27</sup>

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does not appear to break the code of good sportsmanship by striking Homer's boast from the record (compare II.62.1-3, I.21, 22.4, 23).

<sup>24</sup> Thucydides mentions women only in their connection with political life. For example, they fight at Plataea and Corcyra (II.4.2, III.74). Pericles tells them to be silent in their grief (II.45.2). Further, *eros* is only used once by Thucydides in the nominative, in the unusual love of the Athenians for Sicily (VI.24.3)—while Pericles asks the Athenians to become lovers of their city (II.43.1). (For the exception that proves the rule, consider I.136.3.) Most important, Thucydides' view of the conflict between erotic desire (the private) and a good regime (the public) can be seen in his discussion of the so-called tyrannicides Harmodius and Aristogeiton (VI.53.3-59). Thucydides depreciates *eros* for the same reason Plato does—for the sake of the public and the common, the city (*Republic*, 420b-421c, 440b, 452c-459e).

<sup>25</sup> Strauss, *City and Man*, p. 236.

<sup>26</sup> Thucydides, of course, does take the literal basis of Homer's account seriously, both in the archeology (I.10.3-4) and, more important, in book III, where Thucydides presents Homer to show that there was an ancient festival on Delos (compare I.9.3 and III.104.6).

<sup>27</sup> The Acarnanians symbolize the ancient peoples at their best. The Aetolians

Thucydides thus foregoes his customary severity, and permits the Acarnanians, his ancient or Homeric people, to voyage on his epic expedition, not prosaically, for reasons of gain or necessity, but Homerically, for friendship and honor. In this marvelously "silent" and indirect fashion, Thucydides apologizes to Homer for the injustice he had shown to him in the archeology. Homeric wisdom, which adorns and exaggerates, is restored, and the entire "progressive thesis" of the archeology is corrected. The ancient Acarnanians (the barbarians) are shown to be in fundamental respects the precursors of Athenian and Thucydidean gentleness, intelligence, daring, and moderation (*dike*).

Thucydides thus qualifies his own account (I.1.1-2, 23.1-4, III.82.1-2, 83.1, II.38.2, 62.1); no war is total war, no motion is total motion. War and the motion which war brings can never become universal. There are always restful places and restful times in the midst of the greatest possible motion, as there are men (the Acarnanians, Demosthenes, and Thucydides) who can live amidst the greatest motion, still guided by passions and opinions which are supposed only to be found in peace—mildness, honor, and patriotism (III.82.2).<sup>28</sup> The wisdom of Thucydides, which looks to an absolute necessity (*ananke*) caused by absolute motion, is as deficient as the wisdom of Homer, which disguises necessity (war and motion) in a halo of gods and heroes (I.9.3). There is always a combination of motion and rest in both the theoretical and the practical world.

Homeric wisdom is as true as Thucydidean wisdom. The Homeric barbarians are, in many respects, better men than the Greeks: Thucydides allows us to see this. So in the end, ancients and moderns, barbarians and Greeks, Homer and Thucydides, and honor and necessity are all judged by Thucydides in a new and juster perspective.

In summary, one might characterize Thucydides' contest with Homer as follows: Homer proceeds with poetic eloquence and then silently qualifies his great themes through the dramatic denouement. As Benardete has observed about Homer's manner of writing: "the *Iliad* moves from the apparently higher to the apparently lower; Achilles, the Achaean hero, finally yields to his opposites."<sup>29</sup> One might say that the honor-loving Achilles yields to the wily Odysseus.<sup>30</sup>

Thucydides, on the other hand, claiming to proceed prosaically and severely (in opposition to Homer), in fact fashions a poetic drama, and then silently qualifies both his prosaic and his poetic accounts. He proceeds

serve for gain (VII.57.9), the Ozolian Locrians are no longer mentioned, and none of the other peoples of the Ionian gulf are distinguished by name.

<sup>28</sup> The Spartans and the pious Nicias, while appearing from the point of view of outsiders to be at rest and to desire rest, are actually always in motion. Their private and hidden motion results from the potential or actual deprivations of helots and gods (I.101-2, IV.41.3, 80, VIII.40.2, VII.50.4).

<sup>29</sup> "Achilles and the *Iliad*," *Hermes* 91 (1963):16.

<sup>30</sup> Consider *Odyssey* XI.488-91, XXIV.

from the prosaic archeology to the grandeur of the Sicilian expedition to the silent teaching conveyed in part by the Acarnanians, whose qualities elevate the archeology (the non-Greeks) and thus diminish the tragedy of the Sicilian expedition and the decline of "Greekness."

All in all, the contest between Homer and Thucydides is so severe because they have so much in common. Both seek to become the highest standard for the Greeks through their accounts of decisively important men and events. While both their accounts point to a standard which is beyond the particular events they describe, they do not transcend the particular.<sup>31</sup> So Homer and Thucydides are forced to emphasize different features of the particular: ancients vs. moderns, fate vs. motion and rest, honor vs. necessity. Plato's Socrates would say that Homeric wisdom and Thucydidean wisdom are in the most fundamental respect the same, i.e., particular, or imitative.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Harry V. Jaffa, "The Case against Political Theory," *Equality and Liberty* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1965), pp. 221ff.

<sup>32</sup> Plato, *Republic* 595a-612b.