

# interpretation

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# interpretation

Volume 9 number 1

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## ON THE END OF THUCYDIDES' NARRATIVE

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See the eighth book of Thucydides; A story in these times most necessary to be consider'd.

James Harrington, 1659.

### *Introduction*

Thucydides "entitleth his book KTHMA ΕΣ ΑΕΙ, *a possession for everlasting*."<sup>1</sup> This was Hobbes's judgment of the character of the Athenian's writings. Indeed, Thucydides does not entitle his work *A History of the Peloponnesian War*, or *The Grecian War*, or even *Histories*. And he does make this claim for his whole work: "A valuable for ever has been composed, rather than a topical prize-essay."<sup>2</sup> But what is the meaning of this claim? Thucydides appears to claim to have written a definitive history. If the definitive history is the best possible record of the events of a war between Athens and Sparta; if it is the record of everything that happened in chronological order, then it is difficult to imagine how what he has written could be improved. Indeed, almost nothing of importance could be known of the events in question apart from Thucydides' record of them. Nevertheless, a record, however accurate and exhaustive, may only be a record of accidents. The events of that war, however parallel they may appear to the events of this or of any time, are uninformative or not a matter of serious interest if they are accidental: accidents are events without cause, meaning, or reason. This is not to deny that his narrative could be more than a record of accidents by being a celebration of accident, its power. The events would still be uninformative, although the celebration — Thucydides' art — could still be worthy of serious attention. Therefore, a definitive history (in the sense indicated) cannot be a possession forever.

Yet some of the greatest teachers, for example, Hobbes and Machiavelli, have recommended the study of histories. They did so because they understood the didactic character of such works. Each history was to be read for its lesson or moral, which the narrative itself was supposed to reveal. Of course, lessons or morals may be taught by means other than histories. They may be preached and they may be reasoned. But these means are not suitable for everyone. Not everyone can sit still for the moralizing of Jonathan Edwards, or for the *Nicomachean Ethics*, any more than for Thucydides' writings. Histories moralize for a particular kind of man, the practical or political man. For such men, the actual deeds and speeches of outstanding political men, and not only the god or gods of the preacher and the reason of the moral philosopher, are authoritative. Thus political histories, no less than sermons or ethical treatises, must present arguments.<sup>3</sup> But the argument of such histories must be, and in the best case is, presented silently. That is, the argument ought not to be presented by the historian himself, who as such is not a

political man. The argument ought to become manifest by means of the narrative of the speeches and deeds themselves, rather than by the explicit judgments of the author. Thucydides' silent "no comment" shines through in the austerity of his style and in the severity of his rare judgments, as well as by his apparently strict limitation of his subject matter to "the war" or to foreign policy. As is generally admitted, Thucydides has excelled in silence.<sup>4</sup> He has written the classic political history.

Yet the meaning of Thucydides' claim to have laid up "a valuable for ever" cannot be exhausted by the observation that his work is the most perfect instructor of merely political men. Even if the comprehensiveness and accuracy of Thucydides' record cannot be excelled, and even if Thucydides' amazingly unobtrusive moralizing perfectly compensates for, or corrects, the busy and obtrusive manner of the political man, the permanent value of his work even to practical men would not be beyond doubt. For that, some necessary connection between the particular events written down and the lessons taught ought to exist. The events and the lessons ought to form a part of an intelligible whole. Accordingly, the political philosopher Hobbes understood Thucydides' proud claim to mean that Thucydides' narrative of this particular war circumscribes the whole of human nature; it reveals every human possibility. However assiduously Thucydides may have sought the truth of this war — he may even have risked dear life for it — his narrative, not the war, illumines the permanent possibilities for men.

Hobbes must have seen that the events, the speeches and deeds, of the narrative speak clearly enough. Thucydides presents a clear argument. In the first place, the narrative is worthy of serious attention because this war was the greatest. There could be no more of war — of the destruction of what men praise most highly and, therefore, of omens — in any other. The war's destructiveness, as well as its ominousness, became possible through the greatest peace, which preceded it. In and by that peace, the two peaks of human life were built up, peaks of human power and wealth and of justice (I 2, 7, 8.3, 12, 13.1, 25.3). Sparta and Athens represent those peaks. To repeat, this war is the greatest because its narrative shows the two peaks of human nature in mortal conflict. The peace built up in Sparta was a way of life that aimed at or depended upon the full development of the political element of human nature. The Athenian way of life, on the other hand, aimed at and depended upon the full development of the speechfully reasonable (*λογικῶς*) element. Thucydides shows that, by necessity, these ways conflicted. That is, however true it may be that both ways arose, through peace, out of universal barbarism (I 3.3), still Spartan civic piety, caution, old-fashioned orderliness, and moderation cannot coexist with Athenian openness, daring, inventiveness, and acquisitiveness ("imperialism"). Therefore, only a war between Sparta and Athens could bring out the whole character of the heights of human nature. Moreover, the heights cannot be understood as such without seeing the universal barbarism from which these cities arose and to which they fell in the course of the war, any more than they can be understood apart from the great peace that is their

foundation. Of course, Thucydides narrates not only deeds but also the speeches of the war. Only speeches can reveal the inner life of man. Thus Thucydides reveals the full range of human possibilities: from high to low, in war and peace, through speech and deed.

Thucydides also guides judgments of all he presents. In the course of his narrative, he reveals the bright and dark sides of each of these ways of life: as admirable as Spartan defensiveness, orderliness, and piety are, these habits fostered harsh, narrow, and stupid policies and deeds; similarly, Athenian intelligence, openness, and daring result in injustice, carelessness, and defeat. Which way of life is superior? By the end of Book VII, the low and solid Spartans win a tarnished but total victory in Sicily and the lofty, free-wheeling Athenians suffer a shining but brutal defeat. This does not prove the superiority of calculating brutality to charismatic intelligence, however, because Thucydides shows victory alone is not praiseworthy. The remarkable Spartan victory at Mantinea, a victory that restored the Spartans' reputation with the Greeks following their losses in the first part of the war, appears ridiculous; the great Athenian defeat at Sicily arouses compassion. So Thucydides seems to have provided everything by the end of Book VII. Why, then, is there another book?

#### *The Problem of Book VIII*

From this point of view, what happens at the beginning of Book VIII, the part of the narrative following the Sicilian disaster, seems surprising.<sup>5</sup> Athens did not fall following the defeat in Sicily. In fact, the city still had sufficient strength to fight the Ionian and Hellespontian campaigns, ones not inferior in force of arms and number of enemies to the Sicilian campaign. Book VIII would seem to show the triumph of Sparta over Athens not to be nearly so complete as the course of Books I-VII suggests, were it not that Athens' recovery appears to have become possible by the city's becoming more old-fashioned and moderate — by Spartanizing.

However, in principle, Thucydides has already considered these possibilities prior to Book VIII. The Spartans' most brilliant and telling victories came under the command of the half-Athenian Brasidas, and the Athenians' Sicilian defeat occurred under the command of the half-Spartan Nicias. Moreover, the Athenians were defeated in Sicily not so much by Sparta as by Syracuse. And the Syracusans had deliberately imitated the Athenian manner in order to achieve the victory (VI 33.5, 34.9), as Thucydides emphasizes in Book VIII (96.5). Daring intelligence, it seems, is not weaker than calculating power. Rather, it is self-destructive; it is easily taught to non-Athenians — or at least to Syracusans. Early in the narrative Thucydides describes that destruction (II 65): the Athenians held out for three years after the whole power of the Peloponnesians, the Syracusans, the former members of the Athenian empire, and the Persian empire under Cyrus had come against them. Even then, Athens fell because it was torn by internal dissension.

Thucydides specifies the internal fault: Athens' ruin was caused by the multitude (VI 15). More precisely, Thucydides judges that Alcibiades' unrestrained manner of life — together with the clever planning (*διάνοια*) apparent "in every single thing" he did — was a cause, first, of the defeat in Sicily, and then of the destruction of Athens.<sup>6</sup> Because of the Alcibiadean manner, the many was unable to trust his excellence as a war leader, for it could not believe that a man who indulges his body, and who is also very clever, would strive for anything other than a tyranny. Lacking excellent war leadership and torn by strife over that lack, Athens fell after twenty-seven years of war. But Thucydides does not describe that end; his narrative ends in the twenty-first year. He mentions the final defeat of Athens toward the center of his narrative (V 26.1).

Considerations somewhat like these forced some ancient critics to conclude that Book VIII is somehow spurious: Thucydides should have written on for the full twenty-seven years of the war, or he should have ended it all with Book VII (for nothing really new could be learned from the war after that).<sup>7</sup> But the most respectable ancient (and contemporary) critics trust that it is genuine. Nevertheless, this part of the narrative is marked by a number of atypical features: it has a central character or hero, Alcibiades; it lacks fully quoted speeches (but is marked by the partial and verbatim quote of a speech [53.3]; it seems to be unusually complicated by departures from chronological order; and, in Book VIII, Thucydides departs from his characteristic reserve to render an unusually large number of judgments of men, regimes, and deeds.<sup>8</sup> These formal features are almost obscured by the spectacle of Athens' amazing turnaround and recovery. Thucydides seems to emphasize this spectacle by another peculiarity of Book VIII: he pays attention to the details of domestic politics, especially Athenian domestic politics.

But the formal peculiarities also emphasize that spectacle. As Book VIII ends, Athens is under the rule of the 5000. Athens is not democratic to the end of the narrative. In what may be the most remarkable Thucydidean judgment, he says that the government of this regime was the best ordered in that city in his lifetime. This regime recalled the brilliant Alcibiades from exile. Indeed, Alcibiades' actions appear to have made this regime possible, even if Alcibiades was not its founder or lawgiver. That is, the regime seems to have come into being more by chance or necessity than by art or human intention. Accordingly, Thucydides narrates no speeches regarding that regime. Similarly, there are no speeches about democratic Athens' moderation of itself once it became aware of the harsh necessities imposed by the Sicilian defeat. But, on the other hand, Thucydides does provide a verbatim, if partial, quote of a speech defending the Athenian regime that preceded the 5000. That oligarchy, the 400, was the result of a plot by the cunning and virtuous speechwriter, Antiphon. Considering such connections between form and content, it is reasonable to suppose that the end of Thucydides' narrative has a unity of its own, even while its relation to the rest of the work — its lesson — remains obscure.

In order to understand that relation, compare Thucydides' judgments about the final defeat and destruction of Athens, or the end of the whole twenty-seven-year war (II 65), with his description of the condition of Athens at the end of Book VIII. As the narrative ends, Athens is under a sound regime, "and the Athenian . . . party strife ended" (VIII 98.4). Athens' most outstanding war leader is on his way back, honored at home again. And the Athenians seem to have a substantial reason to hope well of the future. They win a naval victory at Cynossema almost equal in restorative power to the Spartan victory at Mantinea. After this victory, the Athenians again believe their cause can prevail. Thucydides seems to contrive a happy ending by ending the narrative before the whole war ended: a well-ordered Athens, ably led, with good morale. The narrative seems to end, that is, showing how Athens could have won the war, the war whose full narrative would show Athens destroyed. More: *if* the 5000 was a better regime than that of Athens' enemies, and *if* the 5000 acted rightly in recalling the traitorous Alcibiades, and *if* the Athenians' hope — based on the victory at Cynossema — was reasonable, then the last book shows how Athens might have deserved to win. There are, then, three elements of or conditions for this putative happy ending: the regime of the 5000, the recall of Alcibiades, and the restorative victory at Cynossema.

#### *The Virtue of Athens' Best Regime*

After the Athenians lost Euboea, they were even more frightened than after they lost the Sicilian expeditionary force. But, just as after the disaster in Sicily, they made efforts to rearm. And, just as after Sicily, they moderated their regime. Of that new regime, Thucydides says:

Now for the first time in my life at least the Athenians appeared to have good government (*εὖ πολιτεύσαντες*); for it was a moderate temper both of the few and the many; and from its iniserial condition [this regime] first raised the city (VIII 97.2).

Thus moderation or mildness, *metrion*, the virtue of Pericles (II 65.5; cf. 32.5), came to distinguish the whole city of Athens. This virtue marks Athens as better ordered than either the oligarchic 400 or Periclean and post-Periclean democracies, the other regimes under which Thucydides lived. Thucydides' judgment leaves open the question of how the 5000 compares with the Athenian regimes before the war (and before Thucydides' lifetime), particularly the tyranny of Hippias and the democracy of Themistocles, for Thucydides reserves extraordinary praise for these two men. He is also silent about the excellence of the 5000 in relation to non-Athenian regimes. Therefore, the 5000 was merely the best Athenian regime of the war. But, on the other hand, this war is the greatest. That is, if the war's greatness consists in its narrative being able to reveal the heights and depths of human nature, then the best regime of that war may have a claim to being the best regime simply. But this claim would have to be made good against that of the non-Athenian regimes, and particularly against the claim of the best of them — the Spartan. What, then, is this Athenian moderation, *metrion*, and how does

it compare with the political excellence or moderation, *sophrosune*, of Athens' enemy?

At first glance, Athenian moderation appears to differ from Spartan moderation only in degree and not in kind or rank. Moreover, it appears not to be an intrinsic Athenian excellence, but an excellence forced upon Athens from without. Athens moderated after the Sicilian defeat, and became even more moderate in the even-more-fearsome situation caused by the loss of Euboea, the Athenian breadbasket. Athens appears merely to have become more and more Spartan in the course of Book VIII. For emphasis in Book VIII, Thucydides states what distinguishes Spartan virtue. Spartan moderation flourished in prosperity. Moderation—caution, reserve, discipline, deliberation—looks easier or less choiceworthy when it results from harsh necessity or war than from choice in peacetime. So Athenian moderation, which arrives in extreme adversity, looks inferior to Spartan; Spartan moderation appears to be chosen freely, that is, for its own sake. But in the same book, Thucydides emphasizes that the great size of the enslaved population of the Spartans (and the similarly moderate Chians) was the great spur to their moderation: Sparta (and Chios) prospered by increasing the size, and, with that, the dangerousness of its slave population. Fear or harsh necessity, the apprehension that the political community might perish at any moment, seems equally the cause of Athenian and Spartan moderation, not choice. External circumstances—foreign enemies and slaves are equally external to the citizen body—seem not to distinguish, or give the measure of, the excellence of the 5000. From this point of view, Spartan fear and moderation were merely older than Athenian. This accords with the ordinary distinction between *metrion* and *sophrosune*, the one being calculating and the other habitual.<sup>9</sup> However, there are political reasons for Athens' calculation and Sparta's habit.

For there is, at least, this difference between slaves and foreign enemies: slaves can be enemies in peace as well as in war. Athenian fear was built up in and by war or destruction. Spartan fear was built up in and by peace or prosperity. In the face of what were (after the loss of Euboea) or appeared to be (after the Sicilian defeat) the greatest terrors of the war, the Athenians moderated their political order. Following her defeat at Pylos, a reversal trifling in destruction compared with Athens' in Sicily, Euboea, and Ionia, Sparta felt compelled to seek peace. The graceless caution or niggardliness with which the Spartans offered peace following that defeat is characteristic of their manner or way of life. That manner was not merely habitual, for it had its origin in political reality: "the regime is the way of life." That is, that defeat did not destroy the Spartan capacity to govern at home or wage war abroad (and was not Apollo's promised aid to victory [I 118.2] yet to come?), but it did strike at the heart of the Spartan ruling order. As a consequence of that defeat, the scions of the ruling class were captured on Sphacteria and the Athenians established themselves in a place well suited for the encouragement of slave rebellions. So the Spartan peace offer proceeded more from a determination to maintain the existing order, including its worst excesses, than from any inten-

tion to settle differences with Athens. Moreover, the only Spartan domestic reform of the war (IV 63) occurred in middlingly adverse circumstances, and merely for the sake of victory. Athenian fear or moderation appears to have been more reasonable than Spartan; it did not proceed merely from domestic partisanship. Therefore, the 5000 appears more choiceworthy than the Spartan regime.

This is not to conclude that the Athenians acted in a wholly reasonable manner in establishing the 5000, nor to say that the Athenians are shown to have acted on the conviction that failure in war is the punishment for domestic injustice or disorder. For Thucydides' measure of the intrinsic superiority of the 5000, we would have to see Sparta in a situation equally fearsome to that brought about by the loss of Euboea. As the examples in the previous paragraph prove, Sparta was too cautious ever to get herself into such a situation. Then, concretely, what is the measure of the excellence of the 5000? That the Athenians could fight the Ionian war proves that their fears following the Sicilian defeat were as much based upon passion as their enemies' belief that Athens could not hold out another year beyond such a defeat (VIII 2.2). Athens' panicky moderation on this occasion resulted in a change in regime: elders, a Spartan order, were instituted.<sup>10</sup> But also all they had feared when the Sicilian defeat was reported came to pass with the loss of Euboea. Much more: a great part of the Ionian empire had revolted; almost the whole imperial armed force had turned against the city, while remaining at rest on Samos. The many and part of the middle class, Athens' former rulers, comprised that force, and so were not even in Athens anymore. Athenian party strife had made Athenian patriotism questionable. The city had been stripped of everything that—to all appearances—made it Athenian: not even the necessities came in from the empire.<sup>11</sup> Now was there not every reason to fear, as they had following the Sicilian disaster, that the enemy would sail right into Peiraeus? Thus, Thucydides wonders: "How could they be anything but despondent?" He answers the question:

It was not on this occasion only that the Spartans proved themselves the most advantageous people for the Athenians to make war upon, but on many others also. Their characters differed greatly, the one being quick and daring and the other slow and fearful; this helped Athens especially in regard to naval operations (VIII 96.5).

Considered in themselves, Athenian fears following the loss of Euboea were not altogether sound.<sup>12</sup> Their greatest fear was not likely to come to pass until the city destroyed itself, because of the character of the Spartans.<sup>13</sup> But their lesser fears were altogether sound, especially if compared with their fears following the Sicilian defeat. That is, their fears were middlingly sensible, not altogether so. To be properly fearful, the Athenians would have had to understand what Thucydides tells us of the Spartan character. Such an understanding was available to them, for example, in Pericles' funeral oration. Pericles and Athens under Pericles understood that Spartan caution would prevent them from attacking Peiraeus.<sup>14</sup> But the 5000, however virtuous it might have been otherwise, did not understand this.

Considering the truly fearsome situation to which the Athenians had been reduced, and considering the Athenians' not-fully-sensible understanding of this situation, would not genuine political excellence on their part have required something beyond domestic reform? Was the 5000 not only a typically Athenian, but also a foolish solution to their difficulties? At long last, was this not the opportunity for the Athenians to follow the Spartan example and sue for peace? To gain the final measure of the excellence of the 5000, and to understand the character of Thucydides' happy ending, consider that before the 5000 was established the peace party brought Athens as close to utter destruction as can be imagined – by seeking peace.

The domestic condition for peace was oligarchic rule, the regime of the 400. The gray eminence of the oligarchic revolution was the awesomely clever Antiphon.<sup>15</sup> Antiphon plotted to remove the many, a part of the hoplite force, and their leaders from Athens and settle them on Samos, while concentrating oligarchs at home.<sup>16</sup> This put the 400 in office and weakened the city itself. Now Athens could appear, the oligarchs seemed to believe, worthy of peace in Spartan eyes, that is, relatively weak and oligarchic (VIII 70.2, 71.2-3, 72.1, 86.3). Nevertheless, the Spartans would not accept the oligarchs' peace proposals, and, with the loss of Euboea, the Spartan preference for Athens' eventual annihilation over peace, for unconditional surrender, became manifest. It became manifest, that is, to those Athenians, including some of the oligarchs, for whom Athens would not be Athens without an empire (see the remark on Romilly in note 8).

Although the 400 had greatly weakened Athens by getting and keeping its rivals out of town, still it could not rule in its own right. The 400 had to rule by fraud: it claimed to be "5000." There was an external and an internal reason for this sham: internally, the sham deceived the Athenians into fearing that the oligarchy was much larger than it was, for Athens was so large and populous that many believed (what is in fact ridiculous) such a massive conspiracy to be possible<sup>17</sup>; externally, the 400 needed to maintain a defensive army, the 5000 or the hoplites, to protect the city's walls while it conspired for peace.<sup>18</sup> The 400 was also weak because it was divided internally on the question of maintaining the empire, and the related question of Alcibiades' recall.<sup>19</sup> Having brought the city to extremes internally and externally – now many Athenians on Samos were willing to attack Peiraeus – without gaining peace, the regime of Antiphon fell. Some of the 400 appealed to the genuine 5000 against the others to set up Athens' best regime.

The 400 brought Athens nearly to ruin by seeking peace, but the 5000 was its unwitting accomplice. The 5000 are the heavily armed troops, the stodgy middle class that risks both property and life, if not honor, for the city. But its stodginess, which looks like simple patriotism, excuses it from its complicity, and indicates what was the excellence of its regime. The 5000 was not founded merely on fear, for the Athenians' fears were sensible. Nor was it founded merely to preserve imperial wealth, to wage imperial war, or to avoid peace. Peace had been tried and found wanting, the empire was all but destroyed, and, with Euboea threatened and

those on Samos ready to attack, the very existence of the city was at stake. The moderation of the 5000 shows particularly in this: on the brink of civil war — the revolution against the 400 and the threats from Samos — those Athenians considered the safety of the city from foreign enemies before finalizing their rule at home. That is, the 5000 actually interrupted its revolution to undertake a desperate attempt to save Euboea. The attempt had to be made; even the Spartans believed Athens' internal troubles would allow them to take it unopposed (VIII 94-97). How very unusual this moderation was appears more clearly from the next section; it ought not be taken for granted that everyone thinks first of his community's safety when his rule is at stake. Indeed, in Athens at the extremes revealed by Thucydides in Book VIII, only the middle class acted unreservedly for civic survival. All other claimants to rule are shown to have plotted, and acted, against their homeland.

The 5000's internal excellence was effective domestically also. Although very angry at the oligarchs, the 5000 was calmed, and began to institute its rule, by emphatically undemagogic speeches ("by many to many"). It is more lawful and less pious than either the democracy or the oligarchy; practically its first action was the establishment of a court concerned with matters of constitutionality, of the harmony of the laws.<sup>20</sup> The regime, being a polity, had a middling government. Neither rich nor poor could rule in their own right. The poorest of the many were excluded from the citizen body. Because there were no salaries for public office, the richer sort would hold office; but, because all offices were elected by the 5000, oligarchs could not rule in their own right. Also, the 5000's lack of violence toward its political enemies is remarkable.

Yet this regime was Athenian; it is not simply best, as has been shown. The best sign of its fundamentally Athenian character is the 5000's second official act, the recall of Alcibiades (together with all other exiles). Alcibiades was the most Athenian Athenian. For example, his daring intelligence conceived the Sicilian expedition and would have made it succeed, if he had not been impeached and removed from command for his impieties and immoralities.<sup>21</sup> Following his removal, he undertook a career as a traitor that must be unrivaled. However sound the domestic foundation of this regime may be, we may doubt its soundness when we consider its recall of this remarkable traitor.

Was the recall an act of amazing generosity (there was a general amnesty) and daring? Or, considering Alcibiades' defective character and manifest lack of attachment to Athens, was it not anything but an example of Athenian intelligence? These questions gain weight from the consideration, based on Book VIII, that Alcibiades' recall could also be the return of the many from Samos. That return, which Thucydides does not narrate, could dilute the power of the 5000 and thereby spell the end of Athens' best regime — at that regime's own hands. Even at its best, does Athens remain self-destructive? Thus the question of the regime's intrinsic excellence must be reduced to the question of the soundness of the decision to recall Alcibiades.

*The Recall of Alcibiades*

To judge the soundness of the decision, two different, but related, questions will be answered. First, was not Alcibiades' good — what moved him because he believed it would satisfy him — fundamentally in conflict with the good of the 5000? Second, was not Alcibiades fundamentally the enemy of Athens, a traitor to the heart? Because Thucydides ends the narrative when he does, these questions ought to be answered on the basis of the whole narrative rather than on the basis of what might have happened after the narrative closes.

That Alcibiades betrayed Athens is well known. And Alcibiades betrayed practically everyone else: he was a leading Athenian, Spartan, barbarian, democrat, and oligarch. Throughout Book VIII Alcibiades advances his own interest (as he understands it) by frightening everyone with everyone else, in what may be called almost a universal juggling act. As a traitor, Alcibiades practiced the principle announced in Sparta: enemies are managed best by doing what they believe they fear most. The practice of this principle opened and closed Alcibiades' career as a traitor: it informed his Spartan policy for the Athenian defeat in Sicily; what the 400 feared most was the demand that the sham "5000" become actual, and Alcibiades was the one who urged that the 5000 be established.

But Alcibiades was not simply a man of principle. In the course of his career as a traitor, he departed from his Spartan principle three times. In Book VIII, he thrice refrains from doing what Athens feared most. First, immediately after the defeat in Sicily, he convinced Sparta to foster revolts in Ionia, rather than in Euboea. Then, after he was recalled to Athens-on-Samos by the democracy in exile there, he twice dissuaded the "nautical mob" from attacking Athens itself. In both cases, the attack would have resulted in almost the total loss of the empire. In practice, there was a limit to Alcibiades' enmities. He would not choose to ruin Athens entirely (see VIII 47.1).

Alcibiades' practice of his Spartan principle was limited or guided by his Athenian principle. Alcibiades learned in and from democratic Athens, as he said in Athens (VI 16-18), that the appearance of strength and strength are the same; all men respect those whom they hope or fear are powerful. That is, from his experience of what was honored in Athens, Alcibiades learned contempt for all merely conventional standards of praise and blame, for "respectability." More particularly, he concluded that what is honored in a man after he dies cannot be the same as what his contemporaries honor: an outstanding man's contemporary rivals have a private good in opposing him, which good is harmonious with other contemporaries' fear and hatred of him for his superiority. Alcibiades believed that the private reasons for envy, fear, and hatred would disappear once the outstanding one dies. Then, he believed, a man's excellence would be praised for what it is — "whatever [his] homeland" (VI 16.5). Alcibiades did not mean that there are some men who deserve praise from every homeland; he only meant that every homeland must honor its most outstanding men someday, no matter how far they may depart

from established habits and laws while they live. Those very departures could appear to him to be signs of great strength or daring, a strength that every homeland believes it needs or, at least, hopes will not be on the side of its enemies.

Therefore, once he was exiled from Athens for impiety, Alcibiades did nothing but contrive to make himself appear useful to whatever Athenians were in a position to recall him. And, from the point of view of Alcibiades' Athenian principle, his very betrayals made him appear useful: as Athens' strength declined (in part as a consequence of those betrayals), Alcibiades' strength became proportionately greater. By recalling him, the Athenians subtracted from their enemies' strength, even if they did not add equally to their own. Yet there were limits to this fine balance. If Alcibiades had not lived to be recalled to Athens-on-Samos, his homeland would have had no occasion to honor him during life or after death. As Thucydides judges, the second time that Alcibiades restrained the Athenians on Samos is the first time he benefited Athens. The second time was in the presence of the envoys from the oligarchs, as well as the democratic sailors, and it was also the time that Alcibiades cast his lot with the 5000. So this second time was in the presence of the whole city, or as close to the whole city as was possible in the extremes to which Athens had been reduced.<sup>22</sup>

To judge of Alcibiades' patriotism accurately it is not sufficient to consider Alcibiades' outstanding record of betrayal, and its principles. Given the condition of Athens, perhaps nothing else was possible for him. Therefore, consider also how traitorous the other parts of the city had become. In the course of Book VIII, or as a result of the Spartan policies of the oligarchs, the Athenian one, few, and many are reduced to extremes together with their city. Book VIII shows the three normal parts of a city separated by place: the many on Samos, the few in Athens, Alcibiades scurrying between them, and, at the same time, conducting his own foreign policy. One, few, and many were separated and related to one another as foreign enemies.<sup>23</sup> All three held to the Alcibiadean opinion: "My good or Athens' destruction."<sup>24</sup> In this extreme situation, one unprecedented in the narrative if not in human history, there could be a factual identity of Alcibiades' good, glory after death, and Athens' good or survival. No such identity existed for the many or the few, because imperial riches and ruling in peace are impossible without a secure city. Therefore, Alcibiades' first principle — the preference of his good over everything else — had become the principle of the whole city or the empire, if it is possible to secure civic unity on the basis of private goods.

But what of the 5000? Does not Alcibiades' good conflict with that of the middle class? Thucydides judges that it is true that Alcibiades cared no more for democracy than for oligarchy (VIII 48). In this, his political disposition was similar to that of the 5000. Of course, Alcibiades and the 5000 also agreed in understanding that their goods require a unified or powerful Athens; the many and the few did not understand this. But Thucydides' judgment also means that Alcibiades cared only for his own rule, for tyranny. And Alcibiades was not the core of Athens' best regime; that is the middle class, whose good differs from that

of one, few, and many.<sup>25</sup> Athens could remain unified, the best regime could somehow maintain itself, if Alcibiades were able to serve the 5000. Alcibiades might be sufficiently patriotic (given the circumstances), and his good might be in harmony with that of the 5000, and so the political excellence of the 5000 would be fully vindicated. It would be, that is, if Alcibiades were capable of recognizing his common cause with the middle class.

### *The Restorative Victory at Cynossema*

Even with a well-ordered government and an outstanding leader, one recognized as such by some or all the parts of the community, Athens still needed a sound military force. Throughout Book VIII, the Athenians are shown not to have fought with confidence, to say the least.<sup>26</sup> This victory restored their morale. Yet, in the victory itself, there was something ominous: it was necessary for the Athenian right, the democrats, to “face about” in order to defeat the Spartans, who, thinking they had already won, had broken ranks.

In spite of this omen (or perhaps the fact that it was necessary for the democrats to face about was not reported publicly in Athens), the Athenians regarded the victory as a good fortune beyond their hopes. As for the sailors, “Now they ceased either to reproach themselves or to consider their enemy any longer of any account in nautical matters.” All believed Athens might prevail, if they set to work with their old zeal. And, shortly thereafter, the Spartans withdrew from Euboea. With the empire holding, under a moderate regime, the sailors restored to their old fighting spirit, and with an outstanding commander, was not even this hope beyond hope sensible?

### *Conclusion*

This, then, is Thucydides’ happy ending. Having seen the Athenians suffer beyond measure in Sicily, who could help wishing to see them have this nice second chance? Who could help it, assuming they had been properly sobered by their experience? But apart from our wishes, in practice, can graceful intelligence perpetuate itself? With all its complications, Book VIII seems to indicate that it can avoid destruction, even though Thucydides tells us that Athens did destroy itself.

However, Thucydides’ last words are not of Athens: “And so [Tissaphernes] came first to Ephesus and sacrificed to Artemis.” The barbarian, whose friendship Alcibiades had promised to the Athenians, sacrificed to a Greek deity, but also to one somehow more important in Sparta than in Athens.<sup>27</sup> Indeed, Tissaphernes hoped to regain the trust of the Spartans, which his closeness to Alcibiades had lost him. As for the Spartans, they did not retire, but rearmed, albeit giving up Euboea to do so. Therefore, even though the affairs of the Delians were settled at last (a sacral matter that had troubled the Athenians for some time), Thucydides’ last words do not bode well for Athens.<sup>28</sup>

The question of Alcibiades' loyalty to the 5000 remains unanswered. Thucydides last word of him is that "he returned to Samos" after securing parts of the eastern empire. Although Thucydides indicates that he will return to Athens, he does not describe Alcibiades' greatest triumph. And that is necessary to preserve the happy ending. The return of Alcibiades would also be the return of the nautical mob, fresh from its victory at Cynossema. Only a dreamer could believe that Alcibiades restrained the sailors from overthrowing the 5000, from establishing his tyranny in the name of a reestablished democracy. Cynossema restored not just Athens' old spirit, but the old Athens entire — Athens as it stood immediately before setting out for Sicily. Thucydides described that old Athens previously. Everything else about the war, and particularly everything about Athens, is "predictable" in the sense that nothing new can be learned from it. By ending the narrative precisely where he does, Thucydides raises the problem of how, and whether, Athens could remain sober or moderate, how it could maintain its best regime. Implicitly, he solves this problem by his ending: Athens can remain moderate if Alcibiades and the sailors stay out of town. Is this a dreamer's solution?

To repeat, by ending when he does, Thucydides is able to show us Athens reduced to its political extremes, both internally and externally. At the limits of politics, Athens was saved and even improved by the coincidence of the private good of Alcibiades with the good of the most moderate part of the city. And, at these limits, Alcibiades acted to save the city by calling for the 5000; Thucydides writes that he alone could save Athens in these circumstances. Therefore, Alcibiades would have to be called the founder of the 5000, if he were capable of maintaining this regime by his example or by his laws. Whether Athens can remain moderate depends upon Alcibiades' capacity as a founder. Before evaluating his capacity, consider what would be required to maintain the 5000.

Alcibiades would have needed the middle class regime to sustain any of his future actions or schemes of conquest, just as he needed it to be recalled. But, from a merely democratic point of view, Alcibiades would appear to be a potential tyrant. And, from a merely oligarchic point of view, he would appear to be a powerful, if vulgar, rival. Alcibiades and the middle class would stand between these two opposed parts. They could maintain themselves, on the one hand, by coping with the overwhelming desires of the many for imperial riches and, on the other hand, by foiling the plots of the few to rule in peace or in their own right. The action of Book VIII shows how the 5000 could be maintained. The many could be managed, kept out of town, by occupying it with the defense of the empire. But the few could be managed only to the extent that it could be frightened by the many. Therefore, the one could maintain himself and gain glory by alternately leading the many out to defend the empire and bringing it back to terrorize the few. Consequently, this regime would be acquisitive, but only mildly so, because the one's foreign adventures would always be limited by the threat of the oligarchic plots that must occur when he is out of town with the many. Still, the middle class would be

the keystone of such a regime because the few would find it very difficult to surrender the city, even if the many were elsewhere, while the middle class remained strong. So this regime would be built for Alcibiades, who thrived on strife. Only a juggler could maintain this moderate Athens. In this extreme situation, no one could easily discriminate between foreign and domestic policy; there would always be the temptation, even the necessity, to treat fellow citizens like foreign enemies, and foreigners like fellow citizens, to advance a cause at home. These are the inconveniences of maintaining moderation in a regime founded upon private interest.

Even if the 5000 were built up for the likes of Alcibiades, and even if his likes could gain the greatest political honors by sustaining it, Alcibiades was not capable of seeing this identity of his good with the good of the new regime and, thereby, becoming its founder. This is proven by an examination of his Athenian principle, of his understanding of the causes of glory after death. When Alcibiades spoke of his desire for such glory, he had before him the example of Themistocles. Themistocles, the founder of democratic Athens who was driven out of his homeland and into the service of its bitterest enemy, Persia, is honored above all others by Alcibiades' outstanding contemporaries, that is, by those responsible for Alcibiades' political education (I 74.1-2, 138.3, 144.4; II 36.2). Alcibiades was not the equal of Themistocles: he aped rather than emulated him. Upon fleeing to the Persians by necessity and as a last resort, the Persian king himself was amazed by his intelligence, "for Themistocles," Thucydides judges, "most manifestly demonstrated natural genius."<sup>29</sup> Alcibiades' worth to the satrap of the king was ambiguous, however valuable he may have been to the Spartans.<sup>30</sup> He was not even the equal of Hippias, the Athenian tyrant who fought against Athens with the Persians even twenty years after he had been driven out of the city. That is, when Alcibiades spoke of the causes of glory after death and infamy during life, he did not take seriously the example of Hippias, the intelligent and virtuous tyrant who was hated in Athens down to Alcibiades' time — for 100 years. Thucydides, not Alcibiades, is the one who can restore Hippias to his proper honors after death; he tried to curb the extreme democratic fear of tyranny, of outstanding men. Of course, the cause of Alcibiades might have advanced, or advanced more quickly, if Athenians had understood the regime of Hippias more adequately (VI 53). But, more importantly, and more probably, Alcibiades might have restrained himself, understood his good more adequately, if he had been capable of considering the lesson taught by the example of Hippias. Instead, Alcibiades took for granted the popular prejudices, the prejudices for Themistocles and against Hippias. This caused him to be unable to grasp the important truth accompanying the prejudices: there are public as well as private reasons for fear, envy, hatred, and glorification. Public reasons have a life of their own in the regime, and so can survive beyond a single lifetime. In spite of his apparent cosmopolitanism, his universal juggling act, Alcibiades could not have escaped the deepest prejudices of democratic Athens to enter the bright field of honor the 5000 could provide. Without its

founder, the 5000 did not equal Hippias' tyranny or Themistocles' democracy. Accordingly, Thucydides presents Athens' best regime as merely fortuitous.

Nothing, not his consideration of his own good and certainly not the middle class, could have restrained Alcibiades from using the many to establish his own rule. The pedestrian good of the middle class (security of body and property) — as distinguished from the many's desire for imperial riches, and one's desire for glory after death, and even the oligarchic desire to rule in peace — does not naturally inspire charismatic leadership. Under any conditions, even under these extreme ones, it is difficult to imagine how middle class morality could be made to appear as resplendent as Alcibiadean vainglory, to say nothing of riches and of peace. In our times, liberal or bourgeois ideology appeared to be the solution to this problem. According to it, middle class morality is upheld by the very principles of the universe. But those who proposed this solution forgot that every relevant claim to rule is partisan or partial and, therefore, equally capable of being ideologized. Thucydides' complex solution is more moderate, or anyway less final. Perhaps some future Alcibiades will learn the public, as well as private, limits to political honors and, with that, the necessity to maintain a well-ordered empire.

But is there any reason to suppose that the likes of Alcibiades are teachable? Thucydides does not give any. This need not mar his happy ending. He shows how, in principle, intelligence is not self-destructive. Indeed, Athens could have won, and could have deserved to win, the whole war. A sensible, if not final solution to the Athenian problem is possible. Therefore, the destruction of Athens — six years after Thucydides ends his narrative — looks ridiculous.

<sup>1</sup>Thomas Hobbes, *English Works*, ed. William Molesworth (London, 1843), viii, xxi: see the frontispiece.

<sup>2</sup>Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, trans. Charles Forster Smith (London, 1951), I, p. 41 (I 22.4). Hereafter cited by book, chapter, and section numbers only. With minor alterations, I have used Smith's translations.

<sup>3</sup>Or *enethememes*. See Hobbes's reply to Dionysius' criticisms (*English Works*, VIII, xxiii-xxix). This was well understood for a long time. See Thomas Babington Macaulay, *Complete Works* (Boston and New York, 1910), VI, 236, 285. Consider also VI, 285: "History . . . is a compound of poetry and philosophy."

<sup>4</sup>See A. W. Gomme, *More Essays in Greek History and Literature* (Oxford, 1962), pp. 123, 159; A. W. Gomme, *The Greek Attitude to Poetry and History* (Berkeley, 1954), pp. 307-08; Jacqueline de Romilly, *Thucydides and Athenian Imperialism*, trans. Thody (New York, 1963), pp. 58, 103; H.D.F. Kitto, *Poiesis: Structure and Thought* (London, 1966), pp. 307-08; Leo Strauss, *The City and Man* (Chicago, 1964), pp. 144-45. However, they do not emphasize the didactic or moralizing purpose of this device so much as its scientific purpose, which I do not deny.

<sup>5</sup>See W. P. Henry, *Greek Historical Writing* (Chicago, 1967), pp. 1-88, for a good contemporary statement of the historical problem. Cf. Strauss, *City*, p. 227, n. 89. See also D. Grene, *Man in His Pride* (Chicago, 1950), pp. 80 ff.

<sup>6</sup>Here following Schadewaldt's reading of VI 15 (*Die Geschichtschreibung des Thucydides* [Berlin, 1929]), according to which *καθ' ἑλκεν* refers to Athens' final defeat and *ἔσφηλαν* to the defeat at Sicily.

<sup>7</sup>See Hobbes, *English Works*, IX, 437 n. Modern critics, building on the ancient, have argued the same. For the question of un-Thucydidean style and vocabulary, see *The Eighth Book of Thucydides' History*, ed. H. C. Goodhart (London, 1893), pp. xxxviii-xlii. Goodhart shows that the divergences from earlier books are not qualitative, but does not give a Thucydidean explanation of them. But my Greek is not fine enough to judge whether the unfinished, not to say rough, style is unintentional. See also Romilly, *Athenian Imperialism*, p. 225, n.1, p. 54, n.2.

<sup>8</sup>Unless I am mistaken, Thucydides uses the formula *μοι δοκεῖ* (or cognate expressions) more often in Book VIII than in all other books combined (if the Archaeology is excluded). In this regard, VIII 87 is particularly striking because there Thucydides offers three opinions about a certain event and then tells how it seemed to him (*ἐμοὶ μέντοι δοκεῖ*). This is followed by an explanation of how the same event seemed to Alcibiades. An exhaustive account of Book VIII would make sense of this passage. Romilly (*Athenian Imperialism*, p. 54) believes that "Thucydides' own presence is . . . least perceptible" in VIII, and so thinks that that book really does not contradict the thesis that Thucydides' theme is imperialism. But, as I believe and try to show, Book VIII indicates how Athenian imperialism could be (but was not) sustained. So Thucydides ought to be (and is) more present in it.

<sup>9</sup>This seems to be Hermocrates' and Archidamus' understanding *σωφροσύνη* (VI 78 and I 80-84).

<sup>10</sup>Thucydides says they moderated (*σωφρονίσαι* = Spartanized) expenses on this occasion.

<sup>11</sup>Euboea was more important to Athens than Attica (VIII 96.2); but see also VII 27.3-4 and 28.1

<sup>12</sup>In addition, it was fortunate for Athens that Syracuse was now again a democracy; Hermocrates, the one most bent upon the annihilation of Athens, is in exile (the last we hear of him is that he is on the way to Sparta before the loss of Euboea). The Athenians must have known this. Cf. VIII 85.4 and 91.2. See also VIII 96.5.

<sup>13</sup>This judgment applies almost equally to a Spartan land attack (see VIII 70.2, 71.1-2, which show Spartan caution in the land approach even under ideal conditions). The whole Spartan army is repulsed by a mere sally of the cavalry and part of the hoplites.

<sup>14</sup>See II 37-39. That this understanding was applied in practice appears from II 93.2, which complicates the above point by showing that Pericles was a little too sanguine regarding the caution of Athens' enemies.

<sup>15</sup>He was so clever, such a "gray eminence," that Aristotle calls his the party of Phrynichus: *Politics*, transl. H. Rackham (London, 1967), p. 405 (1305b27). On the sham of the 400, see also *Politics* 1297a14 ff. Antiphon's cleverness is brought out by the fact that Thucydides does not narrate the details of his part in the plot.

<sup>16</sup>Consider the unusual use of hoplite transports (VIII 25, 30); Phrynichus' amazing restraint leading to the settling of the sailors on Samos (VIII 27); and Phrynichus' replacement by democratic leaders at the instigation of his political friend (VIII 54.3-4). See also ns. 18 and 19 for more on the plot.

<sup>17</sup>That is, it was believed even without any private knowledge of the plot. The final proof of this is that, when the 400 was being overthrown, even the democrats called for the rule of the 5000 (VIII 92.11).

<sup>18</sup>Moreover, the 400 came to power only with the aid of foreign hoplites. See VIII 65.1; cf. 69.3. (These had fought along with Nicias: IV 42.1; VII 57.4; see the remark on Theramenes below, n. 19. Was the 5000 the regime of the party of Nicias?) The 400 was able to take over the senate because the Athenian hoplites were busy guarding the walls (VIII 69.2).

<sup>19</sup>The divisions among the oligarchs are illustrated by three peace proposals at VIII 91.3. The first is that of Peisander (cf. 65.1-2) who was willing to seek a Persian alliance and Alcibiades' recall. The second is that of Phrynichus and, presumably, of Antiphon (cf. 48.5). Phrynichus always opposed a Persian alliance and recall. Thucydides says that it seems to him (64.5) that events confirmed the judgment of Phrynichus that empire and oligarchy — the Spartan way — could not

coexist in Athens. Third is the vengeful policy of Aristarchus (cf. 98; see also 92). The one who was instrumental in establishing the 5000, Theramenes, son of Hagnon, favored empire over oligarchy. He acted together with Aristocrates and Leon, two who signed the Peace of Nicias with Hagnon. The issue of Alcibiades' recall was compromised within the 400 by opening negotiations with Alcibiades (and Tissaphernes) toward recall, rather than recalling or refusing to recall. But, accordingly, Alcibiades' position with Tissaphernes was "not altogether firm" during these negotiations. They broke down. Moreover, the 400 was necessarily divided on the question of recall, because Phrynichus could beat Alcibiades at his own game (VIII 50.2; cf. VI 92.2). Phrynichus was the only fatality in the party strife leading to the establishment of the 5000.

<sup>20</sup>VIII 97.2; cf. 15.1; cf. 70. The 5000 was not as pious as either the oligarchy or the democracy; that is, it did not care so much for the appearance of piety and it recalled Alcibiades against priestly objections. Yet the 5000 would curse anyone who violated the principle of the regime by seeking to make public offices pay.

<sup>21</sup>Demosthenes' quiet excellence could never save Athens because the city is constitutionally incapable of recognizing its supremacy. See Thomas Engeman, "Homeric Honor and Thucydidean Necessity," *Interpretation*, 4, No. 2 (Winter 1974), 69 n. 14, who also elaborates Leo Strauss' argument.

<sup>22</sup>Cf. VIII 82 and 86. Compare the differences in Alcibiades' opinions on foreign policy in these two passages on Alcibiades' restraining actions. Alcibiades' moderation is underlined at VIII 45: for reasons of private interest, he argues for moderation itself against the Chians and Spartans.

<sup>23</sup>This situation is the major cause for the departures from chronological order that so mark Book VIII. It has become impossible to separate foreign from domestic policy for purposes of narration without writing about what happened "about the same time or a little earlier." There are many minor departures and *τοτε* abounds. But VIII 45-51 and 63-76 are especially complicated. There is a departure within a departure at 73.

<sup>24</sup>Compare Alcibiades' speech at Sparta (VI 92.3), the opinions of Phrynichus (VIII 50.2, 50.5), and of the other strict oligarchs (VIII 91.3) with the view of the democratic sailors (VIII 76.6, 82.2, 86.4). Perhaps Phrynichus was not altogether serious, but he certainly understood the Alcibiadean point of view as well as Alcibiades did. Aristotle achieves this same extreme situation by presenting a city in which all the claims to rule are present and yet in which civil war does not break out (*Politics*, 1283b2). Thucydides shows that such a situation is possible if each part occupies a different place. But where then is the Athenian homeland? The position of the Athenians on Samos is confirmed by the authority of Pericles (I 143.5): "Just imagine: if we were islanders, who would be more unassailable?"

<sup>25</sup>Compare the proposals for the 5000 by Alcibiades (VIII 89) and by the soft oligarchs (VIII 93) with the actual 5000 (VIII 97). To repeat, only the hoplites dealt with the problem of the harmony of the laws. See Aristotle, *Politics* 1275a ff.: the problem of maintaining unity when the regime change is a legal one for those concerned with justice.

<sup>26</sup>In spite of its great power, the Athenian fleet at Samos would not seek battle. It feared to sail into the harbor at Miletus; perhaps that would have been too much like Syracuse. See VIII 79; cf. 106.2. The only important battle before Cynossema was a land battle at Miletus; the hoplites were decisive there.

<sup>27</sup>So, with regard to this, consider the atheistic (no oaths) character of the very short-lived Spartan-barbarian treaties in Book VIII (18, 37, 58) as distinguished from the Alcibiadean (oaths, but not to common divinities) character of the Argive-Athenian treaty (V 47.8), the longest-lasting treaty of the war.

<sup>28</sup>See VIII 108.4. Cf. V 1 and V 32; see also II 104.

<sup>29</sup>I 138.3. In this regard, Alcibiades was closer to Pausanias, the pretentious Spartan traitor, than to Themistocles. Moreover, Alcibiades' knowledge of the differences between Sparta and Athens was only relative (or Periclean).

<sup>30</sup>See VIII 46.5, 56.2. Cf. VIII 52 and 109. When Tissaphernes' alternatives are considered,

together with his deeds, his situation appears all but hopeless. He could not favor Sparta or Athens, nor remain neutral. He could only benefit if Alcibiades were recalled, *and* if Alcibiades were willing not to follow a policy of eastern conquest. Alcibiades' actions before the envoys from the 400 and at the end of Book VIII after his recall show that he still has more than western conquest in mind. There is some scant evidence that Alcibiades intrigued on all sides to the end, and that he had some part in setting up the victory at Cynossema (as we know from Plutarch). Hippocrates sent letters to the Spartans, which helped to convince them to desert Ionia for Hellespont. He sent them from Phaselis. A little earlier, after he had settled matters at Samos, Alcibiades set out for Aspendus, as he claims, to negotiate with Tissaphernes. Thucydides does not tell that he ever arrived in Aspendus, but he emphasizes that he was at Phaselis (cf. VIII 88 end and 108). Consider also the other possible connections among Hippocrates, Dorieus, and Alcibiades (III 8; VI 16.2, 61.6-7; VIII 35.1, 84.2). In addition, Mindaurus, the Spartan admiral, was on Delos at the same time as envoys from the 400 (VIII 77, 80).