

The historical value of speeches in thucydides

Literature



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The historical value of speeches in Thucydides In writing his history as a whole, it is fair to say that Thucydides has always been praised for his relative historical accuracy, be that due to his actual presence at events, his use of eyewitness testimony or his noted checking of facts. In style Thucydides kept his narrative sections rather impersonal thereby allowing the story to unfold itself.

However, to then lay bare what stood behind the narrative, the moral possibilities, the mistakes, the fears and the motives, the device he used was the speech, a mechanism he employed with supreme mastery. Perhaps the best way to begin to answer the question in hand, we should examine the definition Thucydides himself gives us in his statement of methodology for his speeches that appears in 1. 22. 1. of his History of the Peloponnesian War. ' In this history I have made use of set speeches some of which were delivered just before and others during the war.

I have found it difficult to remember the precise words used in the speeches which I listened to myself and my various informants have experienced the same difficulty; so my method has been while keeping as closely as possible to the general sense of the words that were actually used, to make the speakers say what, in my opinion, was called for by each situation'' It is not unreasonable to construe that at face value this statement is not at all a ringing endorsement for historical accuracy.

This idea is taken up by Plant who correctly states that there is a lack of correlation between the first and second parts of the statement. He continues that it has long been debated whether the historian claimed and/or

attempted to present verbatim accounts of the arguments put forward by the speakers on each occasion as best he could, or whether he felt free to modify or to invent particular arguments or even whole speeches. And the controversy has been fuelled by what has been widely regarded as the ambiguity of the second of the two parts of Thucydides' famous statement of aims and methods in 1. 2. 1. The accepted ambiguity of 1. 22. 1, moreover, has provided such scholars with what they consider to be primary evidence with which they might successfully call into question the "objectivity" of Thucydides as a "scientific historian," and with which they might thereby persuasively promote the view of him as either an impassioned (outraged) moralist or a tendentious manipulator of his reader's sympathies. * It is clear therefore, that in the speeches what we encounter is in some sense Thucydides' own voice.

In terms of ultimate historical value, however, the thorny question has always been is it Thucydides' view of what the speakers really meant, or his judgment of what they should have meant? To return to his initial statement for a moment, it is interesting to note that Thucydides seems to be making a virtue of the fact that he is not reporting verbatim. We must remember that in the times in which Thucydides was writing rhetoric was an everyday part of the society in which he lived and long speeches in literary works were commonplace.

The contemporary readers of Thucydides were men habituated to a civic life in which public speech played an all important part. To a Greek of that age a written history of political events would have seemed strangely insipid if speech 'in the first person' had been absent from it especially if it did not

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offer some mirror of those debates which were inseparably associated with the central interests and the decisive moments of political life.

On a further point of contemporary style and verbal accuracy, Cole argues that the complexity, compression, and frankness of the arguments in the speeches in Thucydides mean that they cannot have been made in the form he gives us on the occasions when he claims they were made. * Whether or not we accept Cole's thesis, or a modification thereof, we must still accept the strong influence of contemporary rhetoric on Thucydides. In any event, Thucydides' Thomas F. Garrity's article on ' Thucydides 1. 22. 1: Content and Form in the Speeches, (autumn 1998), The American Journal of Philology *T. Cole, The Origins of Rhetoric in Ancient Greece (Baltimore, 1991) speeches are vital highpoints in his work and not only for the structure and form of the arguments they explore. They appear at great moments of decision and turning points and their dramatic impact is useful to Thucydides as an instrument of style.

We therefore may have to accept that they are more great rhetorical set pieces rather than paragons of historical accuracy However, although the exact accuracy of the words spoken in the speeches produced by Thucydides in these works cannot be verified thereby inevitably devaluing their historical value, it can be said that the style and method of the speeches and debates that Thucydides includes in his work do provide us with an almost unwitting testimony of other facts which do have great significance and value for the historian.

For example the Mytilenian debate between Cleon and Diodotus shows us how decisions were made, the grounds on which they were made, and the psychology used by the persuaders. In addition, it provides us with an insight into the considerations about the behavior of an imperial power at war, its relationship with the democrats among the allies and its attention to long-term finance. So by dramatizing a conflict between two orators, Thucydides records for us the interplay of various contemporary problems concerning the exercise of power and the conduct of war.

The conclusion is that the speeches are not what we should call historical reporting in the same sense as the narrative. However there is no doubt that the impact of their presence in the work is very powerful. The reader is quite carried away in the midst of these marvelous orations to a point where, not only does he feel that he has seen the Peloponnesian War from the inside, but he is certain that he knows exactly what the issues were and why things happened as they did.

The overall conclusion, therefore, must be that we cannot quantify the exact historical value of the speeches in Thucydides' work as we can never be sure of their complete verbal accuracy. However, there is no denying that the speeches may be taken as a paradigm for a better understanding of his historiographical project in general and that there is a lasting satisfaction to be obtained from reading Thucydides' speeches for their own sake as a direct and vivid aesthetic experience. Bibliography Connor W. Robert, Thucydides (1984) pages 146-158, <http://www.umanitiesesebook.org> Garrity Thomas F. , Thucydides 1. 22. 1: Content and Form in the Speeches' The American Journal of Philology, Vol. 119, No. 3 (Autumn 1998), pp. 361-384. <https://assignbuster.com/the-historical-value-of-speeches-in-thucydides/>

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