THUCYDIDES

THE PELOPONNESIAN WAR

BOOK VII

EDITED BY
CHRISTOPHER PELLING

THUCYDIDES

BOOK VII

EDITED BY

CHRISTOPHER PELLING
Emeritus Regius Professor of Greek, University of Oxford

CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

CONTENTS

MAPS

PREFACE

'Tacitus was a great man,' said Thomas Babington Macaulay; 'but he was not up to the Sicilian expedition.'[1] To write commentaries on Thucydides' Sicilian books is a daunting privilege. The excellence of the narrative is beyond doubt: as Plutarch says (*Nicias* 1.1), these books show Thucydides at his 'most emotional, most vivid, and most varied'. To try to explain how that excellence is achieved risks labouring the obvious and compromising that immediacy. Nor is it exactly untrodden territory. The great nineteenth- and early twentieth-century commentaries – Krüger, Poppo and Stahl, and Classen and Steup, all still immensely useful – had mighty successors: Dover's 1970 contribution to Gomme, Andrewes, and Dover's *Historical Commentary on Thucydides* (*HCT*) and Hornblower's 2008 third volume of his *Commentary on Thucydides* (*CT*). Dover has many textual and Hornblower many literary comments to complement their thorough treatment of the history. Yet the attempt to add two more commentaries is still worthwhile. Books 6 and 7 are natural choices for those coming to Thucydides for the first time, perhaps in an undergraduate or graduate class; but Thucydides' Greek is notoriously difficult. It is not just the novice reader that often needs, or at least welcomes, help, and even Dover's shorter school commentaries (1965) took too much prior facility for granted. I have therefore included more linguistic explanation than in two earlier 'green-and-yellows' (Cambridge Greek and Latin Classics), my single-authored Plutarch's *Antony* (1988) and the Herodotus Book 6 co-written with Simon Hornblower (2017). Many notes too are keyed to the *Cambridge Grammar of Classical Greek* (*CGCG*), and I hope that these too will be helpful. In many Thucydidean sentences the syntax is difficult or ambiguous while the meaning is clear, and not every native speaker may have heard that syntax in the same way. I have tried to keep this in mind throughout, along with the importance of oral delivery for texts that were designed for hearing as well as reading.

In line with the aims of the series, I have given particular attention too to literary aspects. This has often squeezed out historical material that would be relevant even for a literary critic, for one can hardly gauge what Thucydides has done with his material without an idea of what that material would have been. Still, brevity here may be forgiven because so much is readily accessible in the commentaries of Dover and Hornblower: 'cf. *HCT* and *CT*' could have been added much more frequently than it is,

---

[1] Macaulay, letter to Thomas Flower Ellis, 25 July 1836, Pinney 1974–81 iii. 181 (cited by Rood 2017: 20).

and can be taken for granted throughout. In particular, there are many topographical issues which cannot be gone into here, especially in the opening chapters of Book 7 and the account of the final withdrawal in 7.78–85, and here the thorough work done by Dover and by Peter Green (Green 1970) is still as authoritative as ever. What I have tried to contribute is more attention to what listeners or readers without maps or local knowledge would make of the narrative and what sort of picture of the terrain they would build. Thucydides tried to tell them what they needed to know to make sense of his account, but that would not always have been easy and sometimes it is hard to think that it was possible. Still, even when bewildered those readers or listeners would carry away an impression of a writer thoroughly in command of his material, and that, perhaps, was enough.

Many debts have been accumulated. These commentaries were originally to be jointly written with John Marincola: that turned out to be impossible, but I have benefited from his advice and from an Oxford graduate seminar that he and I gave in summer 2017. Emily Baragwanath kindly agreed to expose some of her own graduate students to an early draft of some of the commentary on Book 6, and her reports and advice were invaluable. Edith Foster, busy with her own commentary on Book 4, found time to exchange materials and send very useful comments. I have also gained much from e-correspondence with Elisabetta Bianco, Bob Connor, Irene de Jong, Donald Lateiner, Christopher Mallan, Hunter Rawlings III, Jeff Rusten, Dan Tompkins, and Tony Woodman, and from conversations locally in Oxford with Richard Rutherford, Tim Rood, and Andreas Willi. The series editors, Richard Hunter, Oliver Thomas, and the late Neil Hopkinson, went through the drafts with their usual meticulous eyes for detail and for superfluity, and I am grateful. One final debt is to Simon Hornblower. I have not embarrassed him by asking him to read any of what I have written, but he has been supportive throughout and has lent books and expertise. After collaborating with him literally in our commentary on Herodotus 6, I have often found myself figuratively doing the same in these two volumes, with his commentary always on my desk.

This and its sister commentary on Book 6 should appear almost simultaneously. Each is complete in itself and some material appears in both introductions, but there are many cross-references to the other volume in the form e.g. 'cf. 6.98.2n.' Where references are to other passages in Book 7, the chapter number is printed in **bold**.

ABBREVIATIONS

Where dates are given in the form 418/7 they refer to archon-years; when in the form 418–417 they refer to a period, normally the winter, spanning both calendar years.

I   ANCIENT AUTHORS AND WORKS

Abbreviations for Greek and Latin authors usually follow those in *OCD*, except for the following:

D. H.	Dionysius of Halicarnassus
Diod.	Diodorus
Hdt.	Herodotus
Plut.	Plutarch
Th.	Thucydides
X.	Xenophon

Ar. is Aristophanes, Arist. is Aristotle.

II   TEXTS, COMMENTARIES, SECONDARY WORKS

Alberti	G. B. Alberti, *Thucydidis historiae*, 3 vols. (Rome, 1972–2000)
Bétant	E.-A. Bétant, *Lexicon Thucydideum*, 2 vols. (Geneva, 1843; repr. Hildesheim 1969)
CGCG	E. van Emde Boas, A. Rijksbaron, L. Huitink, and M. de Bakker, *The Cambridge grammar of classical Greek* (Cambridge, 2019)
C–S	J. Classen, *Thukydides. Siebenter Band: Siebentes Buch, bearbeitet von J. Steup* (Berlin, 3rd ed., 1908)
CT	S. Hornblower, *A commentary on Thucydides*, 3 vols. (Oxford, 1991–2008). Unless otherwise noted, references are to volume III, and if no page number is given the reference is to the note on the passage discussed
DK	H. Diels and W. Kranz, *Die Fragmente der Vorsokratiker* (Berlin, 6th ed., 1952)
FGrH	F. Jacoby *et al.*, *Die Fragmente der griechischen Historiker* (Berlin and Leiden, 1923–58; Leiden, 1994–)

Fornara	C. W. Fornara, *Archaic times to the end of the Peloponnesian War* (Translated Documents of Greece & Rome 1, Cambridge, 2nd ed., 1983)
GG	W. W. Goodwin, *A Greek grammar* (Basingstoke and London, new ed., 1930)
GP	J. D. Denniston, *The Greek particles* (Oxford, 2nd ed., 1954)
GSW	W. K. Pritchett, *The Greek state at war*, vols. I–V (Berkeley and London, 1971–91)
Hammond	M. Hammond, *Thucydides: the Peloponnesian War* (Oxford, 2009)
HCT	A. Andrewes, A. W. Gomme, and K. J. Dover, *A historical commentary on Thucydides*, 5 vols. (Oxford, 1945–80). Unless otherwise noted, references are to volume IV, and if no page number is given the reference is to the note on the passage discussed
Hornblower–Pelling	S. Hornblower and C. Pelling, *Herodotus: book VI* (Cambridge, 2017)
Huitink–Rood	L. Huitink and T. Rood, *Xenophon: Anabasis book III* (Cambridge, 2019)
IACP	M. H. Hansen and T. H. Nielsen (eds.), *An inventory of archaic and classical Greek poleis* (Oxford, 2004)
IG	*Inscriptiones Graecae* (Berlin, 1873–)
K–A	R. Kassel and C. Austin, *Poetae comici Graeci* (Berlin, 1983–9)
Krüger	K. W. Krüger, Θουκυδίδου Συγγραφη *mit erklärenden Anmerkungen* (Berlin, 2nd ed., 1858)
LSJ	H. G. Liddell, R. Scott, and H. S. Jones, *A Greek–English lexicon* (Oxford, 9th ed. with rev. supplement, 1996)
Marchant	E. C. Marchant, *Thucydides: book VII* (London, 1893)
ML	R. Meiggs and D. Lewis, *A selection of Greek historical inscriptions to the end of the fifth century BC* (Oxford, rev. ed., 1988)
M&T	W. W. Goodwin, *Syntax of the moods and tenses of the Greek Verb* (Boston and London, 1890; reissued, 1965)
OCD	S. Hornblower, A. J. S. Spawforth, and E. Eidinow (eds.), *The Oxford classical dictionary* (Oxford, 4th ed., 2012)
OCT	Oxford classical text
OR	R. Osborne and P. J. Rhodes, *Greek historical inscriptions 478–404 BC* (Oxford, 2017)
P.Oxy.	*Oxyrhynchus papyri*

P–S   E. F. Poppo, *Thucydidis de bello Peloponnesiaco*, vol. iii,
                   sect. 2, revised and augmented by J. M. Stahl (Leipzig,
                   2nd ed., 1882)
Walbank   M. Walbank, *Athenian proxenies of the fifth century* BC
                   (Toronto, 1978)

MAPS

T y r r h e n i a n   S e a

Lipari Islands

Mylae

Messina/
Zancle
Rhegium

Hyccara
Panormus
Soloeis

Kale Akte

Leucopetra

Eryx
Egesta
Himera
Halicyae
Motya

Himeras (N.)

Alcantara

Mt. Etna

Naxos

I o n i a n

Selinus

Centuripae

S e a

Catana

Platani
(Halycus)

Morgantine

?Briccynia
Leontini

Pantacyas River

Acragas
Acragas

Himera (S.)

Casmenae

Monte
Climiti

Megara Hyblaea

Thapsus

Gela

Acrae

Syracuse

Cacyparis River
Erineus River

M e d i t e r r a n e a n   S e a

Camarina
Hybla

Assinarus River

Oanis
Hyrminus

Land over 1,000 metres

| 0 | 20 | 40 | 60 | 80 km |
| 0 | 10 | 20 | 30 | 40 | 50 miles |

1 Sicily

2 Southern Italy

Epidamnus

T H R A C E

M A C E D O N I A

Strymon River

Amphipolis

CHALCIDICE

Potidaea

Scione   Torone

Corcyra   Dodona

Ambracia

Ionian Sea

Anactorium   AMPHILOCHIA

Leucas   ACARNANIA   Hestiaea

Alyzia   Mt Oeta △   Aegition

AETOLIA   PHOCIS   EUBOEA

Naupactus   Delphi   Euripus Channel   Chalcis

Erineus   BOEOTIA   Eretria

Rhion   Mycalessus   Tanagra   Oropus

Aegium   Thebes   Delium   Decelea   Styra

Cephallenia   Plataea   Marathon

Sicyon   Eleusis   Carystus

Cyllene   Lechaeum   Athens

Corinth   Megara   Piraeus

Zacynthos   ELIS   Cleonae   Aegina   Laureion

Pheia   Olympia   ARCADIA   Phlius   Epidaurus   Sunium   Ceos

Ornee   Argos

Mantinea   Troezen

Thyrea

PELOPONNESE   Prasiae

Sparta

Pylos

Methone   Asine

Epidaurus Limera

Melos

Taenaron

Cythera

Land over 1,000 metres

0   50   100   150   200 km

0   25   50   75   100   125   150 miles

3a Greece

3b Greece

(?)Leon

Trogilus

(?)Labdalon

Syracusan
cross-wall

Syracusan wall

Euryelus

EPIPOLAE

Athenian wall

Fig tree

Circle

Quarries

Temenites

Athenian
cross-wall
(60.2)

Athenian wall

Athenian wall (101.1–103.1)

*Little
Harbour*

Achradina

Syracuse

(?)Lysimeleia
marsh

Anapus River

Athenian Fleet
after 6.103.2

Ortygia

*Great
Harbour*

Cyana River

Olympieion

Helorus Road

(?)Dascon

Plemmyrion

Helorus

0   1   2   3 km

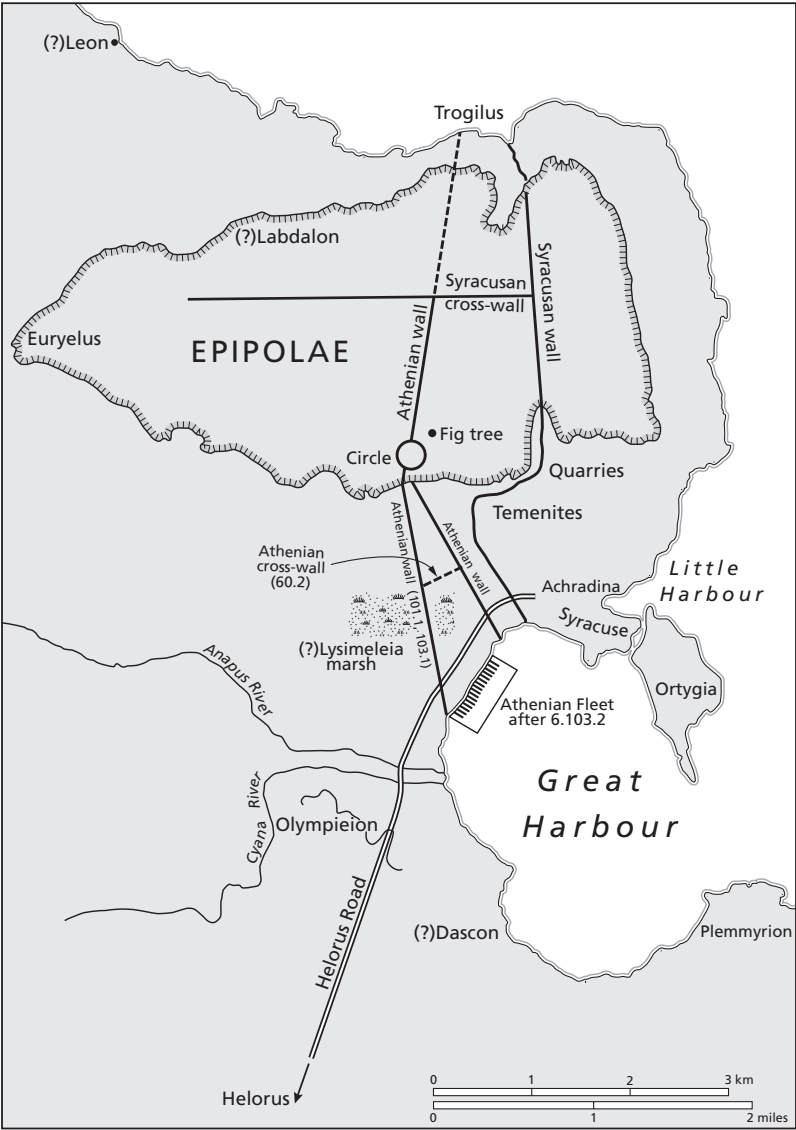0   1   2 miles

4 Syracuse

INTRODUCTION

1 THE STORY SO FAR

As Book 7 opens, things are looking good for the Athenians in Sicily. It is summer 414 BCE, and they have been there for a year. Book 6 described the important decision taken in Athens a year before. At that point an uneasy peace had prevailed since 421, an interval in the 'Peloponnesian War', as we now call it, that had broken out between Athens and Sparta in 431 and would last till 404. It was clear in spring 415 that there were still dangers at home, for Sparta was anything but friendly and many of its allies, Corinth and Thebes in particular, were still fiercer enemies of Athens; any resumption of hostilities would be welcome to them. Still, the prospect of an expedition to Sicily was an attractive one. The immediate prompt was a call from Athens' ally Egesta in western Sicily for support against their neighbour Selinus, but it was clear that the real enemy would be Selinus' ally Syracuse:

> The truest explanation (ἀληθεστάτη πρόφασις) was that the Athenians wished to rule all Sicily, and at the same time they wished to help their own kinsmen and the additional allies that had accrued.   (6.6.1)

'To rule all Sicily': a big ambition, indeed, and one that had been in Athenian minds for some time (3.86.4). Not everyone was keen; one of the least enthusiastic was Nicias, who tried to argue the Athenians out of it even once the decision had been taken (6.9–14). But the charismatic Alcibiades spoke in its favour (6.16–18), and a further ploy of Nicias badly misfired. If the Athenians were to go at all, he said, they needed to go in greater numbers (6.20–3). He pitched the figures so high in the hope that this would put them off; in fact it had the opposite effect:

> A passion (ἔρως) fell on all alike to sail. The older citizens thought that they would conquer the expedition's targets or at least would inflict no damage on Athens' great power; those in the prime of life were influenced by a yearning desire to see and explore a distant land and were confident of being safe; and the mass of the citizens, men who might serve in the army, thought that this would bring them an immediate income and would give the potential for eternal money-making.   (6.24.3)

Thucydides paints a memorable picture of the departure from the Piraeus, with crowds streaming down from the city to see them off, and the vast fleet making a resplendent display (6.30–32.2). What with camp-followers

too – bakers, masons, and carpenters as well as the fighting force – it was as if a whole city was on the move, a new colonising expedition to match those of old.[1] That spectacle, fixed in the audience's imagination, will several times be recalled in Book 7 as the horrors of the end unfold (**69**.3–**71**, **75**.6–7, **87**.5–6nn.).

In fact those vast numbers proved counterproductive. They made nervous even cities that were Athens' traditional allies, notably Rhegium (6.44.3, **1**.2n.), and on their arrival the Athenians did not receive the warm welcome for which they had hoped. Nor did Egesta provide all the promised financial support (6.46.2). An even bigger setback was self-inflicted. Alcibiades was one of the three generals, appointed by the assembly along with Nicias and the experienced military man Lamachus, but Alcibiades had his enemies at home. Their opportunity was offered by two religious scandals that had predated the expedition's departure, the mutilation of the Herms and some profane mimickings of the Eleusinian Mysteries. Alcibiades' name had been in the air in connection with the second, and the accusations soon spread to include the Herms outrage as well. His enemies bided their time, knowing that they would have little chance of bringing Alcibiades down if that meant delaying the expedition, but once the fleet had sailed their agitation and the religious nervousness continued, and Alcibiades was recalled to answer charges. Recalling him was one thing, getting him home was another, and he slipped away en route. His absence made a difference, for his diplomatic skills would have been valuable in persuading wavering allies that the Athenians, however intimidating, were the better side to back. Before the end of Book 6 he had cropped up again in Sparta, denouncing democracy as 'acknowledged folly' and urging the enemy to do what they could to help Syracuse, in particular by sending an experienced general and, closer to home, by fortifying the Athenian outpost of Decelea (6.89–92).

Still, even in his absence things had not gone badly for Athens. True, not much had been achieved by the end of the regular campaigning season of 415, and at that point Syracusan spirits were high. At first many had been incredulous that the Athenians would come at all (6.35) and the populist Athenagoras found a ready audience when he argued that, even if they did come, Syracuse would easily see them off (6.36–40). Not many had believed the more cautious Hermocrates when he had warned of the danger (6.33–4). Even once they were there, the Athenian performance had been so unimpressive during the summer that Syracusan outriders

---

[1] **77**.7n.; cf. 6.23.2 (quoted on p. 28), 6.44.1, 6.63.3nn., Avery 1973. See also p. 33. References in bold type are to chapters within Book 7.

would gallop up to the Athenian lines and hurl insults at the embarrassed soldiers: had they come just to settle down as their new housemates or neighbours (6.61.2)? Then, though, a surprise Athenian attack led to a substantial victory at the beginning of autumn (the battle of the Anapus, 6.67–71). That put an end to the Syracusans' cockiness, and a hard training regime was set up for the winter (6.72).

There were also diplomatic initiatives, with the Syracusans seeking to strengthen their hold over their subjects and allies and the Athenians seeking to win them over (6.88.3–5, **1**.4n.). In particular, both had wooed the important city of Camarina – a 'swing-city', one that could go either way and could make a big difference – and Thucydides' version of the debate airs the sorts of argument that must have weighed not just there but in the other Sicilian cities as well (6.75.3–88.2). Camarina continued to temporise, waiting to see how events would develop, and it was not alone. In the initial exchanges of 414 a series of engagements began to tilt the balance heavily in Athens' favour (6.94–103). On the other hand, Lamachus had been killed in one of those engagements (6.101.6), and some Peloponnesian reinforcements were on the way, together with the Spartan Gylippus as the skilled commander that Alcibiades had recommended. But the Syracusans were already talking of making terms (6.103.3), and Gylippus himself formed the view that Sicily was as good as lost (6.104.1). Nicias regarded the Peloponnesian force as too small to require any protective measures (6.104.3). He was not to remain insouciant for long.

News of all this would be reaching Athens, often in the gossipy form of harbour rumour and chat (cf. **31**.6, **32**.3n.). There may have been some disappointment that more had not been achieved in 415 by so grand an armada, but the Athenians had been in Sicily during the earlier phase of the war, and that campaign had lasted three years (427–424; cf. Intr. to Book 6, pp. 30–2). It would be no great surprise that this new and bigger version had not been wrapped up in a matter of months, and these new reports were certainly encouraging. There was nothing here to prepare them for the shock of Nicias' dispirited letter a few months later (**11–15**).

2 THUCYDIDES AND THE SICILIAN EXPEDITION

Reports would be reaching Thucydides too, but not in Athens. He had not been in the city since 424, in exile after his failure as general to prevent the loss of the northern city of Amphipolis. One can imagine him now settled in his estate in Thrace and eagerly picking up what news he

could get.[2] He had begun assembling materials for his history as soon as
the war had begun in 431, 'realising that this was going to be a great war
and more worth recording than any before' (1.1.1). It is an easy guess that
he had a presentiment in 421 that it was not over yet, and he will have
continued to track events closely: when he came to look back after the war
ended in 404, he was sure that it was a single 27-year conflict rather than
two wars punctuated by a peace (5.26).

What had still been uncertain in 415 is whether this new initiative would
be the trigger to set it off again. Events of winter 415–414 made it clearer
that it might well be, but even that was not certain yet: there had been
quite serious fighting before during the 'peace', including the large-scale
battle of Mantinea in 418, without leading to total war. Nor was it at all
clear that the expedition would fail, still less that it would end in catastro-
phe. It was much more likely during that winter and spring that it would go
the other way. Thucydides himself may have felt in 415 that the expedition
was unwise, and as a narrator he had made sure from the outset that his
readers and listeners would know that it would end badly:

> In the same winter [415–414] the Athenians were wanting to sail again
> to Sicily in a bigger expedition than that with Laches and Eurymedon
> [i.e. that of 427–424] and to conquer it if they could, most of them
> unacquainted with the size of the island and the numbers of people
> living there, both Greek and non-Greek, and not realising that they
> were taking upon themselves a war not much smaller than that against
> the Peloponnesians.   (6.1.1)

That is not the way one would introduce an enterprise that was going to
end in triumph. Yet he also allows a play in his narrative between causality
and contingency, letting the reader sense the uncertainties of the time as
events might develop in any number of ways:[3] some of the reasons why
the enterprise failed could be explained (and Thucydides finds ways to
suggest them, as will be discussed in section 6), but that is not to say that
it was predictable that it would play out as it did. He duly emphasises how
nearly the Athenians came to victory even as Gylippus arrived: had the
walling and counterwalling gone differently by just a few metres, it would
have been decisive (**2**.4); had the Athenians pressed on soon after arrival,
the city would have been walled off and even Gylippus' arrival would not
have helped (**42**.3).

---

[2] He mentions this estate and his mining interests in the area at 4.105.1; cf.
Marcellinus, *Life of Thucydides* 14, 25 (the delightful and implausible detail that he
wrote the history there 'under a plane tree'), and 46–7.

[3] Grethlein 2010: 248–52 and 2013, esp. ch. 2, Greenwood 2017: 170–2.

Gathering material was painstaking, and Thucydides needed as many versions as possible:

> As to the actions of the war, I have thought it right to record them not on the basis of chance informants nor according to my own impressions, but covering matters as accurately as possible, and this applies both to what I witnessed myself and to cases where I was reliant on others. It was a laborious business, because eye-witnesses would disagree about events, each according to their own partisanship or memory.   (1.22.2–3).

The difficulties, it should be noted, do not seem to include *finding* eye-witnesses;[4] weighing their evidence is the problem. Who might these informants be? Doubtless traders brought tales to Thrace, but Thucydides could get more reliable material too. Exile had one advantage, as it allowed him to become familiar with affairs on the side of 'the Peloponnesians' as well (5.26.5), and at **44**.1 he also makes clear that he had questioned men who had fought for the Syracusans. Sometimes he may have talked to more prominent people too. It is not impossible that Alcibiades was one,[5] though if so it did not blind Thucydides to the man's dangers as well as his charms. Some have wondered about Hermocrates, himself in exile from 411 or 410 to 408 (8.85.3, X. *Hell.* 1.1.27);[6] he might even have visited Thucydides in Thrace, especially if – and it is a big 'if' – Thucydides had already circulated a version of his 431–421 narrative (1–5.24) and was becoming known as an authoritative recorder of the war. Letters doubtless came too, and Thucydides would have stayed in touch with friends in Athens. Nor would he have remained steadily at home. He had the means to travel, and those contacts with 'the Peloponnesians' show that he did. It is tempting to think that he would have visited Syracuse too, at least after the end of the war in 404:[7] he is certainly familiar with features of local topography and their names. Still, this remains unclear. He may just have heard the names so often and pondered so much that he could – or thought he could – visualise it all with great lucidity. Immersed as he was, he may sometimes have committed the human error of assuming that his readers had gathered a similar familiarity.[8]

---

[4] Hunt 2006: 391 n. 35.

[5] The thesis is most fully argued by Brunt 1952; Delebecque 1965: 231–3 even names the place and date, Thrace in 406–405. Nývlt 2014 thoughtfully revisits the question, and concludes in favour. Gribble 1999 is sceptical (162–3, 188, and 197 n. 102), and Andrewes very cautious (*HCT* v. 3).

[6] Hammond 1973: 52–3; Fauber 2001: 39–40; cf. *CT* on **73**.2.

[7] So e.g. Golden 2015: 204.

[8] So *HCT* 467; cf. *CT* on 6.66.2 and 6.98.2.

All this will have taken time, with his knowledge and his notes gradually building as more information arrived. When he first began to shape a polished narrative can only be a matter of speculation. Even once he had done so, it might not preclude revision: that was a more cumbersome business with papyrus rolls than it is for a modern author, but it was still possible for a section to be snipped out and/or a new version stitched in. So if some passages are clearly written after 404, including the passage at 2.65 discussed below, that does not mean that everything was. What is reasonably certain, given the extraordinary skill and finish of Books 6–7, is that these are now substantially in the form that Thucydides would have wished to pass them on to posterity.

Thucydides did not live to finish the history as a whole, though it is not known when he died. Book 8 terminates in late summer 411, and it was left to several writers – not just Xenophon in the surviving *Hellenica*, but also Cratippus, Theopompus, and the *Hellenica Oxyrhynchia*[9] – to pick up where he left it.

By 404, and doubtless long before, it was clear that the Sicilian expedition had played a critical part in deciding the war's outcome. Many clearly expected it to end much sooner than it did; many at Athens feared as much when the news of the catastrophe first arrived (8.1.2, quoted on p. 21). But the city gathered its strength, fought on for nine more years, and might well still have won. Thucydides shows his admiration for this resilience in a passage prompted by the death of Pericles and written after the war had ended (2.65.12; cf. **28**.3 with **27–30**n.).

He also says something there about the Sicilian adventure itself. It showed a failure of leadership:

> This resulted in many mistakes (ἡμαρτήθη), as one might expect in a great city and one ruling an empire, including the voyage to Sicily. This was not so much an error of judgement with regard to the expedition's target (οὐ τοσοῦτον γνώμης ἁμάρτημα ἦν πρὸς οὓς ἐπῆισαν), but more a matter of those who despatched the force not making the follow-up decisions that would be advantageous for those in the field (οἱ ἐκπέμψαντες οὐ τὰ πρόσφορα τοῖς οἰχομένοις ἐπιγιγνώσκοντες). Instead, their own wranglings as they contended for popular leadership both blunted the edge of affairs in the camp and stimulated the first internal convulsions at home.   (2.65.11)

How comfortably does this sit with the narrative of Books 6–7 itself? Not well, many have thought,[10] particularly given the implication in early

---

[9] Marincola 1997: 289–90; Gray 2017.
[10] Esp. Gomme 1951: 72 and *HCT* II.195–6. Gomme concludes that 2.65.11 and the narrative of Books 6–7 were 'thought at a different time', with 2.65

Book 6 that the decision was indeed a serious error of judgement; furthermore, 'on each occasion that Nikias asked for them, supplies and reinforcements were sent, and in good measure, and, comparatively, with little or no delay' (cf. **16**, 6.96.4); by contrast the narrative of Books 6 and 7 suggests that the failure 'was due . . . almost entirely to military blunders by the men on the spot' (both citations are from Gomme in *HCT* II. 196). Yet the verdict chimes well enough with the narrative, even if the emphasis and outlook are different.[11]

(1)   At 2.65.11 Thucydides is not talking directly about the reason for the expedition's failure, as Gomme and many others have implied. He is simply gauging which were the biggest mistakes in political leadership, presaging the wranglings that he claims were a principal reason for Athens' eventual defeat. They 'blunted the edge of affairs in the camp', but this need not be 'the' or even the main explanation for the disastrous outcome. Those reasons can be left to emerge from the narrative: see section 6.

(2)   2.65.11 does not deny that the initial decision was wrong-headed; it clearly says it was a mistake (ἡμαρτήθη). It was simply not so big or consequential a mistake as the subsequent ones. Thucydides is fond of such formulations, which have antecedents in Herodotus and parallels in the Hippocratic corpus:[12] Agamemnon recruited his forces for Troy because of his power 'and not so much because Helen's suitors were bound by their oaths to Tyndareus' (1.9.1); the Spartans decided on war 'not so much persuaded by their allies' arguments as fearing that the Athenians should grow more powerful' (1.88); different cities sided with Athens or with Syracuse 'not more according to justice or kinship but as it fell out for each city through expediency or necessity' (7.57.1).[13] They should be taken literally: 'more X than Y' is not the same as 'X, not Y'.[14]

presumably later; cf. *HCT* v. 368 (Andrewes) and v. 423–7 (Dover). The usual explanation of this presumed change of mind is that Alcibiades' military successes in 410–407 persuaded Thucydides that had he stayed Athens might after all have won; alternatively, Cawkwell 1997: 76 and 81–2 suggests that Thucydides came to think that Athenian ambitions were more limited and realistic than he had originally taken them to be.

[11] So Connor 1984: 158 n. 2; Rood 1998a: 159–61, 177–9, 181–2; Gribble 1999: 178–82. Westlake 1958 had led the way. Hornblower 1994: 157 = 2011: 88 takes 2.65.11 as a warning against being misled by the different perspectives: 'the Sicilian Expedition failed, not so much because of bad judgement – as you might think from reading my books 6 and 7 which you haven't got to yet – as because it was marred in the execution'.

[12] Pelling 2019: 100–2, 104–5.

[13] Cf. also 1.111.1, 1.127.2, and 8.45.2 (Westlake 1958: 102–4 = 1969: 162–5).

[14] Cf. also **57**.1n., 6.31.4 and 6nn.

(3) Mistake or not, the expedition might well have succeeded (**2**.4 and
     42.3, p. 4), and Thucydides even suggests some reasons why: per-
     haps he would have sided with Nicias in the initial debate, but his
     initial survey of Sicily provides some support for Alcibiades as well
     (6.1.2–5.3(n.)). It was not a wholly irrational decision.
(4) 'Not making the follow-up decisions that would be advantageous for
     those in the field' need not exclude a willingness to send reinforce-
     ments.[15] The 'follow-up decision' most in point is surely the recall of
     Alcibiades (6.61), and his presence would have injected more imag-
     ination into diplomacy and tactics alike. Even with reinforcements,
     it is possible that the timing and quantity was not 'advantageous for
     those in the field'. More cavalry at an early stage would have been
     better, for this deficiency becomes crucial to the campaign (p. 27);
     and once the tide had turned in summer 414 it might have been bet-
     ter not to reinforce at all but to cut losses and withdraw, just as they
     had ten years earlier (4.65). Alternatively they might have replaced
     Nicias completely, as Nicias himself suggests at **16**.2.

Why, then, is the emphasis at 2.65.11 so different from Books 6–7?
Simply because that stress on leadership is so appropriate to its context,
where Thucydides is highlighting the qualities of Pericles and the wisdom
of his strategy by contrasting the deficiencies of his successors and the
mistakes that ensued.[16] Pericles, he says, had the status and inspired the
respect to be able to lead rather than follow the *dēmos*, restraining and
reassuring according the the situation;

> those that came later were more on a level with one another and
> each wanted to be first, and so they turned to letting the *dēmos* do as
> it liked.   (2.65.10)

It is a strong statement, and one that affects how the later books will
be read: 'every successive leader at Athens should be measured against
Pericles' standard'.[17] In the Sicilian books too the absence of a Pericles
is often felt (e.g. **8**.3, **48**.2, **61–8**, **72–4**nn.). It is reasonable to talk of
decline, but it is not in the *dēmos* itself – at no stage has Thucydides con-
veyed confidence in the wisdom of crowds – but in those who carry the
responsibility of guiding it. He is interested in 'democracy' as a concept

---

[15] But for a different view see Kallet 2001: 115–18, arguing both that 2.65.11
does suggest that reinforcements were inadequate and that Thucydides was right.
[16] Cf. esp. Gribble 1999: 169–75, emphasising the contrast of the successors'
individualism with Pericles' position and goals. The wisdom of Thucydides' judge-
ment on this is another question, and not one to be discussed here.
[17] Stadter 2017: 287.

too; he allows the Syracusan Athenagoras to give an elaborate theory of
democracy (6.36–9), and it certainly matters that Syracuse and Athens
are ὁμοιότροποι, both democracies, so that Athens cannot exploit some of
its usual subversive tricks (**55**.2, 8.96.5: pp. 31–2). He could doubtless see
democracy's inspirational qualities, for otherwise he could not have writ-
ten Pericles' stirring praises in the Funeral Speech (2.35–46) – though
the one system of which he expresses explicit approval is the constitution
of the 5,000 in 411 (8.97.2). But whatever the system, it needs leaders,
and these are not the right sort. Syracuse's Hermocrates is a different
matter (p. 32).

One reason is self-seeking ambition. Pericles had sought to avoid
unnecessary risks and argued against adding to Athens' empire during
the war:

> Those who followed reversed this completely and pursued other
> aims apparently extraneous to the war according to their own per-
> sonal ambitions and gains; this was bad for them and bad for the
> allies. If these initiatives went well, they brought honour and benefit
> more to private citizens; if badly, it was the city that suffered damage
> for the war.   (2.65.7)

One naturally thinks of Alcibiades in particular, whose personal ambitions
were so important for his urging of the expedition (6.15.3); but it is not
just Alcibiades.[18] When peace was in the air in the late 420s, Thucydides
makes it clear why:

> Nicias' concern was to protect his good fortune at this point where he
> had suffered no defeats and had a high reputation. In the short term
> he wished to get some respite for himself and for his fellow citizens,
> and for the future he wanted to leave behind a name as someone
> whose career included no reverses for the city; and he thought that
> the way to achieve this was to take no risks and to be the person who
> trusted as little as possible to fortune – and peace was the way to avoid
> risks.   (5.16.1)

That is surely written with an eye to what would happen in Sicily, and
the irony that Nicias would leave behind a very different 'name'. Nicias
is not wholly selfish there: he wants respite for his fellow Athenians as
well as for himself. But there is still a self-directedness that contrasts with
Pericles' commended immersion of self in city (2.60.2–4) and concern
for the city's 'name' rather than one's own (2.64.3–4). By late summer

---

[18] Cf. Gribble 2006, esp. 443, 458–64.

413 it is evidently time to abandon the expedition; Nicias knows it. Yet he fears what will happen to him if he returns to Athens as an abject failure, and he prevaricates (**48**.4). That is understandable, given the way the city treated failed generals; Thucydides had good reason to know that himself. Nicias does not even feel the need to conceal that motive from his fellow generals. Still, if this is 'love of the city', it is very different from the Periclean version. If a free state, perhaps particularly a democracy, can pride itself on the scope it leaves for an individual to flourish,[19] it is also all too easy for individuality to become egotism.

3 AUTHOR, AUDIENCE, AND PERFORMANCE

Ancient texts were meant to be heard as well as read.[20] That is why the cumbersome 'reader or listener' will so often recur in this commentary. 'Publication' would often begin with reading versions to a listening audience; even when the book market had spread copies more widely, the experiencing of a book would often be more aural and less optic than we are used to. There is evidence for collective readings among small gatherings of friends;[21] even some solitary 'readers' might have passages read to them by a literate slave. Others would read aloud, as seems to have been quite common even though it is no longer thought that silent reading was rare;[22] even silent readers usually 'hear' the words internally.[23] There might be public readings too, for such ἀκροάσεις of historical works are well attested from the fifth century onwards.[24] Between 424 and 404 Thucydides was in no position to give these in Athens, but any portions of his text that he was willing to release could reach there even if he could not. It seems quite likely, for instance, that Xenophon's *Anabasis* was first released anonymously or pseudonymously; whoever performed it in that case, it was not the self-confessing author himself.[25]

---

[19] Though the issues here are not straightforward: Pelling 2019: 204–10.

[20] See now esp. Vatri 2017, with careful discussion of the impact this has on an author's style. For this mix of oral and written reception see Morrison 2007, though his emphasis falls more heavily than mine would on the oral side; mine resembles that of Rawlings 2016 and 2017: 199. Crane 1996 and e.g. Bakker 2006 and Wiseman 2018: xvi by contrast focus almost exclusively on the written.

[21] D. H. Kelly 1996, Vatri 2017: 30–2.

[22] See McCutcheon 2015, esp. 10–11 on the way that even accomplished readers like Cicero would often read aloud. On silent reading Knox 1968 was seminal.

[23] Vatri 2017: 29–30.

[24] Clarke 2008: 367–9, Chaniotis 2009: 259–62.

[25] Pelling 2013a: 40–2. On such absent authors see Baragwanath and Foster 2017b: 6–7, Vatri 2017: 18.

A reading might not always have involved a whole book or more, but it might often have done. A combined performance of both Book 6 and Book 7 has been said to take eight hours,[26] but this is almost certainly an overestimate. At 5.2 syllables per second (well below the range of speeds for modern native speakers given by Vatri 2017: 90–1) or 140 words per minute (roughly the speed of a modern lecturer), the 18,000 words or 40,000 syllables of Book 6 would take just over two hours and the 16,500 words or 37,000 syllables of Book 7 just under,[27] and this is roughly in line with the time taken by a modern audiobook of similar length. So Books 6 and 7 together would be no longer than a Wagner opera or an uncut *Hamlet*. Some passages, though, would be particularly suitable for extraction for shorter occasions, and anyone who has attended a live performance of the Melian Dialogue (5.84–116) knows how gripping the experience can be. Within Book 7 the vivid narratives of the night battle on Epipolae (**43–5**) and the battle in the Great Harbour (**57–71**) would be obvious candidates, and in Book 6 the debates in Athens (6.8–26), Syracuse (6.32.3–40), and Camarina (6.75.3–88.2), along with the Peisistratid excursus (6.54–9).[28] So would the splendour of the departure (6.30–2) and the harrowing scenes of the final retreat (**75–86**); the second at times echoes the first, and they could form a poignant performance pair – perhaps too poignant and distressing, indeed, for performance in Athens itself. Eighty years earlier the poet Phrynichus had been fined for his tragedy describing the fall of Miletus as coming 'too close to home' (Hdt. 6.21.2). One wonders too what would have been the Athenians' reaction if they heard Thucydides' version of Alcibiades' speech at Sparta (6.89–92): doubtless mixed, given the polarisation that the man provoked both during his lifetime and after his death, but even his enthusiasts would have found their sympathy strained.

Still, it was not just an Athenian audience that Thucydides would have in mind. There was an international book trade (Xenophon mentions a cargo including books en route for the Black Sea, *Anab.* 7.5.14), and Thucydides could reasonably expect his work, whenever he chose to circulate it, to spread throughout the Greek world. Just as Athenian drama reached an enthusiastic public in Sicily and Southern Italy – many scenes

---

[26] *CT* 11–12.
[27] Vatri gives good reasons for preferring phonemes-per-second as a more accurate guide to performance time; still, the conversion-rate for syllables into phonemes has to be speculative, and these rougher figures can suffice to give a reasonable idea. The syllable count was made using the method set out by Vatri 2017: 83 n. 57.
[28] *CT* 31 offers some further possibilities.

are depicted on pottery,[29] and some Athenian survivors apparently owed their freedom to their knowledge of Euripides (Plut. *Nic.* 29, **87**.4n.) – so Books 6 and 7 in particular might find an intrigued audience in the Greek west. When Thucydides recorded details of Syracusan topography, he will have known that some of his readers would be able to match them to the locale, though he could hardly think of these as his primary audience. His treatment of Syracusan politics may set the scene for Athens too, especially in view of the oligarchic coup that would come in 411 (p. 33), but many of his readers would be just as interested in Syracuse itself.

Nor is it only, nor even principally, a contemporary audience that Thucydides has in mind. He proudly proclaims his work as a 'possession for ever more than a prize-composition for immediate hearing' (1.22.4): that is another of his 'more *X* than *Y*' formulations (p. 7) and need not exclude a concern for immediate hearing as well, but it does indicate a priority. There is nothing new about this. When Herodotus expressed his hope of saving great events from being 'erased by time' (proem), it is future time that he had in mind; Homer's great figures, not just the fighters but his Helen too (*Il.* 6.358–9), also eyed future memory, and Homer is the poet who gave them that fame. What is new is the explicitness with which Thucydides spells out why these future generations might find useful the knowledge that he gives:[30]

> It will be enough for me if people judge this useful who wish to gain a clear understanding of things that happened in the past and will some day happen again, the human condition being what it is, in the same and similar ways.   (1.22.4)

> I shall describe what the plague was like, setting out the symptoms that might allow someone, if it ever strikes again, to have the fore-knowledge to be able to recognise it; this is on the basis of my own experience of having the disease myself and of my observation of others.   (2.48.3)

> Civil strife brought many hard things to the cities, things that happen and will always happen as long as human nature stays the same, but in more intense or gentler ways and in different forms according to the individual changes of circumstances.   (3.82.2)

---

[29] Taplin 1993: 12–20, 98–9.

[30] The explicitness, but not necessarily the thinking itself. Herodotus too develops patterns of past behaviour that have continued in the present and may continue in the future; his history gives his audience plenty of material that may help in their interpretation. I develop this further at Pelling 2019: 229–31.

So similar events – not identical, but alike – will recur in the future. Thucydides hopes his work will be 'useful' and bring 'clarity' (ὠφέλιμα, σαφές, 1.22.4), both for the past and for these future recurrences. He might have been gratified to know that his history would be studied in modern institutes of international relations and strategic studies,[31] even if he might have reservations about the implications that are often drawn. He puts it carefully: the value will be in 'understanding' and 'recognis-ing' the patterns as they come back. That need not exclude the drawing of morals of what to do about it – how, say, to handle a reckless *dēmos* or fight a naval battle or launch an assault in a distant land, or indeed how to avoid launching a disastrous overseas expedition in the first place. But it does not explicitly include such take-home lessons either.

These envisaged audiences, present and future, are clearly expected to be ready to think hard about what they read or hear; very possibly we should imagine 'an interactive social setting, somewhat on a par with the Athenian assembly, in which Athenian citizens would listen critically . . . and then engage in serious oral debate on the difficult issues in hand',[32] and the same goes for citizens of other states too. That audience need not expect a comfortable ride, for Thucydides is frequently not an easy read and would be an even more difficult listen. That is partly for linguistic reasons: even the native speaker Dionysius of Halicarnassus confessed his trouble in understanding the most rebarbative passages (*On Thucydides* 49, 51), though there are generally reasons why, for instance, speakers come up with formulations that obfuscate as much as clarify (frankness might damage their case),[33] or why there are so many abstractions or impersonal verbs (these may suggest aspects that go beyond the context- or person-specific).[34] But the thinking is not easy either, and often for the same reasons as Thucydides has for making those linguistic choices. He frequently seeks to tease general implications out of the particular and

[31] Low 2007: 7–32. Harloe and Morley 2012 and Lee and Morley 2015 contain several good overviews and critiques: see esp. Forde 2012, Hawthorn 2012, Leb-ow 2012, Johnson 2015, Keene 2015, Stradis 2015, and Sawyer 2015. For wise reservations about the lessons often drawn for international relations see Welch 2003.

[32] Morrison 2004: 113–14; cf. Morrison 2006: 175 and 2007: 220–1, extending the point to reception outside Athens. Similarly Rawlings 2016 and 2017: 199, Baragwanath and Foster 2017b: 6–7, and for Herodotus Thomas 1992: 125–6 and 2000: 258–60.

[33] Price 2013.

[34] See for instance Macleod's exemplary study (1983: 123–39) of the difficult language in the chapters on Corcyra, 3.82–3. For the taste for abstractions cf. **4**.6, **34**.6, 6.12.1, 6.24.2, 6.89–92nn., Poschenrieder 2011, and the extended study of Joho, forthcoming.