

## REVIEW

### THUCYDIDES IN INTER-WAR ITALY

Dino Piovan, *Tucidide in Europa: Storici e storiografia greca nell'età dello storicismo*. Postfazione by Ugo Fantasia. *Classici contro 9*. Milan: Mimesis, 2018. Pp. 180. Paperback, €18.00. ISBN 978-88-5755-060-2.

The core of this book is three articles based on parts of Piovan's doctoral thesis<sup>1</sup> and published in the 1990s: on Thucydides in Germany from Ranke to Schwartz (1995, here ch. 1), on Ferrabino (1996, here ch. 3), and on Momigliano (1997, here ch. 4). Now he has added a substantial postscript to each of them, and an Introduction and a chapter on De Sanctis (ch. 2)—while he notes that he has not included his article of 2003 on Popper. His interest is in fact in Thucydides and in historiography in Italy, particularly in the 1920s and 1930s, with nineteenth-century Germany included as a necessary preliminary.

The Introduction begins with Thucydides in the modern world, from the paragon of objective research praised particularly by the German historicism of the nineteenth century to recent citations of him in Italy (where he has not normally been mentioned outside academic circles, but the series to which this book belongs is encouraging more contact between specialists and others) in connection with recent crises: Athens and Melos, and the Melian Dialogue, have been applied both to the financial plight of Greece and to the Kurds and neighbouring states. Thucydides can be invoked in different ways, and among specialists in International Relations he is cited in support both of Realism and of Constructivism.

Thucydides was not the most popular writer after the rediscovery of Greek literature at the end of the Middle Ages, but he did from the beginning provide material for various men involved in public affairs. And, whether for international relations or for political theory or for how history should be written, because of his enigmatic qualities and his focus on generalities he has been open to different interpretations, 'good to think with' rather than a teacher of specific lessons—and at a time when Reception is of growing interest that adds to the value of studying the reception of Thucydides.

Here Piovan seeks to rectify the neglect of this subject in Italy and the neglect of Italy in increasingly anglophone scholarship, with a study of Italian

<sup>1</sup> D. Piovan, 'Tucidide in Italia: Tra storia e storicismo' (Diss. Padua, 1994). That title is more appropriate than the title of this book.

responses to Thucydides in the period between the two World Wars, which was also the period of the idealist B. Croce and of the rise of fascism and its exploitation of history.<sup>2</sup>

Ch. 1 treats nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century German work on Thucydides, as an essential background to the chapters on Italian scholars which follow. This focuses on L. von Ranke, F. W. Ullrich, Ed. Meyer, and E. Schwartz. Ranke wrote his doctoral thesis on Thucydides but afterwards turned to modern history. In admiration of B. G. Niebuhr and in opposition to Hegel's determinism, he regarded Thucydides as supreme at expounding history objectively 'wie es eigentlich gewesen', and he shared Thucydides' interests in politics and power. Ullrich was the first scholar to confront the question of the composition of Thucydides' history, which was to lead others to reject the idea of it as a unitary piece of work: Piovan sees this as a part of a 'positivist/Darwinian' movement which led to an excessively formal and technical period in philology.

Meyer reacted against that, attributing to Thucydides and himself endorsing the pervasive view that Athens' radical democracy was incapable of living up to the political realism of Pericles: Thucydides was not a photographic recorder but purveyed a deeper truth; Milesian rationalism had led via Herodotus to a bifurcation between sophistic scepticism and the critical history of Thucydides. Meyer insisted on leaving room for chance and for human free will, in opposition to both the determinism of Hegel and the 'scientific' generalisation of K. Lamprecht, and he saw Pericles' Athens as foreshadowing Bismarck's Prussia. Schwartz returned to the problems of Thucydides' composition, not only arguing that Thucydides originally ended with the Peace of Nicias but later had to resume, but also to an implausible extent detecting problem passages, and concluding that Thucydides changed his mind, and having originally assigned the responsibility for the Peloponnesian War to Athens he finally attributed it to Sparta. However, Schwartz was in sympathy with Meyer's focus on power politics and great men, and parallels between Athens and Prussia. The postscript notes recent work on the German historians, the very different attitude to history of M. I. Finley, and the fading of interest in the question of Thucydides' composition.

Ch. 2, newly written for this book, deals with G. De Sanctis, a giant of Italian ancient history, who was active academically and politically in the first half of the twentieth century; he refused to swear the oath of 1931 to the fascist régime, but he remained in charge of the classical antiquity section of the *Enciclopedia Italiana*, when that was published under the fascists, and himself wrote the article on Thucydides. He was a pupil of K. J. Beloch (who though German studied in Rome and then taught there until 1912); he followed Beloch

<sup>2</sup> This anglophone reviewer laments that many Italian publications are hard to obtain, or even to know of, outside Italy.

in seeing the unification of Greece as important, but he was a Roman Catholic and a believer in freedom and free will and their consequences as Beloch was not, and so he could not join Beloch in approving of the unification under Macedon. In sympathy with Croce he distinguished between the *storia politica*, which he saw as a series of Greek failures, and the *storia della civiltà*, which encompassed Greek values.

De Sanctis had a series of outstanding pupils including Ferrabino and Momigliano, and as well as influencing them he was influenced by them. It was in response to Ferrabino's *L'impero ateniese* that he developed his view of Thucydides as a historian who provided readers with the basis for questioning his own judgements; and in response to Momigliano's thesis on the composition of Thucydides he reckoned that the Melian Dialogue was written after 404 and represents a rejection of the views attributed in it to the Athenians, and that Pericles' funeral speech and the judgement on Pericles in 2.65 were late compositions too. This approach was continued in the *Storia dei Greci*, with the argument that Thucydides combined interpretation with factual narration increasingly as his work proceeded, and that the 'archaeology' in book I was new in its attempt to interpret the past in the light of present-day experience. Newly written for this book, this chapter has no postscript.

In chs. 3–4 Piován turns to pupils of De Sanctis, in ch. 3 A. Ferrabino. He combined the traditional scholarship of De Sanctis and Beloch with the idealism first of Croce and later of G. Gentile, to which he himself gave a religious dimension. His *L'impero ateniese* of 1927, to which De Sanctis reacted (cf. above), was an extended commentary on a Thucydides whom he largely trusted but whom he interpreted in a modernising way, with reference to a new mercantilist/capitalist class produced by the empire. Cleon was a champion of the capitalists, Nicias of the landowners, and Pericles was a centrist; all the politicians failed to satisfy society's need to counter the allies' hatred of Athens, and only Socrates offered a basis on which Greek unity could have been built. Athenian imperialism was exemplified by the Melian Dialogue, and in general Thucydides' speeches expressed Thucydides' thought, that in an imperfect world might could prevail.

In *La dissoluzione della libertà nella Grecia antica*, of 1929, Ferrabino saw Greek history in terms of conflict between liberty and power, with a series of ephemeral hegemonies from Athens' fifth-century empire until the final subjection to Rome; only the Romans with their concept of an Italian nation achieved a synthesis of Greek individuality and oriental universality (and thus Ferrabino came very close to if not right into the arms of fascism). But later he distanced himself from fascism, and after the Second World War he turned to a mystical Catholicism. The postscript notes particularly the entry on Ferrabino by P. Treves in the *Dizionario biografico degli Italiani*, and the lack of a good study of the influence of Gentile on Italian historians.

Finally, in ch. 4, we reach A. D. Momigliano, a younger pupil of De Sanctis. He studied philosophy before he turned to ancient history, and in his brilliant thesis of 1929 on the composition of Thucydides' history he announced his intention of exploring the development of Thucydides' thought: while Herodotus remained on the level of narrating famous men and famous deeds, Thucydides, while he had some 'Herodotean' (and presumably early) passages, surpassed Herodotus by using the tools of the sophists and his understanding of the present to illuminate his investigation of the past too. Thucydides began as a narrator and a defender of Athens' empire (a view which Momigliano later abandoned), but after Athens' final defeat he returned to his work, continued it beyond 421, and added the speeches through which he expressed his analysis. On the importance of power Momigliano followed Ferrabino, but he also took from Croce his interest in the history of thought, and he did not suppose that Thucydides should serve as a model for present-day historians.

In that thesis and in other early works Momigliano explored what was to be a main theme throughout his career, the development through antiquity of the concept of liberty. The liberty which Demosthenes defended for fourth-century Athens was liberty to exercise power over others, and Philip of Macedon was not an enemy of Greek civilisation but a man who took it beyond its particularism to the unity of J. G. Droysen's hellenistic world; Theopompus surpassed Thucydides in his wider vision of human psychology and of the Greek world. Jewish notions of justice contributed to Momigliano's intellectual development too (though in adult life he was never observant). Later he turned away from idealism, and while adhering to the importance of interpretation he insisted on the need to establish the facts before interpreting them; but he increasingly preferred the breadth of Herodotus to the narrow focus of Thucydides, and saw the works of ancient historians as documents of their own time.

The postscript notes the appearance of previously unpublished works of Momigliano and of various works about Momigliano (and about his dealings with the fascists before his migration to Britain), emphasises the growing distance between Momigliano and Croce's idealism in his later years, and in fashionable language suggests that he moved from the 'etic' and the 'presentification' of the past to the 'emic', which preserves the distance between past and present.

Piovan does not himself draw together the threads of the separate chapters, but the book ends with Fantasia's 'Postfazione'. He remarks that history-writing in Italy between the two World Wars was a phenomenon unparalleled in other countries, in its reaction against dry philology, its combination of history, historiography and the history of historiography, and its focus on Greek unity and on the problems of liberty and authority (for which he sees a precedent in studies included in the 1861 translation of Thucydides by A.

Peyron). I note that in anglophone scholarship, by contrast, the objective Thucydides continued to hold sway until the second half of the twentieth century, except in F. M. Cornford's *Thucydides Mythistoricus* of 1907. Fantasia stresses that for De Sanctis Thucydides was admirable but nevertheless combined art and subjectivity with fact and objectivity; De Sanctis thought that in agreeing to the Peace of Nicias Athens lost an opportunity to unite the Greek world under its leadership, and that Thucydides gave distorted accounts to reduce the responsibility of Pericles for the Peloponnesian War and of Nicias for the Sicilian campaign of 415–413, while his Periclean funeral speech was a panegyric of Athenian liberty. Fantasia ends by noting that, while the question about Thucydides' composition has not gone away, his manner of working was such that we cannot brand substantial parts of the work as early or late, and that the simple opposition between philology and philosophy studied here has dissolved into a multitude of narrower specialisms.

This book uses approaches to Thucydides to investigate a fascinating period in Italian intellectual history. I cannot begin to rival Piovan's knowledge of the subject, but as far as I can judge this is a thorough piece of work, and a highly interesting and worthwhile study. I note that in twenty-eight pages of bibliography no fewer than six are taken up by publications of Momigliano.

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