REVIEW–DISCUSSION

THUCYDIDES ON SPARTAN
IDENTITY AND PROPAGANDA

Anton Powell and Paula Debnar, edd., *Thucydides and Sparta*. Swansea and London: Classical Press of Wales, 2021. Pp. xiv + 285. Hardback £60.00. ISBN 978-1-910589-75-5.

Anton Powell and Paula Debnar's 2021 collected volume *Thucydides and Sparta* offers a re-appraisal of the historian's representation of Sparta and Spartans, a subject in need of a coherent and sustained analysis such as is provided here. The volume stems from a 2008 conference organised by Powell as part of his Celtic Conference in Classics, his innovative 'scholarly NGO'. It was intended to be part of a series of volumes on various authors and Sparta, and was preceded by *Xenophon and Sparta*, co-edited by Powell and Nicolas Richer in 2020.

Thucydides offers a far less sustained or explicit analysis of Spartan national character than he does of Athens'. Powell and Debnar's project, which collects and distils the historian's many disparate references to Spartans into a single volume approaching the issue from various perspectives, is thus particularly valuable. Many leading ancient historians and scholars of historiography, the majority of them women, employ both literary and historical methods to examine critically the text and its sources in this volume. It offers particularly sharp analyses of some premises that have long been unquestioned by Thucydidean scholars, such as his apparently stereotyping representation of national character or the signs of Spartan propaganda influencing his narrative. At times, the authors challenge traditional interpretations of Thucydides, and at other points question Thucydides' own historical research and agendas, effectively analysing several puzzles regarding historical information that Thucydides omits, such as the role of proxeny in international relations. Like all Classical Press of Wales volumes, it is beautifully produced; I found only one typo.

Powell, who died in 2020, was the preeminent scholar of issues related to Classical Sparta, as well as serving the profession by founding and editing the independent Classical Press of Wales, which published a generation of influential and gorgeous volumes. One of Powell's trademarks was his penchant for collaboration, and *Thucydides and Sparta* is thus an admirable and

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characteristic final work that illustrates the magnitude of his loss to the profession as well as friends and colleagues. The volume opens with moving tributes by two of the contributors, Thomas J. Figueira and Ellen Millender, to Powell as a scholar and a friend; Debnar in the Introduction also offers her appreciation for his scholarship.

Ch. 1: Emily Greenwood, 'Thucydides' General Attitude to Sparta'

Many scholars have attempted to discern whether Thucydides favours Sparta or Athens, a question that often seems unanswerable. Similarly, the role of the 'Spartan Mirage', and the ways that the public image of Sparta sometimes takes on a life of its own, independent of actual Spartan behaviour, have been a topic of widespread interest. This chapter offers an insightful new take on these questions. Greenwood's contribution offers a nuanced approach to Thucydides' attitudes towards the Spartans and their national characteristics: while many have unquestioningly accepted the traditional characterisation of Spartans as slow, pious, and stolid, in contrast with the supposedly fast-moving and brilliant Athenians, Greenwood demonstrates that individuals in Thucydides tend to make mistakes when they presume such stereotypes are accurate, or that they are universally true of all members of the city in question. This interpretation gives Thucydides credit for seeing through the 'Sparta effect', and argues that he is effectively putting on display how stereotyping distorts intellectual processes. The mechanism that creates this sense is often a comparison of plan and results, in which plans fail to produce the expected consequences because the planner relied on stereotypes and thus failed to understand his opponent fully. This an especially interesting approach given that historians of all eras regularly extrapolate 'plans' from their results, sometimes even without realising they are doing so;[1] even modern military figures sometimes have difficulty retrospectively distinguishing original strategy from the way historical reality unfolded.[2] This tendency of planning to be particularly susceptible to alteration or misremembering by historians suggests that Thucydides himself may have had a greater hand than usual in these particular elements of the text, and thus in creating this impression of a connection between stereotyping and failed strategising. Additionally, the portions of the text in which such stereotypes and expectations are normally expressed are the speeches, i.e., another part of the narrative that scholars regard as less likely to reflect literal truth in Thucydides. The failed planning and the stereotyping in speeches thus suggest that Thucydides deliberately explores the question of stereotypes and their consequences. This is especially

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[1] V. J. Hunter, *Thucydides: The Artful Reporter* (Toronto, 1973) 18.

[2] N. Whatley, 'On the Possibility of Reconstructing Marathon and Other Battles', *JHS* 84 (1964) 119–34, at 121.

the case, as Greenwood observes, because prejudices and ethnic generalisations appear mainly in the mouths of his characters, not in the historian's own voice, and the narrative regularly refutes them. In particular, stereotyping of the Spartans among non-Spartans frequently results in miscalculation, and Thucydides' frequent use of verbs of perception in recounting the faulty thought process makes clear that he does not endorse them. Homogeneity, similarly, is not to be relied on in his text: even though the Spartans attempt to project such an image, their behaviour depends on context. While his internal speakers often make judgements about, for example, the archaic and inflexible nature of the Spartans, Thucydides' own narrative often deflates such assessments. In this case, his narrative gives the Spartans credit for early innovation, noting their status as the first to adopt modern dress (1.6.4, p. 14). The use of ethnic stereotyping as a shortcut eliminating true knowledge or thought thus leads to failure. This subtle and convincing interpretation of the 'Spartan mirage' thus gives Thucydides credit for challenging the lazy thought processes of historical figures around him.

Ch. 2: Paula Debnar, ʹΒΡΑΔΎΤΗΣ ΛΑΚΩΝΙΚΗ: Spartan Slowness in Thucydides' *History*'

Debnar similarly questions stereotypes about Spartans, focusing specifically on their alleged slowness, particularly in the Archidamian War narrative. She argues that Spartan actions in the opening of the war were not in fact dilatory, and the slowness imputed to them is not supported by the facts of the narrative. Debnar posits that what has often been taken for slowness, for example in the Spartans assembling their allies at the beginning of the war, was in fact due to challenges named by Pericles, specifically the Spartans' lack of money (1.142.1) and disagreements among the members of the Peloponnesian League (1.141.6). She examines a number of incidents in search of their alleged slowness, most significantly the first invasion of Attica, the Spartan attempt to capture the Piraeus (starting at 2.93.1); the role of political division in hindering the Peloponnesian—and in fact speedy Spartan—response to Athenian aggression at Lesbos; and the Spartan intervention at Rhodes. Debnar also studies Thucydides' barely concealed scorn for Alcidas, the Spartan commander tasked with aiding Lesbos, arguing that his apparently slow journey to aid the Melians could have been due to the fact that he may have been collecting necessary money en route. She concludes that Pericles correctly assessed the situation and understood the motives of his foes' behaviours, while national stereotyping hinders other figures from reaching a similar understanding of the genuine situation. While Debnar takes a less conclusive stance, arguing that Spartans may indeed have been slow, simply not to the universal degree suggested by some parts of the narrative, she, like Greenwood, thus reveals prejudices at work among many characters in Thucydides' work, even while

the facts point to other interpretations, and warns us against following Thucydides' less insightful figures down the same path.

Ch. 3: Jean Ducat, 'The Presence of Sparta in the Funeral Oration of Perikles'

Though the Spartans make only one explicit appearance in the Funeral Oration, most scholars would agree that this speech is, to a large extent, shaped by an implicit contrast between the two cities. Ducat discusses the image of Sparta presented to the Athenian public by Pericles, as depicted by Thucydides, in the speech, arguing that it plays to Athenian anxieties and expectations surrounding Sparta, demonstrating conformity with what Pericles' audience believed about Sparta. He offers a detailed reading, almost commentary-like, of much of the Oration, seeking to demonstrate that Pericles' speech conforms to audience expectations more than the reality of historical Sparta or indeed, possibly, Pericles' own true understanding of them. Ducat thus reads the speech as a polemic asserting Athens' status as a model state, in implicit contrast to Sparta. This assertion would have been controversial to many of Pericles' contemporaries, who would have more likely seen Sparta as the natural 'ideal state' to be emulated. For example, the speech implies that the Athenian electoral system rivals the Spartan selection of *gerontes* at enlisting the best people for the city's cause. The Oration carefully ignores, however, the lottery elements of Athenian governance, because those would be unhelpful to maintaining such an assertion. The speech, Ducat argues, also implies that the Athenian system is fairer to the poor. Various other elements of the speech, such as its treatment of women, its definition of a 'good life', and its study of good governance set up an implicit contrast with Sparta. This analysis concludes with the compelling argument that the Funeral Oration represents the death of Athenian soldiers in battle as exceptionally significant, and a greater sacrifice than citizens of other states, to the degree that Athenian lives were richer and more meaningful than those of Spartans. Ducat concludes that the representation of Sparta in the Funeral Oration owes more to Athenian stereotypes of Sparta than to the historical reality of the city.

Attributing motive to a speaker in Thucydides is always tricky, given that we will never know the extent to which his speeches reflect literal historical reality. This contribution to the volume would have been stronger if it had more explicitly engaged with the question of veracity of Thucydides' speeches. The rich analysis presented here has different implications if the speech is being treated as an accurate reflection of the historical oration, attributable to Pericles himself, or more of a literary invention by the historian.

Ch. 4: Ellen Millender, 'ΝΟΜΙΜΑ ΑΡΧΑΙΟΤΡΟΠΑ ΚΑΙ ΑΜΕΙΚΤΑ:
Thucydides' Alienation of Spartan Kingship'

Millender also explores Sparta's allegedly 'slow' nature, arguing that Thucydides' text showcases the ways that political stagnation hinders Sparta's war effort; that the historian projects contemporary Sparta back into history; and that he is not the neutral observer that he claims to be. She offers an analysis of Thucydides' characters and cities as representatives of different chronological eras, a creative and fruitful approach that could perhaps be even more widely applied in Thucydides' work. She argues that his account of the historical development of the cities of Greece is influenced by his interpretation of contemporary Sparta, as it is the one city that retains the 'old' style of kingship; and that Spartan lack of development is also clear in their having maintained the same constitution for 400 years. They are thus an example of extreme stability as opposed to change and progress and especially Athens' 'almost demonic *polypragmosyne*' (88), resulting in a kind of political lack of development. Similarly, she argues that Sparta is less developed both in terms of political *techne* and other technologies such as seafaring. Millender is particularly concerned with anecdotal stories of the pre-Peloponnesian War past, especially the Athenian response to Cylon in contrast with Sparta's to Pausanias. She shows that the Athenians react much more promptly and aggressively to the threat of tyranny in their state; the response of Sparta, with its unmixed constitution, is more similar to what might be expected of 'barbarian' nations. Sparta thus appears to have two models of behaviour, that of Archidamus, modelling slowness and inertia, and that of Pausanias, capable of change but in a tyrannical direction, with his fellow citizens unable to respond appropriately.

Millender investigates the story of Archidamus at length, as he seems to be represented as a reminder of an earlier phase of development and can thus be seen as symbolic of his whole city. His speeches also occasionally link his people to their ancestral ways. This location of Archidamus (or indeed Sparta) 'in the past' is not necessarily a 'barbarian' feature, however, as the past can also link people to a supposedly simpler and less corrupt time in Greek history; the Plataeans of the Plataean Debate also appear to be located emphatically in the past, morally, politically, and rhetorically,[3] and they can be read as positive figures. Notably, however, all of Thucydides' creatures of the past, displaying 'chronological "otherness"' (99), such as Archidamus and the Plataeans, seem to meet disappointing ends, a subject that merits further study.

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[3] J. J. Price, *Thucydides and Internal War* (Cambridge, 2001) 109.

Ch. 5: Thomas J. Figueira, 'Thucydides, Ethnic Solidarity,
and Messenian Ethnogenesis'

Figueira takes on the historical and cultural question of whether *polis* identity or ethnic tribalism was more significant in influencing behaviour, using the case of the Messenians in particular to argue that *polis* identity trumped ethnic identities. Networks of ethnic identity spanned the Greek world, much of it stemming from colonisation, and linguistic markers thus usually served to differentiate Greek from non-Greek, as well as serving as finer ethnic distinctions within Greek society. Sometimes, however, ethnic lines do not serve as proxies for loyalty, for example in the case of the Plataeans, 'Boeotians who are unwilling to be Boeotians' (Hdt. 6.108.5). Figueira argues that the interactions of members of such groups were not always governed by ethnic relationships. Figueira contends that Dorians seemed more inclined to ally along ethnic lines; among Ionians, however, such ties often served more as an excuse for action based on other true motives. This greater tendency of Ionians to mix ethnicities is apparent, for example, in the disaster caused by the mixed nature of the Athenian side at Epipolae and the catalogue of allies at 7.51.1–59.1, or the fact that there is no reference to ethnicity in the Funeral Oration. He is particularly interested in the case of Messenians—a group whose identity was especially in question, and indeed threatened by the Spartans—and Naupactus as a case study in non-colonial settlement. He explores the relationship between Messenians and helots, untangling the question of whether all Helots were Messenians, and concluding that they were essentially the same group, but that that Spartans had 'de-ethnicised' helots. Figueira notes, for example, that helots who fled to Naupactus were for all practical purposes Messenians, even if they had originated from other groups of *perioikoi*: the act of rebellion from Sparta itself seems to have created helot identity. The Doric language of the Messenians prevented Sparta from completely 'othering' them, meaning that the Spartans instead attempted essentially to strip them of any ethnic identity. On the other hand, links between Attica and Messenia through shared mystery cults, particularly Eleusis, helped establish inter-ethnic ties despite linguistic differences. Messene thus functioned as a theoretical *polis* whose culture had been suppressed, and which existed partly as a diaspora. Messenian identity could therefore serve as both a 'consolidating' *ethnē* and an 'insurgent' one, terms describing ethnic groups who, respectively, served to unify groups through shared identity or to unify them through 'fissional ethnogenesis by separation' (148). While the example of the Messenians might be too historically unique to extrapolate from their example to other Greek identities very widely, Figueira makes this argument convincingly.

Ch. 6: Polly Low, '*Xenia* and *Proxenia* in Thucydides' Sparta'

Thucydides famously downplays both *proxenia* and *xenia* in state behaviour, especially in comparison with other ancient historians such as Herodotus and Xenophon. Low is interested in the historical question of how these ties worked in a Spartan context, as well as their representation in Thucydides. She attempts to fill the gaps left by Thucydides by carefully examining the tensions between private friendships and public duties of leaders of both Athens and Sparta that do appear in his work. Despite Sparta's anti-social reputation, she argues that evidence from the text does not support the idea that the state had an unusually low number of ties between individuals or cities. Rather, the historian suppresses many such issues, obscuring their extent and role in historical reality. She also addresses the question of whether Thucydides deliberately downplays *xenia* relationships or if he assumes his audience will make such connections on their own, concluding that the example of Xenophon suggests that the former may be the case.

In order to shed light on this issue, Low explores a series of individual cases, such as Pericles and Archidamus, or the implicit intercity ties suggested by the name of one of the Plataean speakers, Lacon. The most interesting of the case studies involves Alcibiades and the Spartan Endius, because these two figures conspired to benefit themselves at the expense of Sparta despite their own obligations to the state. While this case might be a bit extreme, she argues for a generally utilitarian application of ties of *proxenia* and *xenia*, as those who are not useful to a city or individual are deemed irrelevant. While there may be some difference in degree of utilitarianism, however, she argues that this is not a uniquely Spartan stance, and thus the Athenian critique of Sparta as unusually self-centred (5.105.4) seems to be false. *Xenia* and *proxenia* are regularly used as flexible tools to be applied in varying ways that are situationally dependent. While for Athens these relationships were key to the 'machinery of empire' (176), less is known about the Spartans' use of them. But Low's study suggests that Spartan applications of them were similarly utilitarian. The study is convincing. Though it lies outside of the scope of Spartan ties, it would have been interesting to hear more of Low's thoughts on the mysterious Corcyraean ἐθελοπρόξενος of Athens, Peithias (3.70.3), whose position has never been satisfactorily explained.

Ch. 7: Maria Fragoulaki, 'The Mytho-Political Map of Spartan Colonisation in Thucydides: the "Spartan Colonial Triangle" vs. the "Spartan Mediterranean"'

Fragoulaki also examines the Spartan inter-city ties that Thucydides occasionally elides, in this case, his representation of Sparta as having an extremely bare-bones colonial network. She, like Figueira, shows that *polis* and ethnic

identities can be put to political uses and occasionally even be dramatically altered, as happens in the effective adoption by Sparta of the Ionian colony Amphipolis and its acceptance of Brasidas as its founder. For the most part, however, she focuses on Thucydides' erasure of most Spartan family ties from his text. In doing so, she effectively explores both myth itself and the active use of myth in identity formation. Thucydides explicitly names only three Spartan colonies (Heracleia in Trachis, Cythera, and Melos), thus the title 'Spartan Colonial Triangle', whereas we know of Spartan colonies from Eryx to Knidos from other sources; Herodotus, for example, extensively details such ties and their history. Thucydides also appears to be far more interested in other states' colonial relationships than he is those of Sparta, for example dwelling at length on the fraught ties between Corcyra and its mother-city, Corinth. Meanwhile, he seems deliberately to ignore significant Spartan colonial history; Taras, for example, and Knidos have their highly relevant colonial relationships with Sparta omitted. Fragoulaki argues that his handling of myth as well as history and location seems to explain some of his decisions in representing Spartan colonial ties. The three colonies that he names span the length of the period of colonisation, from Dark Age near-myth (Melos) to eighth century (Cythera) to contemporary times (Heracleia). Heracleia is a particularly significant foundation with roots deep in its mother-city's own foundation myth. Elsewhere, Thucydides seems to take myth seriously, for example in his acceptance of the *nostoi* and other epic stories as serious history, and in this case, he does the same with the story of the mother city of the Dorians, Doris. The foundation of Heracleia seems intended to reinforce the Spartans' relationship with their metropolis Doris, Heraclea being located nearby to it, and it is also strategically located: Heracleia is thus selected for special attention for both emotional-mythological and practical reasons. These mythical aspects are given further weight in that the founders of Heracleia also have names recalling Heracles and the idea of city-founding. One of the other cities of the 'Spartan colonial triangle' is also significantly located: Kythera was physically very close to its mother city. Rather than overlooking Spartan colonial ties, Fragoulaki argues that Thucydides has an active policy of constructing this triangle effect. He downplays Sicilian colonial ties to Sparta, although they seem to have been significant drivers of the colonies' behaviour, but, in contrast, he calls attention to family ties at Melos, where it is their violation that is seen. Overall, this treatment suggests even more dysfunctional 'family ties' than the historical record might have supported. Fragoulaki argues that Thucydides' interests, restricted to the geographic area of the Greek mainland and the Aegean, help to create a picture of Sparta as inactive, in contrast to the Athenians. By focusing exclusively on daughter cities that are close to Sparta, she argues that Thucydides creates a sense of the Spartans themselves as stationary, similar to the historian's tendency to downplay their naval capacities.

    Ch. 8: Anton Powell, 'Information from Sparta: A Trap *for* Thucydides'?

In keeping with Powell's previous interest in ancient propaganda, both internal and external, this chapter, with its clever pun on the notion of the 'Thucydides Trap', returns to the question of Thucydides' representation of Sparta, and suggests that seeming biases and half-truths in his work may have been deliberate Spartan misrepresentations rather than any bias attributable to the historian himself. This would be in keeping with readings of Herodotus, too, as overly credulous when it comes to Sparta. The historians would probably have had fewer sources, and thus lower-quality information, from Sparta, and this together with elements of Spartan propaganda may have left them more vulnerable than usual to being misled. While Thucydides explicitly acknowledges the Spartan penchant for secrecy and the occasional challenges it presents to a historian, he does not seem to have considered whether the state might also engage in propaganda, an apparent oversight that may have left him overly gullible to Spartan assertions. In particular, Thucydides' aversion to the 'storytelling element' and insistence on numerical accuracy does not seem to apply to Sparta, a remarkable departure from the rest of his work: 'Many of Sparta's untruths may live on like extinct insects in the cloudy amber of Thucydides' prose. Yet, as when such insects are examined by today's geneticists, the structure of Sparta's storytelling may have much to tell us about the realities of a bygone world' (223). Powell notes that Thucydides' account of Spartan history begins 400 years previously (1.18.1), long before he is willing to assert accuracy for other states' histories; for another example of extremely early and suspiciously 'accurate' dating, his account of Dorians and Heraclids begins eighty years after the fall of Troy (1.12.3). Similarly, he makes strikingly confident assertions of precise knowledge of Spartan history, including events that were intentionally kept secret such as the slaughter of helots (4.80.2–4). Powell argues that it is possible the Spartan king lists facilitated such apparent confidence and 'precision', but evidence suggests that the king lists themselves record myth rather than history at early dates, and that they reflect the Spartans' own internal suppression of dissent through the manufacture of an apparent historical record that seems to demonstrate the ruling families' pre-eminence as early as possible. Powell also pays particular attention to the fall of Pausanias, of which Thucydides claims to have specific and accurate knowledge. In the case of this story, Thucydides apparently gives total credence to the unlikely scenario in which secret and shameful information is divulged by the parties in question, men who betrayed their state, or their supporters. This is paired with the Themistocles story in which Thucydides again suggests that he has verbatim communication between Themistocles and the Persian king. Powell argues that this diptych may in fact be Spartan propaganda intended to obscure the fact that several Spartans (including

Leotychidas and Pausanias) had, embarrassingly, defected to Persia, and Themistocles' similar defection would have suggested that this tendency to disloyalty was less of a specifically Spartan problem than it might otherwise appear to be. Powell argues that particular themes, such as remarks on the extraordinarily beauty of an army, or special attention to timing, *kairos,* 'bear a Laconian perfume' and might serve as a tell that a story originated in, and was shaped by, Sparta. Similarly, all of the deaths and burials described at length by Thucydides (Pausanias, Lichas, Agesipolis, Agesilaos and Themistocles) are either Spartans or told in the context of a paired Spartan story, suggesting oral Spartan storytelling creeping into the historical narrative.

Individual stories are also examined for signs of Spartan propaganda. Building on his previous observations about the presentation of Agis,[4] Powell argues that the critical representation of the king in Thucydides is consistent with a hostile Spartan agenda, which preferred to cast blame for visible Spartan failures onto an individual rather than confessing to systemic weaknesses. Similarly, he tries to reconstruct a propagandistic argument among Spartan factions in the aftermath of Pausanias' death, one party resentful of the manner of Pausanias' demise and the other attempting to assert that the situation was not as bad as it seemed. Powell argues that the specificity of the details of Pausanias' death and Thucydides' degree of assertiveness about them may reflect a desire to head off criticism of the Spartan state. The story of Brasidas, on the other hand, shows signs of his having been shaped into an ideal Spartan hero. His death, which he seems to foreshadow by saying that he will demonstrate bravery not just with words but with action, diffuses any potential criticism of him on the grounds of his having been overly loquacious or that he actively sought death.

The ability to understand and predict Spartan actions was at a premium in Thucydides' time, and the historian might have imagined his text as a tool to do so—in competition with his loathed enemies, the soothsayers. Sometimes Powell's argument can be a stretch, for example his speculation that Sparta may have been induced to share stories with Thucydides by money or intelligence. The argument is insightful, however, and the historical parallel with which he concludes, that even highly intelligent Western observers of various modern authoritarian regimes often struggle to understand what they are witnessing, is an astute one.

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This volume thus ably addresses an outstanding issue in Thucydides, the question of Spartan national character and his representation of it. Although

[4] A. Powell, 'Die Könige Spartas im Licht einer Krise und einer Aussergewöhnlichen Quelle', in V. Pothou and A. Powell, edd., *Das antike Sparta* (Stuttgart, 2017) 37–55.

the authors occasionally offer contrasting interpretations, all contributions to the volume are thought-provoking, innovative, and informative. The combination of historical and historiographic analyses works especially well, as readers approaching Greek history and historiography from many and varying perspectives will find material to interest them.

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