Rodem, Pathemata, and Plague: Thucydides’ Narrative and the Tradition of Upheaval

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For Tony Woodman

THUCYDIDES’ ANALYSIS of the pathemata of the Peloponnesian War (1.23) is often ignored or treated as suspect,1 with relatively few scholars arguing for its significance to his work as a whole.2 All indications from the

1 E.g. P. J. Rhodes, Thucydides: History I (Oxford 2014) 207: “By the end of his catalogue Thucydides has departed from the rationalism which we tend to associate with him.” Gomme, HCT I 151, expresses some doubt about “whether Thucydides himself thought there might be some connexion between such natural events and human actions” and attributes this belief to “popular opinion” rather than the historian. H. D. F. Kitto, Poiesis: Structure and Thought (Berkeley 1966) 274, observes how awkwardly the pathemata passage is often skirted by those who prefer not to engage with it. S. Hornblower, A Commentary on Thucydides I (Oxford 1991) 63, notes that the association between natural and political crises in this passage has been “an embarrassment to his commentators,” some of whom simply ignore it. L. Kallet, “Thucydides, Apollo, the Plague, and the War,” AJP 134 (2013) 355–382, at 360–361, argues rightly, however, that “it does no service to his—and, therefore, our—understanding of the war to sweep under the rug, make improbable excuses, or awkward explanations, for what does not conform to our preconceptions, as if the historian has ‘slipped’ a bit from the program.”

2 N. Marinatos, Thucydides and Religion (Königstein 1981) 17–28, takes this passage as significant, as does Kallet, AJP 134 (2013), esp. 360–361. A. J. Woodman, Rhetoric in Classical Historiography: Four Studies (London 1988) 28–32, reads the pathemata within its literary context, especially Homer, arguing that Thucydides’ emphasis on the scale of the suffering “demonstrates that he, like Homer, is writing a ‘disaster narrative’ of the most vivid and dramatic type” (30).
historian himself, however, suggest that it is central to his representation of the war. It is one of his most prominent passages, following immediately after the methodology (1.22) and serving as his final statement before the transition to the narrative of events that will make up the vast majority of his text (1.24). It is also one of the few times he explicitly defends the thesis of the unique greatness of the Peloponnesian War that he asserts at the very outset of his work (1.1). In support of this claim he states that previous wars were of lesser scale, arguing that even the Persian War consisted of only a few battles, while his war was of unprecedented length (1.23.1). He then lists a variety of “sufferings” that afflicted Greece during the Peloponnesian War: a previously unheard-of number of cities desolated (1.23.2), through death and exile in both polemos and stasis, an unsurpassed frequency of eclipses, massive droughts, famines (limoi), and finally and most destructive of all, the plague (1.23.3 loimôdês nosos). The last of the pathemata, the plague, receives its own full treatment in Book 2, and the plague passage has a similarly fraught history of scholarship, often attracting attention for its possible relationship to the Hippocratic corpus. 

3 Kitto, Poiese 275, observes its significant placement in the work. 
4 E.g. C. N. Cochrane, Thucydides and the Science of History (New York 1929) 3: Thucydides attempted “to apply to the study of social life the methods which Hippocrates employed in the art of healing.” See also D. L. Page, “Thucydides’ Description of the Great Plague at Athens,” CQ 3 (1953) 97–119. K. Weidauer, Thukydides und die hippokratischen Schriften (Heidelberg 1954), explores the same topic, as does E. M. Craik, “Thucydides on the Plague: Physiology of Flux and Fixation,” CQ 51 (2001) 102–108. R. Thomas, “Thucydides’ Intellectual Milieu and the Plague,” in A. Rengakos and A. Tsakmakis (eds.), Brill’s Companion to Thucydides (Leiden 2006) 87–108, offers a nuanced reading of the scientific and literary elements of the passage. Borrowing from the Hippocrates or demonstrating a general interest in science does not preclude Thucydides from representing his war as a type of disaster reported in the oral tradition. The historian elsewhere seems to straddle ‘scientific’ and ‘unscientific’ understandings of the natural world; for example, he is capable of both accurately explaining the cause of tsunamis (3.89.5) and suggesting a relationship between earthquakes and eclipses (4.52.1).
sometimes seen as a digression that must be explained,\textsuperscript{5} and less frequently explored for its literary facets.\textsuperscript{6}

As has been observed, Thucydides’ comments on the pathemata are reminiscent of a well-established literary tradition in which a multitude of calamities attack a society in concert.\textsuperscript{7} Although the elements of such an assault are to some degree flexible and are often treated as interchangeable, the most frequent, and oldest, components are war (polemos), starvation (limos), and plague (loimos). Stasis and environmental upheaval such as earthquakes and eclipses are also common, and such concentrated assaults are often presented as an extraordinarily serious threat to the continued existence of the society they afflict. Recent scholarship that identifies the links between Thucydides’ text and this tradition tends to conclude that the historian’s work represents a ‘rationalist’ break from such a scientifically indefensible theory, despite his allusion to it.\textsuperscript{8}

\textsuperscript{5} Gomme, HCT II 161: “that part of Thucydides’ story of the great pestilence which is a detailed account of the symptoms is, essentially, a digression in the History (for they have little to do with politics or war); it is there primarily because he was interested, scientifically, in the disease besides being the recorder of a great disaster which had much to do with politics and the war.” J. Grimm, \textit{Die Literarische Darstellung der Pest in der Antike und in der Romania} (Munich 1965) 35, attributes the plague passage’s significance at least partly to the fact that it changed the course of the war by killing Pericles, but also argues for its greater literary significance in the work as a whole (39–44).


\textsuperscript{8} Jouanna, \textit{Cahiers de la Villa Kérylos} 17 (2006) 206–207 and 217–218,
this paper, however, I argue that far from distancing himself from this tradition or its core features, Thucydides goes to unusual lengths to situate his war within it, efforts which shed light on his broader understanding and presentation of the events of 431–404. His appeal to this tradition reveals a key feature of his war, namely that it is a far graver threat than a war uncomplicated by such accompanying upheavals would be. Rather, he characterizes it as an extreme manifestation of what he casts as a historically plausible tradition of stories detailing total and simultaneous breakdown on many fronts, social, natural, epidemiological, and political, however unrelated these may seem to a modern reader. It is specifically this aspect of the war, its place in a recurring historical pattern of collapse which threatens an entire society, that I will argue he seeks to prepare his reader to recognize when it inevitably returns again to annihilate future states.

This topos frequently appears in prayers or other contexts in which it is explicitly or implicitly attributed to the divine, as is clear in the texts collected below, and there is little indication that Thucydides deploys this same pattern without intending to imply a supernatural element in his own war. His decision to situate the Peloponnesian War in this tradition instead suggests that he sees at least some degree of connection between the war and the supernatural, rather than viewing the conflict as a purely human, political affair. The historian’s relationship with

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argues that Thucydides’ rationalizing perspective on some level recognizes the causal biological relationship between famine and plague, whereas both earlier and subsequent religious perspectives view them as a result of divine anger. He does acknowledge that the inclusion of eclipses and earthquakes in Thucydides suggests that “son rationalisme ne se confond pas avec le nôtre” (217) but does not elaborate on the distinction. P. Demont, “The Causes of the Athenian Plague and Thucydides,” in A. Tsakmakis and M. Tamiolaki (eds.), *Thucydides between History and Literature* (Berlin 2013) 73–87, at 80–81, also notes the traditional joining of *limos* and *loimos* and suggests that Thucydides wishes to associate his war with such events, but also, following Jouanna, argues that “he dissociates the plague from any divine origin, and relates it to a natural cause” (82).
religion is a fraught topic, as some ancient authors⁹ and modern scholars¹⁰ have regarded him as an atheist. True atheism is nearly unattested in his era, however,¹¹ and Thucydides seems

⁹ According to Marcellinus (V.Thuc. 22) Thucydides was taught by Anaxagoras, and thereby acquired a reputation for atheism.


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to accept some types of religious signs even while rejecting
other categories of divination or specific interpretations.\textsuperscript{12} This
brand of skepticism is attested at least as far back as the \textit{Iliad}
\((12.237–250)\), and debates about the correct interpretation of a
particular sign are ubiquitous, as are stories of opaque
prophesies comprehended only in hindsight. Elsewhere, he
considers an oracle about the length of the Peloponnesian War
to be justified \((5.26.2–5.26.4)\), and far from attacking religion
generally, he repeatedly laments its abuse in wartime \((3.82.6, 82.7–8, 83.2)\). His silence about traditional anthropomorphized
gods may indicate that he conceived of the divine differently
than did his more conventional-minded contemporaries such
as Herodotus, and more in line with the philosophers, who did
not normally rule out divine intervention, especially of a non-
anthropomorphized type involving the natural and physical
world.\textsuperscript{13} Even if Thucydides is not a conventional thinker on
the question of religion, however, there is little reason to be
lieve he is an atheist in the modern sense of complete disbelief,
and his presentation of the Peloponnesian War and the ac-

\begin{footnotesize}
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\item[12] E.g., he argues that the Athenians misunderstood the prediction about
the Pelargikon, but states that the oracle itself had foreseen events correctly
even if, in traditional oracular style, it declined to specify what precisely it
meant \((2.17.2, \textit{ὅν οὐκ ὁνοµάζον τὸ μαντεῖον προµήθει ἡ ἐπὶ ἅγαθῳ ποτὲ}
\textit{όφω κατοικισθῆσαιµένον})\). As with other instances in Thucydides in which
the divine appears to be active, some have read this passage as critical or
ironic \((\text{e.g. Hornblower, \textit{Commentary}} \text{ I 270})\). But Kallet, \textit{AJP}\textsuperscript{134}
(2013) 369–370: “The very fact that the historian chooses to bring up, defend, but also
correct the interpretation making the rounds in Athens at the time demon-
strates a concern to link the divine, the war, and, implicitly, the plague.”
Thucydides also objects to Nicias’ decision to remain in Sicily after the
eclipse \((7.50.4)\), and to the Athenians’ reliance on oracle-mongers \((8.1.1)\).
\end{enumerate}
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companying natural upheavals suggests that he does not view it as devoid of superhuman aspects.

Thucydides’ deployment of this old literary topos as an interpretative tool for understanding the Peloponnesian War would to some extent reconcile his apparently conflicting goals of literary appeal and historical accuracy, the “two hearts” beating in his chest.14 As is discussed below, he states that he believes that a pattern of converging, multifaceted disasters is a legitimate historical phenomenon whose record is preserved in traditional stories (1.23.3), albeit embroidered or exaggerated. Even oral tradition—which he otherwise treats as culpably deficient on historical matters—accurately safeguards the core truth of this repeating apocalyptic schema. If he views his war as another iteration of such an event, conflict between his “two hearts” would be minimized. The goal he articulates at 1.22.2, asserting his deep allegiance to accuracy, would pose little challenge to the literary aspects of his work if historical reality itself produces the enthralling tales of cyclical catastrophe that had long attracted the (imperfect) attention of more literary genres. Such a belief about the nature of the conflict, on his part and perhaps among his sources as well, may explain what seem to us inaccuracies or exaggerations that enhance the resemblance of the Peloponnesian War to the older pattern, such as his story of an earthquake at Delos.15

The pattern

Greek authors regularly describe a type of clustered disaster, with multiple apparently unrelated afflictions striking simultaneously.16 In a pattern that begins early and becomes

14 S. Hornblower, Thucydides (Baltimore 1987) 45.
16 Scholars have long noted this pattern, although its relationship to and significance in Thucydides in light of the tradition as a whole has not been
increasingly elaborate, a nexus of calamities that are each individually capable of destroying a city, including war, plague, famine, and crop failure or other widespread environmental or human sterility, are presented as acting in tandem, often in conjunction with natural disturbances such as earthquakes, tsunamis, and eclipses.¹⁷

fully explored. Woodman, Rhetoric in Classical Historiography 32–33, observes the parallels between Thucydides and Hesiod, the Iliad, OT, and Aesch. Suppl. W. R. Connor, Thucydides (Princeton 1984) 31 n.30, discusses the Hesiodic parallel, as does M. L. West, Hesiod: Works and Days (Oxford 1978) 218 on Op. 243. Classen-Steupe II 94; Gomme, HCT II 160; Mittelstadt, RömStudClas 16 (1968) 146; Morgan, TAPA 124 (1994) 206; Kallet, AJP 134 (2013) 361; and R. Mitchell-Boyask, Plague and the Athenian Imagination (Cambridge 2008) 43, note the resonance with the Iliad and Oedipus Tyrannus. Flower, in Art in Athens 4, points out that the Iliad connection must have been obvious to contemporary readers. Mitchell-Boyask (25) touches on Thucydides in his observation that the historian’s constellation of plague and famine also appears in Euripides’ Hippolytus. In a study of the phenomenon more broadly, Jouanna, Cahiers de la Villa Kérylos 17 (2006) 206–209, makes the fullest case that Thucydides should be seen as part of the tradition, rather than as alluding to specific texts, although he rejects any deeper significance for this element of Thucydides’ work, arguing instead that Thucydides represents a rationalization of the traditional motif; Deumont, in Thucydides between History and Literature 73–87, generally accepts Jouanna’s conclusions.

¹⁷ B. Knox, “The Date of the Oedipus Tyrannus of Sophocles,” AJP 77 (1956) 135–136, discusses the “traditional threefold blight” of sterility in humanity, animals, and crops, although he argues that the plague is not a normal feature of this phenomenon. J.-P. Vernant, “Ambiguity and Reversal: On the Enigmatic Structure of Oedipus Rex,” New Literary History 9 (1978) 486, points out that the suffering of Thebes at the opening of OT is part of a “traditional schema” in which all sources of fertility dry up, in concert with a plague, and that although the two words are not used, OT begins with the same coincidence of limos and loimos described by Hesiod (Erg. 489). West, Hesiod Works and Days 215 on Erg. 235, comments that “abnormal and difficult births are a typical feature of heaven-sent pestilences.” For a treatment of the “loimos schema” that includes many elements but does not discuss its frequent coincidence with warfare, see D. Ogden, The Crooked Kings of Ancient Greece (London 1997), esp. 9–14. On loimos, limos, and war, and the increasing frequency of this triad into and after the fifth century, see

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Among our earliest texts, the *Iliad* hints at this pattern, bringing together two of its most frequent elements by opening with the coincidence of plague and war subduing the Greek army (1.61 πόλεμός τε ... κοί λοιμός). As will be typical of such stories, this conglomeration of suffering is due to intertwined divine and human causation: the will of Zeus demands violence (e.g. *Il.* 5) while the plague can be attributed to both humanity and the gods, Apollo inflicting the disease in response to the Greeks’ misdeeds. Much as Thucydides seems to represent his war as both a complex political crisis on the human plane and an event with supernatural components,18 many of the Trojan War’s more immediate causes, such as the abduction of Helen, could also be attributed to either, or both, men and the divine (e.g. 3.156–160, *Eur. Hel.* 37–41). The *Iliad* passage describing war and plague is the first attested use of *loimos*, an otherwise rare word that will remain the preferred term for the plague element in this pattern of cataclysm, and therefore an indicator that a narrative belongs to this pattern.19 Hesiod is more explicit and detailed in describing a menu of options available to a vengeful Zeus punishing wayward humanity. He presents *loimos* with its frequent companion *limos*, famine, in his statement that the god sends the two together to afflict the unjust (Εργ. 243 λιμόν ὡμοῦ καὶ λοιμῶν), alongside female infertility (244 οὐδὲ γυναῖκες τίκτουσιν).20 The poet offers military defeat

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19 See G. Nagy, *The Best of the Achaeans* (Baltimore 1979) 74–77, on *loigos* and *loimos* in Homer.

on land or sea, or destruction of a city wall, as other possible punishments for injustice (246–247). Elsewhere, Hesiod again suggests a relationship between two elements of the pattern, warfare and starvation, by making various types of battles the siblings of personified Limos (Theog. 227–228).21 The assonance of limos and loimos seems to have attached those two elements particularly firmly to one another.22

Later authors offer slightly differing constellations of human and natural crises, but the central features of most treatments remain famine (usually with the term limos) and plague (usually loimos), normally coordinated with war (often specifying both polemos and stasis). Pindar assembles many of the elements that appear in this pattern (Paean 9 Maehler = fr.52.k.13–21) when he asks if an eclipsing sun signifies polemos (πολέμοι δὲ σῶμα φέρεις τινός), wasting of crops (κωποῦ φθίειν), storms (νιφετοῦ σθένος ὑπέφατον), grievous stasis (στάσιν οὐλομέναν), “empt-tyings of the sea onto land,” apparently tsunamis (πόντου κενεώσιας ἂν πέδον), unseasonable weather (νότιον θέρος), or indeed the end of the civilization (ἀνδρῶν νέον).23 The Danaid chorus of Aeschylus’ Suppliants offers a similarly elaborate picture in a prayer for Argos that again implies that the gods drive such events.24 They wish away plague (659 λοιμός), a

215, notes that language similar to Hesiod’s appears in inscriptive evidence as well, Tod II 204 (the ephebic oath).
22 Mitchell-Boyask, Plague and the Athenian Imagination 25.
23 Cf. I. Rutherford, Pindar’s Paeans (Oxford 2001) 189–199: “These catastrophes are not arranged in any obvious order; human and natural disasters are woven together, though the last items in the list all have a connection with water” (195). S. Hornblower, Thucydides and Pindar (Oxford 2004) 76–77, argues that there are parallels between the treatment of stasis in this paean and in Thucydides.
24 Woodman, Rhetoric in Classical Historiography 33, observes that the chorus’ prayer to avert the combination of war and plague and for peace and fertility is reminiscent, in inverse, of Thucydides. Parker, Miasma 279, notes a similar prayer in the Eumenides (902–987); it too asks for general fertility, success in war, and protection from untimely death and stasis.
“swarm of diseases” (684 νούσων δ’ ἐσμος), a λογος, a term for mass death related to λοίμος (678–679 μηδε τις ἀνδροκμής λοιγὸς ἐπελθέτο), civil war (661 ἐπιχωρίως ἔρις), Ares who is a λοιγος to men (665–666 βροτολοιγος Ἀρης), and Ares without an epithet (682 Ἀρη). Instead, they pray for women’s fertility (675–677), general fertility (688–693), and crops in season (690), an apparent reference to the disturbance of natural rhythms that appears in many of these narratives. Eupolis fr.206 K.-A. parodies the pattern, stating that some entity, furious, sends λοίμος along with ψῶζα, stench, upon an army. In Herodotus, limos, loimos, and the military also appear in conjunction when he reports that after the Cretan army returned from the Trojan War, Crete was afflicted by combined limos and loimos (7.171.2), and limos and loimos afflict Xerxes’ army (8.115.2–3). Elsewhere, Herodotus claims that more evils happened to Greece between Darius’ and Artaxerxes’ reigns than in other times, including external war and conflict within Greece, and that these troubles came with an extraordinary earthquake at Delos (8.69.2–3), suggesting some kind of divine involvement. While the Thebes of OT is not at war, fields go sterile while the Thebans suffer from plague (25–26), and Ares is involved: in an unusual passage, the chorus attributes the plague and mass deaths, again a λοιγος, specifically to the god of war (190–191, 215). Among other punishments, the Am-


26. Jouanna, Cahiers de la Villa Kérylos 17 (2006) 204–205, takes this instance to represent an intermediate stage in a process of rationalization of the tradition of plague and famine from archaic times into Thucydides’ more realistic understanding of cause and effect.

27. Marinatos, Thucydides and Religion 17–28, argues that Thucydides’ pa-themata engages in aemulatio with this passage in particular. Both, however, may belong to the larger tradition.

28. R. D. Dawe, Sophocles’ Oedipus Rex (Cambridge 1982) 108–109: “Why they should fasten on Ares as their prime enemy is something not easily to be explained from the play itself, for Ares was a god especially associated
phictyonic oath threatens violators with infertility of women and crops, defeat in war, courts, and marketplaces, and utter destruction of their households and races (Aeschin. 3.111), again implying divine causation.

The frequent evocation of this type of catastrophe in extant texts suggests the popularity of the topos into the fifth century. The potency of the story pattern in Greco-Roman culture is also implied when it remains a common theme in subsequent years as well.29 Demades claims that it is limos and loimos rather than military defeat at the hands of Alexander that has overthrown the Spartans (fr.84 de Falco, λοιμὸς καὶ λιμὸς αὐτοῦς διέφθειρεν): thus, like Hesiod, he treats the most prominent elements of the constellation as functionally interchangeable. Plato’s Athenian does the same in stating that war (polemos), diseases (nosoi), plague (loimos), and unseasonability (akairiai) can force legal changes (Leg. 709A). Eudoxus brings together famine, storms, loimoi, and earthquakes (fr.141 Lasserre), and Xenocrates loimoi, crop failure, polemos, and stasis (fr.230 Parente). Callimachus describes Artemis punishing the unjust with a similar event, albeit with the loimos afflicting herds rather than people, alongside the sterility of crops and women (Hymn 3.124–134). Aristocles describes loimos, limos, earthquakes, wars, disease, and flood nearly eradicating mankind (fr.1.22 Heiland). Pausanias states that the divine obliterated the Phlegyans by first sending constant thunderbolts and earthquakes and then a plague (9.36.3).

As many have observed, the most frequent components of such disasters—plagues and famines—can and do arrive alongside war, precipitated by wartime stress, overcrowding, and deprivation of precisely the sort that Thucydides describes.30

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29 On continuity in historiography see J. Marincola, Authority and Tradition in Ancient Historiography (Cambridge 1997).

30 West, Hesiod Works and Days 218, observes that “malnutrition reduces resistance to disease.” Jouanna, Cahiers de la Villa Kérylos 17 (2006) 200,
But the marked emphasis on the simultaneity of the arrival of these phenomena suggests that ancient observers did not see the causal relationship we now know to exist. The coincidence of several types of sufferings that appeared to be unrelated may have encouraged Greeks to believe they were sent by some malign supernatural force bent on annihilating a society. The elaboration on the theme that brought in truly unrelated phenomena such as earthquakes and eclipses further indicates that ancient observers generally believed the causes to be non-human.

The Greek imagination thus seems to have been fascinated by stories of utter destruction, involving simultaneous political, climatological, seismological, and pandemic crises. This motif may, unsurprisingly, have appeared in folktale as well, since Thucydides’ specifies its oral nature when he states that his war provided evidence of these stories’ potential veracity (1.23.3 τά τε πρότερον ἀκοῆ μὲν λεγόμενα). The power of this story pattern in the Greek mind is attested not only in its frequency and chronological durability, but also in Aeschines’ statement that children in his time memorized Hesiod’s passage threatening ἄμος, λοίμος, and military defeat on land and sea because of

responds that this is an overly modern observation, especially in that archaic texts usually present them as two independent entities arriving simultaneously, not as cause and effect. Although Jouanna sees Thucydides’ work as representing a step toward rational understanding of causation, the historian too repeatedly emphasizes simultaneity.

31 See Jouanna, Cahiers de la Villa Kérylos 17 (2006) 199: “Le découpage des calamités n’est pas le même dans la Grèce archaïque que dans le monde moderne. Il n’y a pas encore une distinction entre des calamités dues à la nature et des calamités dues aux hommes. La calamité se définit d’abord par son effet. C’est la relation à la mort qui est primordiale.”

32 M. R. Bachvarova, “The Destroyed City in Ancient ‘World History’: From Agade to Troy,” in The Fall of Cities in the Mediterranean (Cambridge 2016) 36–78, at 68–69, argues that Near Eastern tales of the complete destruction of cities may have influenced later Greeks’ beliefs about the heroic age and their methods of story-telling about the past. A reading of Thucydides as also influenced by an old story-pattern of calamity would offer further support for this argument.
the utility of these lines in adulthood (3.135).\textsuperscript{33} In this cultural and literary context, the coincidence of what promised to be a deadly war in 431 and a similarly lethal plague the following year must indeed have seemed to vindicate similar tales of convergent disasters reaching deep into the roots of Greek literature. The same phenomenon might well have seemed, to the young historian Thucydides, to be unfolding again in his own time.

\textit{Thucydides’ pathemata and the tradition}

Thucydides first encourages us to consider his narrative within this schema of total collapse when he begins his \textit{pathemata} passage with an approving reference to its oral tradition. Before describing the simultaneous natural, political, and epidemiological crises of 431–404, he asserts that the events of his war proved that stories which were handed down orally, narrating phenomena similar to what he goes on to list in the \textit{pathemata}, were plausible (1.23.3 τά τε πρότερον ἀκοὴ μὲν λεγόμενα ... οὐκ ἁπάστα κατέστη). If his war acts as a touchstone demonstrating the accuracy, or at least potential accuracy, of similar accounts, it seems only reasonable to conclude that he regards the coincidence of plague, war, and natural disturbance as a real, recurring historical fact, and that he views his war as another iteration of it.

The historian’s statement here is all the more striking because only a few paragraphs earlier he made clear that he finds oral tradition an unreliable means of preserving history given humanity’s gullibility toward the spoken word handed down by forebears (1.20.1 τὰς ἀκοὰς τῶν προγεγεγενημένων), a dismissive attitude toward popular belief that reappears at other key moments of his work (e.g. 6.54.1). Stories of multifaceted crisis seem to reverse this pattern, however. Thucydides’ decision not to specify who, exactly, once doubted the accuracy of the oral tradition about them suggests that such an attitude was widespread (1.23.3). His meticulous research, which usually demon-

strates the fallibility of the oral tradition, in this case proves that the old stories are, in his view, at least plausible. The unique durability he attributes to the memory of such stories over long periods of time, even when preserved in the flawed oral tradition, suggests that he may see these narratives and the events they describe as having a special place in human history and remembrance, as is also implied by the similarities between them and the Peloponnesian War he himself records in the ‘first’ serious work of history.\textsuperscript{34}

After stating that earlier tales of similar widespread upheaval are at least possibly true, Thucydides goes on to endorse the idea that natural disturbances have some significant relationship to human violence,\textsuperscript{35} much to the discomfort of some of his modern readers.\textsuperscript{36} In cataloguing these “sufferings,” he lists earthquakes of unprecedented strength, eclipses of the sun, and droughts (1.23.3). Elsewhere he reports on solar eclipses (2.28.1) and tsunamis (3.89.5), correctly hinting at their true causes in these passages even as he later implies that earthquakes and eclipses are related to one another (4.52.1). He repeatedly comments on the extremely frequent earthquakes in his war (3.89.1–2 σεισμῶν δὲ γενομένων πολλῶν ... τῶν σεισμῶν κατεχόντων),\textsuperscript{37} claiming that in fact the largest earth-

\textsuperscript{34} The role he gives it in dispelling skepticism may in fact be a typical effect of crises belonging to this pattern, although he characteristically focuses his attention on the light thrown on events in the past while others think of the present and future. Describing a portentous eclipse, Archilochus claims that nothing, and particularly no violation of nature, is to be disbelieved or wondered at any more (74.1–2 Diehl, χρημάτων ἄελπτον οὐδέν ἐστιν οὐδ’ ἀπώματον οὐδὲ θαυμάσιον). Herodotus, too, says that great natural upheaval should not be wondered at, given the scale of the Persian Wars (6.98.3 οὐδὲν ἦν θαυματικόν).


\textsuperscript{36} E.g. W. D. Furley, “Thucydides and Religion,” in \textit{Brill’s Companion to Thucydides} 415–438, at 423, calls his apparent acceptance of a relationship between natural and human events “a most uncharacteristic thing.”

quake in memory took place during these years (8.41.2 ὃς αὐτοῖς ἔτυχε μεγίστος ἀν ἀν μεμνῄμεθα γενόμενος), and the only one that ever shook Delos (2.8.3). His remarks on such events reinforce the affinities between occurrences he records and the earlier literary tradition he points to in the pathemata, which describes the same type of coordinated social and natural upheaval. He even seems to overstate the degree of correspondence between his war and the existing pattern, for as many have observed, the droughts and resulting famine listed among the pathemata are not documented in his work.\(^{38}\) it can be demonstrated that the scale and frequency of eclipses was less impressive than his text suggests,\(^{39}\) and it appears that the earthquake at Delos may never have happened.\(^{40}\)

The famine-plague pair that caps the pathemata passage further encourages the reader to consider the events of the Peloponnesian War as belonging to this long-established type

\(\text{in these passages, but argues that his work still represents a rationalist approach. See also Demont, in Thucydides between History and Literature 79.}\)

\(^{38}\) E.g. Classen-Steup I 53.

\(^{39}\) Thucydides’ statement on the unusual frequency of eclipses in the Peloponnesian War years is “not accurate,” and “some allowance for exaggeration must be made” regarding his account of at least one of the two solar eclipses he describes: F. R. Stephenson and L. J. Fatooli, “The Eclipses Recorded by Thucydides,” Historia 50 (2001) 245–253, at 248. Mittelstadt, RictStudClas16 (1968)148, and Woodman, Rhetoric in Classical Historiography 39, suggest that Thucydides may have similarly exaggerated in the plague passage.

\(^{40}\) J. Rusten, “ΔΗΛΟΣ ΕΚΙΝΗΘΗ: An ‘Imaginary Earthquake’ on Delos in Herodotus and Thucydides,” JHS 133 (2013) 135–145, observes that there is no archaeological or geological evidence for the earthquake said by Herodotus (6.98) to have occurred at Delos during his war, nor for an earthquake that Thucydides likewise claims for Delos during his (2.8.3). D. Lateiner, “Pathos in Thucydides,” Antichthon 11 (1977) 42–51, at 45–47, argues that Thucydides uses the story of the Delians, who are not pivotal to the outcome of the war in any strict historical sense, to exemplify the sufferings of the war. “In the list of παθήματα (1.23.1–3) Thucydides surely has the Delians in mind: seized cities are emptied, fugitives created, men slaughtered, and earthquake” (47).
of cataclysm. The decision to borrow the language of *loimos* to describe the plague has encouraged comparison with Homer, Hesiod, and Sophocles. The proximity of the words λιµοὶ and λοιµώδης in the *pathemata* further embeds Thucydides’ work in the tradition, bringing together the two terms that often appear in such stories from Hesiod onward. This significant jingle even has pride of place as the final two items of the catalogue (1.23.3 καὶ λιµοὶ καὶ ἡ οὐχ ἦξισα βλάψασα καὶ μέρος τι φθείροσα καὶ λοιµώδης νόσος). Although the historian separates the two nouns with a long string of adjectives and calls the plague a λοιµώδης νόσος rather than a *loimos* itself (which he will do later, at 2.47.3), the alert reader should pick up on the fact that this list culminates in a limos-loimos pair, mobilizing the tradition of calamity dating back to the earliest poets.

Another similarity between Thucydides’ narrative and other accounts of widespread disaster is an emphasis on their clustered and synchronous nature. Indeed, a *loimos* almost never appears unaccompanied in early Greek literature, but


42 Jouanna, *Cahiers de la Villa Kérylos* 17 (2006) 207, also makes this point.

43 Possible exceptions: Aeschylus’ Darius seems to suggest that *loimos* could arrive alone, but nevertheless associates it with one of its usual companions when he proposes two possible explanations for Persia’s downfall, “some bolt of plague or a civil war” (*Pers.* 715 λοιµοῦ τις ἥλθε σκῆπτος ἢ στάσις πόλει). The equation becomes more complete when he is corrected that in fact the Athenians, external war, inflicted the destruction (716 οὐδαµός, ἀλλ’ ἄµερ’ ἀθήνας πᾶς κατέβασαν στρατός). *Loimos* appears once in Herodotus not as part of the main disaster but as a prelude to it, nevertheless alongside another crisis, a building collapse, warning of impending military defeat (6.27.1–2). Demosthenes uses *loimos* alone as an insult (23.80). *Loimos* also appears alone in Plutarch, paraphrasing Stesimbraopus on the death of Pericles’ son in the plague (*Per.* 36.6, *FGrHist* 107 F 11). Thopompus hints at war alongside plague but does not make their simultaneity explicit in his story of an army punished by *loimos* (*FGrHist* 115 F 357).
is almost without exception part of a multitude of simultaneous
blows suffered by a society.\textsuperscript{44} The \textit{Iliad}’s difficulties begin with
Achilles’ frustrated declaration that war and plague attack the
Achaeans together, ὁµῦ working with τε and καὶ to emphasize
that their action is in tandem (1.61 ὁµῦ πόλεµος τε δαµὶ καὶ
λοιµὸς Ἀχαιὸς).\textsuperscript{45} Hesiod too calls attention to the coinci-
dence of famine and plague sent to punish the unjust
(\textit{Erg.} 243 λιµὸν ὁµῦ καὶ λοιµὸν). Vernant notes that although both
words are not used, \textit{Oedipus Tyrannos} begins with the simul-
taneous \textit{limos} and \textit{loimos} described by Hesiod.\textsuperscript{46} Eupolis’ parody
depends on the traditional presence of another entity alongside
\textit{loimos} when he replaces \textit{limos} (or \textit{polemos}) with “stench” (fr.206
λοιµὸν καὶ ψῶξαν ἔπεµψεν). Herodotus, like Homer, employs a
τε ... καὶ construction emphasizing a synchronized attack
(7.171.2 λιµὸν τε καὶ λοιµὸν).\textsuperscript{47} The oracle quoted by
Thucydides also emphasizes simultaneity (2.54.2 πόλεµος καὶ
λοιµὸς ἅµ’ αὐτῷ).\textsuperscript{48} Among later examples, Chrysippus bor-
rows Hesiod’s phrasing (\textit{SVF} II 1175 λιµὸν ὁµῦ καὶ λοιµὸν),
and Dionysius of Halicarnassus calls attention to the coinci-
dence of infertility, plague, and famine (\textit{Ant.Rom.} 10.53.8 τὴν
χώραν ἀγεώργητον ἀφεθεῖσαν λιµὸν ἐπὶ τῷ λοιµῷ συνάψαι).
Like these authors, Thucydides stresses the simultaneity and
multiplicity of the disasters. He introduces the \textit{pathemata} with an

\textsuperscript{44} For some further examples of \textit{loimos} as part of an assault of various
catastrophes, in Plato unbalanced Eros is said to cause \textit{loimoi} in animals
along with hailstorms, plant diseases, and astronomical disruptions (\textit{Symp.}
188B); elsewhere, overweening behavior, disease, \textit{loimos}, and civil disruption
are said to be the same phenomenon (\textit{Leg.} 906C).

\textsuperscript{45} Jouanna, \textit{Cahiers de la Villa Kérylos} 17 (2006) 198–199, observes that in
the \textit{Iliad}, war, \textit{polemos}, plays the role that \textit{limos} does elsewhere, as a partner to
\textit{loimos}.

\textsuperscript{46} Vernant, \textit{Literary History} 9 (1978) 489.

\textsuperscript{47} Jouanna, \textit{Cahiers de la Villa Kérylos} 17 (2006) 203, also notes this parallel
to Hesiod.

\textsuperscript{48} Woodman, \textit{Rhetoric in Classical Historiography} 35, notes that ἅµ’ αὐτῶ in
Thucydides’ report of the prophesy takes the place of ὁµῦ in the \textit{Iliad}.
eye toward the fact that everything happened at once (1.23.1 παθήµατα τε ξυνηνέχθη γενέσθαι). Great earthquakes occurred together (1.23.3 ἀµα), and nearly every word of the conclusion of the pathemata contains reminders that the disasters all happened simultaneously: ταῦτα γὰρ πάντα μετὰ τούδε τοῦ πολέµου ἀµα ξυνεπέθετο. This emphasis on simultaneity will also feature prominently in his treatment of the plague, discussed below.

Thucydides employs other vocabulary associated with loimos—limos-war events as well, further entwining his narrative in the literary and mythological traditions of such stories. Vocabulary deriving from φθείρα appears in many depictions of such crises, especially to describe their plague element. In Herodotus, loimos and dysentery, along with limos, destroy an army as it marches (8.115.2–3 λοιµὸς τε τὸν στρατόν ... ἔφθειρε). Theopompus tells of a seer mistreated by the Spartans, for which they are apparently punished with a loimos (FGrHist 115 F 357 ὑπὸ λοιµοῦ φθειροµένου). Pausanias describes mythical Greece as decaying under stasis and a disease that is loimôdês before Iphitus’ reestablishment of the Olympics (5.4.6 φθειροµένης τὸτε δὴ μάλιστα τῆς Ἑλλάδος ὑπὸ ἐµφυλιὸν στάσεων καὶ ὑπὸ νόσου λοιµώδους). Thucydides also associates this word specifically with his plague. One of the most prominent adjectives modifying the plague in the pathemata is φθείρασα (1.23.3). Later, in the plague passage itself, a noun from the same root serves as a pleonastic description of it, where the plague is again a loimos (2.47.3 οὐ μέντοι τοσοῦτός γε λοιµὸς οὐδὲ φθορὰ οὕτως). He calls the mass deaths in the plague φθορὰς (2.51.2). And verb appears when plague attacks the army twice (2.57.1 νόσος ἐν τῇ στρατιᾷ τοὺς Ἀθηναίους ἔφθειρε καὶ ἐν τῇ πόλει, 2.58.2 ἐπιγενοµένη γὰρ ἡ νόσος ἐνταῦθα δὴ πάνω ἐπίεσε τοὺς Ἀθηναίους, φθειροῦσα τὴν στρατιὰν).

In the absence of divine appeasement such as occurs in the Iliad, the typical result of such multi-faceted disaster, and again especially its plague element, is described in a variety of authors as a profound emptiness, and Thucydides’ description of his plague and war fits this part of the pattern as well. The chorus of Suppliants imagines that a plague might empty Argos (Aesch.
Suppl. 660 τάνδε πόλιν κενόσαι), and the Theban plague driven by Ares, “by which the house of Cadmus is emptied” (Soph. OT 29 κενοῦται δόμα Καδμείων), may leave Oedipus ruling over a void (55 κενής κρατεῖν), a city bereft of men (57 ἔρημος ἀνδρῶν). Herodotus has Crete left deserted, ἐρημοθείσας, by combined limos and loimos after the Trojan War (7.171.2). Pausanias reports that Prodicus wrote a Minyad telling the story of the house of Zethus emptied by a plague, and in his periphrasis uses for the disease nearly the same language as Thucydides (9.5.9 ἡ νόσος ἡ λοιμώδης ἡ ἔρημωσι). Thucydides’ plague also has the effect of emptying households (2.51.5 καὶ ὅλαι ἐκενώθησαν). He employs similar vocabulary to describe the utter devastation he claims was inflicted by his war as a whole, stating in the pathemata that more cities were emptied in the Peloponnesian War than in other eras (1.23.2 ἔρημωθησαν). The complete emptying of a city is a dramatic and rare event even in a terrible war such as the Peloponnesian, and in reality few cities suffered such a fate. Like the claim of a Delian earthquake, however, the description of an unprecedented number of emptied cities reinforces the sense that the Peloponnesian War belongs to the same category of events as is described in earlier literary sources.

49 M. R. Bachvarova and D. Dutsch, “Mourning a City ‘Empty of Men’: Stereotypes of Anatolian Communal Lament in Aeschylus’ Persians,” in The Fall of Cities 79–105, argue that the motif of an emptied city, especially as it appears in Aeschylus’ Persae, may derive from the typical features of Anatolian laments. For more on emptiness in Persae see T. Harrison, The Emptiness of Asia (London 2000) 66–75.

50 Rhodes, Thucydides: History I 208, argues that Colophon (3.34.1), Plataea (3.68), and Thyrea (4.57.3) might qualify as depopulated states. On such destruction see H. van Wees, “Genocide in Archaic and Classical Greece,” in V. Caston and S.-M. Weineck (eds.), Our Ancient Wars (Ann Arbor 2016) 19–37. On the emptiness motif in Herodotus’ description of Miletus, also as an exaggeration, see Bachvarova and Dutsch, in The Fall of Cities 99; they posit that this theme may also have been prominent in Phrynichus’ Sack of Miletus.
Thucydides’ plague and the tradition

Thucydides’ plague passage (2.47–2.54), the lengthy description of the final element of the pathemata, bolsters his claim that his war is the preeminent example of this established brand of compound misfortune. Sometimes the plague narrative has been thought to fit awkwardly with the rest of the work, and its presence has accordingly been excused on grounds such as the historian’s supposed scientific interests or its political consequences. It would be out of character for Thucydides to include anything extraneous to his narrative, however, as he is famous for his bold exclusion of anything he deems superfluous, even issues of great political significance such as the Megarian Decree. If he is shaping his work so as to emphasize its place in this tradition, however, the plague passage is not a digression but a key symptom indicating that the events he describes are not a simple war but belong to a much more frightening old pattern of devastation. Like the discussions of eclipses and earthquakes that appear outside of the pathemata passage, the plague narrative serves to tie the pathemata even more firmly to the rest of Thucydides’ work, indicating that his editorializing remarks there are not a momentary or insignificant departure from character, but a key to the text as a whole.

Earlier authors from Homer onward describe “war and loimos together” assaulting a society, and, as noted above, a loimos almost never acts alone. Whether he uses the term loimos or nosos, Thucydides’ narrative depicts his plague behaving like a typical loimos, always working in conjunction with other afflictions, both in its general arrival alongside the Peloponnesian War and in specific instances. The historian begins and ends his main plague passage by commenting on its timing, and specifically its coincidence with the Peloponnesian invasion of Attica. He states that the plague arrived only a few days after the Peloponnesians’ arrival (2.47.3 καὶ ὀντών αὐτῶν οὐ πολλὰς πω ἡμέρας ἐν τῇ Ἀττικῇ ἡ νόσος πρῶτον ἠρέατο γενέσθαι τοῖς

51 See n.5 above.
Ἀθηναίοις; like his predecessors, he emphasizes the nearly perfectly simultaneous onset of violence and disease. His penultimate sentence in the plague passage makes the same point: “the disease began immediately after the Peloponnesians’ assault” (2.54.5 ἐσβεβληκότων δὲ τῶν Πελοποννησίων ἡ νόσος ἠρέσατο εὐθὺς). Parry remarks on the literary effectiveness of Thucydides’ statement that “those inside were dying while outside the land was being wasted” by the army (2.54.1 ἀνθρώπων τ’ ἔνδον θησαυρὸν καὶ γῆς ἐξ ἐξοσμομένης), war and plague together destroying Attica. As Woodman notes, Thucydides repeats the link between plague and war in a later outbreak, in a statement that again emphasizes their simultaneity (2.59.1 ἡ νόσος ἐπέκειτο ἀμα καὶ ὁ πόλεμος). The apparent cooperation between the two affictions is again emphasized later by τε and καί, as in Homer and Herodotus (Thuc. 3.3.1 ἦσαν γὰρ τεταλαιπωρημένοι ὑπὸ τε τῆς νόσου καὶ πολέμου, cf. Il. 1.61, Hdt. 7.171.2). Nicias points out that the Athenians are just recovering from both plague and war immediately before the renewed violence of the Sicilian Expedition (6.12.1), a point which Thucydides echoes (6.26.2). While the most frequent partner of the plague is violence, another attack (3.87.1–3) happens in concert with unusually frequent earthquakes (3.87.4 ἐγένοντο δὲ καὶ οἱ πολλοὶ σεισμοί τότε τῆς γῆς).54

52 Parry, BICS 16 (1969) 115. He summarizes the connection that Thucydides’ language builds between war and disease: “the Plague is … a partner of war.”

53 Woodman, Rhetoric in Classical Historiography 65 n.207.

54 The presence of neither is also the condition of challenging a treaty (5.41.2 μὴ τοῦ νόσου οὕτως μήτε πολέμου). In an intriguing parallel, albeit one that appears only once, Thucydides has his plague working together with an unusual partner: the Athenians are described as “destroyed,” using the same language of πληθείροο discussed above, by plague and the outlay of money (3.13.3 νόσῳ τε γὰρ ἐφθάραται Αθηναίοι καὶ χρημάτων δαπάνης). The conjunction of plague and expenses works well with Kallet’s argument for the affinities between plague, war, and financial stress in Thucydides’ work (L. Kallet, Money and the Corrosion of Power in Thucydides [Berkeley 2001])
Such is the affinity between the plague and the war that the disease even behaves like a war, as has been argued primarily by Kallet. She observes that the Peloponnesian army and the plague seem to move in concert (2.55–63), and the illness itself attacks the city, its citizens, and its soldiers, Thucydides’ language making it an attacker in a military sense. His depiction of a plague at war in these passages recalls not only the typical behavior of a *loimos* but also the sentiments of the chorus of *Oedipus Tyrannos* when they sing of Ares causing the Theban plague (190–191, 215), in a play that many have thought was influenced by the events described by Thucydides. The plague is similar to the war in other ways as well, also occurring on a scale that was never previously recalled (2.47.3), and, as Rood observes, both have an ἀκμή, an organic metaphor.

Repetition of the combination of the words *limos* and *loimos* in the plague passage further encourages the reader to see the events as part of the old pattern. As we have seen, *loimos* and *polemos* together subdue the Greeks in the opening of the *Iliad* (1.61), while the *limos-loimos* jingle appears as early as Hesiod in conjunction with military defeat (*Erg. 243*). This triad converges in Thucydides’ report that when the plague broke out, some Athenians remembered a prophesy predicting a war arriving along with a plague, *loimos*, but others recalled it calling for famine, *limos* (2.54.3 μὴ λοιμὸν ὄνομάσθαι ἐν τῷ ἐπεὶ ὑπὸ τῶν παλαιῶν, ἀλλὰ λιμόν). He states that the public settled...

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129) She also notes that expenses, like the plague as discussed here, can “attack” (130).

55 Kallet, *AJP* 134 (2013) 364–368: “Thucydides makes clear that the catastrophes, the ultimate of which was the plague, were ‘co-combatants’ in the war—they ‘combined in attacking’ (ξυνεπέθετο, 1.23.3)’ (373). Cf. Classen-Steup I 53; Winton, *Mètis* 7 (1992) 203.

56 Knox, *AJP* 77 (1956) 139, has argued for a relationship between Thucydides’ plague and Sophocles’ play, observing that both Thucydides and this chorus of Sophocles mix the language of plague and war.


58 This example of *limos/loimos* has been noted by many, including Jouanna, *Cahiers de la Villa Kérylos* 17 (2006) 207–208. The added presence of...
on loimos and offers his own opinion that people would remember whatever fit their current circumstances. His comments here are highly unusual, and their significance has been disputed. But the most obvious consequence of his meditation on these specific words and their sounds, in which both halves of the pair appear with almost irritating repetitiveness (2.54.2 λοιμός, 2.54.3 λοιμόν, 2.54.3 λιμόν, 2.54.3 λιμόν), alongside the fact that they accompany a polemos in either case (2.54.1), is to push the reader to think of the polemos-loimos-triad. The alert observer might also recall that Thucydides’ pathemata passage culminated in a statement that, the third item, polemos, has not, to my knowledge, been discussed.

59 His decision to report this debate is highly uncharacteristic, breaking with his usual habit of excluding controversy. On the rarity of Thucydides explicitly attributing a quotation to a source, much less disputing its contents, see V. J. Gray, “Thucydides’ Source Citations: ‘It is Said’,” CQ 61 (2011) 75–90, at 75; C. Dewald, “The Figured Stage,” in J. S. Rusten (ed.) Oxford Readings in Classical Studies: Thucydides (Oxford 2009) 114–147, at 128–147; H. D. Westlake, “ΑΕΙΜΗ in Thucydides,” Mnemosyne 30 (1977) 345–362. To some, his thoughts on the prophesy seem critical (for example Grimm, Literarische Darstellung 37; Jouanna, Cahiers de la Villa Kérylos 17 [2006] 208; Furley, in Brill’s Companion to Thucydides 419). But his usual method of constructing his narrative suggests that his tone here cannot be easily read with certainty. On the most superficial level, he does not normally include stories whose veracity he doubts, whereas he chose to relate this one. Furthermore, any skepticism in his remarks seems to be directed at humanity’s understanding of the oracle, not the oracle itself, and oracular ambiguity and the failure of humanity to fully understand divine pronouncements are both thoroughly traditional motifs (Marinatos, JHS 101 [1981] 119; K. J. Dover, The Greeks and their Legacy [New York 1988] 69–70). Kallet, AJP 134 (2013) 364, states that “these comments move beyond endorsing the authenticity of the oracle and the conjecturing that it might be true; they appear to support its fulfillment. This is a critical point. There is no refutation, no sarcastic aside, no rationalizing critique of the view of the divine origin of the disease.”

60 Woodman, Rhetoric in Classical Historiography 35: “He treats the linguistic dispute in a dismissive manner (54.3), which only prompts the question why he has mentioned it. The reason is that the prophecy, in one of its versions ... recalls the words of Achilles in Iliad 1.”
in fact, this war contained both features, limoi and a loimos (1.23.3): just as he himself does not endorse one or the other version of the oracle,61 both versions of it could apply to the war he describes.

If Thucydides diagnosed the early events of the Peloponnesian War as representing the return of a regular pattern of cataclysm seen in much older mythological stories, he might well have concluded at the opening of the war that it would end with Athens or even all of Greece suffering a fate of emptiness and desolation. Historical reality, of course, diverged from the story pattern. The historian nevertheless seems to overlay his account of the final stages of the Sicilian Expedition with the language that evokes what might have been the expected conclusion. He makes the Athenian army in Sicily a mobile proxy for the city itself and employs language recalling old literary accounts of utter ruin, in particular Homer. In the final passages of Book 7 he describes the retreating men as “like nothing other than a city fleeing after having fallen to siege, and not a small one,” a scene that calls to mind Troy, the most famously besieged and defeated city in Greek literature (7.75.5 οὐδὲν γὰρ ἄλλο ή πόλει ἐκφεύγονταν ὑποφεύγοντας, καὶ ταύτῃ οὐ συμικρῆ).62 Nicias encourages his army to regard itself as a city (7.77.4 λογίζεσθε δὲ ὅτι αὐτοὶ τε πόλις ἐστε ὡς ἄλλοι ἐκφεῦγοντας), and the last sentence of his final speech observes that “men are the city, not walls or ships empty of men” (7.77.7). This synecdoche of the soldiers for Athens itself suggests that their defeat may be understood as its downfall, and the implicit result, leaving Athens bereft of its men, is indistinguishable from that of a sack.63 Thucydides

61 Classen-Steup II 102: “Wie der Vers wirklich ursprünglich lautete, lässt Th. vollständig dahingestellt.”
63 Most scholars see the Sicilian Expedition as representing the end of Athens in Thucydides’ narrative, despite the city’s continued existence, e.g. Connor, Thucydides 206. Harrison, Emptiness of Asia 75, on the final scene of Persae, notes that both Aeschylus’ play and Thucydides on the Sicilian Ex-

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furthermore endorses the idea that Syracusan success would represent a fatal blow to Athens (7.56.2); Nicias warns his troops that failure would mean the end of Athens (7.64.1–2); and Thucydides observes that Athens itself is in danger (7.75.2). When this city-army in Sicily is indeed thoroughly defeated, his language has again reminded scholars of accounts of the fall of Troy, especially his use of the term of πανολεθρία (7.87.6). Thucydides may thus bring the pattern that influences his first books into the end of his work as well, painting the story of the conclusion of the Sicilian Expedition in colors that imply the same type of utter desolation as earlier mythical models would have predicted at the beginning of the war.

Conclusions

By situating the Peloponnesian War within this literary tradition, Thucydides suggests that the people of Greece are only partly in control of the damage done by the war, and an inescapable superhuman force may also be driving events. The bleak endings, or threatened endings, of the older stories further indicate the inadequacy of human means to control or remedy this category of disaster. The assistance that a historian could offer in such a situation is clearly limited, raising the question of how Thucydides intends his work to be “helpful” (1.22.4 ὀφέλιμα). This difficulty is in keeping with his senti-

ments throughout: as has often been noted, he strongly implies that neither the war nor its proxy the plague are susceptible to practical intervention.65

His few statements elaborating on the sort of help to be found in his work suggest that he hopes to enable his reader to identify particularly dangerous threats upon their return, on the explicit assumption that significant historical moments unfold in a series of recurrences in which later events may not precisely replicate earlier ones but nevertheless belong to the same essential category and share the same fundamental nature. This is true of both the plague and the war as a whole.

Thucydides’ detailed account of the plague symptoms is intended to allow for its identification upon its return, recognition itself being the goal rather than treatment or prevention (2.48.3 τι προειδοδες μη ξεγνοειν).66 Similarly, just as he claims that the traumas of his era echo, on a larger scale, ones that came before, he expects this pattern to continue in the future: he writes so as to allow his audience “to examine τὸ σαφές of what happened and the sort of thing, or similar, which will happen again sometime” (1.22.4).67

His next sentence claims

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66 On the identification of the plague as serving no obvious practical purpose for treatment, and the corresponding implication that war cannot be controlled, see e.g. E. Kapp, Gnomon 6 (1930) 76–100, at 92–93; Connor, Thucydides 244; Parry, BICS 16 (1969) 108–110.

67 The translation of το σαφες is elusive. H.-P. Stahl, Thucydides: Man’s Place in History (Swansea 2003 [1966]) 28, captures the abstract nature of the Greek: “to see clarity” concerning the events. Kallet, in Brill’s Companion to Thucydides 333, also takes it as “the clearness.” See J. Moles, “A False Dilemma: Thucydides’ History and Historicism,” in S. J. Harrison (ed.), Texts,
his work’s status as “possession for all time” rather than an exercise in momentary storytelling. The timeless value of his study of history thus seems predicated on the help it offers in recognizing and comprehending a variety of upheaval that is itself eternal. Later on, he reiterates that the war consists of occurrences “such as happened and will always happen” (3.82.2), albeit, like the plague, with variable symptoms.68

Thucydides’ implied reader, a sophisticated and intelligent observer of some future period, could hardly require his assistance to take notice of a generic outbreak of war. But if he proposes to help identify a specific and particularly malignant type of war, just as his plague passage depicts a particular and unusually deadly disease, his analysis could offer the same service as that of a doctor distinguishing a nuisance illness from a lethal one. Greek society was famously at war with itself more or less constantly, and the ability to tell a run-of-the-mill conflict from one threatening exceptional ruin would be of great value. Indeed, the historian proudly claims in his very first sentence that he himself accomplished this feat. By responding to the very human desire to foresee the scale of an impending disaster, Thucydides’ work could offer future readers this type of helpful forecast, even if it gives us no practical means by which to cure the state.69

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68 Thucydides uses εἶδος to describe the form of the plague (2.50.1), the same word as he uses for the varying presentations of war (3.82.2 τοῖς εἴδεσι διηλλακτιμένω).

69 This article is dedicated to A. J. Woodman with much gratitude for his teaching, advice, and generosity. Further thanks are due to J. E. Lendon and the anonymous GRBS readers for their thoughtful comments. John Dillery has also been a source of wise guidance.