

Thucydides, Brasidas, and Clearidas

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THE SUGGESTION THAT BRASIDAS may have been among the informants from whom Thucydides derived material for his *History* is undoubtedly attractive.¹ The arguments which might be advanced in support of this suggestion are twofold, both general and particular. First, Thucydides portrays the career of Brasidas fully and graphically with a wealth of personal detail most exceptional in the first half of the *History* (1.1–5.24). Secondly, a number of passages presuppose acquaintance with the thoughts of Brasidas which cannot have been widely known, including fears and expectations together with plans and the reasons for adopting them. Relevant passages are 4.70.1–2, 73.1–3,² 105.1, 120.2, 124.4; 5.16.1.³ These passages cannot be based merely on knowledge of subsequent action by Brasidas, since in several instances fears proved groundless and expectations were unfulfilled. In addition, information is given about negotiations in which Brasidas played a prominent role, and in some cases the number of persons present must have been small (*cf.* 4.78.2–4, 83.3–6). It is also noteworthy that references to decisions by the Spartan government relating to Brasidas and his mission to the Thraceward area reflect his point of view and not theirs. When he asked for reinforcements, one of the factors stated to have been responsible for the

¹ G. B. Grundy, *Thucydides and the History of his Age*² I (Oxford 1948) 36–37; F. E. Adcock, *CAH V* (1927) 243, who held this view many years later, though he does not refer to it in his *Thucydides and his History* (Cambridge 1963); recently, D. Proctor, *The Experience of Thucydides* (Warminster 1980) 15, who regards “meetings and talks” between Thucydides and Brasidas as “a virtual certainty.” No attempt has been made, so far as I am aware, to refute the suggestion, though it has received much less support than suggestions that Thucydides was able to consult Alcibiades, especially on the Ionian war, or Demosthenes, especially on Pylos.

² The grammatical subject is ‘Brasidas and the army’, but the sentiments expounded in some detail are certainly his.

³ 5.6.3 (*cf.* 5.7.1) and 5.8.2–4 will be discussed below. I have attempted to establish elsewhere that only in his treatment of Cleon (in the second debate on Pylos and in the Amphipolis campaign) and probably in one passage on Nicias (5.16.1) does Thucydides ascribe motives and feelings to the leading figures (in these instances discreditable) merely by inference from his own assessment of their characters: *Individuals in Thucydides* (Cambridge 1968) 69–85 (Cleon) and 93–96 (Nicias).

rejection of his request is that leading Spartans were jealous of him, a charge doubtless with an element of truth in it but hardly likely to have emanated from Sparta (4.108.6–7). Some months later, when three commissioners arrived from Sparta “to observe the situation” (4.132.3), they were almost certainly under orders to restrain the enterprising aggression of Brasidas, which was hampering Spartan efforts to make peace. The brevity and vagueness of Thucydides’ reference to the purpose of this commission, apart from the appointment of young men to govern allied cities, may well reflect Brasidas’ resentment at the curtailment of his freedom to develop his own plans.⁴

This evidence shows that Thucydides was remarkably well informed about Brasidas. Much of his information is such as to encourage the notion that it could hardly have been derived from anyone other than Brasidas himself. A meeting, or meetings, between the two men could have taken place during the period of perhaps a year and a half from the banishment of Thucydides to the death of Brasidas. There is, however, a significant factor which scholars do not seem to have noted. The narrative of Thucydides on events in the Thraceward area continues to include a substantial amount of information not widely disclosed at the time. It does not cease to exhibit its previous characteristics either (A) after it reaches the point at which he may be thought to have been for the last time in a position to consult Brasidas or even (B) when it records developments after Brasidas was dead.

To deal first with (A), it is very questionable whether Thucydides can have been at Amphipolis immediately before the battle there in which Brasidas was mortally wounded. Cleon, who had already recovered Torone, sailed round to Eion in preparation for an attack on Amphipolis (5.3.6, 6.1), which, because the Athenian forces were superior to those of the enemy, was clearly in grave danger. As an exile, Thucydides could well have been put to death if he had fallen into Athenian hands. Accordingly, if he had previously been at or near Amphipolis with the intention of questioning Brasidas—and there is no evidence that he had—he must surely have withdrawn from the neighbourhood before the Athenians reached Eion and before Brasidas made his final preparations for resistance and devised his tactical plan for attacking them when they were off

⁴ P. A. Brunt, *Phoenix* 19 (1965) 276, convincingly maintains that the treatment of Brasidas by the Spartan government was justifiable.

their guard.⁵ Yet, though Thucydides is most unlikely to have been able to converse with Brasidas after these preparations were begun, his narrative displays the same features as before. It refers to a forecast by Brasidas, which in fact proved correct, that Cleon, out of contempt for the size of the force opposing him, would make a move towards Amphipolis before the arrival of reinforcements which had been summoned (5.6.3, *cf.* 7.1). More important, the reasons why Brasidas chose to make a surprise sortie from the city instead of fighting a conventional battle are stated in considerable detail (5.8.2–4). One of these reasons is that he felt his troops to be inferior to the Athenians in quality and armament, a view which he cannot have voiced publicly; it conflicts with what he said, according to the Thucydidean version of his speech, when he addressed them (5.9.1). No attempt will be made here to draw any conclusions from this speech, since a necessary preliminary would be to consider the whole question of exhortations by generals before battles. An unusual feature, however, is that so much of the speech is devoted to explaining the tactical plan. An apophthegm attributed to Brasidas at a later stage when issuing the order to attack has an authentic ring, namely that the enemy, because they could be seen to be moving their spears and their heads, would not stand their ground (5.10.5). Thucydides provides an abundance of information about this engagement and its antecedents, most of it evidently derived from sources on the Peloponnesian side, including details about the composition of the force under the command of Brasidas (5.6.4–5). It is true that the account of the battle has led to controversy among scholars,⁶ but the difficulties arise largely from parts apparently based on Athenian sources and are also to some extent attributable to the desire of Thucydides to contrast Cleon and Brasidas.

Although it is highly improbable for the reasons given above that Thucydides was at Amphipolis at the time of the battle and so in a position to have consulted Brasidas until shortly before it began, the possibility ought not perhaps to be wholly excluded. He knew the district well (4.105.1) and might conceivably have counted on being able to slip away before the Athenians attacked or invested the city, if they won the battle. On the other hand,

⁵ Grundy (*supra* n.1) 36 with n.4 is inclined to believe that Thucydides was at Amphipolis until the expeditionary force under Cleon approached and that he then “absented himself.”

⁶ *Cf.* the recent study by N. Jones, *CSCA* 10 (1977) 71–104.

similar doubts cannot arise in considering the section of narrative defined above as (B), because Brasidas was already dead. Yet here also the distinctive features to which attention has been drawn continue to be prominent in the presentation of events in the Thraceward area.

The wealth of detail about the death and funeral of Brasidas together with the posthumous honours paid to him (5.10.11–11.1) is of little significance for the purpose of the present investigation, since this information must have been given much publicity. More important is a passage on the sending of a reinforcement to the north under the command of Rhamphias and two other Spartans (5.12–13). The brief account of this mission recording the actions and reactions of its three commanders strikes an even more critical note than earlier passages cited above that suggest friction between Brasidas and leading Spartans unsympathetic towards him (4.108.6–7, 132.3). It is implied that Rhamphias and his colleagues wasted time in dealing with disorders at Heraclea⁷ and so failed in their duty to bring aid to Brasidas at Amphipolis before the battle. Later they advanced into Thessaly, but, because the Thessalians were attempting to stop them and Brasidas was dead, they abandoned their mission, “considering it to be no longer opportune, since the Athenians had withdrawn in consequence of their defeat and they themselves were not capable of executing any of the projects that Brasidas planned” (5.13.1). Their principal reason, however, was their knowledge that the Spartans wanted peace rather than ambitious offensives (5.13.2). This passage presents Rhamphias and his colleagues in a most unfavourable light⁸ and shows little sympathy towards the Spartan government. It surely reflects the viewpoint of the forces at Amphipolis and especially of Clearidas, who had succeeded Brasidas as their commander; they must have felt aggrieved that Sparta had granted them so little support and did not appear to be appreciative of their achievement in defeating the Athenians. There was now no prospect that the plans of Brasidas for further action in the north, which are unfortunately not specified, could be put into operation.⁹

⁷ The verb *ἐνδιατρίβειν* (5.12.2) normally suggests undesirable and unnecessary delay, cf. 2.18.2, 3.29.1, 7.81.4.

⁸ A. W. Gomme, *Historical Commentary on Thucydides III* (Oxford 1956) 657, remarks: “These Spartans were very pusillanimous.” This comment reflects the impression conveyed by the account of Thucydides.

⁹ It is noteworthy that Thucydides was aware that such plans existed, but he did not necessarily know what they were.

Even more important is a passage about developments in the same area immediately after the Peace of Nicias was concluded (5.21). It shows clearly that Thucydides continued to have access to information which cannot have been known outside a very narrow circle. The protagonist is Clearidas, and his intentions and personal feelings are recorded in some detail, including expectations which were unfulfilled. He was one of the young Spartans sent to the north at the end of 423, where he was appointed governor of Amphipolis (4.132.3). In the next year he served as second in command in the battle there, leading the attack by the main force from one of the gates (5.8.4, 9.7, 10.7).¹⁰ When in 421 a commission was sent to him from Sparta to order him, as commander of the Peloponnesian forces, to hand over Amphipolis to the Athenians in accordance with the peace treaty, he pleaded that he had no power to do so in the face of local opposition. Thucydides expressly states that he adopted this attitude out of regard for the Chalcidians, who with others in the area defied Spartan instructions to accept the peace terms (5.21.1–2). Clearidas, accompanied by local representatives, then hastened to Sparta with the intention of defending himself if the commissioners accused him of disobeying orders; he also wished to ascertain whether there was still any prospect of altering the terms of the treaty. Both his fears and his hopes proved to be without foundation. He certainly cannot have been prosecuted, since he was promptly sent back to Amphipolis with revised orders, and he learned that Sparta was already committed to implementing the peace terms, so that no modification of them could any longer be contemplated (5.21.3). He was back at Sparta in the summer of 421, bringing with him the troops sent out under Brasidas (5.34.1) but without having handed over Amphipolis to Athens (5.35.2).

This passage is remarkable in that the presentation of Clearidas is so closely akin to the presentation of Brasidas in earlier passages, though without the same tone of admiration because his achievements were relatively insignificant. He is shown to have acted precisely as Brasidas would have been expected to have acted in similar circumstances, pursuing a policy divergent from that of the Spartan government and using a certain amount of deceit in order to accomplish his personal aims.¹¹ He is, like Brasidas, contrasted with more conventional Spartans, and he shows an un-

¹⁰ He is addressed by name in the speech of Brasidas before the battle (5.9.7–9), a feature unique in Thucydidean speeches.

¹¹ Cf. Gomme (*supra* n.8) 690.

Spartan independence of thought. Above all, Thucydides claims knowledge, as in passages on Brasidas, of his inner feelings and of the motives which led him to act as he did.

The outcome of the foregoing investigation may be stated as follows. If Thucydides is believed to have been able to consult Brasidas about the Peloponnesian expedition to the Thraceward area because his narrative exhibits the exceptional features to which attention has been drawn, the continuance of these features until he reaches the end of his account indicates that Brasidas cannot have been his only source of detailed information, much of it undisclosed largely for reasons of security. It seems inescapable that he also consulted a knowledgeable eyewitness, or eyewitnesses, on the Peloponnesian side who could provide similar information on the closing stages of the expedition. It might be thought that Clearidas could have been the principal, even sole, Peloponnesian informant for the whole period. He, however, did not arrive in the north until the end of 423, as already mentioned, and though Brasidas doubtless gave him some account of earlier events, he cannot have been a wholly satisfactory witness on the opening phase of the expedition, including the intervention by Brasidas at Megara.¹² A more feasible suggestion, which certainly cannot be disproved, is that Thucydides obtained information first from Brasidas and later, after the battle at Amphipolis, from Clearidas. There is, however, an alternative which, though also speculative, seems to me to be more convincing because more compatible with the circumstances. Before the Archidamian war was ended by the Peace of Nicias, Thucydides, though banished from Athens, might not, as a recent strategos, be *persona grata* to the Peloponnesians and especially to Brasidas, whose attempts to capture Eion he had thwarted (4.106.4, 107.2).¹³ After the conclusion of peace, his movements were restricted only by exclusion from Athenian territory, and he may well have seized the opportunity, valuable to him as a historian, of visiting Amphipolis to seek information there before Clearidas and his force returned home.¹⁴ In addition to showing himself to be acquainted with the topography of the city and its environs, he refers to constructional alterations carried

¹² Two of the passages cited above presupposing acquaintance with his thoughts (4.70.1–2, 73.1–3) belong to this episode.

¹³ Alcibiades, though granted a safe conduct to visit Sparta, was apprehensive about his reception there (6.88.9).

¹⁴ His contacts with the Peloponnesians from which he claims in his Second Preface to have benefited as a historian as a result of his exile (5.26.5) perhaps began at this point.

out after it was lost to Athens and also to the location of a trophy set up after the battle (4.103.5; 5.10.6, 11.1). Of the Peloponnesians serving there when peace was signed almost all were members of the expeditionary force, consisting of helots and mercenaries, sent out under Brasidas at the outset (4.80.5). He does not seem to have been given the support of any Spartiates in the early stages of his mission, and there is no reference by Thucydides to subordinate officers before the arrival of Clearidas. Yet there must have been a few sufficiently close to Brasidas to have had some knowledge of his intentions and feelings. Among these Thucydides may well have found one, perhaps more than one, informant whose testimony he could trust. Direct contact between Thucydides and Brasidas seems unlikely.

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