CHAPTER THREE

THUCYDIDES. THE ASSEMBLY AND DEMOCRATIC DELIBERATION

In the chapters in which he sets out his historical method, Thucydides states that a historical work must contain deeds and speeches in equal numbers.¹ In deference to this principle, in his *History of the Peloponnesian War* he gives a large number of speeches delivered in assemblies, embassies, debates and meetings of various sorts, as well as addresses given on the field of battle.² Such speeches form part of the author’s historiographical project as tools for reconstructing the historical truth: they penetrate the reasons behind men’s decisions and actions and throw light on the dynamics that regulate a war, from its first foreshadowing to the phases that precede the armed clashes.

Thucydides recognizes in the historical process the result of a process of deliberation: like any other human action, initiatives of warfare have to be decided on before they can be undertaken.³ The outcome is not decided only on the field of battle but also wherever groups of men gather, as “deliberating bodies”, to take decisions. In the peculiar political situation of the Greek *poleis*, and of Athens in particular, the assembly was the privileged forum for deliberation.⁴ Such deliberation was not a logical activity functioning according to mechanisms of rational calculation: rhetoric and the persuasive force of the speeches played a decisive role.⁵

Thucydides pays particular attention to lexical choice in describing the convocation, conduct and outcome of assemblies.⁶ Usually two terms

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¹ 1.22. The dichotomy of action (ἔργον) and word (λόγος) goes back to Homer where (*Il. 9.443*) Phoenix taught Achilles “to be both a speaker of words and a doer of deeds” (μύθων τε ῥητῆρ᾽ ἐμεναι πρηκτῆρὰ τε ἔργων).
² Irrespective of how one regards the vexata quaestio of to what extent they reflect the words actually uttered, Thucydides’ speeches remain highly precious documents of political eloquence in the Greek world at the time of the Peloponnesian War. In the copious bibliography on these speeches see the essays in Stadter (1973).
⁴ The *History of the Peloponnesian War* give a description of some thirty assemblies, half of them containing one or more actual speeches. Apart from two cases, all the assemblies conclude with a deliberation.
⁶ A study of the vocabulary and recurrent formulae used by Thucydides to describe the conduct of the various elements of the assembly (meeting, debate, decision), from
alternate in designating the holding of assemblies: σύλλογος and ἐκκλησία. Although apparently interchangeable, they actually each have a different nuance. The former indicates more generally any form of meeting, for example the congress of allies\(^7\) or the gathering of armed soldiers,\(^8\) while the latter has a clear institutional sense and refers to the assembly of citizens in Athens,\(^9\) Syracuse,\(^10\) and also Sparta. When, more rarely, he uses δῆμος or βουλή, this connotes contexts in which the unity of the civic body within the polis is disrupted because of a struggle between the “people” with its democratic representatives on one hand and the oligarchs on the other. Moreover the assemblies are seen as places of debate,\(^11\) persuasion\(^12\) and decision making (in general indicated by the act of voting).\(^13\)

The verb used for deliberation is βουλεύω, in both the active and middle voices. Βουλεύειν in the active expresses the idea of proposing a project, emphasizing the power of decision making, while βουλεύεσθαι highlights the confronting and reconciliation of opinions, i.e. the communal aspect of deliberation.\(^14\)

In his scrupulous analysis of the mechanisms and contexts of deliberation, Thucydides deals with a problem that was close to his heart, namely correct deliberation: it is not enough to deliberate, one must “deliberate well” (εὖ βουλεύεσθαι), a formula that recurs frequently in the perorations.\(^15\) The reflection on effective deliberation (εὐβουλία) is the predominant motif in the famous antilogy opposing the orators Cleon and Diodotus in the assembly called to decide the fate of the inhabitants of Mytilene.

\(^7\) 1.97.1; 5.30.5; 6.75.4; sometimes σύνοδος is used as a synonym of σύλλογος, e.g. in 1.119.1.
\(^8\) For the meanings of the term σύλλογος in general and in Thucydides (in his relationship with ἐκκλησία) see Christensen-Hansen (1983) 17–31.
\(^9\) 1.31.4; 1.139.3; 2.13.1; 3.36.6; 4.29.1; 5.45.4; 6.8.2.
\(^10\) 6.32.3.
\(^11\) Mention of the diversity of opinions reflects the reality of the debate, which tends to be reduced to an antilogy or the confrontation between two possible solutions.
\(^12\) Thucydides emphasizes the adhesion of the citizens to the orators’ speeches: cf. above all the use of πείθομαι (persuade) and its compound forms.
\(^14\) On the technical use of the verb βουλεύω in rhetorical theory cf. Part III chap. 16.2.2.1.
\(^15\) The formula is expressed in the imperative (in 1.71.7 and 4.87.5) or in the future (in 1.43.3 and 1.85.2).