Weather, Luck and the Divine in Thucydides

Rachel Bruzzone

Thucydides, the historian of the Peloponnesian War, offers only one extended analysis of warfare, following his episode on Corcyraean stasis (3.82–3). In this editorializing passage, he lists the disappearance of piety as one of the forms of social decay associated with the war: human relationships are no longer founded on faith (3.82.6), neither side practices reverence (3.82.8), and oaths lose their hold on humanity (3.83.2). In this paper, I argue that his four lengthy episodes featuring the fall of the small city of Plataea form a cohesive narrative illustrating this sacrilege. Plataea is a particularly appropriate backdrop for a depiction of this metamorphosis in Greek morality, weighted as the city is with the sacred legacy left behind by the Persian War victory of 479 BCE, an event that involved dramatic manifestations of, in particular, Spartan piety. In one of several demonstrations of their faith, the Spartans refused to defend themselves from Persian attacks until their leader Pausanias’ prayer to the local temple of Hera rendered pre-battle sacrifices auspicious (Hdt. 9.61.3–62.1). Herodotus, at least, regards that this belief was well founded, for he surmises that Demeter intervened directly in the battle (Hdt. 9.65.2). The mounting impiety that takes place at Plataea in the Peloponnesian War is particularly disturbing because Thucydides’ narrative implies that the divine forces associated with the one-time victory over barbarians indeed exist and object to transgression. The dialogue between the Spartan king Archidamus and the Plataeans insistently argues that the sacred forces of Plataea judge events there and can be expected to intervene on the side of justice. And indeed, traditional elements of divine intervention, including luck, darkness, fire and storms,\(^1\) consistently protect

---

\(^1\) In Homer, darkness can hide a man even during daytime, and can be used to interfere in a battle (e.g. *Od*. 23.371–2; *Il*. 5.23–4, 344–6, 506–8; 16.567–8), sometimes by making heavy things light for chosen individuals (*Il*. 12.445–50). Gods can inspire thoughts (e.g. Hdt. 1.27.3), and change or limit human perception (e.g. *Od*. 19.476–9; Soph. *Aj*. 51–2; *E. Ion* 14; Pl. *Smp.* 179d). Belief in the divinity of the natural world, and its capacity to punish injustice, transcends literary genres (See e.g. A.H. Sommerstein ed., *Aeschylus Eumenides* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989) 236–7; J.D. Mikalson, *Athenian Popular Religion* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1983) 18–30). The gods employ their most obvious tool, violent weather, liberally in all types of literature (e.g. *Od*. 5.291–6; Aesch. *Ag*. 192–204; Hdt. 8.13). Such intervention was thought to be especially crucial in the Persian Wars, when the Persians suffered a series of disastrous storms. Herodotus reports that the god Boreas deliberately destroyed much of the Persian fleet at Cape Sepias to help the Greeks. This
and help Plataea's defenders, while blinding, confusing, and frightening its attackers.\(^2\)

**Invasion**

Thucydides' account of the initial Theban attack first establishes Plataea as an extraordinarily lucky city; the episode in fact seems so unlikely that it has been read as demonstrating the role of the unforeseeable in war.\(^3\) Three hundred Thebans slip into the city, intending either to convince or to compel it to join the rest of Boeotia (2.2.1). Reinforcements follow, but fail to reach Plataea in time. After a brief capitulation, the Plataeans fight back, but their luck, most often in the form of extraordinary natural phenomena, is more decisive in the victory than their own efforts in battle.

The forces of nature in this narrative, as will be the case in every Plataean episode, are more decisive than any human action. Thucydides repeatedly remarks on the dark night in which the conflict takes place (2.2.1 περὶ πρῶτον ὑπνον, 3.1 ἐν τῇ νυκτί, 3.4 νύκτα, ἐν νυκτί, 4.2 διὰ νυκτὸς, ἐν σκότῳ, 5.1 τῆς νυκτὸς, 2.2.5.2 τῆς νυκτὸς). This darkness disorients the Thebans (2.4.2), but Thucydides twice observes that the Plataeans know the town and are thus unimpeded (2.3.4, 4.2). The Plataeans deliberately take advantage of the darkness that they know will confuse their opponents (2.3.3), but they also display understanding of events appears to have been widely accepted, for the grateful Athenians established a temple for the god beside the Ilissos River (7.189.3), and nearly 50 years later Aristophanes' Philocleon refuses to change the cloak he was wearing when Boreas delivered Greece (Vesp. 1124).

\(^2\) Thucydides rarely introduces the divine into his work, for example not allowing his characters to comment on the violation of Decelea. But this apparent discrepancy between his treatment of Plataea and other cities is in keeping with one of his characteristic techniques, the use of exemplary narratives that serve as templates for the reader to supply elsewhere when appropriate. S. Hornblower, *Thucydides and Pindar* (Oxford: OUP, 2004) 342–3 describes Thucydides' single account of a pre-battle sacrifice: “The message appears to be ‘I am not going to tell you this sort of thing every time; please bear it in mind and assume it elsewhere.’” J. Price, *Thucydides and Internal War* (Cambridge: CUP, 2001) 13 discusses Thucydides' treatment of *stasis*: “This is a variation of a known narrative technique of Thucydides, by which he relates one instance of a recurring event in great detail so that it may serve as an exemplar for all similar instances in the narrative.” H.R.R. Rawlings, *The Structure of Thucydides' History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981) 212–15 and W.R. Connor, *Thucydides* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984) 144 also discuss Thucydides' tendency to use exempla.