CONTRACT AND DESIGN: THUCYDIDES’ WRITING

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Thucydides has written The War of the Peloponnesians and Athenians. We acknowledge that achievement, not only for its intellectual vigor and its insight in history and human nature, but also for the advance it represents in the development of writing as a medium in its own right. With Thucydides, Greek writing has moved beyond the mere transcription of words spoken. Thucydides, we observe, is a real writer, who addresses directly, perhaps for the first time in history, a reading audience. The War of the Peloponnesians and Athenians is a “readerly” text, a discourse that is meant for direct ingestion from the written page, without the mediation of a reading voice. In this regard there is a natural contrast between Thucydides and Herodotus’ “hearerly” History, a work that is meant to be heard in performance, displaying many features that are related to the presence of a voice.¹ The contrast is, from Thucydides’ own standpoint, not only a matter of medium but also of the durability of the message. Thucydides’ writing enables him to address a readership beyond his audience of the moment: the κτήμα ἐξ αἰεί wins out over an ἄγωνισμα ἐς τὸ παραχρήμα ἄκούσειν. Writing outperforms speech.

But such a comparison between Thucydides and Herodotus does not mean that Thucydides’ writing is self-evident or unproblematic. Indeed, the work’s very insistence on its own writtenness should caution us against taking things too much for granted. The question that needs to be addressed is how an Athenian at the end of the fifth century BCE would have conceived of texts that were not meant to be a script for performance or a written version of a public speech.

Let us begin with exploring the way in which Thucydides presents his work in relation to writing. The work’s opening sentence

¹ On Herodotus vs. Thucydides as regards “writtenness”, see Havelock (1963) 53–54 n. 8; cf. Gentili-Cerri (1983) 8–11 (both focusing on the phrase κτήμα ἐξ αἰεί, on which see more below). Some scholars do not exclude oral presentations of Thucydides’ work in private settings, e.g., Hornblower (1987) 29. On Herodotus and “spokenness”, see Bakker (2002a) 11–12; (2006).
presents writing as a transitive link between the author’s name and the War:

\[ \text{Θουκυδίδης} \ '\text{Αθηναίος} \ \text{ξυνέγραψε} \ \text{τὸν} \ \text{πόλεμον} \ \text{τῶν} \ \text{Πελοποννησίων} \ \text{kai} \ '\text{Αθηναίων}, \ \text{ός} \ \text{ἐπολέμησαν} \ \text{πρὸς} \ \text{άλληλους} \ (1.1.1) \]

Thucydides of Athens has written the war of the Peloponnesians and the Athenians, how they waged war against each other.

The tight connection between the name and the war as they are joined transitively in writing recurs throughout the work, at the end of each section dealing with a new year of the evolving conflict:

\[ \text{kai} \ [τὸ] \ \text{δεύτερον} \ \text{ἐτος} \ \text{ἐτελεύτα} \ \text{τῷ} \ \text{πολέμῳ} \ \text{τῷ} \ \text{ἐν} \ \text{Θουκυδίδης} \ \text{ξυνέγραψε} \ (2.70.4) \]

And the second year ended for this present war which Thucydides has written.²

Furthermore, the identification of the Athenian stratēgos at Amphipolis as the writer of the present text yields a similar formula:

\[ \text{Θουκυδίδης} \ \text{τὸν} \ \text{Ολόρον}, \ \text{ὁς} \ \text{τῶδε} \ \text{ξυνέγραψε} \ (4.104.4) \]

Thucydides son of Oloros, who has written these words.

It appears, then, that the central term used for the writing of The War of the Peloponnesians and Athenians is the compound verb ξυγγράφειν. The present chapter will examine this verb’s syntax, semantics, and pragmatics in search of an understanding of Thucydides’ writing in the terms of his own time.

That time knows of συγγραφαὶ, written compositions, treatises on a given subject. Thucydides himself mentions (1.97.2) the “Attic ξυγγραφή” of Hellanikos, and we meet the term in philosophical and sophistic contexts as well.³ We do not have to look into the semantics of the verbal idea ξυγγραφ- to note that Thucydides’ syntax of the verb συγγράφειν differs from the use connected with such treatises. Authors of treatises typically write “about” or “on” their subject. For example, at the beginning of his treatise On Horsemanship (Περὶ ὑπηρεσίας), Xenophon mentions a certain Simon, who “has written [a treatise] about horse-

² The other year-endings carrying Thucydides’ signature: 2.103.2 (3rd); 3.25.2 (4th); 3.88.4 (5th); 3.116.3 (6th); 4.51.1 (7th); 4.135.2 (9th); 6.7.4 (16th); 6.93.4 (17th); 7.18.4 (18th); 8.6.5 (19th); 8.60.3 (20th); see also Luschnat (1970) 1109–10.
³ Heraclit. B 129 DK (the συγγραφαὶ of Pythagoras), Hippias B 6 DK.