It is commonly supposed that Thucydides was, first and foremost, a historian and that his claim to fame lies in his work as a historiographical innovator. According to this view, Thucydides took up the nascent prose genre of history from earlier writers, including Hellanicus and Herodotus, and transformed it into a rigorous and “scientific” discipline. Herodotus (1.1) had stated that the purpose of his Histories was the preservation of memory, “so that things done by men not be forgotten in time, and that great and remarkable deeds ... not lose their glory.”¹ Like Herodotus, Thucydides was intensely aware of his own role, as a writer, in the cultural process of preserving memory of the past, and he followed Herodotus in presenting a sequential narrative of remarkable past events. The standard view of Thucydides as a historian has much to recommend it. He certainly regarded earlier Greek practitioners of self-conscious history-writing as rivals. Like the early red-figure vase painter Euthymides, who wrote on a signed masterpiece amphora “As never Euphronios,” by censuring Hellanicus by name for his inaccuracy in regard to dates (1.97) and Herodotus by implication for factual errors, Thucydides situated his work in a competitive relationship with that of earlier historians.² But the vase painters Euthymides and Euphronios were participants in what both would presumably have recognized as a single artistic genre, a rule-bounded enterprise in which bold innovation was possible but which also recognized and respected clear generic guidelines.³ It is not so clear that Thucydides would have accepted that he was working in just the same generic enterprise as Herodotus—he did not describe his text as historiai.⁴ Indeed, it is not

¹ Hdt. 1.1.
⁴ Th. 1.1.1 “syngrapse ton polemon” might suggest that he saw himself as writing
clear that the rules structuring fifth-century prose writing were nearly as clearly defined as were, e.g., vase painting styles or poetic forms. The essential point is that Thucydides’ text seems clearly to break with, as well as to build upon, the texts written by the Greek founders of the enterprise of writing history.

Modernity and Reflexivity

This essay will suggest that Thucydides developed a new approach to describing and using the past, and that his approach amounted to nothing less than the invention of a new discipline, political and social science. By this I mean that he regarded as inadequate the motivating purposes of all previous (and many later) historians: preserving memory for its intrinsic worth, praising heroic exploits, exposing moral errors, and making causal connections between apparently disparate events in the past. Although we can find substantial traces of each of these purposes in Thucydides’ writing, his description of past events was a means to an end rather than an end in itself. This is stated explicitly in the key programmatic statement at 1.22.4: The author will be content if his text is judged “useful by those inquirers who desire an exact knowledge of the past as an aid to the interpretation of the future.” The text thus does seek to offer a precise account of the past. Yet the purpose of offering such an account is not the preservation of memory of the past for its own sake, but rather guiding action in the future. I suggest that Thucydides’ text teaches its reader that the key to effective future action is understanding sociopolitical systems, i.e., political science.

The programmatic statement at 1.22.4 suggests that Thucydides’ work was intended as a sort of “political systems users’ manual”. Its integration of sociopolitical theory with an accurate narrative of past events was meant to enable human agents (i.e., his readers) to gain leverage upon and thus to participate actively within an interlocking

---

5 There has been much debate on this passage: Gomme, HCT ad loc., e.g., tries to avoid the evident meaning in order to keep Thucydides within the fold of disciplinary historians.

a *xyngraphē* i.e., as working in the same literary genre as Hellanicus whose *Attikē xyngraphē* Thucydides cites (1.97). But Thucydides never describes his work as a *xyngraphē*; cf. Edmunds (1993).