Thucydides’ treatment of individuals must have been one of the aspects of his work that most struck his contemporaries. The History opens (1.1–21) with a reinterpretation of early history based on sea power and finance, in which the famous individuals of the past are portrayed as stages in the development of financial sophistication—their role, as heroes or tyrants, to determine events and generate history, subsidiary to larger historical patterns. The account of the origins of the war begins not with individuals, but with a city—Epidamnos, and we have to wait until Archidamos (1.79) to meet an individual of any note. The words and actions of individual actors in the account of the outbreak of the war are explicitly subjugated to a wider causal structure, Spartan fear of Athenian power (1.23.6; 1.88), which in turn is linked to the economic development sketched in the Archaeologia, and to facets of “human nature”—honor, fear and advantage. In the face of such wider historical patterns, individuals may seem powerless.

There is contrast too with Herodotus here, who opens his work by locating the origin of the Greek-Persian conflicts in a series of “tit-for-tat” actions by individuals, so that the origins of public conflict are seen in private actions. In general, personal motivations of individuals play a dominant role in Herodotus. In Thucydides the avoidance of a Herodotean treatment of individuals looks like a facet of that austere avoidance of elements that may make the experience of history more pleasurable, but trivialize it—to mythôdes (1.22.4).

Not that there is any shortage of individuals in Thucydides—what Westlake calls “the host of nonentities whose names Thucydides so punctiliously preserves as leaders of unimportant missions”. Indeed,
such “catalogic” exactitude seems itself to emphasise the avoidance of a “mythical” treatment. So what is it then that defines this typically Thucydidean treatment of individuals? Three things, perhaps.

The first is the avoidance of personal or private detail. Information supplied about individuals is normally rigorously restricted to their public role, and we learn nothing about their families, their private circumstances, nor (generally) their personal disputes, or indeed anything that goes beyond their role as directors of military action or of their cities’ counsel. Not that there was any lack of this sort of personal material available to Thucydides, as is clear from comedy, or from the fragments of writers like Stesimbrotus of Thasos. When we compare Plutarch’s depiction of Pericles with that of Thucydides it seems clear we are dealing with a deliberate policy of exclusion of this sort of material.

The second is the failure to develop the full story of individuals. Each person fulfills their historical role and then disappears, with only the briefest of indications, if any, of their story before they enter the History, and often nothing about their subsequent fate. In general, we do hear about the deaths of important individuals, but where this occurs outside the context of the main events of the History, we may not even get this—Archidamos is a prime example, and Pericles, whose death we are told of only obliquely (2.65.6).

Third and last, the absence of moralizing in the depiction of individuals is surely another symptom of Thucydides’ refusal to develop the individual in his own right. Not that there is no moral element to the depiction of individuals and the narratorial comment on them—Cleon’s “violence”, for example (3.36.6) or the qualities that Pericles attributes to himself in his last speech (2.60.5)—it is just that, once again, these qualities are linked to the individuals’ political or military performance. We are not allowed to experience individuals’ moral lives, to engage with them by approving or condemning their conduct, except to the extent that it relates to their effectiveness as historical actors. To see how different it could have been, we only have to think of Theopompus.

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4 Bruns (1896) 9ff., who talks of “Stilgesetze”. Cf. also Hornblower (1987) 14—Thucydides excludes the “personal and emotional background” provided by Herodotus.
7 Bruns (1896) 1–23, esp. 9.
8 See Connor (1968) 13, noting the complete absence of Thucydidean restraint in personal matters.