THUCYDIDES IN ROME AND LATE ANTIQUITY

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1. The Arrival of Greek Books from Macedonia

The earliest reference we have to a Roman knowing Thucydides’ work is in connection with Cato the Elder (234–149 BC), who, according to Plutarch, developed an interest in Greek culture. “When he was very old”, Plutarch reports, Cato had to hand “Greek books” from which “he proﬁted” (Cato Maior, 2.5). Plutarch’s choice of phrase (“when he was very advanced in years”) suggests the period after the Roman victory at Pydna against Perseus of Macedonia (168 BC), when Cato was working on the Origines.1

Plutarch (Cat. Ma. 2.5) speaks of two Greek authors whom Cato drew upon during this late acquaintance with Greek literature, Thucydides and Demosthenes. He also explains Cato’s purpose in reading them—“for the rhetorical parts”—and affirms that he proﬁted “somewhat from Thucydides, but more from Demosthenes”. Interestingly, Plutarch immediately explains that from then on Cato’s works were “embroidered” (διαπεποίκοται) with quotations and stories taken entirely from Greek authors, and that we even ﬁnd “whole texts translated literally” (Cat. Ma. 2.6).

This means that, like his contemporary dramatist Terence, Cato chose to demonstrate his acceptance of this superior culture by inserting Latin translations of the parts he liked most into his own work. “For the rhetorical parts” (εἰς τὸ ῥητορικόν): it is obvious that Cato used Demosthenes in this way, and quite understandable that he would have immediately recognized Demosthenes as a useful oratorical model. However, he also took something “from Thucydides”. What this means is not very clear; probably that the latter was doubly useful, in the sense that Cato used him when writing his own speeches, and also when elaborating the rhetorical parts of his own historical work. The Thucydidean inﬂuence consisted above all in the insertion

1 Cf. also Cornelius Nepos, Cat. 3.2: senex historias scribere instituit.
of long *dēmēgoriai* (public speeches) into the narrative: this was typical of Thucydides, and Cato does it too when he inserts his orations—which were also circulating separately—into the *Origines*: he does this with the *Pro Rhodiensibus*, for example, and with the speech *In Galbam*.  

Something similar had happened with some of Demosthenes’ orations: the same speech could appear both in his own corpus and as the oratorical part of a historical narrative—as was the case, for example, with the so-called *Answer to Philip’s letter*, a pastiche in the style of Demosthenes which was published by Anaximenes in Book VII of the *Philippica*, but at some point (certainly long before Didymus recognized it there in the Augustan era) found its way into the Demosthenic corpus. In Cato’s time and thereafter, this speech, thought to be by Demosthenes, was circulating amongst Roman readers in both forms simultaneously, and this could undoubtedly have played a significant role in establishing a trend. It is possible that, as well as clearly drawing upon Demosthenes, Cato may also have used some of the substantial public oratory in Thucydides as a model for his own speeches. He probably used the same reasoning that is later found frequently in Cicero’s works on oratory: namely that Thucydides’ work, being so full of speeches, which are moreover described as “very close” to the real orations they are intended to paraphrase, was the main source on the art of political speaking for a whole period in which, as Plato made clear in *Phaedrus* (257d), politicians did “not write”; their speeches were not written down and thus were not circulated.

The Greek books which had such a dramatic influence on the intellectual development of the ageing Cato were most probably amongst the spoils brought to Rome from the library of the king of Macedonia after Aemilius Paulus’ victorious campaign. The acquisition of these books was deftly portrayed as a gift which the victorious general could not resist making to “his literature-loving sons” (as Plutarch put it); one of these sons was Scipio Aemilianus, Cato the Elder’s first interlocutor in Cicero’s *De senectute*, who had fought at Pydna.

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2 Cf. Leo (1913) 284.
4 Th. 1.22.1: ὁτι ἐγρύτατα τῆς ἕρμομοσ οι γνώμης.
6 Plu. *ibid.* 22.