THUCYDIDES’ RENAISSANCE READERS

Marianne Pade

Thucydides’ History did not conform straightforwardly to Renaissance ideas about historiography. Although Thucydides certainly intended his readers to learn about human nature from his work, he was not primarily a moral writer and it is difficult to view the History as a magistra vitae (“governess of life”, Cic. De orat. 2.36.), i.e., a deposit of moral examples that could guide the reader’s behavior or be used to embellish his own writing, having previously been carefully copied out into a commonplace book for this very purpose. This is evident from the way the History was received during the Renaissance. While Thucydides was always acknowledged as one of the most masterly historians ever, the History did not enjoy the enormous popularity of Greek works that provided more easily-digestible moral instruction (for instance Plutarch’s Lives or Xenophon’s Cyropaedia), especially in the early Renaissance. Readers wanted to learn from the classics rather than about them; so Thucydides was read and imitated as a model of style long before scholarly explanation of his text began.

During the Renaissance Thucydides’ readers mainly studied him in Latin, at least in Western Europe. The entire text of the History was translated into Latin and annotated several times, but certain parts of the work received special attention. The most celebrated and most imitated passages of Thucydides’ work were the proem (1.1–1.22), the speeches, particularly Pericles’ Funeral Oration (2.35–46), the description of the plague in Athens (2.47.3–2.54) and the description of the civil war in Corcyra (3.81–84).

In this chapter I shall trace the reception of Thucydides in the Latin West from the fourteenth century, when the early Italian humanists became interested in Greek literature, until the end of the sixteenth century, by which time the study of Greek was firmly established in Western universities.
Although no one had had any direct knowledge of Thucydides’ work for centuries, his name was familiar in fourteenth-century Western Europe from the works of a number of classical Latin writers, especially critics like Cicero and Quintilian. They had discussed his influence on Latin literature, and their remarks provided inspiration for Renaissance translators struggling with Thucydides’ difficult prose. For the humanists, the proper language in which to render a classical Greek text was Latin rather than the vernacular, and preferably written in a style which matched that of the original. The ideal language was not simply classical Latin (to the extent that the translators were able to reproduce it) but in some cases the actual words of the Latin classics, especially if these in turn had imitated the style of the Greek author in question. For this reason it will be useful to start by drawing attention to some of the classical Latin discussions of Thucydides’ work, and to some of the ancient writers who imitated his style.

Cicero frequently discusses Thucydides in his rhetorical works. In his De oratore he has the orator Antonius praise the style of the Greek writer:

> The next is Thucydides, who in my opinion easily surpasses everybody else in the art of speaking. So abounding is he in fullness of material that the number of thoughts almost equals the number of words, and he is furthermore so exact and precise in his choice of words that one hardly knows whether it is the content which is rendered illustrious by the language, or the words by the thoughts (2.56).

Later, in Brutus, he adds that Thucydides’ style was so compressed that he was sometimes difficult to understand (29). In the De optimo genere oratorum, Cicero emphasises the distinction between rhetoric and history: people are right to admire Thucydides’ eloquence, but this has no bearing on the orator whom the dialogue attempts to define. In both Brutus and Orator Cicero tries to dissuade students of rhetoric from imitating Thucydides’ style. He concedes that his writing is fine

---

1 See Pade (2004).
2 A good survey is provided by Strebel (1935) 27–41.
3 “Thucydidis enim quidam eloquentiam admirantur. Id quidem recte; sed nihil ad eum oratorem quem quaerimus”, Opt. gen. 15.