PARTICIPIAL MOTIVATION IN THUCYDIDES

BY

MABEL L LANG

Concerning Thucydides' attribution of motivation to individuals there is a wide range of scholarly opinion. H D Westlake writes: "It is not the practice of Thucydides to give information about the motives and feelings of individuals based upon mere surmise or even upon inference from his knowledge of their characters". Very different are both A G Woodhead's judgment: "Thucydides is a remarkable thought-reader where Cleon is concerned" and L Pearson's more measured statement: "These instances should be enough to show how arbitrary Thucydides can be in his treatment of individuals and his estimate of their motives". Similar opinions have been expressed in other studies dealing with various aspects of Thucydidean vocabulary and narrative, but there is not, to my knowledge, a thoroughgoing analysis of the one particular Thucydidean treatment of motivation that is most easily studied and quantified: that is, his use, when describing an action taken, of one or more participles modifying the actor(s) to introduce that action.

1) Thucydides and the Fall of Amphipolis, Hermes 90 (1962), 283 (276-287)
2) Thucydides' Portrait of Cleon, Mnemosyne 13 (1960), 313 (289-317)
3) Thucydides as Reporter and Critic, TAPA 78 (1947), 56 (37-60)
4) See particularly: J de Romilly, La crainte dans l'oeuvre de Thucydide, C&M 17 (1956), 119-127; H Montgomery, Gedanke und Tat zur Erzählungstechnik bei Herodot, Thukydides, Xenophon und Arrian (Lund 1965), 45-94, 236-237; P Huart, Le vocabulaire de l'analyse psychologique dans l'oeuvre de Thucydide (Paris 1966); K J Dover, Thucydides (Greece and Rome New Surveys in the Classics No 7), 31-32, 35; C Schneider, Information und Absicht bei Thukydides (Göttingen 1974), Hypomnemata 41.
5) Obviously, Thucydides describes motivation in other ways as well, but the frequency and uniformity of the participial expression make it particularly easy to control.

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Mnemosyne, XLVIII, Fasc 1
Any particular action could be a generally known and reportable fact, and when it was taken by a group or a people, the thoughts and passions leading to action could also be public knowledge as a result of deliberation and intercommunication. But in the case of individuals, it is less likely that the mind-set leading to any particular action would be generally known or knowable. Therefore Thucydides’ frequent indication of such mind-set seems to be the best testing-ground for any opinion about his treatment of motivation. And there is a critical mass of evidence: for 42 named individuals Thucydides supplies participial prelude or accompaniment motivating or explaining 145 different actions. Such motivating participles range from knowing or learning (γνωσις, γνωστος, εξονομη, πεπιθανημονος, πεπιθανημονος), perceiving (ὁρων, ὅρων, ἀκοιτων, ἀποκοιτων, αἰσθανημονος, αἰσθημονος) and thinking (νομισας, νομισμονος, οιδομονος) to fearing (ειδως, ειδως, φοβομονος, φοβηθεις), expecting or hoping (ἐλπιζων, ἐλπιδας), suspecting (ὑπονοης, υπονοησαν, υπονοησας), willing (βουλημονος), or trusting (πιστεων, πιστεους) and being persuaded (πιστεις). And frequently two, or even three, participles combine to introduce a single action. That is, sometimes awareness of a situation (knowing or perceiving) may be enough; and sometimes there may be only calculation (thinking or expecting) or only emotion of some kind (fearing, hoping, suspecting, willing) or outside influence (trusting or being persuaded), but often a combination of two or even three participles with different thrusts provides a complex motivation. In this initial study, however, consideration of differences among verbs of similar meaning and of the semantics of different tenses of the participles will not be attempted, since it requires further research.

The very first instance of such motivation sets the tone: “Thucydides wrote the history of the war, expecting (ἐλπιςας) that it would be a great war, judging (ἐκμαχημονος) that both combatants were at the peak of their powers, and seeing (ὁρων) the rest of Greece joining in.” (111) Here there is no question as to Thucydides’ knowledge of his own motivation and calculation, since it was because of his expectation of greatness that he wrote, and that expectation was based on both what he judged and what he saw. Can we have equal confidence in his knowledge when he uses similar participles in connection with other men’s action?