Fabius, Thucydides, and the Lessons of History (Livy 28.41.13 and 17)

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Parallels between Thucydides' Histories and Livy's third decade have long been noted (most notably by Rodgers 1986). A question that curiously enough has been neglected is what Livy intended to accomplish with these parallels. Over the course of the third decade, Livy engages in a conversation with Thucydides. I would like to focus here on two passages in that conversation that have been underestimated hitherto: 28.41.13 and 17.

In 28.41.13, during the debate over Scipio's plan to invade Africa, Fabius Maximus warns Scipio that what has happened in history could be repeated; and in 28.41.17 Fabius actually refers to the Sicilian Expedition as an example of just how bad an excursion to the African coast could turn out to be. As short as this passage is, it is obvious that Fabius'thinking behind this example resembles exactly Thucydides' theoretical consideration about why it is beneficial to study history (1.22).

In the second half of his preface, Thucydides had encouraged his audience to learn from history because historical events could repeat themselves (1.22). Livy left this part of Thucydides' preface out when he alluded to the preface at the opening of the third decade (21.1f.; on the allusion, its origins, and the pertinent scholarly debate, see, among others, Sieglin 1880, Marincola 1997.) In book 28 Livy returns to Thucydides' chapters on historiographical methods, but he includes Thucydides' theory of historical repetition in Fabius' practical advice. Thucydides probably did not think that history could literally repeat itself: historical repetition had to be taken with a grain of salt, so to speak.

This observation, however, is exactly the moral of Livy's story of the Second Punic War. History showed that what Scipio did not let Fabius distract him from doing was, in fact, not a simple repetition of the Sicilian Expedition, but something entirely successful for the Roman people. Fabius might have wanted to give his argument additional strength by choosing Thucydides' Sicilian Expedition as deterrence for the Roman public. But Scipio shows that it is sometimes worthwhile not to rethink the present in the light of a to some extent flawed and simplified parallel from history.

These observations lead to three important conclusions. First, Livy shows that learning from history is not a theoretical, but a practical exercise. Scipio shows that historiographical textbooks won't do the trick for politicians, even if they use Thucydides as their authority. What Scipio had in mind was not a second Sicilian Expedition, but a direct attack on Sparta, so to speak. Second, Scipio's success validated his approach. In defeating Fabius, Scipio showed that he applied his lessons from history correctly, affirming the superiority of the victorious Romans over the defeated Athenians and the usefulness of reading Roman history to supplement even as respected an authority as Thucydides. Finally, Livy established that in the Hellenistic literary game of imitation and emulation Roman historiography and in fact his own work had to play an essential role.

J. Marincola 1997: Authority and Tradition in Ancient Historiography. Cambridge.

B. S. Rogers 1986: Great Expeditions: Livy on Thucydides, in: Transactions of the American Philological Association 166, 335-352.

W. Sieglin 1880: Die Fragmente des L. Coelius Antipater, in: Jahrbücher für classische Philologie Supplementband 11, 1-92.