

## Chance and Judgment in Thucydides

The notion that chance plays an extraordinary, perhaps even dominant, role in Thucydides' understanding of historical events is a popular one among classicists. Certainly there is a considerable amount of textual support for the idea that the historian considers chance an important factor, but in this paper I will argue that we must understand chance in Thucydides ultimately to be subordinate to judgment.

The argument will center on the Sicilian books (i.e., vi-vii), and in particular on H. P. Stahl's treatment of these books. Stahl, in his book, *Thucydides: Man's Place in History*, has convincingly argued that Thucydides has placed considerable weight, at the beginning of his account of the Sicilian expedition (i.e., vi.1-32), on the notion that the decision to undertake the expedition was a matter of poor judgment. In particular, the specific warnings made by Nicias are repeatedly vindicated in the account of the campaign that follows. Stahl has also presented a detailed reading of Thucydides' description of the events on Sicily, showing just how greatly the historian has emphasized the role of chance in these events, and the basic unpredictability of the result.

All this is correct so far as it goes, but a difficulty arises when we ask how we are to relate these two insights. That is, at the start of book vi, Thucydides suggests strongly that the Sicilian expedition was ill-judged: how can this be coherently related to the suggestion we find by the end of book vii, that chance played a substantial role in the expedition's outcome, making it basically unpredictable? The two sides seem simply to contradict one another: if the expedition was ill-judged, its result can hardly have been a matter of chance, for to the extent that events are fortuitous, there can be no good or bad judgment in relation to them, only lucky guesses. So was

the disastrous outcome the result of poor judgment or bad luck? If Thucydides seems to point to both factors, must we conclude that he simply failed to think the matter through?

In fact, the problem goes far beyond the Sicilian books, and must confront anyone concerned with chance and judgment anywhere in Thucydides. Stahl has certainly shown that Thucydides, throughout his work, constantly brings fortuitous, unexpected turns to light as events unfold, but how is this to be related to the constant emphasis on judgment, which is found even in such basic Thucydidean vocabulary as “judgment” (γνώμη), “intelligence” (ξύεσις) or “foresight” (προνοία)? Such words can be meaningful in relation to history only if there is something in the nature of events which is in some sense predictable, for it will be in reference to this that one can claim good judgment or intelligent foresight.

I will argue that we can find a coherent Thucydidean view of the relation of chance and judgment, in the Sicilian books and elsewhere. We should understand concrete, particular events to be basically unpredictable. So, for example, the exact form that the disaster at Sicily takes – the novel form of naval warfare in the Great Harbor; the fleet trapped; the army forced to retreat on land; the final torments of the army as soldiers try to quench their thirst in a river – cannot be foreseen. Judgment is possible, however, on a more general level, so that we can predict, with a reasonable amount of probability, whether or not the Sicilian expedition contains the likelihood of some disaster in general.

This account of Thucydides carries the considerable advantage that it finds him as a coherent, rather than an incoherent, thinker. However, it will be found to require that judgment is a more fundamental factor in history than chance, however much chance may be emphasized in particular events. This in turn will require the rejection of conceptions about Thucydides’ work that have been founded on the view that chance is the dominant factor. For example, it does not

seem possible to rule out the possibility that Thucydides means to provide instruction to future statesmen – indeed, if judgment plays a dominant role in history, such instruction seems a likely purpose of the work.

#### Work Cited

Stahl, Hans-Peter. *Thucydides: Man's Place in History*. Trans. David Seward. 2003; Swansea: The Classical Press of Wales, 1966. A translation and extension of a work in German.