

The Speech of the Corinthians at Athens in Thucydides' *History*

In Book one, after saying that the episodes that follow are the "openly spoken causes" of the war, Thucydides tells the tangled tale of Epidamnus, Corcyra, Corinth, and ultimately Athens. Most treatments of this episode focus on the "causes" that are openly discussed. Less has been said about it as a story, despite the fact that "reader response" in one form or another has become more popular with readers of Thucydides. (Connor)

This paper is an attempt to treat one passage, the speech of the Corinthians at Athens (1.37-1.43), as it serves as a part of that story. In brief, Corinth and Corcyra are embroiled in a quarrel that involves deep seated hostility, in which they are displaying a self-destructive eagerness to win at all costs. In this quarrel, neither "justice" nor "expediency" are valid terms; rather, they are political slogans that conceal darker forces of human nature.

The Corinthians end the first part of this speech by explaining what they have done: "we have shown that we come with reasonable claims against them and that they are violent and greedy." (1.37-40) The second part addresses "justice" (1.40-41), and the third addresses "expediency." (1.42-43) The outstanding feature of this structure is the length of the first section, 51 lines of OCT text, while 38 lines are devoted to justice, and 23 lines to expediency.

These terms, "violent" (βίαιοι) and "greedy" (πλεονέκται) appear here for the first time, and they are significant in the rest of the history. The Corinthians use the word εὔπρεπες, "fair-seeming," twice, to describe the Corcyreans' lack of a treaty with either side (1.37.4) and with their justice claim that they first offered to negotiate (1.39.2) Although Corinth uses these terms to describe Corcyra, they in fact describe their own

specious justice argument. This episode began with a land grab by Corinth, and hatred of Corcyra was one of the motives. (μίσει, 1.25.3) And they have refused to withdraw before negotiating.

They demonstrate the "greed" of Corcyra by making a remarkable statement. Corcyra had claimed that they had remained free of both alliances out of their moderation (δία τὸ σῶφρον, 1.37.2), but in fact, Corinth declares, they wanted the freedom to practice aggression (πλέον ἔχουσιν, 1.37.4) The narrator has said nothing like this and Corinth offers no evidence, nor is there any evidence outside of Thucydides. (This lack of evidence was noted by Gomme and Hornblower; Stahl has insisted the speeches and narrative comment on each other) The only evidence is their own hatred of Corcyra.

There is a third word that appears in this section for the first time in Thucydides: φιλονικία, "obsession with victory." (3.82.8) The Corinthians first mention it when they are recalling their prior favors to Athens: they helped Athens in a situation where people . . ." neglect even considerations of kinship in their obsession with immediate victory." (φιλονικίας ἔνεκα, 1.41.2-3, Lattimore) Later, they admit that this is their own present situation, "the crisis on hand is one that decisively identifies the benefactor as a friend and the opponent as an enemy." (1.43, Lattimore)

In book three, Thucydides uses these two terms, φιλονικία and πλεονεξία, in another description of cause, this time not of the war but of *stasis*, in particular of the final stages of *stasis* in Corcyra and elsewhere: "The cause of all these things was greed (πλεονεξία) and ambition (φιλοτιμία) which led to obsession with victory (φιλονικεῖν) and from there to great eagerness (τὸ πρόθυμον)." (3.82.8) In the speech of the Corinthians, we can already see those forces at work.

It is a mistake to consider the Corinthians (or anyone else in Thucydides) as perfect rational machines. The truest cause is "most invisible in word" because words do not reflect reality very well. " What lies behind the words is "true human nature." Before leaving the Corinthians, I would quote a modern historian, Woody Allen: "Ninety-nine percent of decisions are predicated on feelings--instinctive, emotional, fear, conflicts, unresolved childhood problems. They're our dominant motivating factor, not reason or rationality or common sense. And that's why the world is in a terrible, terrible state."

Bibliography

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