

Incompetence? Diplomatic Discourse in Book 5 of Thucydides

Book 5 of Thucydides is much maligned for its opaque and confusing sketch of inter-polis affairs between 421 and 418 BCE. Numerous scholars over several generations have railed against the incompleteness (e.g. Andrewes 1966) and incoherence (e.g. Schwarz 1929, Hornblower 2008: 82-3) of the narrative. In the end, both Thucydides himself and the negotiations he describes stand accused of incompetence. In this paper I would like to review only one aspect of this narrative, namely the reported words of the diplomatic discourse.

Thucydides' story begins when the Athenians and Spartans, who have been fighting for ten years, close a peace and alliance in 421. This union of the two great powers sets off a panic among the continental poleis, who employ frantic diplomacy in an attempt to replace the Spartan federation with a new alliance. In 418, the Spartans put an end to this project by winning the Battle of Mantinea, after which they force Argos, their main competitor, to accept their hegemony.

The cities' frantic efforts were therefore apparently entirely wasted. Not only this, but Thucydides' lengthy description of these efforts has provoked the criticisms mentioned above. Westlake's CQ article of 1971 shared that Thucydides' report of the failed diplomacy between the poleis was commonly viewed as 'obscure, confusing, and tedious' (Westlake 1971: 315).

This paper will renew the examination of this supposedly tedious narrative, but from a new angle, namely through looking at what people involved in the diplomatic process actually said, in Thucydides' view. It seems surprising that this method could be considered new.

However, a closer examination of the diplomatic exchanges in Book 5 has long been prevented

by the fact that Thucydides represents these exchanges in indirect discourse, a narrative mode that is still often considered a less important record of events than direct discourse.

But it seems important that Thucydides sometimes chose to represent the words spoken at the negotiations, rather than simply summarizing the proceedings. Thus, after briefly introducing indirect discourse, the paper will offer several examples of how the words of the negotiating cities or personalities reveal their attitudes and dilemmas, creating brief character portraits that help to reveal why their diplomatic initiatives, however competent or incompetent, must fail. At the same time, the paper will demonstrate that an engaged reading of Thucydides' statements and speeches in indirect discourse can help to make this narrative seem less confusing and tedious.

Bibliography

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