

## Thucydides at Syracuse: Lucian's *How to Write History* and Rhetorical Historiography

While Lucian's *How to Write History* has received extensive scholarly attention (Avenarius 1956, Marincola 1997 see index s.v. "Lucian," Georgiadou and Larmour 1994, Pitcher 2009 see index s.v. "Lucian"), the seriousness of the challenge it presents to any history of historiography in antiquity that relies entirely on a hard "rhetorical" model of the genre has not been appreciated.

In the 1990s, the study of ancient historiography in the Anglophone world shifted to a paradigm that still prevails. According to the catalyst of this shift, A. J. Woodman's 1988 *Rhetoric in Classical Historiography: Four Studies (RICH)*, ancient historians and readers of their work mentally categorized it as a rhetorical activity and thus conceived its aim as the creation not of true, but of plausible, accounts.

The greatest impact of *RICH* was on the study of Latin historiography. Its first essay, however, addresses Thucydides, in order to make a categorical claim about the theory, practice, and generic affiliation of historiography in the ancient world. This move aimed to deny traditionalists the refuge of even Thucydides: if *even his* thought and practice were defined by the horizons and activities of rhetoric, then the notion that there was a concept of historical endeavor defined around truth rather than probability would have to be abandoned in the case of other writers, too.

In this paper, I consider the implications of Lucian's treatise, particularly its reception of Thucydides, for our sense of the full spectrum of possible discourse about historiography's nature and aims in antiquity: in fact, in places *How to Write History* sounds as though it were

designed to refute certain claims of *RICH* both about Thucydides and about how historical writing could and could not be understood and described in antiquity.

Lucian's paraphrase (Luc. 59.42) of Thuc. 1.22.4, part of the historian's description of his *History*, recognizes none of the subtleties of Woodman's brilliant reading, cheerfully substituting τὴν ἀλήθειαν for τὸ σαφές as though they were synonyms and separating the argument for future utility from the claim of past accuracy in a way that obviates the challenges Woodman identifies in Thucydides' original. Moreover, he declares rhetorical *inventio* irrelevant to the writing of history (Luc. 59.51). Finally, a set of surprising figures through which he imagines the historian's activity presses us to envision the historian's task as the recording of specific, individual, real occurrences: he compares the historian's mind to a mirror that reflects the visible images of actions (τὰς μορφὰς τῶν ἔργων, Luc. 59.42); presents an ἀδύνατον in which the writing of history permits Thucydides to intervene bodily in the Sicilian expedition, upturning the fortifications at Syracuse and sinking the ship of Hermocrates (Luc. 59.38); and recommends the historian acquire an Olympian view of the events of his narrative (Luc. 59.49).

This matters for our understanding of the genre of historical writing and its place in intellectual history. For one thing, while Lucian's account may be an outlier, it shows that a truth-oriented understanding of historiography is not an anachronism within the mental world of antiquity. For another, Lucian's prescriptions for historical writing, though distinctive in important ways, do not advertise themselves as a revolutionary perspective, but as common-sense, old-fashioned, back-to-basics verities that various absurd and extravagant contemporaries have forgotten and abandoned. That feature suggests that the prescriptions are meant to sound familiar and thus ethically and aesthetically compelling.

Rather than a scenario in which ancient writers of history are both talking about and practicing their endeavor as rhetoric, the instance of Lucian suggests one in which they are practicing it as rhetoric, and sometimes also talking about it as rhetoric, but also sometimes talking about it as a representation of empirical reality.

If true, that conclusion encourages us to ask what use historians had for the construction of historical writing as something different from their actual practice. Here I suggest that one thing a readership might care about is whether they believe a thing described occurred, and because that is so, writers have an interest in laying claim to veracity, not mere probability or suitability, as well as a corresponding interest in having the notion of an achievable true account as a cudgel with which to beat competitors.

#### Works Cited

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