

The Limits of Human Perception in Thucydides' Narrative of Events from 433 to 432 B.C.E.

In his *Histories*, Thucydides presents himself as a critical, reliable narrator of the Peloponnesian War who has taken the time to develop a well-informed understanding of events (e.g. Thuc., 1.1.1-3, 1.20-23). His powers of perception stand in stark contrast to those of the individuals who populate the text. Throughout the *Histories*, Thucydides is very sensitive to the significance of an individual's perception of events to that individual's actions. His regular use of verbs such as αἰσθάνομαι—Xenophon is the only extant writer to use it more frequently—and ὁράω is a testament to the important role that perception plays in the *Histories* (University of Chicago, *Perseus Digital Library*, s.v. “αἰσθάνομαι”, <http://perseus.uchicago.edu>). Thucydides' narratives of battles emphasize that the “fog of war” and lack of perception often shape the course of events. In this paper, I will investigate Thucydides' presentation of misperception in his narrative of events in north-western Greece and the Chalcidian Peninsula from 433 to 432 and the significance of this for understanding of warfare in the *Histories*.

A case study on the role played by misperception in the *Histories* is offered by Thucydides' account of the Battle of Sybota in 433. Near the end of the battle, the Corinthians—who had thus far been getting the better of the Corcyran fleet—suddenly back water and withdraw when they observe (κατιδόντες) a force of twenty Athenian ships approaching to reinforce the Corcyrans (Thuc. 1.50.5). The Corinthians mistakenly assume that the twenty ships that they can see (έώρων) are but the vanguard of a much larger force (Thuc., 1.51.1). Thucydides then emphasizes that the Corcyrans have not yet seen these Athenian ships (οὐχ έωρῶντο) and are amazed that the Corinthians are withdrawing (Thuc. 1.51.2). Even when they do see the approaching ships, the Corcyrans do not realize that they are friendly (for it was night) and are afraid that this is a hostile relief force (Thuc., 1.51.5). In this scene, Thucydides

consistently highlights the imperfect ability of humans to perceive the world around them and the effect that this has on the course of events.

The manner in which Thucydides develops his narrative of this battle not only creates a dramatic resolution, but also helps the reader to understand the shock experienced by the combatants at the sudden appearance of the Athenian relief force. These twenty ships had been dispatched well before the occurrence of the battle, yet Thucydides does not introduce them into the narrative until the very moment when the Corinthians spot them. At this point, the reader is abruptly taken back in time as Thucydides explains why the Athenians had decided to dispatch this force (Thuc., 1.50.5).

The significance of Thucydides' narrative method regarding this episode should not be underestimated. He has deliberately disjoined narrative time (the moment in the text when a given event happens) from historical time (the moment in the real-world course of events when the same event occurred) in a calculated effort to surprise his readers with new information—i.e. the existence of the Athenian relief force—at the moment when this information is most critical to the course of the battle (for the general significance of such temporal distortions in narrative, see Genette (1980), 35-36). The shock felt by the Corinthians at the sudden appearance of these Athenian ships is similarly felt by the reader—for these have just as abruptly and unexpectedly intruded into the narrative. By focalizing the narrative perspective through the gaze of the battle's participants, Thucydides brings his readers into the narrative and draws attention to the effect that misperception has on the actions of these same participants (For a general discussion of focalization, see Rood (1998), 11-14; Davidson (1991) offers an analysis of how the focalization of a narrative through the gaze of a participant can create a more vivid scene).

The account of the Battle of Sybota is Thucydides' first full-scale battle narrative in the *Histories*, and it sets the tone for the presentation of warfare for the rest of the text. From Thucydides' sensitivity to this facet of warfare in his introductory battle narrative and its continued presence in the text (e.g. 6.1), one can infer that he perceived this to be a critical element of historical causation that must be considered if one is to accurately understand the course of the Peloponnesian War and to wisely prepare for future military operations.

Bibliography

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