

Confessions and Confines: A Case Study of Accuracy and Precision in Herodotus and Thucydides

As some of the first Greeks to engage in historical inquiry, Herodotus and Thucydides were both very concerned with accuracy. Nevertheless, despite this common concern, the way in which these two authors discuss accuracy is, at times, quite different. Scholars such as Asheri and Rösler have addressed the importance of the concept of accuracy to the *Histories*, just as Woodman and Crane have pointed to the significance of the notion of precision to Thucydides' writing, but none of these scholars has compared the ways in which Herodotus and Thucydides approach the question of accuracy and precision. This paper seeks to fill this gap by exploring the relationship between Herodotus and Thucydides through their use of ἀτρεκέως and ἀκριβῶς (and their compounds) in select passages within the works of these historians—specifically, Herodotus 1.57, 4.81, and 7.187 and Thucydides 1.22 and 5.68. Each of these passages is significant because in them the author makes reference to accuracy or precision as it pertains to his own methods and, more specifically, to the possibility of inaccuracy within his narrative. (In a conference paper, it is not possible to examine every appearance of ἀτρεκέως and ἀκριβῶς in Herodotus and Thucydides, because of the sheer volume of the sample size).

By examining the key passages in which Herodotus employs the adverb ἀτρεκέως to confess that he cannot report information with accuracy, this paper demonstrates that Herodotus' confession is not meant to undermine the strength of his narrative, but is rather part of the way in which Herodotus actually asserts the reliability of his authorial voice. Though Herodotus may often be unable to write with accuracy, he is nevertheless determined to record everything that he does know and to do so without fabrication. In this way, Herodotus employs admissions of

inaccuracy to represent himself as an honest historian who is committed to relaying information without privileging his own opinions (cf. Hdt. 7.152).

Thucydides, by contrast, rarely admits to moments when he cannot record an event with precision. By examining two passages in which Thucydides does gesture to imprecision (Thuc. 1.22 and 5.68), this paper proves that Thucydides still leaves his readers with the impression of accuracy even when he has taken pains to convey to his reader the immense difficulty of his task. What is of greater significance, however, is that Thucydides admits to inaccuracy only when it is humanly impossible to uncover the facts.

Finally, by comparing Thucydides' approach to the question of accuracy with that of Herodotus, this paper shows that, while Herodotus openly admits to inaccuracy in order to prove his authority, Thucydides attempts to bolster his authority by distancing himself from the very real possibility of imprecision in his narrative. Thus, the concepts of precision and accuracy, as seen in the authors' respective use of the terms ἀτρεκέως and ἀκριβῶς, serve as a common thread between them. Despite the differences between Herodotus and Thucydides and their approaches, this common thread brings to the fore concepts and questions of fundamental importance to both authors' works.

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