

Envy in the Greek Historians

“Man, according to the Greek, is naturally envious, envy being part of his basic character and disposition.” (Walcot 1978: 11)

Zelos and phthonos (ζῆλος and φθόνος) are often cited as significant factors in human behaviour. Starting from Hesiod, who stated that envy of others will set a man on the path to wealth – or at least get him out in the field with his plow, envy appears as a source of motivation in Greek authors (and one tends to think of the Attic orators in particular, e.g., Demosthenes 18.315).

But what role do the Greek historians attribute to human envy in historical events? An off-hand response would (probably) suppose that envy had a significant role in historical causation, based in part on the impression formed by the role of envy in other sorts of writers. In fact, the status of envy in the historians is more complex. For example, a search of Thucydides suggests that he was hesitant to attribute men's actions to envy (whether zelos or phthonos), at least in his own voice. Forms of phthonos appear just twelve times in Thucydides; forms of zelos are even rarer – a mere five instances. Most examples appear in speeches, while phthonos-words are used twice in the description of the stasis at Corcyra. One example each of zelos and phthonos are used to describe actions by Spartans. Thus, in most instances in Thucydides, envy is something that a speaker attributes to others (especially in Pericles' Funeral Oration), and not something that Thucydides himself, in his own voice, sees as a factor.

This paper will explore what role Herodotus, Thucydides and Xenophon (in the *Hellenica*) see for envy in historical events, and, in particular, the degree to which the historian's perspective differs from that attributed by him to his characters.

Bibliography

Walcot, P. 1978. *Envy and the Greeks*. Warminster: Aris and Phillips Ltd.