

## Don't Trust the Messenger: Letters in Thucydides

The writers of letters in Thucydides exhibit an almost meta-literary concern over the effectiveness of their chosen form of communication. Letters occur among considerations of who can be trusted and how to best reveal or conceal the truth. There are two episodes in Thucydides which contain letters: the explanation of why there are curses to be expiated by the Spartans and Thucydides in book 1 and Nicias' communication with the Athenian assembly during the Sicilian expedition in book 7. The explanation of the curses prompts a flash-back to the Persian war and contains three separate letters: Pausanias to Xerxes (1.128.7), Xerxes to Pausanias (1.129.3), and Themistocles to Xerxes (137.4). In both books, the letters appear in the broader context of plotting by the Athenians and Spartans to resume open warfare. There is an interesting contrast between how letters function as a plot device to create drama and the contents of the letters themselves; treason and trickery may be carried out through the letter, but the contents are remarkably clear and businesslike. Harris notes that this context of trickery is typical: "Literary sources seem to suggest that they were largely reserved for grave occasions or sensitive secret communications. . . . It is remarkable how much the letters in Thucydides - political of course - are instruments of death, betrayal, and deceit." (Harris 1989) The letters are a flashpoint for anxieties over truthful and effective communication and choices between in-person, oral communication and long-distance, written communication.

Nicias' letter has been read as simply a speech in letter form because it is read aloud to the assembly. Allen, however, argues that reading a letter is not the same as giving a speech, such as at Herodotus 1.125.1-2 where Cyrus reads a forged letter to seize power. (Allen 2013)

Nicias makes a conscious choice to communicate in writing rather than orally, deciding not to trust his message to the individual reporting of the men he sends:

φοβούμενος δὲ μὴ οἱ πεμπόμενοι ἢ κατὰ τὴν τοῦ λέγειν ἀδυνασίαν ἢ καὶ μνήμης ἐλλειπεῖς γινόμενοι ἢ τῷ ὄχλῳ πρὸς χάριν τι λέγοντες οὐ τὰ ὄντα ἀπαγγέλλωσιν, ἔγραψεν ἐπιστολήν (7.8.2)

Fearing least those he sent would not tell the truth either because of a lack of ability in speaking or forgetfulness or speaking to please the masses, he wrote a letter.

Despite the endless scholarly debate over the authenticity of Thucydides' speeches, here we have Nicias highlighting three major issues for using speeches to report factual information. This letter claims a very different purpose than speeches which overall must be persuasive. although Ceccarelli questions whether an element of persuasion is entirely absent. (Ceccarelli 2013)

Nicias uses a letter to make sure the real facts reach the Athenians, just as Pausanias' letter is used as evidence of his treason against Sparta. Thucydides presents the Spartans as very cautious investigators who require multiple forms of evidence, needing oral proof as confirmation of the letter. Letters emerge as a tool for discovering the truth, even beyond what is written in them.

The sender, messenger, and recipients (both intended and unintended) of the letters are prompted to examine how they can best communicate their message and if they can trust those with whom they are communicating. The letter senders need to be sure they have chosen the clearest and most effective method to carry out their devious intentions.

## Bibliography

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