

Polemos, Pathemata, and Plague: Thucydides' Narrative and the Tradition of Upheaval

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For Tony Woodman

THUCYDIDES' ANALYSIS of the *pathemata* of the Peloponnesian War (1.23) is often ignored or treated as suspect,¹ with relatively few scholars arguing for its significance to his work as a whole.² All indications from the

¹ E.g. P. J. Rhodes, *Thucydides: History I* (Oxford 2014) 207: "By the end of his catalogue Thucydides has departed from the rationalism which we tend to associate with him." Gomme, *HCT I* 151, expresses some doubt about "whether Thucydides himself thought there might be some connexion between such natural events and human actions" and attributes this belief to "popular opinion" rather than the historian. H. D. F. Kitto, *Poiesis: Structure and Thought* (Berkeley 1966) 274, observes how awkwardly the *pathemata* passage is often skirted by those who prefer not to engage with it. S. Hornblower, *A Commentary on Thucydides I* (Oxford 1991) 63, notes that the association between natural and political crises in this passage has been "an embarrassment to his commentators," some of whom simply ignore it. L. Kallet, "Thucydides, Apollo, the Plague, and the War," *AJP* 134 (2013) 355–382, at 360–361, argues rightly, however, that "it does no service to his—and, therefore, our—understanding of the war to sweep under the rug, make improbable excuses, or awkward explanations, for what does not conform to our preconceptions, as if the historian has 'slipped' a bit from the program."

² N. Marinatos, *Thucydides and Religion* (Königstein 1981) 17–28, takes this passage as significant, as does Kallet, *AJP* 134 (2013), esp. 360–361. A. J. Woodman, *Rhetoric in Classical Historiography: Four Studies* (London 1988) 28–32, reads the *pathemata* within its literary context, especially Homer, arguing that Thucydides' emphasis on the scale of the suffering "demonstrates that he, like Homer, is writing a 'disaster narrative' of the most vivid and dramatic type" (30).

historian himself, however, suggest that it is central to his representation of the war. It is one of his most prominent passages, following immediately after the methodology (1.22) and serving as his final statement before the transition to the narrative of events that will make up the vast majority of his text (1.24).³ It is also one of the few times he explicitly defends the thesis of the unique greatness of the Peloponnesian War that he asserts at the very outset of his work (1.1). In support of this claim he states that previous wars were of lesser scale, arguing that even the Persian War consisted of only a few battles, while his war was of unprecedented length (1.23.1). He then lists a variety of “sufferings” that afflicted Greece during the Peloponnesian War: a previously unheard-of number of cities desolated (1.23.2), through death and exile in both *polemos* and *stasis*, an unsurpassed frequency of eclipses, massive droughts, famines (*limoi*), and finally and most destructive of all, the plague (1.23.3 *loimôdês nosos*). The last of the *pathemata*, the plague, receives its own full treatment in Book 2, and the plague passage has a similarly fraught history of scholarship, often attracting attention for its possible relationship to the Hippocratic corpus,⁴

³ Kitto, *Poiesis* 275, observes its significant placement in the work.

⁴ E.g. C. N. Cochrane, *Thucydides and the Science of History* (New York 1929) 3: Thucydides attempted “to apply to the study of social life the methods which Hippocrates employed in the art of healing.” See also D. L. Page, “Thucydides’ Description of the Great Plague at Athens,” *CQ* 3 (1953) 97–119. K. Weidauer, *Thukydidés und die hippokratischen Schriften* (Heidelberg 1954), explores the same topic, as does E. M. Craik, “Thucydides on the Plague: Physiology of Flux and Fixation,” *CQ* 51 (2001) 102–108. R. Thomas, “Thucydides’ Intellectual Milieu and the Plague,” in A. Rengakos and A. Tsakmakis (eds.), *Brill’s Companion to Thucydides* (Leiden 2006) 87–108, offers a nuanced reading of the scientific and literary elements of the passage. Borrowing from the Hippocratics or demonstrating a general interest in science does not preclude Thucydides from representing his war as a type of disaster reported in the oral tradition. The historian elsewhere seems to straddle ‘scientific’ and ‘unscientific’ understandings of the natural world; for example, he is capable of both accurately explaining the cause of tsunamis (3.89.5) and suggesting a relationship between earthquakes and eclipses (4.52.1).

sometimes seen as a digression that must be explained,⁵ and less frequently explored for its literary facets.⁶

As has been observed, Thucydides' comments on the *pathemata* are reminiscent of a well-established literary tradition in which a multitude of calamities attack a society in concert.⁷ Although the elements of such an assault are to some degree flexible and are often treated as interchangeable, the most frequent, and oldest, components are war (*polemos*), starvation (*limos*), and plague (*loimos*). *Stasis* and environmental upheaval such as earthquakes and eclipses are also common, and such concentrated assaults are often presented as an extraordinarily serious threat to the continued existence of the society they afflict. Recent scholarship that identifies the links between Thucydides' text and this tradition tends to conclude that the historian's work represents a 'rationalist' break from such a scientifically indefensible theory, despite his allusion to it.⁸ In

⁵ Gomme, *HCT* II 161: "that part of Thucydides' story of the great pestilence which is a detailed account of the *symptoms* is, essentially, a digression in the *History* (for they have little to do with politics or war); it is there primarily because he was interested, scientifically, in the disease besides being the recorder of a great disaster which had much to do with politics and the war." J. Grimm, *Die Literarische Darstellung der Pest in der Antike und in der Romania* (Munich 1965) 35, attributes the plague passage's significance at least partly to the fact that it changed the course of the war by killing Pericles, but also argues for its greater literary significance in the work as a whole (39–44).

⁶ Among those who do discuss literary aspects see M. C. Mittelstadt, "The Plague in Thucydides: An Extended Metaphor?" *RivStudClas* 16 (1968) 145–154; A. Parry, "The Language of Thucydides' Description of the Plague," *BICS* 16 (1969) 106–118; Woodman, *Rhetoric in Classical Historiography* 32–40; R. I. Winton, "Athens and the Plague: Beauty and the Beast," *Mètis* 7 (1992) 201–208; T. E. Morgan, "Plague or Poetry? Thucydides on the Epidemic at Athens," *TAPA* 124 (1994) 197–209. On Thucydides' treatment of the nature and causes of war see C. Pelling, *Literary Texts and the Greek Historian* (London 2000) 82–111.

⁷ See especially J. Jouanna, "Famine et pestilence dans l'Antiquité grecque: un jeu de mots sur *limos/loimos*," *Cahiers de la Villa Kérylos* 17 (2006) 197–219.

⁸ Jouanna, *Cahiers de la Villa Kérylos* 17 (2006) 206–207 and 217–218,

this paper, however, I argue that far from distancing himself from this tradition or its core features, Thucydides goes to unusual lengths to situate his war within it, efforts which shed light on his broader understanding and presentation of the events of 431–404. His appeal to this tradition reveals a key feature of his war, namely that it is a far graver threat than a war uncomplicated by such accompanying upheavals would be. Rather, he characterizes it as an extreme manifestation of what he casts as a historically plausible tradition of stories detailing total and simultaneous breakdown on many fronts, social, natural, epidemiological, and political, however unrelated these may seem to a modern reader. It is specifically this aspect of the war, its place in a recurring historical pattern of collapse which threatens an entire society, that I will argue he seeks to prepare his reader to recognize when it inevitably returns again to annihilate future states.

This topos frequently appears in prayers or other contexts in which it is explicitly or implicitly attributed to the divine, as is clear in the texts collected below, and there is little indication that Thucydides deploys this same pattern without intending to imply a supernatural element in his own war. His decision to situate the Peloponnesian War in this tradition instead suggests that he sees at least some degree of connection between the war and the supernatural, rather than viewing the conflict as a purely human, political affair. The historian's relationship with

argues that Thucydides' rationalizing perspective on some level recognizes the causal biological relationship between famine and plague, whereas both earlier and subsequent religious perspectives view them as a result of divine anger. He does acknowledge that the inclusion of eclipses and earthquakes in Thucydides suggests that "son rationalisme ne se confond pas avec le nôtre" (217) but does not elaborate on the distinction. P. Demont, "The Causes of the Athenian Plague and Thucydides," in A. Tsakmakis and M. Tamiolaki (eds.), *Thucydides between History and Literature* (Berlin 2013) 73–87, at 80–81, also notes the traditional joining of *limos* and *loimos* and suggests that Thucydides wishes to associate his war with such events, but also, following Jouanna, argues that "he dissociates the plague from any divine origin, and relates it to a natural cause" (82).

religion is a fraught topic, as some ancient authors⁹ and modern scholars¹⁰ have regarded him as an atheist. True atheism is nearly unattested in his era, however,¹¹ and Thucydides seems

⁹ According to Marcellinus (*V.Thuc.* 22) Thucydides was taught by Anaxagoras, and thereby acquired a reputation for atheism.

¹⁰ Scholars sometimes assume or argue that Thucydides' work reflects an atheistic viewpoint, e.g. T. Gomperz, *Greek Thinkers* (London 1901) 407; J. H. Finley, *Thucydides* (Cambridge 1942) 310–311; Dover, *HCT* IV 394; J. de Romilly, *Thucydide et l'impérialisme athénien* (Paris 1947) 292; A. Powell, "Thucydides and Divination," *BICS* 26 (1979) 45–50; E. Badian, "Plataia between Athens and Sparta," in H. Beister and J. Buckler (eds.), *Boiotika* (Munich 1989) 95–111, at 98; S. Hornblower, "The Religious Dimension to the Peloponnesian War, or, What Thucydides Does Not Tell Us," *HSCP* 94 (1992) 169–197; T. Whitmarsh, *Battling the Gods* (New York 2015) 81–86. F. M. Cornford, *Thucydides Mythistoricus* (London 1907) 72, suggests that Thucydides is agnostic. Kallet, in contrast, argues that his plague passage can be read as implying the work of the divine (*AJP* 134 [2013] 355–382). Demont notes that although Thucydides does not explicitly attribute the plague to the divine, his Pericles does: *Thucydides between History and Literature* 78, on 2.64.1–2. Those who have argued for the significance of religion in Thucydides include Classen-Steup I lvii–lxi; H. Lloyd-Jones, *The Justice of Zeus* (Berkeley 1971) 141; L. Strauss, "Preliminary Observations on the Gods in Thucydides' Work," *Interpretation* 4 (1974) 1–16; L. Edmunds, "Thucydides' Ethics as Reflected in the Description of Stasis (3.82–83)," *HSCP* 79 (1975) 73–92, esp. 74 n.10; S. I. Oost, "Thucydides and the Irrational: Sundry Passages," *CP* 70 (1975) 186–196; N. Marinatos, "Thucydides and Oracles," *JHS* 101 (1981) 138–140; B. Jordan, "Religion in Thucydides," *TAPA* 116 (1986) 119–147; A. Rubel, *Stadt in Angst: Religion und Politik in Athen während des Peloponnesischen Krieges* (Darmstadt 2000) 82; M. Ostwald, *Language and History in Ancient Greek Culture* (Philadelphia 2009) 292–293.

¹¹ Plato's Socrates attributes atheism to others (*Phdr.* 229C, *Leg.* 908C–909C). Protagoras seems to express a kind of agnosticism (74 B 4 D.-K.). M. P. Nilsson, "Kultische Personifikationen," *Eranos* 50 (1952) 31–40, at 36, describes growing skepticism about anthropomorphized gods in the second half of the fifth century but holds that rather than turning to atheism, people began to ascribe power to τὸ θεῖον or οἱ θεοί. A. Powell, *Athens and Sparta* (London 1988) 383–384, discusses the variety of belief systems. See also K. J. Dover, *Greek Popular Morality* (Oxford 1974) 129–133; D. B. Martin, *Inventing Superstition* (Cambridge 2004) 37–50; J. N. Bremmer, "Atheism in Antiquity," in M. Martin (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Atheism* (Cambridge 2007) 11–26; M. A. Flower, "Athenian Religion and the

to accept some types of religious signs even while rejecting other categories of divination or specific interpretations.¹² This brand of skepticism is attested at least as far back as the *Iliad* (12.237–250), and debates about the correct interpretation of a particular sign are ubiquitous, as are stories of opaque prophecies comprehended only in hindsight. Elsewhere, he considers an oracle about the length of the Peloponnesian War to be justified (5.26.2–5.26.4), and far from attacking religion generally, he repeatedly laments its abuse in wartime (3.82.6, 82.7–8, 83.2). His silence about traditional anthropomorphized gods may indicate that he conceived of the divine differently than did his more conventional-minded contemporaries such as Herodotus, and more in line with the philosophers, who did not normally rule out divine intervention, especially of a non-anthropomorphized type involving the natural and physical world.¹³ Even if Thucydides is not a conventional thinker on the question of religion, however, there is little reason to believe he is an atheist in the modern sense of complete disbelief, and his presentation of the Peloponnesian War and the ac-

Peloponnesian War,” in O. Palagia (ed.), *Art in Athens during the Peloponnesian War* (Cambridge 2009) 1–23; A. Gregory, *The Presocratics and the Supernatural* (London 2013). Whitmarsh, *Battling the Gods* 63–64, argues that Hippo of Samos might have been an atheist in the modern sense.

¹² E.g., he argues that the Athenians misunderstood the prediction about the Pelargikon, but states that the oracle itself had foreseen events correctly even if, in traditional oracular style, it declined to specify what precisely it meant (2.17.2, ὃν οὐκ ὀνομάζον τὸ μαντεῖον προήδει μὴ ἐπ’ ἀγαθῷ ποτὲ αὐτὸ κατοικισθῆσόμενον). As with other instances in Thucydides in which the divine appears to be active, some have read this passage as critical or ironic (e.g. Hornblower, *Commentary* I 270). But Kallet, *AJP* 134 (2013) 369–370: “The very fact that the historian chooses to bring up, defend, but also correct the interpretation making the rounds in Athens at the time demonstrates a concern to link the divine, the war, and, implicitly, the plague.” Thucydides also objects to Nicias’ decision to remain in Sicily after the eclipse (7.50.4), and to the Athenians’ reliance on oracle-mongers (8.1.1).

¹³ G. E. R. Lloyd, *Magic, Reason, and Experience* (Cambridge 1979) 11–12; E. R. Dodds, *The Greeks and the Irrational* (Berkeley 1951) 179–206.

companying natural upheavals suggests that he does not view it as devoid of superhuman aspects.

Thucydides' deployment of this old literary topos as an interpretative tool for understanding the Peloponnesian War would to some extent reconcile his apparently conflicting goals of literary appeal and historical accuracy, the "two hearts" beating in his chest.¹⁴ As is discussed below, he states that he believes that a pattern of converging, multifaceted disasters is a legitimate historical phenomenon whose record is preserved in traditional stories (1.23.3), albeit embroidered or exaggerated. Even oral tradition—which he otherwise treats as culpably deficient on historical matters—accurately safeguards the core truth of this repeating apocalyptic schema. If he views his war as another iteration of such an event, conflict between his "two hearts" would be minimized. The goal he articulates at 1.22.2, asserting his deep allegiance to accuracy, would pose little challenge to the literary aspects of his work if historical reality itself produces the enthralling tales of cyclical catastrophe that had long attracted the (imperfect) attention of more literary genres. Such a belief about the nature of the conflict, on his part and perhaps among his sources as well, may explain what seem to us inaccuracies or exaggerations that enhance the resemblance of the Peloponnesian War to the older pattern, such as his story of an earthquake at Delos.¹⁵

The pattern

Greek authors regularly describe a type of clustered disaster, with multiple apparently unrelated afflictions striking simultaneously.¹⁶ In a pattern that begins early and becomes

¹⁴ S. Hornblower, *Thucydides* (Baltimore 1987) 45.

¹⁵ On "imaginary earthquakes" that reflect religious feeling more than literal reality see A. Chaniotis, "Willkommene Erdbeben," in E. Olshausen and H. Sonnabend (eds.), *Stuttgarter Kolloquium zur historischen Geographie des Altertums* 6 (1998) 404–416, at 407–408. The alleged earthquake is discussed below.

¹⁶ Scholars have long noted this pattern, although its relationship to and significance in Thucydides in light of the tradition as a whole has not been

increasingly elaborate, a nexus of calamities that are each individually capable of destroying a city, including war, plague, famine, and crop failure or other widespread environmental or human sterility, are presented as acting in tandem, often in conjunction with natural disturbances such as earthquakes, tsunamis, and eclipses.¹⁷

fully explored. Woodman, *Rhetoric in Classical Historiography* 32–33, observes the parallels between Thucydides and Hesiod, the *Iliad*, *OT*, and Aesch. *Suppl.* W. R. Connor, *Thucydides* (Princeton 1984) 31 n.30, discusses the Hesiodic parallel, as does M. L. West, *Hesiod: Works and Days* (Oxford 1978) 218 on *Op.* 243. Classen-Steup II 94; Gomme, *HCT* II 160; Mittelstadt, *Riv.StudClas* 16 (1968) 146; Morgan, *TAPA* 124 (1994) 206; Kallet, *AJP* 134 (2013) 361; and R. Mitchell-Boyask, *Plague and the Athenian Imagination* (Cambridge 2008) 43, note the resonance with the *Iliad* and *Oedipus Tyrannos*. Flower, in *Art in Athens* 4, points out that the *Iliad* connection must have been obvious to contemporary readers. Mitchell-Boyask (25) touches on Thucydides in his observation that the historian's constellation of plague and famine also appears in Euripides' *Hippolytus*. In a study of the phenomenon more broadly, Jouanna, *Cahiers de la Villa Kérylos* 17 (2006) 206–209, makes the fullest case that Thucydides should be seen as part of the tradition, rather than as alluding to specific texts, although he rejects any deeper significance for this element of Thucydides' work, arguing instead that Thucydides represents a rationalization of the traditional motif; Demont, in *Thucydides between History and Literature* 73–87, generally accepts Jouanna's conclusions.

¹⁷ B. Knox, "The Date of the *Oedipus Tyrannus* of Sophocles," *AJP* 77 (1956) 135–136, discusses the "traditional threefold blight" of sterility in humanity, animals, and crops, although he argues that the plague is not a normal feature of this phenomenon. J.-P. Vernant, "Ambiguity and Reversal: On the Enigmatic Structure of *Oedipus Rex*," *New Literary History* 9 (1978) 486, points out that the suffering of Thebes at the opening of *OT* is part of a "traditional schema" in which all sources of fertility dry up, in concert with a plague, and that although the two words are not used, *OT* begins with the same coincidence of *limos* and *loimos* described by Hesiod (*Erg.* 489). West, *Hesiod Works and Days* 215 on *Erg.* 235, comments that "abnormal and difficult births are a typical feature of heaven-sent pestilences." For a treatment of the "loimos schema" that includes many elements but does not discuss its frequent coincidence with warfare, see D. Ogden, *The Crooked Kings of Ancient Greece* (London 1997), esp. 9–14. On *loimos*, *limos*, and war, and the increasing frequency of this triad into and after the fifth century, see

Among our earliest texts, the *Iliad* hints at this pattern, bringing together two of its most frequent elements by opening with the coincidence of plague and war subduing the Greek army (1.61 πόλεμος τε ... καὶ λοιμός). As will be typical of such stories, this conglomeration of suffering is due to intertwined divine and human causation: the will of Zeus demands violence (e.g. *Il.* 5) while the plague can be attributed to both humanity and the gods, Apollo inflicting the disease in response to the Greeks' misdeeds. Much as Thucydides seems to represent his war as both a complex political crisis on the human plane and an event with supernatural components,¹⁸ many of the Trojan War's more immediate causes, such as the abduction of Helen, could also be attributed to either, or both, men and the divine (e.g. 3.156–160, Eur. *Hel.* 37–41). The *Iliad* passage describing war and plague is the first attested use of *loimos*, an otherwise rare word that will remain the preferred term for the plague element in this pattern of cataclysm, and therefore an indicator that a narrative belongs to this pattern.¹⁹ Hesiod is more explicit and detailed in describing a menu of options available to a vengeful Zeus punishing wayward humanity. He presents *loimos* with its frequent companion *limos*, famine, in his statement that the god sends the two together to afflict the unjust (*Erg.* 243 λιμὸν ὁμοῦ καὶ λοιμόν), alongside female infertility (244 οὐδὲ γυναικες τίκτουσιν).²⁰ The poet offers military defeat

especially Mitchell-Boyask, *Plague and the Athenian Imagination* 23–25. S. D. Olson, *Fragmenta Comica* VIII.1 (Heidelberg 2017) 341, on Eupolis fr.99.33–34 K.-A., collects fertility-related instances of divine punishment: Ar. *Av.* 578–584; Hdt. 3.65.7, 6.139.1; Soph. *OT* 269–271; [Dem.] 25.82; *IG* II² 13188.5–8, 13189.6–10; *I.Cret.* I IX 1.85–90; *SEG* XLI 741.9–12.

¹⁸ Connor, *Thucydides* 208 n.57, and Kallet, *AJP* 134 (2013) 378, also discuss the possibility of divine causation in Thucydides' text.

¹⁹ See G. Nagy, *The Best of the Achaeans* (Baltimore 1979) 74–77, on *loigos* and *loimos* in Homer.

²⁰ Jouanna, *Cahiers de la Villa Kérylos* 17 (2006) 201–202, observes the conjunction of *limos* and *loimos* with general sterility and war, all factors capable of destroying a community, in Hesiod. On *loimos*, *limos*, and other disasters see R. Parker, *Miasma* (Oxford 1983) 271–275. West, *Hesiod Works and Days*

on land or sea, or destruction of a city wall, as other possible punishments for injustice (246–247). Elsewhere, Hesiod again suggests a relationship between two elements of the pattern, warfare and starvation, by making various types of battles the siblings of personified *Limos* (*Theog.* 227–228).²¹ The assonance of *limos* and *loimos* seems to have attached those two elements particularly firmly to one another.²²

Later authors offer slightly differing constellations of human and natural crises, but the central features of most treatments remain famine (usually with the term *limos*) and plague (usually *loimos*), normally coordinated with war (often specifying both *polemos* and *stasis*). Pindar assembles many of the elements that appear in this pattern (*Paeon* 9 Maehler = fr.52.k.13–21) when he asks if an eclipsing sun signifies *polemos* (πολέμοιο δὲ σᾶμα φέρεις τινός), wasting of crops (καρποῦ φθίσιν), storms (νιφετοῦ σθένος ὑπέρφρατον), grievous *stasis* (στάσιν οὐλομένην), “emptyings of the sea onto land,” apparently tsunamis (πόντου κενεώσις ἄμ πέδον), unseasonable weather (νότιον θέρος), or indeed the end of the civilization (ἄνδρῶν νέον).²³ The Danaid chorus of Aeschylus’ *Suppliants* offers a similarly elaborate picture in a prayer for Argos that again implies that the gods drive such events.²⁴ They wish away plague (659 λοιμός), a

²¹ 215, notes that language similar to Hesiod’s appears in inscriptional evidence as well, Tod II 204 (the ephebic oath).

²² Jouanna, *Cahiers de la Villa Kérylos* 17 (2006) 200.

²³ Mitchell-Boyask, *Plague and the Athenian Imagination* 25.

²⁴ Cf. I. Rutherford, *Pindar’s Paeans* (Oxford 2001) 189–199: “These catastrophes are not arranged in any obvious order; human and natural disasters are woven together, though the last items in the list all have a connection with water” (195). S. Hornblower, *Thucydides and Pindar* (Oxford 2004) 76–77, argues that there are parallels between the treatment of *stasis* in this paeon and in Thucydides.

²⁵ Woodman, *Rhetoric in Classical Historiography* 33, observes that the chorus’ prayer to avert the combination of war and plague and for peace and fertility is reminiscent, in inverse, of Thucydides. Parker, *Miasma* 279, notes a similar prayer in the *Eumenides* (902–987); it too asks for general fertility, success in war, and protection from untimely death and *stasis*.

“swarm of diseases” (684 νόσων δ’ ἔσμός), a *loigos*, a term for mass death related to *loimos* (678–679 μηδέ τις ἀνδροκμῆς λοιγὸς ἐπελθέτω), civil war (661 ἐπιχωρίοις ἔρις), Ares who is a *loigos* to men (665–666 βροτολοιγὸς Ἄρης), and Ares without an epithet (682 Ἄρη). Instead, they pray for women’s fertility (675–677), general fertility (688–693), and crops in season (690), an apparent reference to the disturbance of natural rhythms that appears in many of these narratives. Eupolis fr.206 K.-A. parodies the pattern, stating that some entity, furious, sends *loimos* along with ψῶζα, stench, upon an army. In Herodotus, *limos*, *loimos*, and the military also appear in conjunction when he reports that after the Cretan army returned from the Trojan War, Crete was afflicted by combined *limos* and *loimos* (7.171.2),²⁵ and *limos* and *loimos* afflict Xerxes’ army (8.115.2–3).²⁶ Elsewhere, Herodotus claims that more evils happened to Greece between Darius’ and Artaxerxes’ reigns than in other times, including external war and conflict within Greece, and that these troubles came with an extraordinary earthquake at Delos (8.69.2–3), suggesting some kind of divine involvement.²⁷ While the Thebes of *OT* is not at war, fields go sterile while the Thebans suffer from plague (25–26), and Ares is involved: in an unusual passage, the chorus attributes the plague and mass deaths, again a *loigos*, specifically to the god of war (190–191, 215).²⁸ Among other punishments, the Am-

²⁵ Jouanna, *Cahiers de la Villa Kérylos* 17 (2006) 203, notes this instance of the pattern, and Mitchell-Boyask, *Plague and the Athenian Imagination* 23, remarks on this passage’s echo of Hesiod.

²⁶ Jouanna, *Cahiers de la Villa Kérylos* 17 (2006) 204–205, takes this instance to represent an intermediate stage in a process of rationalization of the tradition of plague and famine from archaic times into Thucydides’ more realistic understanding of cause and effect.

²⁷ Marinatos, *Thucydides and Religion* 17–28, argues that Thucydides’ *pathemata* engages in *aemulatio* with this passage in particular. Both, however, may belong to the larger tradition.

²⁸ R. D. Dawe, *Sophocles’ Oedipus Rex* (Cambridge 1982) 108–109: “Why they should fasten on Ares as their prime enemy is something not easily to be explained from the play itself, for Ares was a god especially associated

phictyonic oath threatens violators with infertility of women and crops, defeat in war, courts, and marketplaces, and utter destruction of their households and races (Aeschin. 3.111), again implying divine causation.

The frequent evocation of this type of catastrophe in extant texts suggests the popularity of the topos into the fifth century. The potency of the story pattern in Greco-Roman culture is also implied when it remains a common theme in subsequent years as well.²⁹ Demades claims that it is *limos* and *loimos* rather than military defeat at the hands of Alexander that has overthrown the Spartans (fr.84 de Falco, λοιμὸς καὶ λιμὸς αὐτοὺς διέφθειρεν): thus, like Hesiod, he treats the most prominent elements of the constellation as functionally interchangeable. Plato's Athenian does the same in stating that war (*polemos*), diseases (*nosoi*), plague (*loimos*), and unseasonability (*akairiai*) can force legal changes (*Leg.* 709A). Eudoxus brings together famine, storms, *loimoi*, and earthquakes (fr.141 Lasserre), and Xenocrates *loimoi*, crop failure, *polemos*, and *stasis* (fr.230 Parente). Callimachus describes Artemis punishing the unjust with a similar event, albeit with the *loimos* afflicting herds rather than people, alongside the sterility of crops and women (*Hymn* 3.124–134). Aristocles describes *loimos*, *limos*, earthquakes, wars, disease, and flood nearly eradicating mankind (fr.1.22 Heiland). Pausanias states that the divine obliterated the Phlegyans by first sending constant thunderbolts and earthquakes and then a plague (9.36.3).

As many have observed, the most frequent components of such disasters—plagues and famines—can and do arrive alongside war, precipitated by wartime stress, overcrowding, and deprivation of precisely the sort that Thucydides describes.³⁰

with Thebes, and not elsewhere associated with plague.” See also Knox, *AJP* 77 (1956) 139.

²⁹ On continuity in historiography see J. Marincola, *Authority and Tradition in Ancient Historiography* (Cambridge 1997).

³⁰ West, *Hesiod Works and Days* 218, observes that “malnutrition reduces resistance to disease.” Jouanna, *Cahiers de la Villa Kérylos* 17 (2006) 200,

But the marked emphasis on the simultaneity of the arrival of these phenomena suggests that ancient observers did not see the causal relationship we now know to exist.³¹ The coincidence of several types of sufferings that appeared to be unrelated may have encouraged Greeks to believe they were sent by some malign supernatural force bent on annihilating a society. The elaboration on the theme that brought in truly unrelated phenomena such as earthquakes and eclipses further indicates that ancient observers generally believed the causes to be non-human.

The Greek imagination thus seems to have been fascinated by stories of utter destruction, involving simultaneous political, climatological, seismological, and pandemic crises.³² This motif may, unsurprisingly, have appeared in folktale as well, since Thucydides' specifies its oral nature when he states that his war provided evidence of these stories' potential veracity (1.23.3 *τά τε πρότερον ἀκοῆ μὲν λεγόμενα*). The power of this story pattern in the Greek mind is attested not only in its frequency and chronological durability, but also in Aeschines' statement that children in his time memorized Hesiod's passage threatening *limos*, *loimos*, and military defeat on land and sea because of

responds that this is an overly modern observation, especially in that archaic texts usually present them as two independent entities arriving simultaneously, not as cause and effect. Although Jouanna sees Thucydides' work as representing a step toward rational understanding of causation, the historian too repeatedly emphasizes simultaneity.

³¹ See Jouanna, *Cahiers de la Villa Kérylos* 17 (2006) 199: "Le découpage des calamités n'est pas le même dans la Grèce archaïque que dans le monde moderne. Il n'y a pas encore une distinction entre des calamités dues à la nature et des calamités dues aux hommes. La calamité se définit d'abord par son effet. C'est la relation à la mort qui est primordiale."

³² M. R. Bachvarova, "The Destroyed City in Ancient 'World History': From Agade to Troy," in *The Fall of Cities in the Mediterranean* (Cambridge 2016) 36–78, at 68–69, argues that Near Eastern tales of the complete destruction of cities may have influenced later Greeks' beliefs about the heroic age and their methods of story-telling about the past. A reading of Thucydides as also influenced by an old story-pattern of calamity would offer further support for this argument.

the utility of these lines in adulthood (3.135).³³ In this cultural and literary context, the coincidence of what promised to be a deadly war in 431 and a similarly lethal plague the following year must indeed have seemed to vindicate similar tales of convergent disasters reaching deep into the roots of Greek literature. The same phenomenon might well have seemed, to the young historian Thucydides, to be unfolding again in his own time.

Thucydides' pathemata and the tradition

Thucydides first encourages us to consider his narrative within this schema of total collapse when he begins his *pathemata* passage with an approving reference to its oral tradition. Before describing the simultaneous natural, political, and epidemiological crises of 431–404, he asserts that the events of his war proved that stories which were handed down orally, narrating phenomena similar to what he goes on to list in the *pathemata*, were plausible (1.23.3 τὰ τε πρότερον ἀκοῆ μὲν λεγόμενα ... οὐκ ἄπιστα κατέστη). If his war acts as a touchstone demonstrating the accuracy, or at least potential accuracy, of similar accounts, it seems only reasonable to conclude that he regards the coincidence of plague, war, and natural disturbance as a real, recurring historical fact, and that he views his war as another iteration of it.

The historian's statement here is all the more striking because only a few paragraphs earlier he made clear that he finds oral tradition an unreliable means of preserving history given humanity's gullibility toward the spoken word handed down by forebears (1.20.1 τὰς ἀκοὰς τῶν προγεγεννημένων), a dismissive attitude toward popular belief that reappears at other key moments of his work (e.g. 6.54.1). Stories of multifaceted crisis seem to reverse this pattern, however. Thucydides' decision not to specify who, exactly, once doubted the accuracy of the oral tradition about them suggests that such an attitude was widespread (1.23.3). His meticulous research, which usually demon-

³³ Jouanna, *Cahiers de la Villa Kérylos* 17 (2006) 202.

strates the fallibility of the oral tradition, in this case proves that the old stories are, in his view, at least plausible. The unique durability he attributes to the memory of such stories over long periods of time, even when preserved in the flawed oral tradition, suggests that he may see these narratives and the events they describe as having a special place in human history and remembrance, as is also implied by the similarities between them and the Peloponnesian War he himself records in the ‘first’ serious work of history.³⁴

After stating that earlier tales of similar widespread upheaval are at least possibly true, Thucydides goes on to endorse the idea that natural disturbances have some significant relationship to human violence,³⁵ much to the discomfort of some of his modern readers.³⁶ In cataloguing these “sufferings,” he lists earthquakes of unprecedented strength, eclipses of the sun, and droughts (1.23.3). Elsewhere he reports on solar eclipses (2.28.1) and tsunamis (3.89.5), correctly hinting at their true causes in these passages even as he later implies that earthquakes and eclipses are related to one another (4.52.1). He repeatedly comments on the extremely frequent earthquakes in his war (3.89.1–2 *σεισμῶν δὲ γενομένων πολλῶν ... τῶν σεισμῶν κατεχόντων*),³⁷ claiming that in fact the largest earth-

³⁴ The role he gives it in dispelling skepticism may in fact be a typical effect of crises belonging to this pattern, although he characteristically focuses his attention on the light thrown on events in the past while others think of the present and future. Describing a portentous eclipse, Archilochus claims that nothing, and particularly no violation of nature, is to be disbelieved or wondered at any more (74.1–2 Diehl, *χρημάτων ἀελπτον οὐδὲν ἔστιν οὐδ’ ἀπώμοτον οὐδὲ θαυμάσιον*). Herodotus, too, says that great natural upheaval should not be wondered at, given the scale of the Persian Wars (6.98.3 οὐδὲν ἦν ἀεικέες).

³⁵ Cf. Parry, *BICS* 16 (1969) 115; Marinatos, *Thucydides and Religion* 19–28.

³⁶ E.g. W. D. Furley, “Thucydides and Religion,” in *Brill’s Companion to Thucydides* 415–438, at 423, calls his apparent acceptance of a relationship between natural and human events “a most uncharacteristic thing.”

³⁷ Jouanna, *Cahiers de la Villa Kérylos* 17 (2006) 208–209, observes that Thucydides suggests a connection between natural and biological upheaval

quake in memory took place during these years (8.41.2 ὃς αὐτοῖς ἔτυχε μέγιστός γε δὴ ὧν μεμνήμεθα γεινόμενος), and the only one that ever shook Delos (2.8.3). His remarks on such events reinforce the affinities between occurrences he records and the earlier literary tradition he points to in the *pathemata*, which describes the same type of coordinated social and natural upheaval. He even seems to overstate the degree of correspondence between his war and the existing pattern, for as many have observed, the droughts and resulting famine listed among the *pathemata* are not documented in his work,³⁸ it can be demonstrated that the scale and frequency of eclipses was less impressive than his text suggests,³⁹ and it appears that the earthquake at Delos may never have happened.⁴⁰

The famine-plague pair that caps the *pathemata* passage further encourages the reader to consider the events of the Peloponnesian War as belonging to this long-established type

in these passages, but argues that his work still represents a rationalist approach. See also Demont, in *Thucydides between History and Literature* 79.

³⁸ E.g. Classen-Steup I 53.

³⁹ Thucydides' statement on the unusual frequency of eclipses in the Peloponnesian War years is "not accurate," and "some allowance for exaggeration must be made" regarding his account of at least one of the two solar eclipses he describes: F. R. Stephenson and L. J. Fatoohi, "The Eclipses Recorded by Thucydides," *Historia* 50 (2001) 245–253, at 248. Mittelstadt, *RivStudClas*16 (1968)148, and Woodman, *Rhetoric in Classical Historiography* 39, suggest that Thucydides may have similarly exaggerated in the plague passage.

⁴⁰ J. Rusten, "ΔΗΛΟΣ ΕΚΙΝΗΘΗ: An 'Imaginary Earthquake' on Delos in Herodotus and Thucydides," *JHS* 133 (2013) 135–145, observes that there is no archaeological or geological evidence for the earthquake said by Herodotus (6.98) to have occurred at Delos during his war, nor for an earthquake that Thucydides likewise claims for Delos during his (2.8.3). D. Lateiner, "Pathos in Thucydides," *Antichthon* 11 (1977) 42–51, at 45–47, argues that Thucydides uses the story of the Delians, who are not pivotal to the outcome of the war in any strict historical sense, to exemplify the sufferings of the war. "In the list of παθήματα (1.23.1–3) Thucydides surely has the Delians in mind: seized cities are emptied, fugitives created, men slaughtered, and earthquake" (47).

of cataclysm. The decision to borrow the language of *loimos* to describe the plague has encouraged comparison with Homer, Hesiod, and Sophocles.⁴¹ The proximity of the words λιμοὶ and λοιμώδης in the *pathemata* further embeds Thucydides' work in the tradition, bringing together the two terms that often appear in such stories from Hesiod onward. This significant jingle even has pride of place as the final two items of the catalogue (1.23.3 καὶ λιμοὶ καὶ ἡ οὐχ ἥκιστα βλάβασα καὶ μέρος τι φθείρασα ἢ λοιμώδης νόσος). Although the historian separates the two nouns with a long string of adjectives and calls the plague a λοιμώδης νόσος rather than a *loimos* itself (which he will do later, at 2.47.3), the alert reader should pick up on the fact that this list culminates in a *limos-loimos* pair, mobilizing the tradition of calamity dating back to the earliest poets.⁴²

Another similarity between Thucydides' narrative and other accounts of widespread disaster is an emphasis on their clustered and synchronous nature. Indeed, a *loimos* almost never appears unaccompanied in early Greek literature,⁴³ but

⁴¹ E.g. Gomme, *HCT* II 160; West, *Hesiod Works and Days* 218; Connor, *Thucydides* 31 n.30; Woodman, *Rhetoric in Classical Historiography* 28–32; Morgan, *TAPA* 124 (1994) 206; Kallet, *AJP* 134 (2013) 361; Mitchell-Boyask, *Plague and the Athenian Imagination* 43; Flower, in *Art in Athens* 4.

⁴² Jouanna, *Cahiers de la Villa Kérylos* 17 (2006) 207, also makes this point.

⁴³ Possible exceptions: Aeschylus' Darius seems to suggest that *loimos* could arrive alone, but nevertheless associates it with one of its usual companions when he proposes two possible explanations for Persia's downfall, "some bolt of plague or a civil war" (*Pers.* 715 λοιμοῦ τις ἦλθε σκηπτὸς ἢ στάσις πόλει). The equation becomes more complete when he is corrected that in fact the Athenians, external war, inflicted the destruction (716 οὐδ' αὖ μὲν, ἀλλ' ἄμφ' Ἀθήνας πᾶς κατέφθαρται στρατός). *Loimos* appears once in Herodotus not as part of the main disaster but as a prelude to it, nevertheless alongside another crisis, a building collapse, warning of impending military defeat (6.27.1–2). Demosthenes uses *loimos* alone as an insult (25.80). *Loimos* also appears alone in Plutarch, paraphrasing Stesimbrotus on the death of Pericles' son in the plague (*Per.* 36.6, *FGrHist* 107 F 11). Theopompus hints at war alongside plague but does not make their simultaneity explicit in his story of an army punished by *loimos* (*FGrHist* 115 F 357).

is almost without exception part of a multitude of simultaneous blows suffered by a society.⁴⁴ The *Iliad*'s difficulties begin with Achilles' frustrated declaration that war and plague attack the Achaeans together, ὁμοῦ working with τε and καὶ to emphasize that their action is in tandem (1.61 ὁμοῦ πόλεμος τε δαμῶ καὶ λοιμὸς Ἀχαιοῦς).⁴⁵ Hesiod too calls attention to the coincidence of famine and plague sent to punish the unjust (*Erg.* 243 λιμὸν ὁμοῦ καὶ λοιμόν). Vernant notes that although both words are not used, *Oedipus Tyrannos* begins with the simultaneous *limos* and *loimos* described by Hesiod.⁴⁶ Eupolis' parody depends on the traditional presence of another entity alongside *loimos* when he replaces *limos* (or *polemos*) with "stench" (fr.206 λοιμὸν καὶ ψῶζαν ἔπεμψεν). Herodotus, like Homer, employs a *te ... kai* construction emphasizing a synchronized attack (7.171.2 λιμόν τε καὶ λοιμόν).⁴⁷ The oracle quoted by Thucydides also emphasizes simultaneity (2.54.2 πόλεμος καὶ λοιμὸς ἅμ' αὐτῷ).⁴⁸ Among later examples, Chrysippus borrows Hesiod's phrasing (*SVF* II 1175 λιμὸν ὁμοῦ καὶ λοιμόν), and Dionysius of Halicarnassus calls attention to the coincidence of infertility, plague, and famine (*Ant.Rom.* 10.53.8 τὴν χώραν ἀγεώρητον ἀφεθεῖσαν λιμὸν ἐπὶ τῷ λοιμῷ συνάψαι). Like these authors, Thucydides stresses the simultaneity and multiplicity of the disasters. He introduces the *pathemata* with an

⁴⁴ For some further examples of *loimos* as part of an assault of various catastrophes, in Plato unbalanced Eros is said to cause *loimoi* in animals along with hailstorms, plant diseases, and astronomical disruptions (*Symp.* 188B); elsewhere, overweening behavior, disease, *loimos*, and civil disruption are said to be the same phenomenon (*Leg.* 906C).

⁴⁵ Jouanna, *Cahiers de la Villa Kérylos* 17 (2006) 198–199, observes that in the *Iliad*, war, *polemos*, plays the role that *limos* does elsewhere, as a partner to *loimos*.

⁴⁶ Vernant, *Literary History* 9 (1978) 489.

⁴⁷ Jouanna, *Cahiers de la Villa Kérylos* 17 (2006) 203, also notes this parallel to Hesiod.

⁴⁸ Woodman, *Rhetoric in Classical Historiography* 35, notes that ἅμ' αὐτῷ in Thucydides' report of the prophesy takes the place of ὁμοῦ in the *Iliad*.

eye toward the fact that everything happened at once (1.23.1 παθήματά τε ξυνηέχθη γενέσθαι). Great earthquakes occurred together (1.23.3 ἅμα), and nearly every word of the conclusion of the *pathemata* contains reminders that the disasters all happened simultaneously: ταῦτα γὰρ πάντα μετὰ τοῦδε τοῦ πολέμου ἅμα ξυνεπέθετο. This emphasis on simultaneity will also feature prominently in his treatment of the plague, discussed below.

Thucydides employs other vocabulary associated with *loimos-limos*-war events as well, further entwining his narrative in the literary and mythological traditions of such stories. Vocabulary deriving from φθείρω appears in many depictions of such crises, especially to describe their plague element. In Herodotus, *loimos* and dysentery, along with *limos*, destroy an army as it marches (8.115.2–3 λοιμός τε τὸν στρατὸν ... ἔφθειρε). Theopompus tells of a seer mistreated by the Spartans, for which they are apparently punished with a *loimos* (*FGrHist* 115 F 357 ὑπὸ λοιμοῦ φθειρόμενοι). Pausanias describes mythical Greece as decaying under *stasis* and a disease that is *loimôdês* before Iphitus' reestablishment of the Olympics (5.4.6 φθειρομένης τότε δὴ μάλιστα τῆς Ἑλλάδος ὑπὸ ἐμφυλίων στάσεων καὶ ὑπὸ νόσου λοιμώδους). Thucydides also associates this word specifically with his plague. One of the most prominent adjectives modifying the plague in the *pathemata* is φθείρασα (1.23.3). Later, in the plague passage itself, a noun from the same root serves as a pleonastic description of it, where the plague is again a *loimos* (2.47.3 οὐ μέντοι τοσοῦτός γε λοιμός οὐδὲ φθορὰ οὕτως). He calls the mass deaths in the plague φθόρος (2.51.4, 2.52.2). And verb appears when plague attacks the army twice (2.57.1 νόσος ἔν τε τῇ στρατιᾷ τοὺς Ἀθηναίους ἔφθειρε καὶ ἐν τῇ πόλει, 2.58.2 ἐπιγενομένη γὰρ ἡ νόσος ἐνταῦθα δὴ πάνυ ἐπίεσε τοὺς Ἀθηναίους, φθείρουσα τὴν στρατιάν).

In the absence of divine appeasement such as occurs in the *Iliad*, the typical result of such multi-faceted disaster, and again especially its plague element, is described in a variety of authors as a profound emptiness, and Thucydides' description of his plague and war fits this part of the pattern as well. The chorus of *Suppliants* imagines that a plague might empty Argos (Aesch.

Suppl. 660 τάνδε πόλιν κενώσαι),⁴⁹ and the Theban plague driven by Ares, “by which the house of Cadmus is emptied” (Soph. *OT* 29 κενούται δῶμα Καδμείον), may leave Oedipus ruling over a void (55 κενῆς κρατεῖν), a city bereft of men (57 ἔρημος ἀνδρῶν). Herodotus has Crete left deserted, ἐρημωθείσης, by combined *limos* and *loimos* after the Trojan War (7.171.2). Pausanias reports that Prodicus wrote a *Minyad* telling the story of the house of Zethus emptied by a plague, and in his periphrasis uses for the disease nearly the same language as Thucydides (9.5.9 ἡ νόσος ἡ λοιμώδης ἠρήμωσε). Thucydides’ plague also has the effect of emptying households (2.51.5 καὶ οἰκίαι πολλὰ ἐκενώθησαν). He employs similar vocabulary to describe the utter devastation he claims was inflicted by his war as a whole, stating in the *pathemata* that more cities were emptied in the Peloponnesian War than in other eras (1.23.2 ἠρημώθησαν). The complete emptying of a city is a dramatic and rare event even in a terrible war such as the Peloponnesian, and in reality few cities suffered such a fate.⁵⁰ Like the claim of a Delian earthquake, however, the description of an unprecedented number of emptied cities reinforces the sense that the Peloponnesian War belongs to the same category of events as is described in earlier literary sources.

⁴⁹ M. R. Bachvarova and D. Dutsch, “Mourning a City ‘Empty of Men’: Stereotypes of Anatolian Communal Lament in Aeschylus’ *Persians*,” in *The Fall of Cities* 79–105, argue that the motif of an emptied city, especially as it appears in Aeschylus’ *Persae*, may derive from the typical features of Anatolian laments. For more on emptiness in *Persae* see T. Harrison, *The Emptiness of Asia* (London 2000) 66–75.

⁵⁰ Rhodes, *Thucydides: History* I 208, argues that Colophon (3.34.1), Plataea (3.68), and Thyrea (4.57.3) might qualify as depopulated states. On such destruction see H. van Wees, “Genocide in Archaic and Classical Greece,” in V. Caston and S.-M. Weineck (eds.), *Our Ancient Wars* (Ann Arbor 2016) 19–37. On the emptiness motif in Herodotus’ description of Miletus, also as an exaggeration, see Bachvarova and Dutsch, in *The Fall of Cities* 99; they posit that this theme may also have been prominent in Phrynichus’ *Sack of Miletus*.

Thucydides' plague and the tradition

Thucydides' plague passage (2.47–2.54), the lengthy description of the final element of the *pathemata*, bolsters his claim that his war is the preeminent example of this established brand of compound misfortune. Sometimes the plague narrative has been thought to fit awkwardly with the rest of the work, and its presence has accordingly been excused on grounds such as the historian's supposed scientific interests or its political consequences.⁵¹ It would be out of character for Thucydides to include anything extraneous to his narrative, however, as he is famous for his bold exclusion of anything he deems superfluous, even issues of great political significance such as the Megarian Decree. If he is shaping his work so as to emphasize its place in this tradition, however, the plague passage is not a digression but a key symptom indicating that the events he describes are not a simple war but belong to a much more frightening old pattern of devastation. Like the discussions of eclipses and earthquakes that appear outside of the *pathemata* passage, the plague narrative serves to tie the *pathemata* even more firmly to the rest of Thucydides' work, indicating that his editorializing remarks there are not a momentary or insignificant departure from character, but a key to the text as a whole.

Earlier authors from Homer onward describe “war and *loimos* together” assaulting a society, and, as noted above, a *loimos* almost never acts alone. Whether he uses the term *loimos* or *nosos*, Thucydides' narrative depicts his plague behaving like a typical *loimos*, always working in conjunction with other afflictions, both in its general arrival alongside the Peloponnesian War and in specific instances. The historian begins and ends his main plague passage by commenting on its timing, and specifically its coincidence with the Peloponnesian invasion of Attica. He states that the plague arrived only a few days after the Peloponnesians' arrival (2.47.3 καὶ ὄντων αὐτῶν οὐ πολλάς πω ἡμέρας ἐν τῇ Ἀττικῇ ἡ νόσος πρῶτον ἤρξατο γενέσθαι τοῖς

⁵¹ See n.5 above.

Ἀθηναίους); like his predecessors, he emphasizes the nearly perfectly simultaneous onset of violence and disease. His penultimate sentence in the plague passage makes the same point: “the disease began immediately after the Peloponnesians’ assault” (2.54.5 ἐσβεβληκότων δὲ τῶν Πελοποννησίων ἡ νόσος ἤρξατο εὐθύς). Parry remarks on the literary effectiveness of Thucydides’ statement that “those inside were dying while outside the land was being wasted” by the army (2.54.1 ἀνθρώπων τ’ ἔνδον θνησκόντων καὶ γῆς ἔξω δρουμένης),⁵² war and plague together destroying Attica. As Woodman notes, Thucydides repeats the link between plague and war in a later outbreak,⁵³ in a statement that again emphasizes their simultaneity (2.59.1 ἡ νόσος ἐπέκειτο ἅμα καὶ ὁ πόλεμος). The apparent cooperation between the two afflictions is again emphasized later by *te* and *kai*, as in Homer and Herodotus (Thuc. 3.3.1 ἦσαν γὰρ τεταλαιπωρημένοι ὑπὸ τε τῆς νόσου καὶ πολέμου, cf. *Il.* 1.61, *Hdt.* 7.171.2). Nicias points out that the Athenians are just recovering from both plague and war immediately before the renewed violence of the Sicilian Expedition (6.12.1), a point which Thucydides echoes (6.26.2). While the most frequent partner of the plague is violence, another attack (3.87.1–3) happens in concert with unusually frequent earthquakes (3.87.4 ἐγένοντο δὲ καὶ οἱ πολλοὶ σεισμοὶ τότε τῆς γῆς).⁵⁴

⁵² Parry, *BICS* 16 (1969) 115. He summarizes the connection that Thucydides’ language builds between war and disease: “the Plague is ... a partner of war.”

⁵³ Woodman, *Rhetoric in Classical Historiography* 65 n.207.

⁵⁴ The presence of neither is also the condition of challenging a treaty (5.41.2 μήτε νόσου οὔσης μήτε πολέμου). In an intriguing parallel, albeit one that appears only once, Thucydides has his plague working together with an unusual partner: the Athenians are described as “destroyed,” using the same language of *phtheiro* discussed above, by plague and the outlay of money (3.13.3 νόσῳ τε γὰρ ἐφθάραι Ἀθηναῖοι καὶ χρημάτων δαπάνη). The conjunction of plague and expenses works well with Kallet’s argument for the affinities between plague, war, and financial stress in Thucydides’ work (L. Kallet, *Money and the Corrosion of Power in Thucydides* [Berkeley 2001]

Such is the affinity between the plague and the war that the disease even behaves like a war, as has been argued primarily by Kallet. She observes that the Peloponnesian army and the plague seem to move in concert (2.55–63), and the illness itself attacks the city, its citizens, and its soldiers, Thucydides' language making it an attacker in a military sense.⁵⁵ His depiction of a plague at war in these passages recalls not only the typical behavior of a *loimos* but also the sentiments of the chorus of *Oedipus Tyrannos* when they sing of Ares causing the Theban plague (190–191, 215), in a play that many have thought was influenced by the events described by Thucydides.⁵⁶ The plague is similar to the war in other ways as well, also occurring on a scale that was never previously recalled (2.47.3), and, as Rood observes, both have an ἀκμή, an organic metaphor.⁵⁷

Repetition of the combination of the words *limos* and *loimos* in the plague passage further encourages the reader to see the events as part of the old pattern. As we have seen, *loimos* and *polemos* together subdue the Greeks in the opening of the *Iliad* (1.61), while the *limos-loimos* jingle appears as early as Hesiod in conjunction with military defeat (*Erg.* 243). This triad converges in Thucydides' report that when the plague broke out, some Athenians remembered a prophesy predicting a war arriving along with a plague, *loimos*, but others recalled it calling for famine, *limos* (2.54.3 μὴ λοιμὸν ὀνομάσθαι ἐν τῷ ἔπει ὑπὸ τῶν παλαιῶν, ἀλλὰ λιμόν).⁵⁸ He states that the public settled

129). She also notes that expenses, like the plague as discussed here, can “attack” (130).

⁵⁵ Kallet, *AJP* 134 (2013) 364–368: “Thucydides makes clear that the catastrophes, the ultimate of which was the plague, were ‘co-combatants’ in the war—they ‘combined in attacking’ (ξυνεπέθετο, 1.23.3)” (373). Cf. Classen-Steup I 53; Winton, *Mētis* 7 (1992) 203.

⁵⁶ Knox, *AJP* 77 (1956) 139, has argued for a relationship between Thucydides' plague and Sophocles' play, observing that both Thucydides and this chorus of Sophocles mix the language of plague and war.

⁵⁷ T. Rood, *Thucydides: Narrative and Explanation* (Oxford 1998) 122.

⁵⁸ This example of *limos/loimos* has been noted by many, including Jouanna, *Cahiers de la Villa Kérylos* 17 (2006) 207–208. The added presence of

on *loimos* and offers his own opinion that people would remember whatever fit their current circumstances. His comments here are highly unusual, and their significance has been disputed.⁵⁹ But the most obvious consequence of his meditation on these specific words and their sounds, in which both halves of the pair appear with almost irritating repetitiveness (2.54.2 λοιμός, 2.54.3 λοιμόν, 2.54.3 λιμόν, 2.54.3 λοιμόν, 2.54.3 λιμόν), alongside the fact that they accompany a *polemos* in either case (2.54.1), is to push the reader to think of the *polemos-limos-loimos* triad.⁶⁰ The alert observer might also recall that Thucydides' *pathemata* passage culminated in a statement that,

the third item, *polemos*, has not, to my knowledge, been discussed.

⁵⁹ His decision to report this debate is highly uncharacteristic, breaking with his usual habit of excluding controversy. On the rarity of Thucydides explicitly attributing a quotation to a source, much less disputing its contents, see V. J. Gray, "Thucydides' Source Citations: 'It is Said,'" *CQ* 61 (2011) 75–90, at 75; C. Dewald, "The Figured Stage," in J. S. Rusten (ed.) *Oxford Readings in Classical Studies: Thucydides* (Oxford 2009) 114–147, at 128–147; H. D. Westlake, "ΑΕΓΕΤΑΙ in Thucydides," *Mnemosyne* 30 (1977) 345–362. To some, his thoughts on the prophesy seem critical (for example Grimm, *Literarische Darstellung* 37; Jouanna, *Cahiers de la Villa Kérylos* 17 [2006] 208; Furley, in *Brill's Companion to Thucydides* 419). But his usual method of constructing his narrative suggests that his tone here cannot be easily read with certainty. On the most superficial level, he does not normally include stories whose veracity he doubts, whereas he chose to relate this one. Furthermore, any skepticism in his remarks seems to be directed at humanity's understanding of the oracle, not the oracle itself, and oracular ambiguity and the failure of humanity to fully understand divine pronouncements are both thoroughly traditional motifs (Marinatos, *JHS* 101 [1981] 119; K. J. Dover, *The Greeks and their Legacy* [New York 1988] 69–70). Kallet, *AJP* 134 (2013) 364, states that "these comments move beyond endorsing the authenticity of the oracle and the conjecturing that it might be true; they appear to support its fulfillment. This is a critical point. There is no refutation, no sarcastic aside, no rationalizing critique of the view of the divine origin of the disease."

⁶⁰ Woodman, *Rhetoric in Classical Historiography* 35: "He treats the linguistic dispute in a dismissive manner (54.3), which only prompts the question why he has mentioned it. The reason is that the prophecy, in one of its versions ... recalls the words of Achilles in *Iliad* 1."

in fact, this war contained *both* features, *limoi* and a *loimos* (1.23.3): just as he himself does not endorse one or the other version of the oracle,⁶¹ both versions of it could apply to the war he describes.

If Thucydides diagnosed the early events of the Peloponnesian War as representing the return of a regular pattern of cataclysm seen in much older mythological stories, he might well have concluded at the opening of the war that it would end with Athens or even all of Greece suffering a fate of emptiness and desolation. Historical reality, of course, diverged from the story pattern. The historian nevertheless seems to overlay his account of the final stages of the Sicilian Expedition with the language that evokes what might have been the expected conclusion. He makes the Athenian army in Sicily a mobile proxy for the city itself and employs language recalling old literary accounts of utter ruin, in particular Homer. In the final passages of Book 7 he describes the retreating men as “like nothing other than a city fleeing after having fallen to siege, and not a small one,” a scene that calls to mind Troy, the most famously besieged and defeated city in Greek literature (7.75.5 οὐδὲν γὰρ ἄλλο ἢ πόλει ἐκπεπολιορκημένη ἐώκεσαν ὑποφυγούση, καὶ ταύτη οὐ μικρῆ).⁶² Nicias encourages his army to regard itself as a city (7.77.4 λογίζεσθε δὲ ὅτι αὐτοὶ τε πόλις εὐθύς ἐστε ὅποι ἂν καθέζησθε), and the last sentence of his final speech observes that “men are the city, not walls or ships empty of men” (7.77.7). This synecdoche of the soldiers for Athens itself suggests that their defeat may be understood as its downfall, and the implicit result, leaving Athens bereft of its men, is indistinguishable from that of a sack.⁶³ Thucydides

⁶¹ Classen-Steup II 102: “Wie der Vers wirklich ursprünglich lautete, lässt Th. vollständig dahingestellt.”

⁶² Cf. G. M. Paul, “*Urbs Capta*: Sketch of an Ancient Literary Motif,” *Phoenix* 36 (1982) 144–155, at 145–146.

⁶³ Most scholars see the Sicilian Expedition as representing the end of Athens in Thucydides’ narrative, despite the city’s continued existence, e.g. Connor, *Thucydides* 206. Harrison, *Emptiness of Asia* 75, on the final scene of *Persae*, notes that both Aeschylus’ play and Thucydides on the Sicilian Ex-

furthermore endorses the idea that Syracusan success would represent a fatal blow to Athens (7.56.2); Nicias warns his troops that failure would mean the end of Athens (7.64.1–2); and Thucydides observes that Athens itself is in danger (7.75.2). When this city-army in Sicily is indeed thoroughly defeated, his language has again reminded scholars of accounts of the fall of Troy, especially his use of the term of *πανωλεθρία* (7.87.6).⁶⁴ Thucydides may thus bring the pattern that influences his first books into the end of his work as well, painting the story of the conclusion of the Sicilian Expedition in colors that imply the same type of utter desolation as earlier mythical models would have predicted at the beginning of the war.

Conclusions

By situating the Peloponnesian War within this literary tradition, Thucydides suggests that the people of Greece are only partly in control of the damage done by the war, and an inescapable superhuman force may also be driving events. The bleak endings, or threatened endings, of the older stories further indicate the inadequacy of human means to control or remedy this category of disaster. The assistance that a historian could offer in such a situation is clearly limited, raising the question of how Thucydides intends his work to be “helpful” (1.22.4 *ὠφέλιμα*). This difficulty is in keeping with his senti-

pedition treat their defeated subjects as utterly vanquished, although neither was.

⁶⁴ H. Strasburger, “Thukydides und die politische Selbstdarstellung der Athener,” *Hermes* 86 (1958) 17–40, at 39–40 n.3, first compared this to Herodotus’ account of Troy’s fall (2.120.5). See esp. J. Grethlein, “Eine herodoteische Deutung der sizilischen Expedition (Thuc. 7.87.5f)?” *Hermes* 136 (2008) 129–142, who argues that the parallel is intended to draw a distinction between Thucydidean and Herodotean methods. See also N. Marinatos Kopff and H. R. Rawlings, “*Panolethria* and Divine Punishment,” *PP* 182 (1978) 331–337. J. W. Allison, “Homeric Allusions at the Close of Thucydides’ Sicilian Narrative,” *AJP* 118 (1997) 499–516, argues for additional Homeric elements in the final episodes of the Sicilian Expedition, as does Kallet, *Money and the Corrosion of Power* 97–100.

ments throughout: as has often been noted, he strongly implies that neither the war nor its proxy the plague are susceptible to practical intervention.⁶⁵

His few statements elaborating on the sort of help to be found in his work suggest that he hopes to enable his reader to identify particularly dangerous threats upon their return, on the explicit assumption that significant historical moments unfold in a series of recurrences in which later events may not precisely replicate earlier ones but nevertheless belong to the same essential category and share the same fundamental nature. This is true of both the plague and the war as a whole. Thucydides' detailed account of the plague symptoms is intended to allow for its identification upon its return, recognition itself being the goal rather than treatment or prevention (2.48.3 *τι προειδῶς μὴ ἄγνοεῖν*).⁶⁶ Similarly, just as he claims that the traumas of his era echo, on a larger scale, ones that came before, he expects this pattern to continue in the future: he writes so as to allow his audience "to examine τὸ σαφές of what happened and the sort of thing, or similar, which will happen again sometime" (1.22.4).⁶⁷ His next sentence claims

⁶⁵ For some of the many arguments about Thucydides' usefulness see Weidauer *Thucydides und die hippokratischen Schriften* 34; J. de Romilly, "L'Utilité de l'histoire selon Thucydide," in *Histoire et historiens dans l'antiquité* (Geneva/Vandoeuvre 1956) 41–81; Parry, *BICS* 16 (1969) 107–109; Connor, *Thucydides* 242–248; S. Flory, "The Meaning of τὸ μὴ μισθῶδες (1.22.4) and the Usefulness of Thucydides' *History*," *CJ* 85 (1990) 193–208; L. Kallet, "Thucydides' Workshop of History and Utility outside the Text," in *Brill's Companion to Thucydides* 335–368; J. Grethlein, *The Greeks and their Past* (Cambridge 2010) 268–274.

⁶⁶ On the identification of the plague as serving no obvious practical purpose for treatment, and the corresponding implication that war cannot be controlled, see e.g. E. Kapp, *Gnomon* 6 (1930) 76–100, at 92–93; Connor, *Thucydides* 244; Parry, *BICS* 16 (1969) 108–110.

⁶⁷ The translation of τὸ σαφές is elusive. H.-P. Stahl, *Thucydides: Man's Place in History* (Swansea 2003 [1966]) 28, captures the abstract nature of the Greek: "to see clarity" concerning the events. Kallet, in *Brill's Companion to Thucydides* 335, also takes it as "the clearness." See J. Moles, "A False Dilemma: Thucydides' *History* and Historicism," in S. J. Harrison (ed.), *Texts,*

his work's status as "possession for all time" rather than an exercise in momentary storytelling. The timeless value of his study of history thus seems predicated on the help it offers in recognizing and comprehending a variety of upheaval that is itself eternal. Later on, he reiterates that the war consists of occurrences "such as happened and will always happen" (3.82.2), albeit, like the plague, with variable symptoms.⁶⁸

Thucydides' implied reader, a sophisticated and intelligent observer of some future period, could hardly require his assistance to take notice of a generic outbreak of war. But if he proposes to help identify a specific and particularly malignant type of war, just as his plague passage depicts a particular and unusually deadly disease, his analysis could offer the same service as that of a doctor distinguishing a nuisance illness from a lethal one. Greek society was famously at war with itself more or less constantly, and the ability to tell a run-of-the-mill conflict from one threatening exceptional ruin would be of great value. Indeed, the historian proudly claims in his very first sentence that he himself accomplished this feat. By responding to the very human desire to foresee the scale of an impending disaster, Thucydides' work could offer future readers this type of helpful forecast, even if it gives us no practical means by which to cure the state.⁶⁹

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Ideas, and the Classics: Scholarship, Theory, and Classical Literature (Oxford 2001) 195–219, at 200, on the difficulty in translating this phrase.

⁶⁸ Thucydides uses εἶδος to describe the form of the plague (2.50.1), the same word as he uses for the varying presentations of war (3.82.2 τοῖς εἴδεσι δηλλαγμένα).

⁶⁹ This article is dedicated to A. J. Woodman with much gratitude for his teaching, advice, and generosity. Further thanks are due to J. E. Lendon and the anonymous *GRBS* readers for their thoughtful comments. John Dillery has also been a source of wise guidance.