

NICIAS' INADEQUATE ENCOURAGEMENT (THUCYDIDES 7. 69. 2)

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I. NICIAS' PECULIAR παραίνεσις

THUCYDIDES 7. 69. 2 reports a supplementary exhortation that Nicias directed at his trierarchs. The *parainesis* has several unique features. No other talk by a military commander appears as an addendum to an earlier oration (7. 61–64).¹ No other speech and report of a speech is so deficient in subordinating structure: one immensely long (14 lines), paratactic sentence of 137 words.² No other report is so completely void of perceptive observations and generalizations. No other Thucydidean address is both introduced and concluded with such extensive evaluative comments, which are then generalized, to refer to all such desperate straits. Thucydides presents Nicias' words neither in *oratio recta* nor in his usual style of *oratio obliqua* (cf., e.g., 2. 13; 5. 27. 2; 7. 47–49; 8. 48, 53), but in a bald summary, more a critique than an abstract. These peculiarities deserve more attention than they have received, especially since they might illuminate the problem of Thucydides' complex presentation of Nicias. This portrait displays a thematic continuity and a dramatic progression. The historian has highlighted the general's inability to adapt his words and actions to new circumstances as his chief defect from Book 3 to Book 7. The presentation of the *parainesis* substantiates this defect and comments on Nicias' psychological state.³

1. O. Luschnat, *Die Feldherrnreden im Geschichtswerk des Thukydides* (Leipzig, 1942), p. 99, who points out (p. 94) the germ of this exhortation in the peroration of Nicias' main speech (64. 2). The *parainesis* has no entry in W. C. West, "Bibliography of Scholarship on the Speeches in Thucydides, 1873–1970," in *The Speeches in Thucydides*, ed. P. Stadter (Chapel Hill, 1973), p. 161.

2. H. Rawlings, *The Structure of Thucydides' History* (Princeton, 1981), p. 155: eighteen "ands." The main verb is followed by four coordinate participles. All Nicias' other speeches are remarkable for the high degree of subordination in his sentences: see D. P. Tompkins, "Stylistic Characterization in Thucydides: Nicias and Alcibiades," *YCS* 22 (1972): 181–214. Archaic elements in the presentation, arguments, themes, and vocabulary of this exhortation (ring composition, appeals to god and country, absence of syllogism and definition, parataxis; and below, notes 5 and 18) suggest a conscious stylistic intent to have manner imitate matter.

3. J. Wilson, "What does Thucydides Claim for his Speeches?" *Phoenix* 36 (1982): 95–103, lucidly treats the hardy perennial problem posed by Thucydides' programmatic sentences at 1. 22. 1–2. Wilson properly regrets the relative absence of modern criticism concerning the historian's deployment of *oratio*

Thucydides provides a varied and generous sample of Nicias' public and private remarks. Nicias' speeches in assembly and on the battlefield (*sympouleutikoi*; *parakeleuseis*; also *paraineseis*, *hypomnemata*) are characterized by caution, clumsiness, and lack of original vision. His only daring political strategies misfired completely. He harmed himself and Athens by yielding to Cleon command of the expedition to reinforce Pylos, and by trying to prevent the Athenian invasion of Sicily by emphasizing the huge extent of the manpower and equipment necessary (4. 27–28, 39. 3–40. 1; 6. 24–26). Another important failure at suasion, Nicias' letter to the Athenians from Sicily (7. 11–15), aiming at the recall of Nicias and his entire force, provided a generally accurate strategic analysis; but Nicias' candor in public never persuaded his fellow citizens. Paradoxically, his mysterious hints about Syracusan weakness and treachery in the private council of the Athenian generals (7. 47–50) carried the day, as did his response to the eclipse, despite all the sound objections of his colleagues. When this strategist was right, he was incapable of translating his foresight into actuality: καὶ τοῦναντίον περίεστη αὐτῷ (6. 24. 2).

In Sicily, Thucydides has Nicias address the army four times; all but the first exhortation (6. 68) cluster around the decisive defeat. Even the earliest, a brief and businesslike address before encountering an inexperienced enemy, expresses a timid point of view (6. 68). Although Nicias refers to Athenian power and skill (παρασκευή, ἐπιστήμη), the general introduces his usual passive, reactive themes of uncertain hope, present necessity, and general inadequacy (ἐλπίς, ἀνάγκη, ἀπορία). The dire consequences for Athens, should they fail, become ever more prominent in Nicias' remarks from the opening of Book 6 to the end of Book 7. Although many battles, and presumably as many speeches, intervene after the Athenian victory in summer 415, Thucydides next presents Nicias speaking to troops only before the final battle (7. 61–64). In his last three exhortations, Nicias retreats from qualified but real confidence in a great army, to a catalog of futile clichés about chance and hope, to, finally, pathetic appeals to the gods and his men (7. 61–64, 69. 2, 77). All three talks attempt to encourage a defeated, disheartened army (ἄθυμον: 7. 60. 5, 61. 2, and 76).

Before the final battle, Thucydides presents both Nicias' speech to the entire army and its Syracusan counterpart (7. 61–68). The general recurs to the theme of irrevocable disaster and places his hopes in fortune and

obliqua. Taking account of the arguments of Andrewes, Dover, Kagan, and de Ste. Croix, *inter alios*, he asserts that substantial accuracy was the historian's goal. Explanations for reported speech, based on the contingencies of the situation rather than the essence of the remarks, may be suggested. For instance, no other *oratio* in Thucydides was delivered to its audience *seriatim*. From this viewpoint there was no speech at all, and one can mention other examples of *oratio obliqua* where the audience was not a public assembly (e.g., 4. 78, 4. 97–99, 7. 47–49, 8. 48. 4–7). Another possible, but unlikely, reason for the odd treatment of this encouragement may be the absence of reliable evidence to elaborate (if the few trierarchs who spoke to Thucydides remembered only the trite phrases).

“lucky breaks”: τὰ ἐν τοῖς πολέμοις παράλογα and τὸ τῆς τύχης (61. 3). As if he and his men had heard the following acute assessment by the enemy commanders, Nicias accurately estimates current morale and the present danger. In his consternation (ἐκπεπληγμένος), Nicias believes that his preparations and exhortation have been insufficient, “as happens in the greatest crises.”⁴ The paragraph then appended reveals much about the historian’s understanding of Athens’ commander. Nicias addresses the trierarchs only, one by one and most formally: the commander calls each of them by his father’s name, his own name, and his *phyle*. After the six-line introduction, commenting on Nicias’ fears and second thoughts and the unparalleled parenthesis on onomastics, Thucydides offers his six-line summary of what Nicias actually said. A six-line epilogue follows. Thucydides seems to have slighted Nicias’ actual words because Nicias employed platitudes only, he expressed them plitudinously, and the exercise achieved little. Nicias adjured the captains not to fail to uphold whatever distinction each had himself acquired, and he admonished those who had preeminent ancestors not to tarnish their inherited glory. He reminded the captains of the freedom of their fatherland and of the unfettered right of all there to live as each might choose.⁵

Indeed this is all that Thucydides specifically attributes to Nicias, but the historian also reports that Nicias “said other things, such as men generally say when they are already this deep in a crisis and not guarding against appearing to anyone to be speaking the same old commonplaces in the same old way” (ἀρχαιολογεῖν). Thucydides then specifies what such men talk about when off-guard: “[appeals] are brought forward nearly identical and unvarying, suitable to any crisis, concerning wives and children and the ancestral gods; men, however, thinking them useful in the present moment of consternation, cry them out.” Thucydides faults Nicias here. He disapproves of the general’s failure to offer specific advice on tactics or even exhortation particular to the present juncture (ἄλλα τε λέγων ὅσα, generalized potential optative εἶποιεν ἄν, ὑπὲρ πάντων παραπλήσια). He disapproves of appeals to helpless and absent dependents and to the uncertain attitudes of the gods, and he disapproves of expedients chosen in a moment of consternation (ἐκπεπληγμένος, ἔκπληξις). He uses the verb ἐπιβοάω, “cry out, invoke,” only of desperate or disturbed characters.⁶ The telling phrase ὠφέλιμα νομίζοντες clearly

4. “Ὅπερ appears 69 times in Thucydides’ text, frequently in speeches. The particle colors the relative pronoun by suggesting a universal application (as here and at, e.g., 4. 17, 4. 4, 125. 1, and 8. 1. 4, “a thing which in fact generally . . .”) or an ironic tint for a particular event (as in 8. 47. 2, 8. 72. 2, or 8. 96. 4, with a condition contrary-to-fact, found only there and at 2. 94. 1).

5. Four words from the πατρ- root occur within nine lines; πατρόθεν occurs uniquely here. The scholia appositely quote *Iliad* 10. 68, Agamemnon addressing Menelaus when Greek aggressors are threatened with destruction by overseas defenders: πατρόθεν ἐκ γενεῆς ὀνομάζων ἄνδρα ἕκαστον. The Homeric reminiscence underlines the obsolete quality of Nicias’ effort. Cf. K. Krüger’s commentary, *Thoukydides Xyngraphe*², vol. 2.2 (Berlin, 1861), p. 66.

6. Nine occurrences, e.g., 3. 59. 2, 67. 2 (the Plataeans), 5. 65. 2, 7. 70. 7, 8. 92. 8.

implies that Thucydides judged Nicias' efforts to have been in vain (like those of others who would think the same in similar situations).

Even after this, Nicias did not think that he had encouraged his men enough, but only as he was able (69. 3). Gylippus had assessed his plight with antilogic accuracy (67. 4): the Athenians have been forced into panic (ἄπορία, ἀπόνοια, ἀταξία) by their situation; they depend now on chance, not thought and stratagem. This assessment itself sheds light on the puzzling word *archaiologeîn*, to which we now turn: for when properly understood, it will clarify Thucydides' description of Nicias here and his estimate of his character.

H. L. Hudson-Williams has argued against the translation of LSJ⁹ for *archaiologeîn* ("discuss antiquities or things out of date");⁷ K. J. Dover terms this gloss "absurd." The former prefers to translate "speaking in an old way," the latter, "say what always has been said."⁸ Neither scholar asks why Thucydides pauses to criticize Nicias' behavior and performance. The unique and weighty word demands further consideration.

Hudson-Williams argued that *archaiologeîn* refers to manner rather than to matter, because, as he concludes, "Greek writers in general were not afraid of the trite and the commonplace, but they were very much concerned with the form in which it was expressed."⁹ This statement about triteness fits Isocrates well (cf., e.g., *Paneg.* 8, 74), or epideictic eulogists in general, whose skill and ingenuity were tested by the very repetitiousness involved in commemorating certain events. Their celebratory remarks were delivered in a situation where nothing was at risk. Yet I find Hudson-Williams' comment inappropriate to symbouleutic oratory (cf. 3. 43. 4), and *a fortiori* inappropriate to symbouleutic and parainetic speeches when they appear in Thucydides' *History*.¹⁰ It trivializes the criticism of Nicias at 7. 69, if one claims that the only objectionable aspect was the naked use of commonplaces. "Novelty of diction and rhetorical devices"¹¹ is neither the general's nor the historian's concern, but, rather, effective leadership; here: survival itself. Nicias' rhetoric is faulted for its futility, and its futility follows both from the banality of its themes repeated on all occasions (ὕπὲρ πάντων παραπλήσια . . . προφερόμενα) and from the absence of tactical advice and effective encouragement.

The general is not criticized because "he failed to disguise [commonplaces] in appropriate language," or because his *topoi* were stale, or even

7. "Thucydides, Isocrates, and the Rhetorical Method of Composition," *CQ* 42 (1948): 79–80. O. Luschkat, "Thukydides," *RE Suppl.* 12 (1971): 1149, accepts the argument.

8. *Historical Commentary on Thucydides*, vol. 4 (Oxford, 1970), p. 446, ad loc. Dover's translation, and reference to Pericles' funeral speech, suggest correctly that the historian concentrated on the substance, not the style, of Nicias' words. *LSJ*⁹, *Supplement* (Oxford, 1968), p. 24A, already had "corrected" the gloss on this passage to "talk platitudes."

9. "Thucydides," p. 81. Hudson-Williams begins with gnomes (pp. 76–78) and aphorisms, of which Thucydides is very fond, but this constitutes an issue separate from triteness. Later he avers (pp. 79–80) that Thucydides' speeches are uncommonly saturated with *loci communes*. The historian's dissatisfaction with such phrases, however, seems evident from 2. 36. 1, 43. 1; 4. 62. 1; and see the end of n. 19, below. Rhetorical commonplaces become in Thucydides' *History* the focus of real, historical issues; they are not included for display or amusement.

10. *Ibid.*, p. 79.

11. *Ibid.*, p. 78.

because his hollow slogans tumbled inelegantly from his mouth.¹² For Thucydides, verbal brilliance is hardly the *summum bonum*. Nicias, rather, failed to accomplish anything at all. "Εκπληξίς opens and closes the incident. Before and after Nicias himself was dissatisfied with his effort: νομίσας . . . πάντα . . . λόγῳ . . . οὐπω ἱκανὰ εἰρῆσθαι . . . and οὐχ ἱκανὰ . . . νομίσας παρηνῆσθαι . . . This is surely more a judgment on Nicias than reported evidence, for how could Thucydides know? Nicias had repeated himself and had done nothing useful, ὠφέλιμον. This word appears first at 1. 22. 4 and last here. It is the chief criterion by which Thucydides wishes his work to be judged, and the criterion by which he judges others.

The earlier interpretation of *archaiologeîn*, found in Bétant, Arnold, Poppo-Stahl, Marchant, and Crawley, deserves further consideration. This long sentence is replete with language, sentiment, and concepts more suitable to the heroic age or to Nicias' childhood (born ca. 470) than to his last year (413). He retreats to an earlier political world, in which a gentleman dealt with the rich only (trierarchs), swayed them by recalling their genealogy and tribe (cf. Dem. 60. 27, an *epideixis*), their own exploits and their own ancestors' *arete*. In this pre-Cleonic world, appeals relying on wives, children, and gods of the fathers worked. The *gnorimoi* would like to hear about Athenian freedom and unconstrained ways of life—the typical funeral oration *réchauffé*—but not at this time. The concentration of age-old concepts, culled from an archaic world view and rarely found in Thucydides' text,¹³ suggests that the word in question may well mean *antiqua et saepius repetita memorare*, "speak time-worn clichés."¹⁴

Rawlings notes that this trite exhortation might be regarded as an ironic analogue to Pericles' *epitaphios*.¹⁵ Pericles found use for the *topoi* of ancestors, children, and wives (cf. 2. 36. 1–4, 45. 1, 45. 2), but handled them uniquely, as far as we may judge from Thucydides' text and extant *epitaphioi*. Both speakers refer to great conflicts and crisis; both appeal to contemporary and past accomplishments, and political and social freedom; and both men, of course, depend on the survivors to uphold the glory of Athens.¹⁶ Pericles notably omits the gods that play so central a

12. Ibid., p. 80. See Dover, *HCT* 4:446. Luschnat, "Thukydides," col. 1150, summarizes by asserting that the historian speaks here "über das *wie* einer Kampfparänese," not the "*was*."

13. Cf. Luschnat, *Feldherrnreden*, p. 53, n. 1. N. Marinatos' recent monograph, *Thucydides and Religion* (Königstein, 1981), will persuade few readers that Thucydides was a defender of religion (p. 32), and a pious believer in divine signs (p. 56) and divine justice (p. 58).

14. J. Finley, "Euripides and Thucydides," in *Three Essays on Thucydides* (Cambridge, Mass., 1967), pp. 43, 45, speaks of "such old and natural pleas," "that trite but universal eloquence"—more satisfactory glosses on *archaiologeîn*. One easily believes that the Athenian here refers to both matter and manner, since Thucydides deploys rhetoric to illuminate individual impulse and the psychology of political deliberation as well as the logic and defects of each speaker's actual arguments: see C. MacLeod, "Reason and Necessity: Thuc. III. 9–14, 37–48," *JHS* 98 (1978): 64–78.

15. *Structure*, pp. 156–57.

16. Ibid., p. 156. For the *topoi*, see T. C. Burgess, "Epideictic Literature," *University of Chicago Studies in Classical Philology* 3 (1902): 89–261, or J. Ziolkowski, *Thucydides and the Tradition of Funeral Speeches at Athens* (Ph.D. diss., Chapel Hill, 1963; rev. ed., New York, 1981).

role in Nicias' thinking and in other epideictic speeches. One might explain this by noting that Pericles praises the Athenians' accomplishments while Nicias laments their failure. The former wishes to claim credit, the latter to distance himself from responsibility. It is unlikely that the similarities between Pericles' calm *epideixis* and Nicias' two last frantic appeals "were created consciously and carefully in order to make the reader compare them":¹⁷ I doubt that Thucydides intended any parallelism to be noticed between two speeches so distant and of such disproportionate length. Rawlings' observation of the inversion, however, helps to clarify what made Nicias' *parainesis* so inept and pathetic simultaneously. The account conveys the desperation that colors the narrative from this point to the end of Book 7 and into Book 8.

The nature of the Athenian's encouragement illustrates the enemy's assertion: Nicias and his troops are in a state of ἀπόνοια, desperate disregard of calculation, resulting from their circumstances (7. 67. 4). Gone is the πρόνοια of Pericles or Themistocles' ability to improvise as needed (αὐτοσχεδιάζειν τὰ δέοντα). Nicias appeals to the specious terms that the Athenians at Melos had recently declared to be irrelevant to power and conducive to avoidable disasters (5. 89, 111. 3). He embodies the rhetoric of conventional values and nostalgia for the code of the heroic defender—although, ironically, he is the aggressor.¹⁸ Such arguments in Thucydides always signify impending disaster for the pleader, as here. His explicit criticism of Nicias here suggests disapproval of other speakers in his work who employ similar, traditional arguments.

Men apply noble concepts *in extremis*, when no alternative is evident. The strategy of the fair-sounding phrase reveals desperation in Thucydides' *History*, as consideration of the similarly desperate plights of the Plataeans and the Melians makes clear. All lean on Hellenic custom and law, ancestors and their accomplishments, the gods, hope and fortune, and, finally, the possibility of deliverance, simple survival.¹⁹ These men perish miserably. Their histories exemplify that suffering and disturbance to which Thucydides alerted the reader from the beginning (1. 1. 2, 23. 1–3). Moralistic rhetoric in war is futile.

17. Rawlings, *Structure*, p. 161.

18. Nicias recognizes the reversal at 7. 11. 4. The theme of the "attacker on the defensive" has various Homeric parallels, of which the closest perhaps is Nestor at *Iliad* 15. 661–66. He appeals to his men's sense of group responsibility (αἰδώς) and the recollection of children, wives, property, and parents. Like Homer's Greeks at Troy, Thucydides' Athenians in Sicily become a beleaguered *polis* and even a *patria* (7. 64. 2, 77. 4, 77. 7).

		<i>Melians or [Athenians]</i>	<i>Nicias</i>
19.	<i>Plataeans</i>		
νόμιμα, τὰ κοινά	3. 58. 3–4, 59. 1–2	5. 90. 104, [105. 1.4]	7. 77. 2. 86. 5
πάτρες, πρόγονοι	3. 58. 4–5, 59. 1–2	5. 112. 2	7. 69. 2
θεοί	3. 58. 1, 5; 59. 2	5. 104. [105], 112. 2	7. 69. 2; 77. 2–4
ἐλπὶς, τύχη	3. 57. 4	5. 102 <i>bis</i> , [103] <i>ter</i> , 104 <i>bis</i> , [111. 2–3], 112. 2, 113 <i>bis</i>	7. 61. 2–3, 63. 4, 77. 1–2 <i>bis</i> , 77. 4, 86. 5
(and compounds)		5. [87], 88, [91. 2] <i>bis</i> , [101], [103. 2], [105. 4], 110. 1, [111. 2], 112. 2	7. 61. 1, 63. 3, 64. 2, 77. 1, 77. 7
σωτηρία	3. 59. 4		

The Athenians several times disparage the use of "fair-sounding phrases": 1. 73. 2; 5. 89, 111. 3.

Archaiologeîn, then, parallels in speech Nicias' earlier act, his refusal to depart Sicily after a lunar eclipse (7. 50. 4). On both occasions, he exhibits an inability to solve a critical problem or even to face it properly, that failure of nerve that Pericles had warned against (2. 63. 3 τὸ γὰρ ἄπραγμον οὐ σφύζεται μὴ μετὰ τοῦ δραστηρίου τεταγμένον), and that breakdown of rationality that is chronicled for the plague and for *stasis* in Corcyra. His appeals to familial glory, Athenian freedom, wives, children, and ancestral gods were hardly effective in the post-heroic world of the Peloponnesian War. *Archaiologeîn*, like ἀρχαιοτρόπος (1. 71. 2)²⁰ and related concepts in Thucydides (cf. the twenty appearances of παλαι-words, 1. 1–21), connotes failure to recognize a new set of conditions and inability to conceive new approaches to more complex problems. Nicias could not devise in speech or act what was necessary—the virtue of Themistocles (1. 138. 3).

The historian's critical presentation conveys what he deemed most significant about this speech, its impotence. Tension and pressure, even trite speeches, are common in any war, but Thucydides has characteristically reserved for the dramatic moment of pathos the paradigm of useless talk for the sake of talk. Thucydides' neglect of the words themselves and his emphasis on their trivial substance reflect his estimate of Nicias' performance. That the encouragement was delivered at all and that it accomplished nothing outweighed in importance its actual words, arguments, and form.

Nicias' last words exemplify the criticism found in 7. 69. 2. Not only the substance is obsolete; the style is remarkable again: there is (uniquely) not a single abstract or verbal noun in Nicias' last harangue (7. 77). It is delivered after the Athenian defeat and just before the Athenian forces set out from the environs of Syracuse. The reflections complement a description of extreme pathos concerning the sick and wounded left behind (7. 75). Nicias' theme is hope (three occurrences), all that the Athenians have now. The speech, given at a shout (7. 76), is saturated with the religious and other delusions of a desperate man (cf., for the psychology, 4. 108. 4).²¹ It seems incorrect to judge him "the most tragic character in the *History*" and "almost heroic."²² In the beginning he had bungled matters while trying to prevent the expedition, and later his superstitious scruples had prevented him from leaving Sicily after the lunar eclipse (7. 50. 4). Nor does this self-exculpation, on private and theological rather than political and strategic grounds, suit his circumstances. His acts never fit his resolutions, events rarely conform to his

20. These two compounds of *archaiō-* occur only once in Thucydides, and there are no others (save for proper names and technical terms).

21. The speech is analyzed by Luschkat, *Feldherrnreden*, pp. 101–6, and by L. Edmunds, *Chance and Intelligence in Thucydides* (Cambridge, Mass., 1975), pp. 135–39 (the latter's analysis of Nicias, pp. 109–42, does not mention the passage under review here). Plutarch (*Nic.* 26. 6) uses the speech to describe the disconsolate army. Dionysius (*Thuc.* 42) considers the speech a model of a consolation.

22. H. D. Westlake, *Individuals in Thucydides* (Cambridge, 1968), pp. 210, 201; cf. his earlier article, "Nicias in Thucydides," *CQ* 35 (1941): 58–65.

predictions, a historical fact that conditions Thucydides' presentation. He has enough honesty to hint at the immorality of the Athenian venture (77. 1, 3, 4), but insufficient perspicacity to reject a self-serving view of divine retribution. He presents a simplistic version of conventional beliefs about expiation.

In his distress, he runs together such "archaiologic" sentiments and language as ἐλπίς (*ter*), σωτηρία, κακοπαθία,²³ εὐτυχία (*bis*),²⁴ πολλὰ ἐς θεοῦς (*ter*), νόμιμα, φθόνος (*ter*),²⁵ τιμωρία, δρᾶσαι-παθεῖν, and οἶκτος.²⁶ These characterize a desperate attempt to persuade the army that he and they have "suffered enough." Old moral catchwords seem to comfort him, thinking as he does in terms painfully different from murderous reality. His subsequent advice is more practical, but his "Melian" remarks on divine justice amount to a covert appeal for divine mercy (77. 2-4), inappropriate to a military harangue and at odds with other Greeks in its understanding of the divine mechanism: compare, for instance, Phoenix's view of retribution (*Iliad* 9. 496-514), or Solon's prayer (frag. 1), or the chorus of Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*. The "archaiologic" content, concepts, and style of 7. 77. 1-4 seem to supply an inverted version of Herodotus' account of Polycrates (3. 39-43).

Furthermore, Nicias' claim that Athenian aggression, like the aggression of others in the past, is only human, and that its consequences are therefore worthy of divine pity,²⁷ seems outrageous, as a desperate extension of the amoral justification of power that the Athenians had purveyed at Melos: "We consider it to be clearly established among men that one will rule wherever he can, compelled by all the dictates of nature" (5. 105. 2 ἡγούμεθα . . . τὸ ἀνθρώπειόν τε σαφῶς διὰ παντὸς ὑπὸ φύσεως ἀναγκαίας, οὗ ἂν κρατῇ ἄρχειν). In this last exhortation, Nicias reveals the brittleness of his previous moralistic rhetoric; yet his courage, in his impossible task, affected Thucydides. The dramatic contrast between his previous career and its end, between his life and his death, between his strategic perception and his tactical failures, led Thucydides to compose a unique assessment of him.

II. THUCYDIDES' EVALUATION OF NICIAS

Nicias, in a final judgment expressed with great care, was the least worthy of Thucydides' contemporaries to meet such a death because of his lifelong practice, guided by law and precedent, of virtue (7. 86. 5).²⁸

23. Only here in Thucydides. For a discussion of "Pathos in Thucydides," see D. Lateiner, *Antichthon* 11 (1977): 42-51.

24. At the debate concerning the expedition, Alcibiades exploited Nicias' reputation for good luck (6. 17. 1; cf. 5. 16. 1).

25. Ἀνεπίφθοτος appears here only; ἐπίφθοτος only here and at 2. 64. 5; φθόνος four other times. Edmunds, *Chance and Intelligence*, p. 137, characterizes the general's present argument as "anfractuous."

26. Seven occurrences, all in speeches and all (save here) in Book 3, where Mytilene and Plataea are at issue.

27. 7. 77. 4 ἤλθον γάρ που καὶ ἄλλοι τινὲς ἤδη ἐφ' ἐτέρους, καὶ ἀνθρώπεια δρᾶσαντες ἀνεκτὰ ἐπαθον. καὶ ἡμᾶς εἰκὸς νῦν τὰ τε ἀπὸ τοῦ θεοῦ ἐλπίζειν ἡπιώτερα ἔξειν (οἴκτου γὰρ ἀπ' αὐτῶν ἀξιώτεροι ἤδη ἐσμὲν ἢ φθόνου). . . .

28. For this interpretation, see C. F. Smith, *Thucydides, Book VII* (Boston, 1886), pp. 193-94, or somewhat differently and obscurely, Dover, *HCT* 4: 461-64.

Thucydides pitied the man, indeed admired some aspects of his character, but even the last comment on the man cogently stresses the conventionality of his life and mind. The historian was always interested in Nicias' motives, political moves, and military maneuvers, but he does not wish to minimize Nicias' limitations. His piety and superstition outweigh his intelligence (ξύνεσις). His moral qualities cannot excuse the political and military incompetence evident to Thucydides in his paralyzing caution, tantamount to inactivity (cf. 5. 16. 1 and 2. 63. 3), and in his reliance on fortune, stressed at the beginning and end of the latter part of the *History* (5. 16. 1 and 7. 86. 5).²⁹ Thucydides' judgment is primarily political, not moral or personal, for he is writing history useful for those who wish to understand human affairs, not pontificate about them. Nicias revealed an absence of political skills in leading the Athenian *demos*, and, at least in Sicily, his military perspicacity rarely achieved success (cf. 7. 42. 3, 47–50). Even when he reasoned soundly about Pylos and Sicily,³⁰ he could not lead the *demos* to endorse his perceptions and policy. Pericles scorned such incapacity (2. 60. 5–6): ὅτε γὰρ γνοὺς καὶ μὴ σαφῶς διδάξας ἐν ἴσῳ καὶ εἰ μὴ ἐνεθυμήθη. The historian's last appraisal of Nicias reflects on his character because, as with Alcibiades, his character had a significant role in his city's fortunes. The judgment does not excuse his political failure; it rather juxtaposes the inglorious dishonor of his execution in Sicily with the public honor of his life in Athens. The dissonance between his private virtues and public failings demanded remark. Thucydides' respect for Nicias' high sense of duty and personal heroism at the end do not incline him to be indulgent toward his incompetent leadership.

Nicias delivered the same justification of himself in his last words (77. 2): "And yet I have spent my life (δεδιήτημαι) performing many a religious obligation (πολλὰ μὲν ἐς θεοὺς νόμιμα), and many just and irreproachable acts toward my fellow men (πολλὰ δὲ ἐς ἀνθρώπους δίκαια καὶ ἀνεπίφθονα)." Here one has Nicias' *arete* defined positively and negatively. He has done what others consider right and noble, *and* avoided giving offense. The significant Greek words above are echoed in the evaluation of 86. 5: τὴν πᾶσαν ἐς ἀρετὴν νενομισμένην ἐπιτήδευσιν. His good conduct was always guided by custom and law in order to be acceptable to the gods and inoffensive to his fellow men. This timidity affected his every campaign, political and military, leading him to support peace in 421 for self-interested, more than civic, motives (5. 16. 1). Thucydides asserts that his concerns were to remain safe (ἀπαθής), not endanger his good luck (εὐτυχία), be rid of difficulties, and (ironic, for the

29. Dover, *HCT* 4: 461–63; H. A. Murray, "Two Notes on the Evaluation of Nicias in Thucydides," *BICS* 8 (1961): 33–46; D. Lateiner, "The Speech of Teutiaplus," *GRBS* 16 (1975): 183–84. Another fault to be noted is Nicias' tendency to overrate enemy strength: his speech in, and letter to, Athens unduly emphasize Sicilian strength and success.

30. His repeated attempts to shirk responsibility do not gain Thucydides' admiration or ours: 4. 28. 3; 6. 23. 3; 7. 15. G. Donini, "Thucydides 7. 42. 3: Does Thucydides Agree with Demosthenes' View?" *Hermes* 92 (1964): 116–19, seconded by Dover, *HCT* 4: 419–20, uncovers another subtle way in which the historian makes known his opinion, here another criticism of Nicias' dilatory conduct.

historian) leave a name behind for having never in his life caused the city harm (οὐδὲν σφήλας τὴν πόλιν διεγένετο). Since he was preoccupied with maintaining his reputation, τὸ ἀκίνδυνον (*bis*) appealed most to him, and one recalls Pericles' stricture on that subject (2. 63. 3).

The most notable feature of these last words on Nicias is the absence of any reference to his abilities. *Arete* does not in itself necessarily include *xynesis*, political insight.³¹ The judgments on Brasidas and the Peisistratids, mentioning both qualities, make this clear (6. 54. 5): ἐπετήδευσαν ἐπὶ πλείστον δὴ τύραννοι οὗτοι ἀρετὴν καὶ ξύνεσιν—"These tyrants manifested more than any others the highest merit and intelligence." *Arete*, for Thucydides, no longer sufficed to denote all of a man's potential excellence. Thucydides most admired men's intellectual qualities. Consider Themistocles (1. 138. 3 οἰκεῖα ξύνεσις, κράτιστος γνώμων, ἄριστος εἰκαστὴς προεώρα, κράτιστος αὐτοσχεδιάζειν); Pericles (1. 139. 4, 2. 34. 6, 2. 65. 5–9 πρόνοια, δυνατὸς τῇ γνώμῃ, οὐδενὸς ἥσσω γινῶναι τὰ δέοντα, κτλ.); Brasidas (4. 81. 1–3 ἀρετὴ καὶ ξύνεσις); perhaps Archidamus (1. 79. 2 ξυνετὸς δοκῶν εἶναι καὶ σώφρων); Alcibiades (6. 15. 4 κράτιστα διαθεῖς τὰ τοῦ πολέμου); Hermocrates (6. 72. 2 ἐς τὰλλα ξύνεσιν οὐδενὸς λειπόμενος); Antiphon (8. 68. 1 ἀρετῇ τε οὐδενὸς ὕστερος καὶ κράτιστος ἐνθυμηθῆναι); Phrynichus (8. 27. 5); and Theramenes (8. 68. 4). Nicias neither arrogates to himself, nor is credited with, such political virtues. His excellence is mainly personal and moral.

Such judgments are usually proffered when the qualities begin to manifest themselves,³² but occasionally Thucydides provides a final comment on a character's capacities, or at least on that quality that most affected the war, which is Thucydides' proper subject. Westlake has not adequately refuted Bender and Murray, who demonstrate Thucydides' disapproval of Nicias' actions.³³ Westlake maintains that Thucydides does not portray Nicias as lacking intelligence, does not implicitly deny that quality to Nicias here, and does not expect us to notice the narrowness of his praise. But the hedged assessment agrees carefully with the unfavorable portrait of the ever-anxious Nicias as an incompetent Athenian politician and military commander throughout.³⁴ He died as he had lived,

31. Westlake, *Individuals*, p. 209, cites the peculiar example of 8. 68. 1 (Antiphon) to prove that "*arete* may denote ability," but that passage couples *arete* with superior ability to plan and speak to the point. "Force of character" and intellect impressed Thucydides, who perhaps in this passage refers to Antiphon's loyalty and boldness as *arete*; see Gomme, Andrewes, and Dover, *HCT* 5: 172; W. H. Forbes, *Thucydides, Book I*, part 2 (Oxford, 1895), p. 158, s.v.

32. G. T. Griffith, "Some Habits of Thucydides when Introducing Persons," *PCPhS* 7 (1961): 30–31.

33. Westlake, *Individuals*, p. 210; Murray, "Two Notes"; G. F. Bender, *Der Begriff des Staatsmannes bei Thukydides* (Würzburg, 1938), pp. 49–51, esp. n. 139. The last author neatly compares the "self-defense" clauses of Pericles and Nicias that both begin with *kairōi* (2. 60. 5 and 7. 77. 2).

34. Dover, *HCT* 4: 461; Edmunds, *Chance and Intelligence*, pp. 129, 140–42. No other speaker in Thucydides is faulted for inadequate rhetoric; no one (save Alcibiades) speaks on more occasions (sixteen). See J. Patwell, "Grammar, Discourse, and Style in Thucydides Book 8" (Ph.D. diss., University of Pennsylvania, 1978), pp. 79, 85–89.

trying to serve himself and his city but misjudging and failing in his purpose.³⁵

Judged by the values of his fifth-century peers, Nicias was *agathos*. That is to say, he was of respectable (although not outstanding) birth,³⁶ he possessed wealth (7. 86. 4, Lys. 19. 47, Xen. *Vect.* 4. 14, Plut. *Nic.* 3–4), he performed with great expense his civic and religious duties, he served his state in war, he was elected to high office. He pursued and cultivated traditional *arete*, good credentials in the democracy, and he did what he could to preserve his carefully nurtured reputation.³⁷ His notion of *arete* was incomplete and his leadership wanted energy, but his misfortune (δυστυχία) originally proceeded from the miscalculations of his fellow citizens. The man who wished least to trust himself to fortune (5. 16. 1, 6. 23. 3) finally had most need to pray for a decent one, and met with disaster. He consequently deserves his brief but poignant comment on the reversals of fortune.

Nicias certainly had assessed correctly the difficulty of the Athenian attempt on Sicily. Both Nicias and Thucydides penetrated Alcibiades' personal motives (6. 12. 2, 15), both exploded the Segestan promise of military funds (6. 22, 8. 2 and 46. 2); and Nicias' estimate of Sicilian political stability, of Sicilian willingness to form a coalition, and of Sicilian ability to launch a fleet all proved substantially correct (20. 2, 21. 1, 20. 4). Nicias had also foreseen that supplies would be hard to procure for so huge and distant a force, and that the enemy cavalry would severely hamper Athenian operations (6. 21. 2, 22. 1; 20. 4, 21. 1, 22. 1). Events in Sicily forced him to ask for reinforcements, in just those matters which he had analyzed so thoroughly: money, supplies, and cavalry (71. 2, 74. 2). He had realized that the conquest of Sicily was a *mega ergon*, indeed a "diseased love of the distant" (6. 8. 4 and 13. 1), and he had applied his apotrepic powers of speech—to no avail. Nicias was the realist at the debate, when the Athenians did not listen to him. Yet his insight and knowledge repeatedly led him into error. Nicias sailed away, aware of the difficulties to come—a Cassandra figure, as Stahl suggests—but he was not freed from the necessity to act. The Sicilian campaigns were fought and lost through indecision, bad luck, and mistakes. Nicias suffered defeat and illness along with his men. As they deserved and received commemoration for their suffering, so does he. Thucydides affects one's emotions in his description of the abandonment of the sick and wounded, as the Athenian survivors depart from Syracuse (7. 75).

35. Thucydides can only have *inferred* the dead man's motive for surrendering to Gylippus (7. 86. 4). Cf. W. E. Thompson, "Individual Motivation in Thucydides," *C&M* 30 (1969): 158–74.

36. See J. K. Davies, *Athenian Propertied Families* (Oxford, 1971), pp. 403–4.

37. A. W. H. Adkins, "The *Arete* of Nicias: Thucydides 7. 86," *GRBS* 16 (1975): 379–92, esp. 388, or, more succinctly, Bender, *Begriff*, pp. 49–50, n. 139. The general had confessed that he preferred chancing death at the enemy's hands to returning to Athens, perhaps to be tried on an unjust charge of cowardice (7. 48. 4) and executed: "as disgraceful a proposition as any general in history" ever advanced (Dover, *HCT* 4: 426).

Nicias, because he accurately foresaw and foretold it all, least deserved his fate, and so receives his own measure of sympathy.³⁸

On the other hand, Thucydides thought that the Athenians might well have won and came near to winning (2. 65. 11; 6. 15. 4, 49. 1–2; 7. 2. 4, 28. 3). The decisive errors, committed at home and in Sicily, were partly the fault of Nicias. His desire not to extend the empire of Athens is attractive, after the fact, but does not conform to the policies that led Thucydides to admire Pericles. Nicias' imperial policy, or lack of long-range policy (5. 16. 1; 6. 9. 3, 18. 3, 6), is embodied in a moralistic rhetoric that accorded poorly with empire. Thucydides noted an internal contradiction in Athens' empire, a political and military system that needed simultaneously to consolidate and secure possessions already acquired and to continue to awe other states with new exploits (6. 18. 3; cf. 2. 62. 3, 63. 2–3). In addition to Nicias' expressed discomfort with the reality of the Athenian empire, his private superstition caused catastrophe in the field (7. 50. 4), after his initial political opposition, timid plan of attack, and blunt communiqué had misfired.

Although his policy of no further expansion is partly endorsed by the Sicilian narrative (and by comparison with some sentiments attributed to Pericles), he cannot be the historian's mouthpiece, for that policy is explicitly superseded and contradicted by the late judgments of 6. 15. 4 and 2. 65. 11: ἡμαρτήθη καὶ ὁ ἐς Σικελίαν πλοῦς, ὃς οὐ τοσοῦτον γνώμης ἀμάρτημα ἦν. . . . Nicias was wrong to believe that an imperial policy and the formidable expeditionary force could not have succeeded, even though he correctly analyzed the logistical problem: οἱ ἐκπέμψαντες οὐ τὰ πρόσφορα τοῖς οἰχομένοις ἐπιγιγνώσκοντες. . . . As for Athenian internal politics, they confused him both when he was present in Athens and when he was on duty overseas. His lack of boldness and enterprise in Sicily is portrayed as culpably timid, or, at best, as impolitic and inept.

Nicias exemplifies an archaic concept of *arete* that no longer applied in a world at war. His approach was neither persuasive to his fellow citizens nor effective against enemies. Thucydides' genuine dismay at the demise of Nicias and at the destruction of traditional values (e.g., 2. 52. 3–4; 3. 83. 1) never led him to suggest that those values, especially the private values, suited the radically changed situation that the Peloponnesian War had engendered. Nicias, in the most charitable view, is an ambivalent hero, one whom time had passed by, choosing, for his part (ἰδίᾳ), to die at the enemy's hand sooner than face trial in Athens on a charge of dishonorable conduct (7. 48. 4 ἐπ' αἰσχρᾷ αἰτίᾳ). He is portrayed as more concerned with himself, his honor and inadequacies, than with the advantage of his *polis* (cf. 5. 16. 1, 6. 9. 2). This egocentrism proved destructive for man and state, just as his unwavering belief in his own

38. The present paragraph is indebted to both Bender, *Begriff*, pp. 39–57, and H. P. Stahl, "Speeches and Course of Events in Books Six and Seven of Thucydides," in Stadter, *Speeches in Thucydides*, pp. 60–78, esp. 65–76. Stahl, however, overrates Nicias' insight. The next paragraph owes much to an unpublished lecture by D. P. Tompkins, "The Death of Nicias" (1974).

merit mistakenly led him to expect a different and better fate. He was so victimized by his concern with personal shame and seductive moral labels that he led his troops into irremediable disaster (cf. 5. 111. 3). Nicias tried to avoid depending on *tyche* but spoke of it constantly and came to place all hope in it.³⁹ He consistently failed to manipulate men and events as he needed to. The tragic warrior became an agent of his own destruction, and thereby a victim.⁴⁰ To the last breath he was deceived of his hopes (7. 86. 4). Nicias' beliefs, reasoning, practices, and policies were now obsolete—just as his arguments had been at 7. 69.⁴¹

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39. *Tyche*: 5. 16. 1, 6. 23. 3, 7. 61. 3; *dystychia*: 7. 86. 5; *eutychia*: 5. 16. 1, 6. 23. 3, 7. 63. 4, 7. 77. 2, 3; cf. Edmunds, *Chance and Intelligence*, pp. 131, 139. Pericles rebukes (1. 140. 1) those who blame their fortune, as he faults those who cannot adequately explain a situation (2. 60. 5 ἐρμηνεύσαι). These and other observations on good and bad leadership apply most aptly to Nicias.

40. Tompkins, "The Death of Nicias."

41. D. P. Tompkins and the Editor especially, and two sceptical referees as well, improved every page of this paper.