

## dianoesis

Vol 13 (2022)

Thomas Hobbes: Individualism, Freedom, Sovereignty



### A Note on Hobbes's Thucydides

*Kyriakos Demetriou*

doi: [10.12681/dia.37781](https://doi.org/10.12681/dia.37781)

## A Note on Hobbes's Thucydides

**Kyriakos Demetriou,**  
*Cyprus Academy of Sciences, Arts and Letters*  
*University of Cyprus*  
k.demetriou@ucy.ac.cy

**Abstract:** The aim of this paper is to examine Hobbes's translation of Thucydides in the post-renaissance philological context and show that it surpasses other existing texts in its syntactical and morphological adherence to the original Greek text. Through this examination, Thomas Hobbes's understudied Greek scholarship will shine in crystal clear clarity. Furthermore, it is proposed that the similarities between the two authors stem primarily from their shared viewpoint on political matters and human psychology, rather than from Thucydides having a decisive impact on Hobbes.

**Keywords:** Thucydides, Hobbes, state of nature, political matters, human psychology, history, political philosophy, human nature, civil war

The similarities between Thucydides' and Hobbes's thought are undeniable. In the 1980s, scholars became increasingly interested in intertextual similarities, but soon research expanded on issues of conceptual and philosophical convergence, especially those that define their descriptions of

life in the state of nature and the primary causes of conflict between individuals and struggle between rival groups and nations, their anthropology, the philosophy of morality, and other central theoretical arguments. George Klosko pointed out that the gloomy passage in *Leviathan* regarding the pre-political condition can be traced back to the text of Thucydides, whereas Clifford W. Brown argued that Hobbes's translation of Thucydides constitutes "an integral part of his offerings to the public on the nature of man and society".<sup>1</sup> The idea that Hobbes somehow reproduced or expanded upon the philosophy of the *History of the Peloponnesian War* in his political thought (or that it significantly shaped Hobbes's own understanding and perception of human nature) is appealing, and to some degree, compelling, even though clinging too much to "influences" and similarities derive from our privileged advantage of knowing the unfolding entirety of Hobbes's ideas – a privilege he obviously did not enjoy.

Still, what has been overlooked over time, is the significance of the philosopher's classical scholarship in its own right. His classical scholarship has been understandably overshadowed by his political philosophy. Despite the surge of interest in Hobbes in the past 75 years, his extensive translations of classical prose or verse have remained overlooked and understudied for three reasons – two major and one minor: first, because they had presumably little to add to a proper

---

<sup>1</sup> George Klosko and Daryl Rice, "Thucydides' and Hobbes's State of Nature", *History of Political Thought*, 6, 1985, pp. 405-9; Clifford W. Brown, "Thucydides, Hobbes, and the Derivation of Anarchy", *History of Political Thought*, 8, 1987, pp. 33-62. For the discussion, see Gabriella Slomp, "Hobbes, Thucydides and the three greatest things", *History of Political Thought*, 11, 1990, pp. 565-86. One of the earliest studies Hobbes' Thucydides is that of Richard Schlatter, "Hobbes and Thucydides", *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 6.3, 1945, pp. 350-362. See also, Clifford Orwin, "Stasis and Plague: Thucydides on the Dissolution of Society", *Journal of Politics*, 50, 1988, pp. 831-47; Robin Sowerby, "Thomas Hobbes's Translation of Thucydides", *Translation and Literature*, 7.2, 1998, pp. 147-69. Laurie M. Johnson, *Thucydides, Hobbes, and the Interpretation of Realism*, Northern Illinois University Press, 1993. More recent studies: Ioannis D. Evrigenis, "Hobbes's Thucydides", *Journal of Military Ethics*, 5, 2006, pp. 303-316; Chris Campbell, "The Rhetoric of Hobbes' Translation of Thucydides", *The Review of Politics*, 84.1, 2022, pp. 1-24.

understanding of his political treatises (it was something like a parergon), and secondly, because great literati and purist philologists, like John Dryden, Alexander Pope, and even Coleridge, dismissed his translations as poor if not vulgar.

It is undeniable that Hobbes's translation (and, of course, interpretation) of Thucydides lent support to his major premises and contentions in his political philosophy, both in *Leviathan* and other works: for instance, that by the law of nature the strong should rule the weak, that justice is meaningless in international relations or wherever there is no sovereign power. Furthermore, Thucydides' *History* could have provided an antidote to the moralizing overtones and "misconceptions" of classical political theory and historiography, such as those of Plato, Aristotle, Cicero and Seneca. Hobbes, as is well known, was very critical of the intellectual authorities of classical antiquity, especially when it comes to their concept of civil liberty. Thucydides was an exception among ancient authors.

Hobbes, who was born in 1588, studied at Magdalen Hall at Oxford from 1603 to 1608 and became a well-versed classical scholar, immersed in Greek and Latin literature. Apart from Thucydides he produced the first English translation of Aristotle's *Rhetoric*, which was anonymously published in 1637. Additionally, when he was already well into his eighties, he translated the entire *Odyssey* and *Iliad* into English verse (published in 1676-1677).<sup>2</sup> Hobbes's translation of Homer is clear, vigorous, and fast paced, with iambic pentameter lines and a fixed rhyme scheme. But it is also quite careless about including whole sentences. Interestingly, Hobbes confessed that he translated Homer because at his mature age he "had nothing else to do". "Why publish it? Because I thought it might take off my Adversaries from shewing their folly upon my more serious Writings, and set them upon my Verses to

---

<sup>2</sup> Hobbes, *Homer's Iliads in English by Tho. Hobbes of Malmsbury. To which may be added Homer's Odysseys Englished by the same Author*, London, 1676.

shew their wisdom”.<sup>3</sup> Hobbes’s playful “confession” was taken seriously, thereby providing an additional third reason for not taking his classical scholarship seriously. However, the truth is that Hobbes spent several years translating and composing the ancient texts and various records indicate that he regarded his work as anything but a frivolous entertainment. Published in 1629, his translation of Thucydides must have taken four years of hard work.<sup>4</sup>

The purpose of this brief paper is to examine Hobbes’s translation in the post-renaissance philological context and demonstrate that it far exceeded existing texts in syntactical and morphological faithfulness to the original Greek text. In this way, Thomas Hobbes’s Greek scholarship will shine in crystal clear clarity. At the same time, it aims to suggest that similarities between the two authors largely resulted from a comparable or even identical viewpoint on political matters and premises on human psychology, rather than from Thucydides having a decisively formative impact on Hobbes. Setting aside obvious similarities, it is much more consistent with Thucydidean philosophy to attribute common elements as those incorporated in Hobbes’s corpus to similar conditions of extreme vulnerability and political instability. This is consistent with Hobbes’s fundamental philosophical viewpoint, namely, that there is a transhistorical consistency in the manifestations of human behaviour. Under historical contingencies and social circumstances that bear strong affinities, people tend to think rationally or instinctively react in similar ways; this is a general and universal behavioral pattern. Hobbes integrated essential “Thucydidean concepts” into his political and ethical discourse as he lived in a similar atmosphere of political turmoil and civil conflict as Thucydides.

---

<sup>3</sup> Quoted in Eric Nelson, ed. Thomas Hobbes: *Translations of Homer, The Iliad and the Odyssey*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008, p. xv. Noticeably Nelson provided the first critical edition of Hobbes’ *Homer*.

<sup>4</sup> The title page is dated 1629, but Hobbes was able to send a copy to a friend on January 1st, 1628.

It is worth noting that there is a common and almost overpowering connection between Thucydides and Hobbes with political realism. One wonders, however, whether “political realism” could be traced back to Homer’s *Iliad* and especially the *Odyssey*, as well as in many other classical works, such as Herodotus or ancient Greek tragedy. There are definitely conceptual elements and various assumptions that would define the framework of an “early classical realism”, such as the timelessness of self-interest, the strike for self-preservation and aggressiveness, and the view of human nature as not inherently benevolent, which can be prominently traced back to the Homeric epics. Only recently scholars have finally been engaged in the overdue project of attempting to locate connections between Hobbes’s political theory and these translations of Homer’s great epics, a testament to Hobbes’s intellectual potency, even in the twilight of his long life.<sup>5</sup>

## I

### *Lost in translation: Composition and Sources*

Why did Thomas Hobbes, in his early career as a man of letters, undertake the arduous task of rendering a new translation of the *History of the Peloponnesian War*? The history of the translations may shed some light on the reasons of his undertaking.

Thucydides’ Latin translation was made available by the humanist and priest Lorenzo Valla about 1452, in the spirit of the Renaissance humanistic tradition of drawing upon Greek and Roman texts for guidance in contemporary politics. Thus Valla pointed out in his Preface that true histories are useful to the moderns as a means to emulate and stimulate the true spirit of virtue, citizenship and heroism. Valla must have used a Greek text that preserved various readings subsequently

---

<sup>5</sup> See e.g., Andrea Catanzaro, *Politics through the Iliad and the Odyssey: Hobbes writes Homer*, Taylor & Francis: New York, 2019.

lost.<sup>6</sup> Valla's translation is thought to have been made from a now-lost manuscript, and his Latin wording is occasionally cited as an independent source of evidence for textual uncertainties. The *editio princeps* of Thucydides was printed by Aldus in 1502. In 1527 Bishop Seyssel of Marseilles (Claude de Seyssel), afterwards bishop of Marseilles and Archbishop of Turin, translated Thucydides in French (he was the first to put the *History* into a modern language), using Valla's inaccurate Latin version, which inevitably resulted in a much distorted and inaccurate French version (*L'Histoire de Thucydide Athenien, de la guerre, qui fut entre les Peloponnesiens et Athéniens* (Paris, 1527)). In his prologue, he stated that this is one of the translations he has done for the use of King Louis XII, who could obtain useful lessons suitable to a modern monarch. The famous printer Jodocus Badius was contracted to produce 1225 copies on paper and a few on vellum. Despite inaccuracies and infelicities in style, in the fifty years following this edition, Seyssel's (mis)translation was retranslated into several modern languages: Francesco di Soldo Strozzi published the *History* in Venice in 1545, which he dedicated to Cosimo de Medici; a Spanish translation was printed at Salamanca in 1564 by "el Secretario Diego Gracian";<sup>7</sup> a second French translation was published in 1600 by Louis Jaussaud,<sup>8</sup> who used the first Estienne edition of the revised Greek and Latin text (1564).<sup>9</sup>

At the time Hobbes embarked on translating Thucydides from the original Greek text, using the 1594 bilingual edition by Aemilius Portus (which contained the Latin alongside with

---

<sup>6</sup> For Valla's text, see Marianne Pade, "Translating Thucydides: the metadiscourse of Italian humanist translators", *Renaissanceforum*, 11, 2016, pp. 2-6.

<sup>7</sup> *Historia de Thucydides: que trata de las guerras entre los Peloponesos y Athenienses; la qual allēde las grandes y notables hazañas por mar y por tierra, delos vnos y delos otros, y de sus aliados y cōfederados, esta llena de oraciones y razonamiētos prudentes y auisados a proposito de paz y de guerra ;traduzida de lengua griega en castellana ... por el secretario Diego Gracian* (En Salamanca, 1564).

<sup>8</sup> *Histoire de la guerre des Péloponnésiens et Athéniens* (Genève: Jacques Chouet, 1600).

<sup>9</sup> *Thucydidis, de bello Peloponnesiaco libri octo* (Geneva, 1564).

the Greek text) he was of course aware that an English version already existed. It was Thomas Nicolls' (a Cambridge scholar and then barrister), *The history writtome by Thucydides the Athenyan of the warre, whiche was betwene the Peloponesians and the Athenyans, translated oute of Frenche in to the Englysh language* (1550). Nicolls actually retranslated Seyssel's French text of the *History*, which in turn had been taken from the Latin translation of Valla. It was a long and winding road that inevitably resulted in an inadequate and distorted version of the Greek original. However, it cannot be dismissed on any grounds: it was a meticulous project, and it was a success. In the spirit of the age, it rendered the text in his mother tongue (often coining new words in lieu of English equivalents), disseminating knowledge about the ancients for modern emulation. It was a vehicle of classical thought that succeeded in conveying the spirit of Thucydides with an urgency and immediacy of its own. Whatever the inaccuracies in the English version of Nicolls, they were largely due to the literally corrupt translation of Seyssel that goes back to Valla's own inaccuracies. Nicolls, interestingly, belonged to the school of translators who emphasized the virtues of 'literal accuracy' (the school of the classical scholar and statesman Sir John Cheke, 1514-1557). That means, he tried to translate the text 'plainly and truly', in order to educate the young King.

Hobbes thus, in setting up on the project of translating Thucydides, stated in his Preface addressed "To the Readers" that a new English version was needed, one that should have been directly extracted from the revised Greek text of his own day, to replace the imperfect Greek text (of unknown origins) of Valla, plus the *History* needed maps and Hobbes's first edition supplied them.<sup>10</sup> But there was another significant

---

<sup>10</sup> "... They followed the Latine of Laurentius Valla, which was not without some errours, and he a Greeke Copie, not so correct as now is extant. Out of French hee [Nicolls] was done into English, (for I neede not dissemble to haue seene him in English) in the time of Kind Edward the sixth; but so, as by multiplications of errour, *hee became at length traduced, rather than translated into our Language*. Hereupon I resolved to take him immediatly from the Greeke, according to the Edition of Aemilius Porta; not refusing, or neglecting any version, Comment, or other helpe I could come by. Knowing that when with Diligence and Leasure I should haue



reason that dictated a new version: Nicolls' English, by the 1620s was profoundly outdated. Within less than a century the English language developed rapidly, so a large part of Hobbes' task was to make an accurate modernized translation to replace that of Nicolls, naturalizing the text, giving it a sense of life and vivacity.

Thus, all things considered, Hobbes's main objective was to translate the *History* in modernized English directly from the Greek with accuracy and exactness to replace the extant text of Nicolls. Suffice to say that the English language itself had developed rapidly between 1550 and 1625 that Nicolls' translation looked entirely obsolete.

Consider a few sentences from Thucydides' description of the Plague, which demonstrate Hobbes's superior understanding and correction of the Greek text.<sup>11</sup>

### The Plague<sup>12</sup>

#### 1.

Thomas Nicolls, *The hystory writtone by Thucidides the Athenyan of the warre, whiche was betwene the Peloponesians and the Athenyans, translated oute of Frenche into the Englysh language by Thomas Nicolls citezeine and goldesmyth of London* (London, 1550).

“And to them, that were infected with other sickenes, yt tourlned into this selfe same. And those, that were in full helth, founde thē soubdainly taken, without that, there was any cause preceding, that might be knowin. And furste they felte a great heate in the hedde, whereby their eyes became redde and

---

done it, though some error might remaine, yet they would be errors but of one descent; of which neuerthelesse I can discouer none, and hope they bee not many. Afther I had finished it, it lay long by mee, and other reasons taking place, my desire to communicate it ceased” (my emphasis).

<sup>11</sup> Some of those passages are to be found in Schlatter (1945), but passages in this article are drawn from the original sources.

<sup>12</sup> All passages are transcribed from the original sources via archive.org – and original linguistic elements are retained intact except letter ‘v’ was replaced with ‘u’, eg. ‘upon’ instead of ‘vpon’.

inflamed. And withinfourthe, their tongue and their throte, became all redde, & their breath became stinkyng and harshe. Whereupon, there ensued a continual neysinge, and therof their voice became hoerse. Anone after that, yt descended into the stomacke, whyche caused a greate coughe, that did righte sharpely payne them, and after that the matter came to the partes of the harte, it prouokedde them to a vomyte By meane whereof, wyth a peyne yet more vehemente, they auoyded by the mouthe, stykinge and bitter humors. And wyth that, some dyd fall into a yeskyng, whereupon they came incontynently into a palsey, whyche passed from some fourthwyth, and with othere endured longer. And allthough, that, to touche and se them wythoute, and through the bodyes: they were not excedinge hotte nor pale, but that their skynne was, as redde colour adusted, full of a lytle thynne blaynes: yet they feeled w<sup>n</sup>fourthe so maruailous a heate, that they might not indure, one onely clothe of linnen upon their fleshe, but they mst of necessytye be all bare ... But the woorste that was in this, was that men loste their harte, & hope incontynently, as they feeled themselves attain•ted. In suche sort, that many, for despaire, holding themselues for dead, habanldoned & forsoke thēself, & made no prouisyon nor resistance against the sickenes. And an other great euill was, that the malady was so cōtagious, that those, that went for to visit the sicke, were taken and infected, lyke as the shepe be, one after an other. By occasyon whereof, many dyed for lacke of succours, whereby it haplpened that many howses stode voyde, and they that went to se theym, dyed allso. And specially the most honest & honorable people, whiche toke it for shame, not to go to se nor succour their parentes and their frendes. And loued better to putt and sett fourth themselfe to manifest danger, than to faile them at their necessitie”.

*Comments:* The text is 379 words long, is quite prolix, obscure, riddled with errors, and inaccurate compared to the Greek original, most likely due to Valla's use of an unknown Greek source as well as his mistranslation of the text into Latin.

## 2.

*Eight bookes of the Peloponnesian Warre written by Thucydides the sonne of Olorus. Interpreted with faith and diligence immediately out of the Greeke by Thomas Hobbes secretary to ye late Earle of Deuonshire* (London: Henry Seile, 1629).<sup>13</sup>

“If any man were sicke before, his disease turned to this; if not, yet suddenly, without any apparent cause preceding, and being in perfect health, they were taken first with an extreame ache in their heads, rednesse and inflammation of the eyes; and then inwardly, their throats and tongues, grew presently bloody, and their breath noysome, and unsavory. Upon this, followed a sneezing and hoarsenesse, and not long after, the paine, together with a mighty cough, came downe into the breast. And when once it was settled in the stomacke, it caused vomit, and with great torment came up all manner of bilious purgation that Physitians ever named. Most of them had also the Hickeyexe, which brought with it a strong convulsion, and in some ceased quickly, but in others was long before it gave over. Their bodies outwardly to the touch, were neither very hote nor pale, but reddish livid, and beflowred with little pimples and whelkes; but so burned inwardly, as not to endure any the lightest cloathes or linnen garment, to be upon them, nor any thing but meere nakednesse ... But the greatest misery of all was, the deiection of mind, in such as found themselves beginning to be sicke (for they grew presently desperate, and gave themselves over without making any resistance) as also their dying thus like sheepe, infected by mutuall visitation; for the greatest mortality proceeded that way. For if men forbore to visite them, for feare; then they dyed forlorne, whereby many Families became empty, for want of such as should take care of them. If they forbore not, then they died themselves, and principally the honestest men. For

---

<sup>13</sup> I cite the impression of 1629, available online but without the map of Greece at [arghive.org](http://arghive.org)

out of shame, they would not spare themselves, but went in unto their friends”.

*Comments:* The text is 293 words long, compressed and densely translated as well as very faithful to the original Greek. Hobbes modernized the punctuation and spelling and substituted new words for Nicolls' obsolete ones. Where Nicolls elaborated on the text Hobbes rendered exact statements. His approach is much nearer to the simplicity and force of the original.

Nevertheless, if Hobbes might have considered Nicolls' translation out of date, and inaccurate too, Hobbes's *History* would have been considered out of date, albeit not inaccurate, a century later by the Rev. William Smith in his Preface of his translation of Thucydides:

“Mr. Hobbes, however sorry and mischievous a philosopher, was undoubtedly a very learned man. He hath shewn it beyond dispute in his translation of Thucydides ... [but] he cannot now be read with any competent degree of pleasure. He is faithful, but most servilely so, to the letter of his author. ... Too scrupulous an attachment to the letter of the original hath made the copy quite flat and heavy, the spirit is evaporated, the lofty and majestic air hath intirely disappeared. Too many low and vulgar expressions are used, which Thucydides ever studiously avoided. Such frequently occur in the midst of some grand circumstance, which they throw into a kind of burlesque, and may excite a reader's laughter. The English language hath gone through a great variation, hath been highly polished, since Mr. Hobbes wrote. Hence, tho' his terms be in general very intelligible, yet they have not that neatness, precision, and dignity, to which the polite and refined writers within the last century have habituated our ears”.

But let us have a look at Smith's own translation of the "Plague" passage:

3.

*William Smith, The History of the Peloponnesian War, translated from the Greek of Thucydides, in two volumes (London, 1753), pp. 163-4.*

"But those, who enjoy'd the most perfect health, were suddenly, without any apparent cause, seiz'd at first with head-achs extremely violent, with inflammations and fiery redness in the eyes. Within – the throat and tongue began instantly to be red as blood; the breath was drawn with difficulty and had a noisome smell. The symptoms that succeeded these were sneezing and hoarseness; and not long after, the malady descended to the breast, with a violent cough: But when once settled in the stomach, it excited vomitings, in which was thrown up all that matter physicians call discharges of bile, attended with excessive torture. A great part of the infected were subject to such violent hiccups without any discharge, as brought upon them a strong convulsion, to some but of a short, to others of a very long continuance. The body, to the outward touch was neither exceeding hot, nor of a pallid hue, but of reddish, livid, marked all over with little pustules and sores. Yet inwardly it was scorched with such excessive heat, that it could not bear the lightest covering or the finest linen upon it, but must be left quite naked.

...Yet the most affecting circumstances of this calamity were --- that dejection of mind, which constantly attended the first attack; for the mind sinking at once into despair, they the sooner gave themselves up without a struggle ---- and, that mutual tenderness in taking care of one another, which communicated the infection, and made them drop like sheep. This latter case caused the mortality to be so great. For if fear withheld them from going near one another, they died for want of help, so that many houses became quite desolate for

want of needful attendance: And, if they ventured, they were gone. This was most frequently the case of the kind and compassionate. Such persons were ashamed, out of a selfish concern for themselves, entirely to abandon their friends, when their menial servant, no longer able to endure the groans and lamentations of the dying, had been compelled to fly from such a weight of calamity”.

*Comments:* The text is 350 words long and is far from being an accurate translation of the Greek original. The language is clearly adapted to reflect the latest developments of the English language at the time.

For the reader’s convenience, I have transcribed below the original in ancient Greek which is 270 words long:

[2.49.1] Τὸ μὲν γὰρ ἔτος, ὡς ὠμολογεῖτο, ἐκ πάντων μάλιστα δὴ ἐκείνο ἄνοσον ἐς τὰς ἄλλας ἀσθενείας ἐτύγγανεν ὄν· εἰ δέ τις καὶ προύκαμνέ τι, ἐς τοῦτο πάντα ἀπεκρίθη. [2.49.2] τοὺς δὲ ἄλλους ἀπ’ οὐδεμιᾶς προφάσεως, ἀλλ’ ἐξαίφνης ὑγιεῖς ὄντας πρῶτον μὲν τῆς κεφαλῆς θέρμαι ἰσχυραὶ καὶ τῶν ὀφθαλμῶν ἐρυθήματα καὶ φλόγωσις ἐλάμβανε, καὶ τὰ ἐντός, ἢ τε φάρυγξ καὶ ἢ γλῶσσα, εὐθύς αἱματώδη ἦν καὶ πνεῦμα ἄτοπον καὶ δυσῶδες ἠφίει· [2.49.3] ἔπειτα ἐξ αὐτῶν πταρμός καὶ βράγχος ἐπεγίγνετο, καὶ ἐν οὐ πολλῷ χρόνῳ κατέβαινε ἐς τὰ στήθη ὁ πόνος μετὰ βηχὸς ἰσχυροῦ· καὶ ὁπότε ἐς τὴν καρδίαν στηρίξειεν, ἀνέστρεφέ τε αὐτὴν καὶ ἀποκαθάρσεις χολῆς πᾶσαι ὅσαι ὑπὸ ἰατρῶν ὠνομασμέναί εἰσιν ἐπῆσαν, καὶ αὐταὶ μετὰ ταλαιπωρίας μεγάλης. [2.49.4] λύγξ τε τοῖς πλέοσιν ἐνέπιπτε κενή, σπασμὸν ἐνδιδοῦσα ἰσχυρόν, τοῖς μὲν μετὰ ταῦτα λωφήσαντα, τοῖς δὲ καὶ πολλῷ ὕστερον. [2.49.5] καὶ τὸ μὲν ἔξωθεν ἀπτομένῳ σῶμα οὔτ’ ἄγαν θερμὸν ἦν οὔτε χλωρόν, ἀλλ’ ὑπέρυθρον, πελιτνόν, φλυκταίναις μικραῖς καὶ ἔλκεσιν ἐξηνηθός· τὰ δὲ ἐντός οὕτως ἐκάετο ὥστε μήτε τῶν πάνυ λεπτῶν ἱματίων καὶ σινδόνων τὰς ἐπιβολὰς μηδ’ ἄλλο τι ἢ γυμνοὶ ἀνέχεσθαι...

[2.51.4] δεινότατον δὲ παντὸς ἦν τοῦ κακοῦ ἢ τε ἀθυμία ὁπότε τις αἴσθοιτο κάμνων (πρὸς γὰρ τὸ ἀνέλπιστον εὐθύς

τραπόμενοι τῇ γνώμῃ πολλῶ μᾶλλον προΐεντο σφᾶς αὐτοὺς καὶ οὐκ ἀντεῖχον), καὶ ὅτι ἕτερος ἀφ' ἑτέρου θεραπείας ἀναπιμπλάμενοι ὥσπερ τὰ πρόβατα ἔθνησκον· καὶ τὸν πλεῖστον φθόρον τοῦτο ἐνεποιεῖ. [2.51.5] εἴτε γὰρ μὴ θέλοιεν δεδιότες ἀλλήλοις προσιέναι, ἀπώλλυντο ἐρήμοι, καὶ οἰκίαι πολλαὶ ἐκενώθησαν ἀπορία τοῦ θεραπεύσοντος· εἴτε προσίοιεν, διεφθείροντο, καὶ μάλιστα οἱ ἀρετῆς τι μεταποιούμενοι· αἰσχύνῃ γὰρ ἠφείδουν σφῶν αὐτῶν ἐσιόντες παρὰ τοὺς φίλους, ἐπεὶ καὶ τὰς ὀλοφύρσεις τῶν ἀπογιγνομένων τελευτῶντες καὶ οἱ οἰκεῖοι ἐξέκαμνον ὑπὸ τοῦ πολλοῦ κακοῦ νικώμενοι.

## 4.

Here is a modern 20<sup>th</sup>-century version, translated by Rex Warner, with an Introduction and Notes by M.I. Finley (Penguin Books, 1954).

“That year, as is generally admitted, was particularly free from all other kinds of illness, though those who did have any illness previously all caught the plague in the end. In other cases, however, there seemed to be no reason for the attacks. People in perfect health suddenly began to have burning feelings in the head; their eyes became red and inflamed; inside their mouths there was bleeding from the throat and tongue, and the breath became unnatural and unpleasant. The next symptoms were sneezing and hoarseness of voice, and before long the pain settled on the chest and was accompanied by coughing. Next the stomach was affected with stomach-aches and with vomiting of every kind of bile that has been given a name by the medical profession, all this being accompanied by great pain and difficulty. In most cases there were attacks of ineffectual retching, producing violent spasms; this sometimes ended with this stage of disease, but sometimes continued long afterwards. Externally the body was not very hot to the touch, nor was there any pallor: the skin was rather reddish and livid, breaking out into small pustules and ulcers. But inside there was a feeling of burning, so that people could

not bear the touch even of the lightest linen clothing, but wanted to be completely naked... The most terrible thing of all was the despair into which people fell when they realized that they had caught the plague; for they would immediately adopt an attitude of utter hopelessness, and, by giving in in this way, would lose their powers of resistance. Terrible, too, was the sight of people dying like sheep through having caught the disease as a result of nursing others. This indeed caused more deaths than anything else. For when people were afraid to visit the sick, then they died with no one to look after them; indeed, there were many houses in which all the inhabitants perished through lack any attention. When, on the other hand, they did visit the sick, they lost their own lives, and this was particularly true of those who made it a point of honour to act properly”.

*Comments:* The text is 359 words long, deviating heavily from the ancient Greek text, albeit enriched by later editions of the Greek text (August Immanuel Bekker, Thomas Arnold, Franciscus Göller and Ernest Frederic Poppo, Alfred Croiset, et al, and the Loeb edition translated by C.F. Smith in 1919); it is long-winded and paraphrased to make it more accessible for the native English reader.

### ***Remarks***

Hobbes meticulously translated directly from the Greek and included maps and an index. He also added concise summaries and interpretive marginal notes on political, moral, philosophical, and literary topics. He described his English version as “Interpreted with Faith and Diligence Immediately out of the Greeke”, as indeed he did. His translation is generally accurate and fluent; he rendered the Greek text (and even idioms) without disfiguring its meaning, not only as faithfully but as clearly as possible, even though occasionally he omitted phrases that seemed redundant to him, or the text was corrupt and posed insurmountable difficulties. Yet one needs to consider that changes in the grammatical structure are necessary (if not desirable), even by the standards of



modern translators for the sake of fluent reading. Overall, his opus is a landmark in the history of Thucydidean reception. As the late Professor Peter J. Rhodes observed: “A good translation was considered to be one which reflected the style of the original; and Hobbes did this in such matters as word arrangement (chiasmus and the like), forms of construction (such as ----- ἕνεκα rendered ‘for ----- sake’), and alliteration, while adding to features of the original ... to fit the Grand Style of his own time”.<sup>14</sup>

## II

### *Hobbes’s Thucydides, philosophical convergence, and appropriation*

In 1629, when Hobbes published his translation of Thucydides – notably, his first printed work – he reached the ripe age of his early forties. His admiration for Thucydides is unequivocally acknowledged in the Preface – laying bare the reasons for his high regard of the ancient historian:

The “use of history” (“To the Readers”, pp. 1 and 2)

“For the principall and proper worke of *History*, being to instruct, and enable men, by the knowledge of Actions *past*, to beare themselves prudently in the present, and proudly towards the *Future*, there is not exant any other (meerely humane) that doth more fully, and naturally performe it, then this of my Author”.

“But *Thucydides* is one, who, though he neuer digresse to reade a Lecture, Morall or Politicall, upon his owne Text, nor enter into mens hearts, further then the actions themselves evidently guide him, is yet accounted the most Politique Historiographer that euer writ. The reason whereof I take to bee this: He filleth his Narrations with that choice of matter,

---

<sup>14</sup> P.J. Rhodes, “Review Discussion: Hobbes’s Thucydides”, *Histos*, 10, 2016, p. xxxiv.

and ordereth them with that Judgement, and with such perspicuity and efficacy expresseth himselfe, that, as *Plutarch* saith, he maketh his *Auditor* a *Spectator* ... These Vertues of my Author did so take my affection, that they begat in me a desire to communicate him further; which was the first occasion that moued mee to translate him.”

Thucydides' historical narrative skillfully blends factual presentation with eloquence.

Now for his writings, two things are to be considered in them, *Truth*, and *Eloquution*. For in *Truth* consisteth the Soule, and in *Eloquution* the *Body* of History. The latter without the former, is but a picture of History; and the former without the latter, unapt to instruct” (fourth page of “Of the Life and History of Thucydides”).

Thus, for Hobbes: (a) Thucydides is undoubtedly the leading “political historiographer” (i.e., because he was able to convincingly present conflict as an essential feature of political life, especially in the form of civil discord). (b) His narrative is expertly crafted, founded upon a judicious selection of material and arranged in a manner that renders him an impartial “observer” of human affairs. (c) History is the perennial instructor for humanity and Thucydides had provided one in the spirit of pragmatism and elocution (i.e., in Hobbesian terms: rhetoric). It is these literary and philosophical merits that engendered in Hobbes an admiration for Thucydides, that eventually led him to undertake the task of translating his work. (d) Thucydides developed a historiography that could broadly fit Hobbes's model of ‘civil science’.

*In context*

Contextually, Hobbes's dislike of democracy, explicit in marginal notes of the first edition), highlights the political implications of his translation. Hobbes thought of Thucydides' "histories" as "hauing in them profitable instruction for Noblemen, and such as may come to haue the managing of great and waighty actions" (third page of Epistle Dedicatory). In "Of the Life and History of Thucydides" that preceded the text, Hobbes praised the rule of Pisistratus and of Pericles: "So that it seemeth that as he was of Regall descent, so he best approved of the Regall Government" (third page). Within the confines of a historicist reading, Hobbes's translation would seem a convenient vehicle to express his concerns over the British crisis concerning the perilous Thirty Years' War (1618-48) and the powers of the king, which were curtailed by the Petition of Right, passed by both Houses of Parliament in May 1628 and accepted by Charles I in June. Further, Hobbes seems to be echoing the growing scepticism of the Jacobean age in the field of morals and the intractability of moral disagreement. Individualism and self-interest were deemed the main driving forces behind human actions. Since the Reformation Europe was a scene of unrelentless savagery and civil unrest, wracked by religious wars and dynastic conflict. In England the debate between royalists and parliamentarians was intensified. Faced with extraordinary instability, coupled with the growing the sceptical temperament of the age, Hobbes deployed his philosophical armory by emphasizing the absolute priority of civil peace.

Francis Bacon thought of Thucydides *History* as the most perfect type of historical writing. In the second book of the *Advancement of Learning* Bacon states that the business of the historian is to describe events and allow the reader to draw one's own conclusions from them. Perhaps Hobbes turned to Thucydides at the suggestion of Francis Bacon. At the time Hobbes offered his services to him as his amanuensis and followed closely his steps in the scientific revolution of the age sharing his pro-royalist political concerns.

*Off context*

A puzzling question is whether Hobbes's Thucydides needs the analytic tools of contextualist historicism as a means to understanding and appreciating the significance of Thucydidean thought for his political philosophy. Without questioning that contextualism could be an auxiliary tool for an understanding of Hobbes's authorial intentions, his pioneering work on Thucydides could stand alone within the frame of intellectual transhistoricity, i.e., not necessarily bounded by any sort of "contexts" (as Thucydides himself would have wished to be read, as a *κτῆμα ἐς ἄει*, an everlasting possession).

Basically, Hobbes utilized the principles of Thucydideanism in his study and translation of Thucydides, aligning himself intellectually with the ancient historian and drawing parallels between the context of their respective works. Through his extensive classical scholarship and proficiency in language, Hobbes produced a vigorous and clear translation. But was Thucydides integral to his political writings? Would he write the *Leviathan* if Thucydides never existed? Despite numerous inter-textual similarities, I see no reason why Hobbes wouldn't do that. Hobbes simply found a welcome ally from the classical past, and a most eminent one, to lend support to his anthropological pragmatism and political realism. What are the major premises that sustained Thucydidean realism? In a nutshell: History repeats itself as human character will always be the same; without rule (a sovereign and legal provisions) people will be aggressive, in constant conflict and in a permanent state of anarchy due to the lack of an overarching government; rational actors, even under a government, are still motivated by self-interest; human nature is unchanging, it is the common denominator in history, which helps the historian to compare events and construct patterns which are intelligible and useful: this is the science of history. One can argue that Hobbes either arrived at the same realistic view of the world under the influence of Thucydides or independently. However, a more persuasive argument is that Hobbes found validation for his political views in Thucydides.

**(a) *The state of nature***

A more compelling similarity in text and spirit is the classic description of human life in the state of nature:<sup>15</sup>

“In such condition, there is no place for Industry; because the fruit thereof is uncertain; and consequently no Culture of the Earth; no Navigation, nor use of the commodities that may be imported by Sea; no commodious Building; no Instruments of moving, and removing such things as require much force; no Knowledge of the face of the Earth; no account of Time; no Arts; no Letters; no Society; and which is worst of all, continual fear, and danger of violent death; And the life of man, solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short.” (*Leviathan*, 13.62).

[1.2.2] τῆς γὰρ ἐμπορίας οὐκ οὔσης, οὐδ’ ἐπιμειγνύοντες ἀδεῶς ἀλλήλοις οὔτε κατὰ γῆν οὔτε διὰ θαλάσσης, νεμόμενοί τε τὰ αὐτῶν ἕκαστοι ὅσον ἀποζῆν καὶ περιουσίαν χρημάτων οὐκ ἔχοντες οὐδὲ γῆν φυτεύοντες, ἄδηλον ὄν ὀπότε τις ἐπελθὼν καὶ ἀτειχίστων ἅμα ὄντων ἄλλος ἀφαιρήσεται, τῆς τε καθ’ ἡμέραν ἀναγκαίου τροφῆς πανταχοῦ ἂν ἡγούμενοι ἐπικρατεῖν, οὐ χαλεπῶς ἀπανίσταντο, καὶ δι’ αὐτὸ οὔτε μεγέθει πόλεων ἴσχυον οὔτε τῇ ἄλλῃ παρασκευῇ.

**(b) *Human nature and the civil war in Corcyra***

Another instance of overlap is seen in the events at Corcyra, where during political chaos and internal strife, when the state and law disintegrate, humans revert to their innate aggressive behavior. In the margins at book 3 (p. 187) Hobbes wrote: “The people, upon the coming in of the *Athenians*, most cruelly put to death whomsoever they can of the contrary Faction”, and “Description of the behaviour of the people in the sedition”.

---

<sup>15</sup> First indicated by G. Klosko and D. Rice.

“Amongst whom, some were slaine upon priuate hatred, and some by their debtors, for the money which they had lent them. All formes of death were then seene, and (as in such cases it usually falles out) whatsoever had happened at any time, happened also then, and more. For the Father slew his Sonne; men were dragged out of the Temples, and then slaine hard by; and some immured in the *Temple of Bacchus*, dyed within it. So cruell was this Sedition; and seemed so the more, because it was of these the first. For afterwards, all *Greece*, as a man may say, was in commotion; and quarrels arose euery where betweene the Patrons of the Commons, that sought to bring in the *Athenians*, and the *Few*, that desired to bring the Lacedaemonians. Now in time of peace, they could haue had no pretence, nor would haue beene so forward to call them in; but being Warre, and Confederates to bee had for eyther party, both to hurth their Enemies, and strengthen themselues, such as desired alteration, easily got them to come in. And many and heynous things happened in the Cities through this Sedition, which though they haue beene before, and shall be euer, *as long as human nature is the same* [emphasis added], yet they are more calme, and of different kinds, according to the seuerall coniunctures” (pp. 187-8).

[3.81.4] ἀπέθανον δέ τινες καὶ ἰδίας ἔχθρας ἔνεκα, καὶ ἄλλοι χρημάτων σφίσιν ὀφειλομένων ὑπὸ τῶν λαβόντων· [3.81.5] πᾶσά τε ἰδέα κατέστη θανάτου, καὶ οἷον φιλεῖ ἐν τῷ τοιούτῳ γίγνεσθαι, οὐδὲν ὅτι οὐ ξυνέβη καὶ ἔτι περαιτέρω. καὶ γὰρ πατήρ παῖδα ἀπέκτεινε καὶ ἀπὸ τῶν ἱερῶν ἀπεσπῶντο καὶ πρὸς αὐτοῖς ἐκτείνοντο, οἱ δέ τινες καὶ περιοικοδομηθέντες ἐν τοῦ Διονύσου τῷ ἱερῷ ἀπέθανον.

[3.82.1] Οὕτως ὦμῃ <ή> στάσις προὔχωρησε, καὶ ἔδοξε μᾶλλον, διότι ἐν τοῖς πρώτη ἐγένετο, ἐπεὶ ὕστερόν γε καὶ πᾶν ὡς εἶπειν τὸ Ἑλληνικὸν ἐκινήθη, διαφορῶν οὐσῶν ἕκασταχοῦ τοῖς τε τῶν δήμων προστάταις τοὺς Ἀθηναίους ἐπάγεσθαι καὶ τοῖς ὀλίγοις τοὺς Λακεδαιμονίους. καὶ ἐν μὲν εἰρήνῃ οὐκ ἂν ἐχόντων πρόφασιν οὐδ’ ἐτοίμων παρακαλεῖν αὐτούς, πολεμουμένων δὲ καὶ ξυμμαχίας ἅμα ἑκατέροις τῇ τῶν ἐναντίων κακώσει καὶ σφίσιν αὐτοῖς ἐκ τοῦ αὐτοῦ προσποιήσει ῥαδίως αἱ ἐπαγωγαὶ τοῖς νεωτερίζειν τι

βουλομένοις ἐπορίζοντο. [3.82.2] καὶ ἐπέπεσε πολλὰ καὶ χαλεπὰ κατὰ στάσιν ταῖς πόλεσι, γιγνόμενα μὲν καὶ αἰεὶ ἐσόμενα, ἕως ἂν ἡ αὐτὴ φύσις ἀνθρώπων ᾗ, μᾶλλον δὲ καὶ ἡσυχαιότερα καὶ τοῖς εἶδεσι διηλλαγμένα, ὡς ἂν ἕκασται αἰ μεταβολαὶ τῶν ξυντυχιῶν ἐφιστῶνται.

In *Leviathan*, 19:92-94, Hobbes (“Of the Rights of Sovereignes by Institution”, emphasis added), where the a commonwealth is pronounced to be created by a “Covenant”, the philosopher states that the end of the state being “the peace and defence” of all citizens, any objection to the inconveniences of submission to the sovereign or the commonwealth can be juxtaposed to the perilous conditions of civil war and rebellion: in any form of government the worst calamities can be avoided, i.e. “in respect of the miseries, and horrible calamities, that accompany a Civill Warre; or that dissolute condition of masterless men, without subjection to Lawes, and a coercive Power to tye their hands from rapine, and revenge... *For all men are by nature provided of notable multiplying glasses (that is their Passions and Selfe-love), through which, every little payment appeareth a great grievance*” (emphasis added).

In conclusion, Thusydidean influences on Hobbes are profound and deeply rooted in his classical humanism and early education. It has been shown that his translation of the *History* is a landmark in the reception of the classics, and particularly in the direction of the diffusion of knowledge about Thucydides for the use of the moderns. The *Leviathan* and Hobbes’s mature political thought is unmistakably imbued with *Thucydidean spirit*. Yet, focusing too much on a contextualist reading of Hobbes’s Thucydides could be subsumed into anti-Thudycideanism in as long as it runs against Thucydides’ own transhistorical universalism. Here is why:

(a) Thucydides’ analysis of the underlying causes of the Peloponnesian war, his insights into the motivations of those in conflict, and his conclusions regarding the forces that stir popular sentiments and drive collective action, projected a universalistic model for understanding human motivation and explaining political behaviour that (arguably) still endures in

the modern world. In doing so, Thucydides avoided any metaphysical categories which are irrelevant to physical realities. (b) Hobbes, like Thucydides, intended to offer an enduring and transhistorical authoritative model for understanding human motivation and a materialist vision of the world within the parallel framework of “a science of politics”. (c) Their philosophical alignment can be easily explained within a decontextualized framework that focuses on the convergence of big ideas and central concepts rather than contextual factors — as David Armitage stated, by using a “telescope instead of a microscope” in intellectual pursuits.<sup>16</sup>

Such an understanding does not challenge the notion that Hobbes actively engaged in a conscious and meaningful conversation with Thucydides within the broad trajectory of ideas throughout history.



---

<sup>16</sup> David Armitage, “What’s the big Idea? Intellectual History and the Longue Durée”, *History of European Ideas*, 38.4, 2012, pp. 493-507.



BRILL'S COMPANION TO  
GEORGE GROTE  
AND THE CLASSICAL  
TRADITION



*Edited by*  
Kyriakos N. Demetriou