

REVIEW ESSAY

Coming to Terms with the Past

The Greeks and Their Past: Poetry, Oratory and History in the Fifth Century BCE. By Jonas GRETHLEIN. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010. Pp. xii + 350. Hardcover, £58.00/\$99.00. ISBN 978-0-521-11077-8.

This is an ambitious, lucid, well-researched and well-organized book. Jonas Grethlein explores a variety of ways in which the Greeks of the fifth century BCE understood the human past, using the concepts and some of the terms of hermeneutics and phenomenology to analyze the treatment of the past in epinician poetry, elegy, Attic tragedy, epideictic oratory, and deliberative oratory in the first half of the book, and in the histories of Herodotus and Thucydides in the second half. He begins with a dense but clear, if dry, introduction that establishes the grid on which the rest of the book will be organized, setting out four basic modes of linking past to present through memory: regularity (through examples); continuity (through maintaining and articulating traditions); development (through understanding dynamic processes); and the contingency of chance (through recognizing disruptions created by the eruption of the unexpected).

In the mode of exemplarity, positive and negative events or moments of the past (whether mythic or historical) become paradigms for understanding and also motivating present acts or behaviors. To take examples from within works of two different genres: Phoenix in *Iliad* 9 recalls the Meleager episode to exhort Achilles to bury his wrath; Pericles in the Funeral Oration of Thucydides uses the courageous efforts of Athenians in founding their empire in the past to inspire the youth of the present to similar effort. Fifth- and fourth-century authors of epinician, elegy, and the funeral oration in particular think in the same way, using past examples to articulate and evaluate present circumstances and actions, thereby giving their present audiences a sense of continuity between even the distant or mythic past and their own present.

The traditional mode often reinforces exemplarity. It can be found within the content of an epinician poem, as genealogies and the memory of ancestral

exploits establish an ongoing thread binding the past achievement of his ancestors to Theron's present victory in *Olympian 2*, or within a deliberative speech, as Andocides' more recent ancestors' efforts as ambassadors inspire his own efforts in *de pace*. It is also found embedded in the performative context of four of the five genres considered in the book's first half. The aristocratic symposium is the locus of epinician and elegy, and the traditional singing of victory odes like *Olympian 2* or Simonides' and Mimnermus' more historical poems (with their strongly Homeric overtones) both celebrates an ongoing elite sense of privilege for the governing classes that hear the poems, and reinforces their sense of responsibility for the polis and concern for the collective. Each occasion of the poem's performance, that is, reestablishes the sense of traditional continuity ('we have always done it that way') that is a major gift of all ritual. In Attic tragedy, the annual context of the spring Dionysia in general, and the presence of children of fallen warriors sitting in the audience of the *Persae* in particular, are testimonies to continuity, as well as a stark reminders of the cost of defending the fatherland in 472 BCE. The performative context itself establishes continuity: tragedy's ability annually to articulate Athens' ongoing sense of itself. The *epitaphios logos* or funeral oration, finally, resembles tragedy in this respect, celebrating the achievements of the fallen by binding them into the ongoing memory of the city's sense of itself and thus assuring them a share in the immortality of the city's achievement. Lysias' funeral oration contains the 'floating gap' that is found in traditional, often oral, ways of thinking of the past. The mythic past and the chronologically ordered, detailed account of the recent historical present give a sense of seamless Athenian historical continuity, despite the omission of the Archaic Age in his narrative.

The third commemorative strategy that bridges the gap between past and present is the mode of development. Grethlein argues (288–9) that it did not really emerge in force before about 1800 CE, when change itself became linked more to an optimistic idea of progress. In the mode of development, it is a given that the past is different from the present, while the two modes used in the ancient world most frequently, the exemplary and the traditional, rather stress similarity, permanence, and regularity. That is because for the ancient world in general and the fifth century in particular, the fourth basic mode of understanding the past, which Grethlein terms "contingency of chance," tends to overwhelm, and both *exempla* (regularity) and traditions (continuity) have been designed to offset and make bearable our recognition of how great a role contingency of chance plays in the way events in human life turn out.

In *Olympian 2*, *gnomai* and the Oedipus lineage become the dark foil, inserting the presence of contingency of chance into Theron's glorious family story and showing the fragility of the human experience. Its disruptive tendencies are embedded, however, in the larger structures of continuity and regularity provided by examples of past glory and the epinician ode's ability to recognize and sustain aristocratic tradition for the polis. Even in early elegy, the sea in Archilochus is a metaphor for contingency of chance, while Mimnermus uses the image of leaves. Again the construction of regularity, recounting glory achieved at the level of the polis, "the timeless collective of the fathers of our fathers," is designed to counteract the experience of contingency of chance that dominates the individual life, however heroic in achievement.

Fifth-century tragedy deals with contingency of chance by displacing events into the mythic past and a non-Athenian locus. Athens itself, in the plays, is not tragic; Aristotle's catharsis works for the audience of the play but often not for the audience in the play, the chorus, overwhelmed as they are by contingencies of chance that are too close to them for comfort. One reason the *epitaphios logos* becomes such a standard feature of Athenian epideictic oratory is that, as in elegy, in the funeral speech the deaths the city has experienced (the ultimate experience of the disruption of the unexpected) become part of a larger permanence: the story of Athens' glory.

In the fifth genre explored in the first half of this book, deliberative oratory, there is a slightly different approach taken to *exempla*, traditions, and contingency of chance, one that serves effectively as a transition to the exploration of history in the book's second half. Arguing for a particular course of action to be taken in the present, Andocides in *de pace* relies heavily on both negative and positive past *exempla*, and articulates a particular vision of Athenian tradition that would link present power and prosperity to the need for peace with Sparta. On the other hand, "defeat and rupture are admitted and given a poetic emplotment" (141), so contingency of chance is more vividly present as something that might erupt again if the course taken is not the one the speaker argues for. The *exempla* used are almost always drawn from recent history. Grethlein ends the first half of this book arguing that "[t]he idea of history that underlies all genres pits contingency of chance against continuity and regularity" (145).

The second half of the book evaluates the idea of the past found in Herodotus and Thucydides, using many of the same terms and concepts established previously. Both authors, Grethlein finds, critique contemporary uses of exemplarity, by presenting speeches given by characters in their texts who

misconceive and misuse past events quite badly. Herodotus presents the use of the *Iliad* by speakers in the Syracusan embassy scene (7.153–63) as one that meta-historically reminds us of the unsuccessful embassy in *Iliad* 9. The more or less tacit references by the Spartan and Athenian speakers to Agamemnon, Nestor's speech in *Iliad* 7 (124–8), and Menestheus' in *Iliad* 2 (553–4) jar in their inappropriateness, highlighting for the alert reader of Herodotus how unheroic, indeed completely inadequate in their vision, all the actors are. Moreover, the proleptic allusion to Pericles' "spring of Greece" found in Gelon's acrid final retort (7.162) reminds the reader not only of the intra-Hellenic disputes of the Persian Wars, but also of the much more devastating ones to come, in Herodotus' own time. Here exemplarity has been used savagely by Herodotus to reveal the inadequacies of speechmaking and statesmanship at a particular time, but also in the heroic past and the frightening future to come. In the paired Tegean–Athenian speeches before Plataea (9.26–7), Grethlein argues (174–7) that the Athenians even directly critique the whole idea of the relevance of ancient *exempla* for speechmaking, when they state that they prefer deeds to words and more recent events to distant ones. Herodotus, speaking now directly as the narrator, critiques the use of the past in epic, as well: Homer knew what really happened but chose in the *Odyssey* to privilege the version that would better fit his generic requirements (156).

Herodotus himself uses exemplarity, the regularity of patterns of human behavior, to highlight the brutal realities of contingency of chance; in the Croesus episodes that begin the *Histories* (1.26–94), patterns of misunderstanding and misguided action occur that will recur throughout the work. Divine retribution, divine envy, and ineluctable fate are all adduced as possible explanations, but the very pluralism of these concepts testifies to the difficulty of mastering contingency of chance (195). The prolepseis and analepseis that stud the *Histories*, as well as the multiple explanatory patterns that emerge, protect the reader somewhat from experiencing contingency of chance, but they do so by a focus on exemplarity as a part of *historiè*, investigation. Attentive investigation will replace glorification and legitimization with critical analysis: reality counts.

This same recasting of the use of past example is found, even more strongly, in Thucydides. Grethlein argues (208–9) that Thucydides' critique of "competition pieces" (1.22.4) and *logographoi* refers not just to poets and other historians but to orators, and probably specifically the orators who deliver *epitaphioi logoi*. Thucydides' notion of human nature is an essentialist one, and the intertextual relationships found in the *History* establish a meta-historical

dimension that enables him to explore how this understanding of “human nature” can be made useful in the political present (210–11, 268–79). The Athenians’ disastrous response to their own tyranny in 415 BCE (6.53.2) shows how important a correct understanding of history can be for dealing with contemporary events. Thucydides refuses most Herodotean prolepseis, making the reader experience unrolling events from the perspective of the characters, reinforced with his own insights. There is no hint, however, that correct understanding either of past history or of present events ever guards, in Thucydides’ eyes, against contingency of chance.

This book provides a stimulating argument and one based on much careful analysis of ancient texts and knowledge of the extensive relevant modern scholarship. The few caveats I have mostly come from the fact that I wanted more. Regarding deliberative and epideictic oratory, a more extended discussion would have been helpful, especially about the fact that both of the speeches Grethlein examines in detail come from the Corinthian War of the 390s and thus certainly postdate Herodotus and are at least contemporaneous with Thucydides. What does Grethlein think about the possible influence of the historians on the *logographoi*? Regarding Herodotus and Thucydides, Grethlein has chosen largely to focus on their criticism of genres of literature; he has convincingly demonstrated that both authors at least tacitly critique the tradition- and example-based modes of dealing with the recent past found in other genres. What I miss, however, is a discussion devoted more generally to the historians’ own sense of the pasts they have chosen to narrate, and why they have chosen to structure their histories as detailed, extended, and causally-connected accounts of recent past events.

Grethlein is certainly not unaware either of this issue or of the considerable scholarship devoted to it for both authors, but his organization of his chapters into individual, discrete discussions of particular passages tends, in the analysis of these two authors especially, to make it more difficult to perceive an interpretation that underlies and supports his acute individual observations. To the less severely focused reader, much of the presentation of speechmaking in the histories of Herodotus and Thucydides looks less like a tacit authorial critique of genres or even modes of thinking about the past than like a picture of ordinary human beings exercising their political intelligence, as they are wont to do. One wonders whether the largely bypassed mode of development, as Grethlein defines it in the introduction and the conclusion, might have played a part in the analysis, since both historians articulate as a major part of their task to record the

remarkable political and military changes in the recent past that have affected their own time: for Herodotus, not just the defeat of Persia in 479 BCE, but the disappearance of powerful Greek tyrannies, the radical diminishment of Ionian power after Lade, and the astonishing growth of democratic Athens after 508; for Thucydides, the even more astonishing defeat of the Athenian empire in 404 BCE. One looks forward for more from Jonas Grethlein in the future on these and similar challenging topics.

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