

BOOK REVIEW

The Historical Present in Thucydides: Semantics and Narrative Function. Le présent historique chez Thucydide: Sémantique et fonction narrative. Edited by Jean LALLOT, Albert RIJKSBARON, Bernard JACQUINOD, and Michel BUIJS. Amsterdam Studies in Classical Philology. Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2011. Pp. xi + 327. €108.00/\$148.00. ISBN 978-90-04-20118-7.

The following is a brief example of Thucydides' use the historical present tense, followed by two translations.

καὶ μελλόντων αὐτῶν, ἐπειδὴ ἐτοῖμα ἦν, ἀποπλεῖν ἢ σελήνη
ἐκλείπει: ἐτύγχανε γὰρ πασσέληνος οὖσα. (Thuc. 7.50.4)

But when they were about it and everything was ready, the moon happened to be eclipsed; for it was full moon. (Hobbes translation)

The preparations were made and they were on the point of sailing, when the moon, being just then at the full, was eclipsed. (Jowett translation)

As the example demonstrates, the historical present tense (ἐκλείπει), which marks “events that the narrator considers crucial or decisive for the development of the ... plot” (Rijksbaron 5), is generally invisible in translation. It is all the more important for those who read Thucydides in Greek to grapple with this usage. This efficient volume is a mine of information and thoughtful interpretations, and is moreover furnished with indispensable aids. In particular, three full glossaries follow the papers: an annotated glossary of all 164 Thucydidean verbs used in the historic present, a glossary of Thucydidean verbs not used in the historical present, and a further glossary providing Thucydidean verbs in the historical present tense together with their furthest and most immediate narrative context. This last glossary is especially useful for distinguishing the kinds of events Thucydides tends to emphasize with the historical present.

Such information has not been easily accessible. For example, Smyth's entire commentary on the historical present tense (*Greek Grammar*, §1883) runs as

follows: “Historical Present. — In lively or dramatic narration the present may be used to represent a past action as going on at the moment of speaking or writing. This use does not occur in Homer.” These comments are followed by three brief notes, two of which take examples from Thucydides. Smyth’s remarks are barely adequate to a usage that occurs 545 times in Thucydides, and is, as the papers in this volume point out, also significant in authors ranging from Andocides, Euripides, and Xenophon to Polybius. (Somewhat to my despair, Herodotus is rarely mentioned in this volume; cf. only Rijksbaron 5–6, 9–10).

To mention a few of the important arguments in this book: Albert Rijksbaron (1–17) and Jean Lallot (19–35) provide excellent general introductions to Thucydides’ use of the historical present and the information contained in the glossaries. Both essays present striking and basic information, for instance, that historical presents are almost always in the third person, and almost never passive, subordinated, or negativized. The vocabulary of these verbs is also limited; 13 verbs (several of which are analyzed by other authors in this volume) account for 255 of the 545 occurrences of the historical present tense in Thucydides (22–3).

Rutger Allan’s introduction of the term “epistemic immediacy” (38) to describe the effect of the historical present tense is echoed in other papers, especially that of Louis Basset (174–5); Allan binds this useful idea to the suggestion that the narrator “remains covert” or “makes himself absent” from the narrative in the use of the historical present tense (39), an idea I found harder to accept. For me, Frédéric Lambert’s argument that the historical present signals the narrator’s evaluations to the reader was more convincing, probably because it was more coherent with my own reading experience: “Le présent historique sert alors de signal intersubjectif, c’est-à-dire destiné au lecteur, et il souligne un élément essentiel à l’évaluation du protagoniste et de ses décisions” (211; cf. also Mortier-Waldschmidt, 86–7).

Bernard Jacquinod reveals impressive evidence pertaining to the verb *πείθω* in Thucydides: one quarter of all indicative occurrences of this verb in Thucydides are historical presents (89). Interestingly, whenever Thucydides uses an historical present to say that someone persuaded someone else, he provides no direct speech (98), so that the historical present stands for the decisive moment of persuasion. Jacquinod’s evidence dovetails nicely with Coulter George’s argument that the use of the historical present speeds the pace of the narrative (228); the historical present tends to lend punctuality (239), an aspect that goes hand in hand with its “vividness.”

In addition to the four scholars mentioned above, several others show how the use of an historic present signals a decisive event, from the narrator's or speaker's point of view (cf. e.g. Rijksbaron on Andocides and Thucydides, 193–4, or Lambert on Polybius and Thucydides, 195–222). It was therefore surprising to me that this volume featured little discussion of the historical present's potential to create suspense; only Lambert mentions this possibility (221). But surely an occurrence of the historical present encourages the reader to expect the consequences of the event Thucydides chose to emphasize in this way; the sentence cited at the head of this review is one example.

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