Part II Special Paper Option A

Thucydides

Course Directors: Professor Robin Osborne and Dr Hannah Willey

Aims and objectives

1. To explore in depth the issues that surround writing history through close and sustained study of the first historian explicitly to discuss historical method.
2. To explore the tensions between history as an account of the past and history as past events, through close attention to the way in which ‘literary’ decisions impact upon the way historical events are understood.
3. To understand the ways in which certain recurrent themes shape the picture of events and human motivations given by the text.
4. To understand the extent to which the interactions uncovered by Thucydides are peculiar to the Greek city state.
5. To understand why Thucydides has come to occupy so important a place both in historiography and in the study of international relations.

Course Description

It is hard to overstate the influence of Thucydides. He is the earliest author whose text substantially survives to theorise the writing of history. He describes his methods and the reasons for adopting them, and he also structures his work so as explicitly to address historical causation. Thucydides’ primary concern was not simply to preserve a record of events, but to come to understand the forces at work in bringing to pass what he argued to be the greatest war fought in the Greek world down to his own day.

Thucydides’ analysis of internal politics and of the relations between states has proved foundational, not simply for all subsequent attempts to understand the dynamics of individual cities and their interrelations within the Greek world, but for understandings of politics and international relations across time and space. His decisions about what was and what was not relevant as an explanatory framework have had a massive impact. His exploration of the inter-relationship between word and deed has come to dominate our understanding both of Athenian democracy and of how politics in general works.

This course will look closely at Thucydides’ whole history, trying to understand why he included and excluded what he included and excluded, and exploring the interpretation embedded in the structure of his work. It will look closely at Thucydides’ understanding of what brings success or failure in war, and what the effects of war are. It will explore his treatment of internal political dynamics, both in his treatment of individual political occasions (e.g. meetings of the assembly in Athens and elsewhere) and in his discussion of civil strife, both in Corcyra and in Athens. It will ask what role Thucydides allows to the supernatural, and how the influence of the gods is manifested.

The course will also explore Thucydides’ place in the Greek historical tradition and his influence on the writing of history more widely as well as examining his impact on understandings of international relations.

Course structure
There will be a mixture of lectures and classes on key themes and topics. In the Michaelmas Term, there will be an hour-long lecture and a two-hour class each week. The classes will expand on and develop the topics of the lectures in more detail, examining the key Thucydidean passages and the ongoing debates in modern scholarship. These lectures and classes will be held in the Classics Faculty and will be shared with Classics Students. In the Lent Term, four more two-hour classes, organised fortnightly, will be dedicated to History Students taking the Paper, ensuring that all the set texts have been discussed, placing Thucydides within the broader context of the Greek historical tradition, and allowing space for student presentations on chosen topics in connection to their long essays. In the Easter Term there will be two more two-hour hour classes focusing on gobbets training and other aspects of preparation for the exam. All texts will be studied in English translation.

The 8 Michaelmas Term topics will be:

1. Thucydides the writer and the writing of history: aims, claims, the plague and literary practice.
2. Thucydides and historical causation: the archaeology, the causes of war in 431 and the causes of the Sicilian expedition.
3. Thucydides and war: strategy, tactics, experience and the role of the leader.
4. Thucydides and civil strife: Corcyra and the 400 at Athens.
5. Thucydides as political theorist: Pericles’ funeral speech and the analysis of democracy.
6. Thucydides and rhetoric: paired speeches and political persuasion.
7. Thucydides and international relations: Mytilene, Plataia, Melos: treaties and ethics.
8. Thucydides and religion: curses, oracles and purification.

Lent Term

1. Predecessors: Herodotus and the Poets
2. Successors: Xenophon and Polybius
3. Student presentations
4. Student presentations

Easter Term

1. Revision and gobbet practice
2. Revision and gobbet practice

List of Primary Sources
Thucydides’ *History of the Peloponnesian War* (the most helpful edition is probably the Landmark edition, with the translation by Crawley). [c. 550 pages]

Herodotus, *Histories* Books 1, 3 and 9 (c. 250 pages)

Xenophon, *Hellenika* Books 1 and 2 (c. 150 pages)


**Sample Long Essay Questions:**

1. How distinctive and how consistent was Thucydides approach to historical causation?
2. ‘Scholars have over-estimated Thucydides’ stress on universal factors.’ Discuss
3. Did Thucydides have a blind-spot when it came to the importance of Persia?
4. Was Thucydides a political theorist?
5. ‘Thucydides is the only Greek historian to have any idea of military strategy.’ Discuss
6. What role do oracles play in Thucydides?
7. Has Thucydides’ influence on how history is written been malign?

**Preliminary Reading**


**Thematic Bibliography:**

*Thucydides, general*


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**Thucydides, the writer**


Flory, S.G. 1990. “The Meaning of to me mythodes (1.22.4) and the Usefulness of Thucydides` History”, CJ 85, 193–208.


Cambridge, 21–44.


Rhodes, P.J. 1998b. “‘Epidamnus is a City’: On Not Overinterpreting Thucydides”, *Histos* 2.

**Thucydidex’ theory of history**


**Thucydides and War**


**Thucydides and Political Theory**


Thucydidies and internal politics


Thucydides and International Relations


Thucydides and Religion


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