

Politician and Polis: Thucydides on Positive Leadership

In this paper I argue that Thucydides utilizes the characterization of individuals to illustrate his conception of the nature of good leadership. While some scholars have claimed that, for Thucydides, positive leaders possess a specific and identifiable set of skills and qualities (such as intelligence/foresight, persuasiveness, and moral uprightness; Luginbill 1999: 190), I posit that the historian constructs a much more dynamic and nuanced portrait of the relationship between leader and led. Indeed, by setting each leader's individual character against the backdrop of his *polis*' collective, "national" character, and allowing readers to see the successfulness (or not) of this interaction, Thucydides demonstrates that each *polis* has its own, specific set of strengths and weaknesses, and that the attributes required of leaders are dependent upon the context in which they operate. The effective leader must therefore be able to act as a moderating force, correcting the flaws particular to their *polis*' national character, while at the same time maintaining its strengths.

In order to demonstrate these points, I will take as a case study Thucydides' characterization of Brasidas. Previously, many scholars have tied this Spartan general's success to his energy and daring, traits that have led them to identify him as "the Athenian Spartan" (see, for example Westlake 1968, Connor 1984, Strauss 1964, and Palmer 2015). I argue, however, that while Thucydides certainly emphasizes Brasidas' "Athenian" attributes in his history, in certain key passages he also portrays Brasidas as able to control his impulses to swift action and utilize the "Spartan" qualities of hesitation, good judgment, and risk avoidance to his advantage.

To demonstrate this point I will specifically address three passages: Brasidas' actions around Megara and Nisaea in 424 BCE (particularly at 4.73.1), his behavior upon arriving at Amphipolis (4.103–5), and his unwillingness to follow Perdiccas' advice during their second

expedition and push forward without waiting for reinforcements (4.124.4). In my analysis, I establish that in each of these passages Thucydides attributes to Brasidas a unique combination of energy, daring, and caution. Indeed, the language of speed is commonly associated with him in the build-up to these encounters, with Brasidas using rapid movement to put himself in advantageous positions. At critical moments, however, he stops and waits, either to see what the enemy will do (such as at Nisaea), to allow his target to come to terms with him (as at Amphipolis), or simply because he believes it imprudent to continue (as he does during his second expedition with Perdiccas). Such choices are not out of line with earlier descriptions of Spartan collective behavioral tendencies, and Thucydides uses certain linguistic callbacks in these passages (such as his reuse of the verb ἡσυχάζω) to reinforce this connection.

Based on the combination of both “Athenian” and “Spartan” traits attributed to Brasidas in these episodes, I argue that he is not portrayed as purely “Athenian,” but instead as a leader able to deploy the best qualities of both national characters. Indeed, Brasidas consistently drives the chronically hesitant and slow Spartans to act with speed and energy, but can, when appropriate, deploy Spartan judgment and hesitation to his advantage. As such, he exhibits the very specific set of attributes required of a successful Spartan leader. After establishing these points, I conclude by tying this result back to Thucydides’ larger practice of basing the requirements of effective leaders on their contextual backgrounds.

Bibliography

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