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Fortune Favors the Prepared? τύχη in *The History of the Peloponnesian War*

Liam O'Toole '20

Given how frequently Thucydides references τύχη (*tuchè*) in his *History of the Peloponnesian War*, it is clear that the concept, however he may define it, is essential for comprehending his narration of the war between Sparta and Athens. What, then, does Thucydides mean by τύχη? Are the most common translations of “luck,” “chance,” or “fortune” sufficient? Not so. After exploring different passages in which it plays a vital role, it is evident that Thucydides understands τύχη in a complex fashion. In this paper, I will examine a small subset of the passages in which τύχη appears in order to try to strike at the heart of Thucydides’ intent when employing this loaded word. Critically, τύχη does not often appear in isolation. In fact, Thucydides, in part, formulates his understanding of τύχη in relation to two other abstract ideas: παρα λογον (“contrary to expectation”) and γνώμη (“knowledge,” “opinion”). Through exploring the relationship between τύχη and these other ideas, it becomes easier to see how Thucydides thinks. This paper will explore Thucydides’ multilayered understanding of τύχη and its role in the outcome of the Peloponnesian War and human events more generally.

Thucydides was neither the first Greek historian, nor the first Greek author, to employ τύχη as an explanatory tool. In their works, most ancient Greek authors often brought τύχη into the equation when they were unable to explain an event as the result of human action. Others, like Hesiod, saw Τύχη as a divine force, a literal goddess born from Thetis and Okeanos¹. Thucydides largely followed the former tradition. This becomes clear through the words of the Athenian orator Pericles in his first speech in *The History of the Peloponnesian War*. Therein, he speaks to the Athenian (and Thucydidean) notion of τύχη as an explanation for the inexplicable. He states that, “The movement of events is often as wayward and incomprehensible as the course of human thought; and this is why we ascribe to chance whatever is contrary to expectation” (‘ἐνδέχεται γὰρ τὰς ξυμφορὰς τῶν πραγμάτων οὐχ ἥσσον ἀμαθῶς χωρῆσαι ἢ καὶ τὰς διανοίας τοῦ ἀνθρώπου: δι’ ὅπερ καὶ τὴν τύχην, ὅσα ἂν παρὰ λόγον ξυμβῆ, εἰώθαμεν αἰτιᾶσθαι’ 1.140.1). Here is the first instance that Thucydides connects τύχη to events that are παρα λογον, or “contrary to expectation.” In this use, τύχη becomes the “ready-made scapegoat for the inexplicable events of history.”² This is not the only time that Thucydides proves to use τύχη in this way. Section 2.85.2, for instance, describes

¹ Hesiod, *Theogony*, 336-370; Sorensen (2014), 26

² Sorensen (2014), 26

the aftermath of the naval battle of Naupactus where the Spartans suffer a loss Thucydides terms “ὁ παράλογος.”³ The reason this loss was unexpected was because the Spartans had the superior number of ships going into the fight. Stunned, the Spartan generals attempt to boost their soldiers’ confidence before the next battle by claiming that this disastrous result came about because “fortune was in many ways unpropitious to us” (‘ξυνέβη δὲ καὶ τὰ ἀπὸ τῆς τύχης οὐκ ὀλίγα ἐναντιωθῆναι’ 2.87.2). By blaming τύχη, the Spartan generals make the same “scape goat” association between τύχη and παραλογον as Pericles.

By far the greatest example of Thucydides’ impulse to connect events that happen παραλογον to τύχη comes in the Pylos episode in Book 4. At one point during the fighting, the Athenians find themselves warding off the Spartans, who are attacking by sea, from Laconian land. Thucydides draws attention to this occurrence primarily because the Spartans “particularly prided themselves on being a land power supreme in infantry” while the Athenians were “seafarers who excelled in fighting with ships” (ἐπὶ πολὺ γὰρ ἐποίει τῆς δόξης ἐν τῷ τότε τοῖς μὲν ἡπειρώταις μάλιστα εἶναι καὶ τὰ περὶ ἀκρατίστοις, τοῖς δὲ θαλασσίους τε καὶ ταῖς ναυσὶ πλεῖστον προύχειν 4.12.3). Although not explicitly defined as παραλογον, this situation was clearly unexpected and contrary to

³ Thucydides 2.85.2

expectation. What brought about this unusual situation? Thucydides claims that it was τύχη alone: “Fortune brought it round into this state” (ἐς τοῦτό τε περιέστη ἡ τύχη 4.12.3).

This is not the only time that τύχη comes into play during the Pylos episode. Indeed, τύχη is a factor from the moment a storm “happens” to force the Athenian troops to land at Pylos in the first place.⁴ τύχη later benefits the Athenians when they trap the Spartans on the nearby island of Sphakteria, for an accidental fire clears the forest and allows the Athenian general Demosthenes to make a bold attack.⁵ Demosthenes and the Athenians then surround the Spartans and force them to surrender. Such an outcome was entirely unexpected, leading Thucydides to describe the Pylos episode as “the biggest event contrary to expectation of the Greeks during the war” (παρὰ γνώμην τε δὴ μάλιστα τῶν κατὰ τὸν πόλεμον τοῦτο τοῖς Ἕλλησιν ἐγένετο 4.40.1). While he uses παρὰ γνώμην (“contrary to opinion”) in place of παρα λογον (“contrary to expectation”), the sense is the same. Considering their unexpected conclusion, it is unsurprising that Thucydides works so hard to demonstrate the critical role that τύχη played the Pylos episode.

⁴ “While they were objecting, it happened that a storm came up and forced them into Pylos (ἀντιλεγόντων δὲ κατὰ τύχην χειμῶν ἐπιγεγόμενος κατήγεκε τὰς ναῦς ἐς τὴν Πύλον 4.3.1)

⁵ “One of them accidentally set fire to a small part of the woods, and after this a wind came up, most of the woods burned down before they knew it” (ἐμπρήσαντός τινος κατὰ μικρὸν τῆς ὕλης ἄκοντος καὶ ἀπὸ τούτου πνεύματος ἐπιγεγομένου τὸ πολὺ αὐτῆς ἔλαθε κατακαυθέν 4.30.2)

That he uses it to explain events that he cannot otherwise explain does not begin to encompass the entirety of Thucydides' conception of τύχη. Despite its seemingly inextricable link to the inexplicable, Thucydides' idea of τύχη still lies within the realm of human control—to a degree, that is. Specifically, Thucydides contrasts the idea of τύχη with words denoting preparation/skill (γνώμη, παρασκευη, τεχνη) in several episodes of his work in order to demonstrate that τύχη is a force that can be controlled, but only with the proper tools. Pericles gives credence to this idea when he tells his soldiers, “Maritime skill is like skill of other kinds, not a thing to be cultivated by the way or at chance times” (‘τὸ δὲ ναυτικὸν τέχνης ἐστίν, ὥσπερ καὶ ἄλλο τι, καὶ οὐκ ἐνδέχεται, ὅταν τύχη, ἐκ παρέργου μελετᾶσθαι’ 1.142.9). Pericles here directly contrasts τύχη (“chance”) with τέχνη (“skill”). That is, success cannot and will not come by simply trusting in τύχη. Later in his speech, Pericles goes further, reminding the Athenians how their ancestors came to power: “Not by good fortune but by wisdom, and not by power but by courage, they drove the Barbarian away and raised us to our present height of greatness” (‘γνώμη τε πλέονι ἢ τύχη καὶ τόλμη μείζονι ἢ δυνάμει τὸν τε βάρβαρον ἀπεώσαντο καὶ ἐς τὰδε προήγαγον αὐτά’ 1.144.4). Although τέχνη has become γνώμη (“wisdom”), the idea that skill and preparation are to be trusted more than τύχη remains the same.

Through the previously discussed naval battle of Naupactus, Thucydides provides further indication that skill can override τύχη. While the Spartan generals attribute their loss here mainly to τύχη, they also note that “they lacked preparation” for any type of sea battle (τῆ τε γὰρ παρασκευῆ ἐνδεῆς ἐγένετο 2.87.2). This battle, then, is a perfect illustration of what Pericles earlier stated: there will be no opportunity for good fortune without proper preparation and skill. Thucydides pointedly makes no mention of τύχη in his narration of the battle. Rather, he makes sure to note how the Athenian general Phormio makes a careful plan to wait for wind to break up the Spartan naval formation.⁶ In crafting a plan rather than relying on chance, Phormio makes use of all three ideas contrary to τύχη by trusting in his knowledge and his navy’s preparation and skill. Phormio does not wait for τύχη to come his way, but rather makes his own “luck.” This maneuver embodies what Thucydides has been striving to portray by contrasting τύχη with these different ideas. He shows that while τύχη itself might be out of human control, the outcome of events its effects are not. Phormio and Pericles both show that while τύχη is not “a force...that we can control,” it nonetheless “can be countered with preparation and experience.”⁷

⁶ Thucydides 2.84.2-3

⁷ Heilke (2004), 134

Why must τύχη be countered in the first place? In Thucydides' interpretation, τύχη is not always a benevolent good. In fact, it is most often a dangerous psychological construct. When something unexpected happens, both those whom it benefits and those whom it harms perceive it as the result of τύχη. Soon after, the idea of τύχη invades the minds of both the victor and the vanquished. Each side begins to buy into the idea that what happened was out of their control; the losers genuinely believe they can never win again while the winners perceive themselves to be invincible. The Athenian general Diodotus, in his speech advocating against sacking the Mytilenians, first articulates such a psychological conception of τύχη. He claims that trusting in ἐλπίς (“hope”) gives the impression that τύχη is on your side.⁸ This is only a problem, however, because τύχη, “induces states as well as individuals to run into peril, however inadequate their means” (ἀδοκίτως γὰρ ἔστιν ὅτε παρισταμένη καὶ ἐκ τῶν ὑποδεεστέρων κινδυνεύειν τινὰ προάγει, 3.45.6). Through Diodotus, Thucydides begins to demonstrate his understanding of τύχη as not simply an imaginary force, but rather as a dangerous mindset. Because “perceptions or descriptions of events as lucky or unlucky motivate deeds in turn,” Thucydides’

⁸ “Desire and hope are in all things, the former leading, the latter urging it on, the former devising the plan, the latter suggesting fortune will be kind” (ἢ τε ἐλπίς καὶ ὁ ἔρως ἐπὶ παντί, ὁ μὲν ἡγούμενος, ἢ δ’ ἐφεπομένη, καὶ ὁ μὲν τὴν ἐπιβουλήν ἐκφροντίζων, ἢ δὲ τὴν εὐπορίαν τῆς τύχης ὑποτιθεῖσα 3.45.5)

believes that it is one's belief in *τύχη* that causes events, not *τύχη* itself.⁹

The Spartan reaction to the Pylos episode leads to a further clarification on the psychological effects of *τύχη*. After losing the battle, the Spartans send ambassadors to the Athenians in hopes of reaching a peace settlement. In their talks, the Spartans bring up the ever-changing nature of *τύχη*. Using themselves as a prime example, they warn the Athenians that ““You should not suppose that, because your city and your empire are powerful at this moment, you will always have fortune on your side”” (‘οὐκ εἰκὸς ὑμᾶς διὰ τὴν παροῦσαν νῦν ῥώμην πόλεός τε καὶ τῶν προσγεγενημένων καὶ τὸ τῆς τύχης οἶεσθαι αἰεὶ μεθ’ ὑμῶν ἔσεσθαι’ 4.18.3). *τύχη* is not a one-and-done experience to the Spartans or Thucydides. It must be constantly acquired and directed, earned through human *γνώμη*. To become complacent and to trust that one instance of *τύχη* will lead to others can cause a drop-off in the preparation and forethought necessary to control *τύχη* in the first place. More dangerously, it can lead to a corresponding increase in confidence, often to the point of arrogance that the Spartans warn against here.

Of course, the Athenians do not listen to their enemies instead letting *τύχη* get into their heads. At the close of the Pylos episode, Thucydides notes that even as the Spartans

⁹ Schillinger, 16

continued to send ambassadors to release those captured on Sphacteria, “the Athenians only raised their terms” (οἱ δὲ μειζόνων τε ὠρέγοντο 4.41.4). Clearly, they were already beginning to trust in their present τύχη. This arrogance comes back to bite the Athenians a few chapters later, when the Sicilians make peace so the Athenians will not attack. Thucydides writes that the Athenians did not expect things to go this way. Indeed, they had fully expected to conquer Sicily, “for in their present prosperity they were indignant at the idea of a reverse; they expected to accomplish everything, possible or impossible, with any force, great or small” (οὕτω τῆ [τε] παρούση εὐτυχία χρώμενοι ἠξίουσιν σφίσι μηδὲν ἐναντιοῦσθαι, ἀλλὰ καὶ τὰ δυνατὰ ἐν ἴσῳ καὶ τὰ ἀπορότερα μεγάλη τε ὁμοίως καὶ ἐνδεεστέρα παρασκευῆ κατεργάζεσθαι 4.65.4). It is clear that the Athenian perception of their own capabilities had already become inflated. This inflated ego comes to a head in the disastrous defeat that results from the Sicilian expedition. As one scholar notes, “Athens' actions from Pylos through to Sicily” illustrates “the pattern of good fortune leading to ὑβρις and resulting in downfall.”

Naturally, there are two sides to the psychological construct of fortune—both equally dangerous. In the aftermath of Pylos, the Spartans experience the psychological effect of τύχη opposite to their opponents: they “wallow in fear of bad luck.” In its disheartening effect, τύχη is just as

malignant as in its confidence-boosting impact. At Cythera, soon after their defeat at Pylos, Thucydides writes that “Never in their [Spartan] history had they shown so much hesitation in their military movements” (ἔς τε τὰ πολεμικά, εἴπερ ποτέ, μάλιστα δὴ ὀκνηρότεροι ἐγένοντο 4.55.2). What caused such a change in the Spartan mindset? τύχη, of course: “Fortune too was against them, and they were panic-stricken by the many startling reverses which had befallen them within so short a time” (καὶ ἅμα τὰ τῆς τύχης πολλὰ καὶ ἐν ὀλίγῳ ξυμβάντα παρὰ λόγον αὐτοῖς ἔκπληξιν μεγίστην παρεῖχε”4.55.13). τύχη puts the Spartans in a negative headspace that they are not able to overcome until their victory at the Battle of Mantinea. Thucydides states that by winning that battle, the Spartans cleared themselves of their previous mindset and now found themselves finally to be out of the grasp of fortune: “they, although reproached because of fortune, seemed to be the same as before in character (τύχη μὲν, ὡς ἐδόκουν, κακιζόμενοι, γνώμη δὲ οἱ αὐτοὶ ἔτι ὄντες 5.75.3). For Thucydides, τύχη, “can cause extreme moods of despair and dissent or elation and over-confidence depending on circumstance.” To remedy the vitriolic nature of τύχη, of course, Thucydides would recommend γνώμη.

In his *History of the Peloponnesian War*, Thucydides aimed to present the most clear and accurate depiction of the events of the various campaigns, a pursuit which undoubtedly

made its many unexpected and inexplicable events frustrating. Fortunately, he had the “catch-all” word τύχη at his disposal. Throughout his own narration and the speeches of his characters (whose words are, in large part, his own), Thucydides uses τύχη in a much more nuanced way than Greek authors and historians before him. τύχη is neither a scapegoat nor some divine being by whose will human actions are determined. Rather, Thucydides’ τύχη is a powerful force, a psychological construct even, that can still be countered—primarily with γνώμη. In *The History of the Peloponnesian War*, even when τύχη is present, Thucydides consistently attempts to show how “human actions and natural causes [are] the underlying explanations of the outcome.” Ultimately, this work demonstrates that fortune favors those who do not rely on its assistance.

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* Translations adapted from Benjamin Jowett's translation of "Thucydides, *The History of the Peloponnesian War*" (1900)