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Dionysius of Halicarnassus on Thucydides

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Abstract and Keywords

Thucydides was very popular among Roman rhetoricians and historians of the first century bce. The Greek critic Dionysius of Halicarnassus, however, criticizes Thucydides for his unnatural style and his inappropriate treatment of subject matter. This chapter explains Dionysius' criticisms by taking into account the later writer's rhetorical perspective on the writing of history, as well as the character of his Roman audience, which included the addressee of the treatise, the historian Quintus Aelius Tubero. Dionysius' criticisms of Thucydides' anti-Athenian attitude (Letter to Pompeius 3.15), and his apparently conflicting praise (On Thucydides 8.1) of Thucydides' commitment to the truth can be reconciled if we take into account Dionysius' concept of "truth," his intended audience, and his rhetorical concept of historiography.

Keywords: Dionysius of Halicarnassus, Quintus Aelius Tubero, reception, rhetoric, Rome, Thucydides, truth

Philosophers and rhetoricians, if not all of them, yet most of them, bear witness to Thucydides that he showed the greatest concern for the truth, the high-priestess of which we desire history to be.

Dionysius of Halicarnassus, *On Thucydides* 8.1¹

Introduction

THE ancient reception of Thucydides was rich, diverse and wide ranging. Historians continued his work, imitated his style, or followed his idea of historiography; scholars wrote learned commentaries that explained his difficult vocabulary and syntax; and rhetoricians found inspiration in the speeches, which they analyzed as models of stylistic

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writing.² While readers of different periods and disciplines had their own interests and approaches, they generally shared their admiration for one aspect of the work: Thucydides was regarded as a champion of the truth. The point of departure of such portrayals was the historian's criticism of colleagues who did not care about "the search after the truth" (ἡ ζήτησις τῆς ἀληθείας, Thuc. 1.20.3). Thucydides' methodological statements on his careful investigation of the events of the war, the absence of the fabulous (p. 642) from his narrative, and the usefulness of his work as "a possession for all time" (κτῆμα ἐς αἰεὶ, Thuc. 1.22.4) deeply shaped and guided the ancient reception of Thucydides. In his essay *On How to Write History*, Lucian (2nd century CE) presents Thucydides as the sort of man the historian should be: fearless, incorruptible, free, and "a friend of freedom of speech and truth" (παρρησίας καὶ ἀληθείας φίλος, 41–42). Following the admonition of their great predecessor, later historians again and again emphasize the truthfulness of their own narratives. "Truth," however, could mean different things. It could be impartiality, as in Lucian, or it could refer to the close correspondence between historical facts and narrative; and truth could also mean the rejection of myth and unverifiable stories.

For modern readers, it can be difficult to understand how this emphasis on truthfulness relates to the rhetorical character of ancient historical writing.³ Ancient historians constantly emphasize that truth is their primary aim, their best friend, or their "goddess" (see Avenarius 1956, 40–46). At the same time, however, their histories adopt all sorts of rhetorical forms, such as the artistic arrangement of narrative, polished speeches, and vivid accounts of reported events (ἐνάργεια), which might seem to detract from their historical accuracy in the eyes of a modern audience. One ancient author who perfectly embodies this complex relationship between historiography and rhetoric is Dionysius of Halicarnassus (first century BCE), who was a historian, a rhetorician, and also a critic of Thucydides. Dionysius' readings of his predecessor constitute a fascinating chapter in the reception of Thucydides, in which the notion of "truth" plays an important role.

In his *Letter to Pompeius Geminus* (3.15) Dionysius points out that "the attitude (διάθεσις) of Thucydides is outspoken and bitter, revealing the resentment that he felt against his native city for his exile." How does this judgment relate to the idea, expressed in the same author's *On Thucydides* (8.1) that Thucydides was "most careful of the truth, the high-priestess of which we desire history to be"? Starting from a general discussion of Dionysius' reception of Thucydides, which will be explained within the context of rhetorical culture at Rome, this chapter will examine the two passages in context. It will be argued that Dionysius' ideas on Thucydides' anti-Athenian attitude on the one hand and truthfulness on the other can be reconciled, if we take into account the critic's concept of "truth," the intended audience of his writings, and his rhetorical, pragmatic view on the writing of history. A close analysis of the statement on Thucydides' honouring of the truth (*Thuc.* 8.1, cited above) will reveal that Dionysius' praise of his predecessor is more ambiguous than a first reading might suggest. The final part of this chapter will

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concentrate on Dionysius' self-fashioning in his treatise *On Thucydides*: Dionysius presents himself as a critical historian of Thucydidean historiography, who claims to be writing nothing but the truth—that is, the truth *about Thucydides*.⁴

(p. 643) Dionysius on Thucydides

Dionysius of Halicarnassus came to Rome in 30 BCE, where he worked at least until 8 BCE. His extant works demonstrate in various ways that he, like most of his contemporaries, regarded rhetoric and historiography as a harmonious and productive couple (Fox 1993; Fox and Livingstone 2010). While writing his history of early Rome in twenty books, of which the first ten and part of the eleventh are preserved, he was also active as a rhetorician. In that capacity he constantly urged his students and colleagues to read, to study, and to imitate the orators, poets, and historians of classical Greece. Deeply engaged as he was in the Greek literature of the classical past, Dionysius was well connected with the intellectual elite of the Roman world in which he lived. His extensive treatise *On Thucydides* is addressed to the Roman lawyer and historian Quintus Aelius Tubero, the father of two consuls, who seems to have had a particular interest in the subject (see below). More generally, Dionysius composed this work “for the special benefit of those who would wish to imitate Thucydides” (*Thuc.* 25.2). In adopting this practical perspective, *On Thucydides* follows the framework of Dionysius’ treatises *On Imitation* and *On the Ancient Orators*, which includes separate essays on Lysias, Isocrates, Isaeus, and Demosthenes. All those works aim to guide students of rhetoric and writers of prose to the creative imitation and emulation of the best elements of classical Greek literature.

Apart from *On Thucydides*, Dionysius wrote several critical works that contain observations on Thucydides.⁵ The *Letter to Pompeius* presents an extensive comparison between Herodotus and Thucydides in terms of subject matter and style, which results in a clear victory for the historian of Halicarnassus (*Pomp.* 3: see below, “Thucydides’ anti-Athenian Attitude: the *Letter to Pompeius*”). The criticism of Thucydides in the *Letter to Pompeius* is repeated and somewhat mitigated in *On Thucydides*, which takes a slightly more balanced view of Thucydides’ subject matter. In the technical treatise *On Composition* Dionysius analyses some passages of Thucydides as examples of the so-called austere type of word arrangement (σύνθεσις αὐστηρά). The *Second Letter to Ammaeus*, finally, is an appendix to *On Thucydides*, which examines and illustrates the grammatical peculiarities of Thucydides’ style, which are rejected as unnatural and close to solecism (see De Jonge 2011).

Dionysius cites a total of sixty-nine passages from Thucydides in his treatise *On Thucydides*; in his other works, he quotes another seventy-five passages. Not surprisingly, the rhetorician has a particular interest in the speeches, but he also offers detailed analyses of a number of narrative passages. While Dionysius deeply admires his fellow townsman Herodotus, he has some serious reservations about Thucydides. His objections against Thucydides concern both the contents of the narrative (discussed in *Thuc.* 9–20) and his obscure style (*Thuc.* 21–49), which he finds unfit for creative imitation (p. 644) (μίμησις). He criticizes Thucydides’ narrative for a variety of reasons that have raised the eyebrows of modern scholars. According to Dionysius, his predecessor has chosen an

unworthy topic for his history, he has selected the wrong beginning and end for his narrative, he has devoted too much space to unimportant events while passing over more important ones, and he has assigned some of the speeches to the wrong moments in his narrative. Pericles' monumental funeral speech (Thuc. 2.35–46), to mention one example, comes after the first invasions of the Peloponnesians, which were relatively insignificant; the speech would have been much more appropriately placed after an important battle with many victims: “any book that one might choose would be a more suitable place for the funeral oration than the second book” (Thuc. 18.1). Notorious is Dionysius' criticism of the arrangement of the first book of the *Histories*. He claims that the work would have been much improved if Chapters 2–20 had been left out, and he actually rewrites the passage by first citing Chapter 1.1 and then immediately moving on to Chapters 1.21–23 (Thuc. 20).

In his discussion of Thucydides' style, Dionysius praises the description of the battle of Syracuse (Thuc. 7.69–72 in Dion. Hal. Thuc. 26–27) as “worthy of emulation and imitation” (ἄξια ζήλου τε καὶ μιμήσεως), demonstrating such qualities as elevation (μεγαληγορία), elegance (καλλιλογία), and forcefulness (δεινότης). The narrative of the revolution at Corcyra (Thuc. 3.81–83 in Dion. Hal. Thuc. 28–31) on the other hand is characterized by “the obscure and involved style, in which the charm is far exceeded by the confusion that obscures the sense” (Thuc. 33.1).

Dionysius' Criticism in Context: Historiography and Rhetoric in Rome

Some of Dionysius' objections to both the contents and the style of Thucydides sound bizarre, if not ridiculous in the ears of a modern audience, and they have indeed provoked the scorn of many readers. When Dionysius prefers Herodotus' choice of subject matter to that of Thucydides on the ground that the former historian deals with the glorious deeds of the past whereas the latter describes a war “that had best never happened at all, or should have been consigned to silence and oblivion” (*Pomp.* 3.3–4), Thomas Hobbes reacts by stating that “there was never written so much absurdity in so few lines.”⁶ It is not difficult to criticize Dionysius from a modern perspective on what historiography should be. But Dionysius' reception of Thucydides must be understood in its historical context, more particularly the context of historiography and rhetorical teaching in Rome.

In the course of the first century BCE Thucydides had become quite popular in Rome, especially after 83 BCE when Sulla brought the library of Apellicon of Teos, including copies (p. 645) of Thucydides, from Athens to Rome. In different ways Thucydides' writing inspired such Roman writers as Lucretius, Nepos, and especially Sallust, the Roman Thucydides (cf. Quint. 10.1.101; on Thucydides in Rome, see Leeman [1955]; Canfora [2006]; Weaire [2005, 256–57]; Wiater, chapter 38 in this volume). There were also Roman orators who took Thucydides as their stylistic model in composing speeches. Cicero took

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exception to these “Thucydideans,” because he considered their artificial style incomprehensible and hence self-defeating in forensic or deliberative oratory: “Thucydides gives us history, wars and battles—fine and dignified, I grant, but nothing in him can be applied to the court or to public life. Those famous speeches contain so many dark and obscure sentences (*obscuras abditasque sententias*) as to be scarcely intelligible, which is a prime fault in a public oration” (*Orator* 30, trans. Hubbell). Cicero’s evaluation of Thucydides is echoed in Dionysius’ observations on the historian’s obscure style and “unnatural” syntax in *On Thucydides* and the *Second Letter to Ammaeus*. It is clear that the criticism of Thucydides in both Cicero and Dionysius formed a reaction to the popularity of the Greek historian among Roman rhetoricians and historians.

One of the fervent supporters of Thucydides in Rome seems to have been the prominent historian Quintus Aelius Tubero, the addressee of Dionysius’ treatise *On Thucydides*. As he was not satisfied with Dionysius’ treatment of Thucydides in *On Imitation* (which is preserved in the *Letter to Pompeius*), Tubero asked Dionysius for a separate essay on the Greek historian (*Thuc.* 1.4) whose archaic style appears to have inspired Tubero’s own history of Rome in Latin.⁷ Dionysius accepted the invitation, but we may wonder whether his friend, possibly his patron, was entirely happy with the result. At first reading, the work commissioned by Tubero appears to adopt a slightly more positive view of Thucydides than the *Letter to Pompeius*, since it praises certain aspects of the narrative and tones down some of the negative comments presented in the earlier work (see Weaire 2005); but its general message nevertheless comes down to a severe warning *against* the imitation of Thucydides.

If we wish to understand Dionysius’ criticism of Thucydides’ subject matter and style, we must take into account his own concept of historiography, which is closely related to his rhetorical program of classicism. Dionysius’ works are invariably based on the crucial concept of μίμησις, the eclectic and creative imitation of admirable examples from the past (Delcourt 2005, 43–47). In his rhetorical works he asks his students to adopt the best elements of classical writing; in his *Roman Antiquities* he holds up the earliest inhabitants of Rome, who were in fact Greek (1.5.1), as excellent models of a noble lifestyle, to be imitated by the readers of the *Roman Antiquities* (1.6.4).⁸ This approach to historiography implies that the historian presents, or rather shapes and constructs, the past as a useful framework that inspires a good life in the present (Fox 1993; Wiater 2011, (p. 646) 165–223). It also means that for Dionysius a historiographical work should be organized in such a way that it facilitates the process of imitation, which has direct consequences for the choice of topic, the portrayal of characters, and the arrangement of the narrative. Dionysius’ objections to Thucydides’ treatment of subject matter should be understood from this rhetorical perspective on historiography.

Dionysius’ stylistic criticism of Thucydides is likewise grounded in his program of classicizing rhetoric. Faithful as he is to the principles of Atticism, Dionysius constantly draws attention to the importance of stylistic clarity (σαφήνεια). For students and orators who aim at a clear and lucid style, the work of Thucydides is a dangerous model: Dionysius points to his exotic vocabulary, his unnatural syntax (which borders on

solecism), and his obscure composition and figures of speech. These criticisms are repeated and illustrated with numerous examples in the *Second Letter to Ammaeus*, for which Dionysius made use of a philological commentary on Thucydides, an indispensable tool, as the Greek critic claims: “Very few people can understand the whole of Thucydides and even they do not understand him without a linguistic commentary” (*Thuc.* 51.1: see De Jonge 2011). It might surprise us that Thucydides, being an Attic writer, receives such negative feedback from an Atticist critic. In Dionysius’ perception, however, Thucydides seems to have turned from an Athenian citizen into an anti-Athenian outsider, an isolated figure, who lost the connection with his Attic roots when he was banished from Athens (cf. Wiater 2011, 142–144).

In the treatise *On Thucydides* (50.2–3), Dionysius concludes that Thucydides’ style is not only inappropriate for political debate, but also for historical works, despite the claims made by “some professors of repute” (τινες οὐκ ἄδοξοι σοφισταί), who think that Thucydides’ grandeur, solemnity, and impressiveness are at home in the writing of history. While some scholars have suggested that Dionysius here refers to the views of his contemporary colleague Caecilius of Caleacte (Leeman 1955, 198; Aujac 1991, 161), he may as well be alluding to the reception of Thucydides by Roman admirers (Weaire 2005, 261–62). The view that Thucydides is suitable as a model for historiography but not oratory is reminiscent of Cicero’s statement that “everyone praises Thucydides, but as an intelligent, serious and dignified commentator on events, one to describe wars in history, not to handle cases in law-courts” (*Orator* 31, trans. Hubbell; see De Jonge 2008, 214–15).

Dionysius’ objections to Thucydides’ style and narrative thus reflect his program of rhetorical education as well as his rhetorical perspective on historiography. This background will help us to understand Dionysius’ views on Thucydides’ biased attitude in the *Letter to Pompeius* and his statements on the historian’s commitment to the truth in *On Thucydides*.

Thucydides’ anti-Athenian Attitude: The *Letter to Pompeius*

In the third chapter of the *Letter to Pompeius* Dionysius presents a systematic comparison between Herodotus and Thucydides, which he reproduces from his earlier work *On* (p. 647) *Imitation*.⁹ In the discussion of style (*Pomp.* 3.16–21), Thucydides is said to be superior in conciseness, the representation of emotions, and in force and intensity; Herodotus wins points for the portrayal of character, persuasion and delight, and appropriateness; the two historians divide the points for purity of language (Ionic versus Attic dialect), vividness, and grandeur and impressiveness. “The beauty of Herodotus is gay, while that of Thucydides is awe-inspiring,” Dionysius concludes (*Pomp.* 3.21: τὸ μὲν Ἡροδότου κάλλος ἰλαρόν ἐστι, φοβερὸν δὲ τὸ Θουκυδίδου). We will here concentrate on

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his discussion of subject matter (*Pomp.* 3.2-15), where Herodotus defeats Thucydides on all accounts.

The first task for a historian is to select a subject that is fine and pleasant (καλὴ καὶ κεχαρισμένη, *Pomp.* 3.2). Herodotus, who records “wonderful deeds” (θαυμαστὰ ἔργα) of Greeks and barbarians, has succeeded, whereas Thucydides has failed, for the Peloponnesian war was “neither glorious nor fortunate” and hence should have been forgotten altogether (*Pomp.* 3.4). The second task for a historian is to decide where to begin and where to end. Again Herodotus wins: his narrative starts with the earliest origins of the conflict between Greeks and barbarians and ends with the Persian defeat. The starting point of Thucydides’ *History*, however, is “the moment when Greek affairs started to decline.” Dionysius argues that “Thucydides, being a Greek and an Athenian” (*Pomp.* 3.9), should not have shown his native city in such bad light. He ought to have started his narrative directly after the Persian wars, when Athens was flourishing, and instead of ending his story abruptly with the sea-battle at Cynossema in the twenty-second year of the war, Thucydides should have carried his narrative down to the end of the war and the liberation of Athens. Herodotus also beats Thucydides in the selection of events, which is the third task of the historian: Dionysius tells us that Herodotus’ account has a pleasant variety, whereas the narrative of Thucydides is uniform, so that the audience’s mind is quickly exhausted. The fourth duty concerns the distribution and arrangement of the material. Thucydides adopts a purely chronological structure, which makes his narrative obscure. Herodotus follows the divisions that the events themselves suggested to him and thereby manages to bring many subjects together into one harmonious body (σύμφωνον ἐν σῶμα, *Pomp.* 3.14). The final category of subject matter concerns the historian’s “attitude” (διάθεσις) toward the events that he describes (*Pomp.* 3.15):

ἡ μὲν Ἡροδότου διάθεσις ἐν ἅπασιν ἐπεικῆς καὶ τοῖς μὲν ἀγαθοῖς συνηδομένη, τοῖς δὲ κακοῖς συναλγοῦσα· ἡ δὲ Θουκυδίδου διάθεσις ἀνθέκαστος τις καὶ πικρὰ καὶ τῇ πατρίδι τῆς φυγῆς μνησικακοῦσα. τὰ μὲν γὰρ ἀμαρτήματα ἐπεξέρχεται καὶ μάλα ἀκριβῶς, τῶν δὲ κατὰ νοῦν κεχωρηκότων ἢ καθάπαξ οὐ μέμνηται, ἢ ὥσπερ ἠναγκασμένος.

The attitude of Herodotus is fair throughout, showing pleasure in the good and distress at the bad. That of Thucydides on the other hand is outspoken and harsh, revealing the grudge that he felt against his native city for his exile. He recites a catalogue of its mistakes, going into them in minute detail; but when things go according to plan he either does not mention them at all, or only like a man under constraint.

(p. 648) A century later, Plutarch reverses this judgment when he accuses Herodotus of malice (κακοήθεια), which consists among other things in reporting something discreditable that is irrelevant to the narrative and in “the omission of good things” that deserve a place in the narrative (*On the Malice of Herodotus* 855c-d). In Dionysius’ view, however, it is Thucydides who is guilty of such faults, including μνησικακία (“the

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remembrance of wrongs”). His negative attitude toward Athens comes to light in the decisions that he has made in choosing his subject, in determining the beginning and end of his narrative, and in the selection of events: all these aspects of his work present the Greek world, and Athens in particular, in a bad light. The past that Thucydides presents to his readers is unworthy to be remembered, let alone to be studied or imitated by later generations.

Herodotus’ work, on the other hand, is both useful and entertaining. It is useful because it offers admirable exempla of human behaviour; and it is entertaining because the reader will enjoy a varied, unbroken narrative about his brave compatriots with a happy ending, namely, the Greek defeat of the Persians. Dionysius’ praise of Herodotus and criticism of Thucydides is echoed in the introduction of the *Roman Antiquities* (1.1.2-3), which emphasizes that history should deal with admirable subjects that will be morally useful for the reader:

For I am convinced that all who propose to leave such monuments of their minds to posterity as time shall not involve in one common ruin with their bodies, and particularly those who write histories, in which we have the right to assume that truth, the source of both prudence and wisdom, is enshrined (έν αἴς καθιδρῦσθαι τήν ἀλήθειαν ὑπολαμβάνομεν ἀρχήν φρονήσεώς τε καὶ σοφίας οὔσαν), ought, first of all, to make choice of noble and lofty subjects (ὑποθέσεις ... καλὰς καὶ μεγαλοπρεπεῖς) and such as will be of great utility (ώφέλειαν) to their readers, and then with great care and pains, to provide themselves with the proper equipment for the treatment of their subject. For those who base historical works upon deeds inglorious or evil or unworthy of serious study (...) are neither admired by posterity for their fame nor praised for their eloquence; rather, they leave this opinion in the minds of all who take up their histories, that they themselves admired lives which were of a piece with the writings they published, since it is a just and a general opinion that a man’s words are the images of his mind (εἰκόνας εἶναι τῆς ἐκάστου ψυχῆς τοῦς λόγους).

The contrast between Thucydides and Dionysius is enormous. Thucydides famously states that, while the absence of storytelling might render his work “less pleasing” (ἀτερπέστερον) to the ear, he wishes his history to be intellectually “useful” to his readers for the understanding of the events that happened in the past as well as similar events that will happen in the future (Thuc. 1.22.4). Dionysius by contrast is not so much interested in intellectual as in moral usefulness: his history will make his readers better citizens. Hence, for Dionysius usefulness and entertainment go hand in hand, as Wiater (2011, 135) has pointed out, because history can only be practically useful if the reader is able to identify with the protagonists. Dionysius believes (p. 649) that history must be truthful—truth being the “origin of both prudence and wisdom” (ἀρχήν φρονήσεώς τε καὶ σοφίας)—but not every truth is appropriate to being treated in historiography (cf. Goudriaan 1989, 279). Here we arrive at the central problem that Thucydides poses to Dionysius. Within the discourse of Dionysius’ classicism, Athens represents the glorious model of all political oratory, art, and literature (Delcourt 2005,

157–173). A narrative that brings out Athenian failures, like Thucydides' account of the Peloponnesian War, cannot be reconciled with that idealized image (Wiater 2011, 147–149).

The High Priestess of Truth: *On Thucydides*

Let us now turn to *On Thucydides*. In the light of the objections that Dionysius raised against Thucydides in his *Letter to Pompeius*, his praise of the historian's devotion to the truth in the treatise might come as a surprise to his readers (*Thuc.* 8.1–2):

Μαρτυρεῖται δὲ τῷ ἀνδρὶ τάχα μὲν ὑπὸ πάντων φιλοσόφων τε καὶ ῥητόρων, εἰ δὲ μή, τῶν γε πλείστων, ὅτι καὶ τῆς ἀληθείας, ἧς ἰέρειαν εἶναι τὴν ἱστορίαν βουλόμεθα, πλείστην ἐποιήσατο πρόνοιαν, οὔτε προστιθεὶς τοῖς πράγμασιν οὐδὲν ὃ μὴ δίκαιον οὔτε ἀφαιρῶν, οὔδὲ ἐνεξουσιάζων τῇ γραφῇ, ἀνέγκλητον δὲ καὶ καθαρὰν τὴν προαίρεσιν ἀπὸ παντὸς φθόνου καὶ πάσης κολακείας φυλάττων, μάλιστα δ' ἐν ταῖς περὶ τῶν ἀγαθῶν ἀνδρῶν γνώμας. καὶ γὰρ Θεμιστοκλέους ἐν τῇ πρώτῃ βύβλῳ μνησθεὶς τὰς ὑπαρχούσας αὐτῷ ἀρετὰς ἀφθόνως ἐπελήλυθε, καὶ τῶν Περικλέους πολιτευμάτων ἀψάμενος ἐν τῇ δευτέρᾳ βύβλῳ τῆς διαβεβοημένης περὶ αὐτοῦ δόξης ἄξιον εἶρηκεν ἐγκώμιον· περὶ τε Δημοσθένους τοῦ στρατηγοῦ καὶ Νικίου τοῦ Νικηράτου καὶ Ἀλκιβιάδου τοῦ Κλεινίου καὶ ἄλλων στρατηγῶν τε καὶ ῥητόρων ἀναγκασθεὶς λέγειν, ὅσα προσήκοντα ἦν ἐκάστω, δεδήλωκε.

It is confirmed by all philosophers and rhetoricians, or at least by most of them, that Thucydides showed the greatest concern for the truth, the high priestess of which we desire history to be. He adds nothing to the facts that should not be added, and takes nothing therefrom, nor does he take advantage of his position as a writer, but he adheres to his purpose without wavering, leaving no room for criticism, and abstaining from envy and flattery of every kind, particularly in his appreciation of men of merit. For in the first book, when he makes mention of Themistocles, he unstintingly mentions all of his good qualities, and in the second book in the discussion of the statesmanship of Pericles, he pronounces a eulogy such as is worthy of a man whose reputation has penetrated everywhere. Likewise, when he was compelled to speak about Demosthenes the general, Nicias the son of Niceratus, Alcibiades the son of Clinias, and other generals and speakers, he has spoken so as to give each man his due.

(p. 650) Various scholars have pointed out that there is a tension, if not a contradiction, between this praise of Thucydides as the guardian of truth and the passage in the *Letter to Pompeius* on his anti-Athenian attitude (Pritchett 1975, 58; Goudriaan 1989, 289–290; Weaire 2005, 253–255). How should we explain this tension? Two approaches to this problem have been suggested: one is based on the relative chronology, the other on the different audiences of the two works.

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Some scholars have explained the differences between the *Letter to Pompeius* and *On Thucydides* as resulting from a development in Dionysius' critical thinking. The comparison between Herodotus and Thucydides was originally presented in *On Imitation*, one of Dionysius' earlier works. The *Letter to Pompeius* (which reproduces the passage from *On Imitation*) has been assigned to the essays of the "middle period," whereas *On Thucydides* belongs to the later works (Bonner 1939). So, did Dionysius change his mind about Thucydides? That is what Pritchett (1975, 58) suggests when he qualifies the *Letter to Pompeius* as the "earlier and less mature" work. This solution however is not satisfactory, for many of Dionysius' points of criticism in the *Letter to Pompeius* are actually repeated in *On Thucydides*, including comments on the chronological method, the treatment of the beginning and the end of the work, and the distribution of speeches. More importantly, if we read carefully, we will see that Dionysius complains about Thucydides' negative portrayal of the Athenians in *On Thucydides* just as much as in the *Letter to Pompeius* (Goudriaan 1989, 289–90; Weaire 2005, 254). He points out that the words of the Athenians in the Melian Dialogue are those of barbarian kings rather than Greeks (*Thuc.* 39.1). And he objects to the superficial treatment of the Athenian embassy to Sparta in 430 BCE, which Thucydides (2.59) presents as a minor event, omitting the speeches as well as the names of the ambassadors. When the Spartans send an embassy to Athens in 425 BCE, however, Thucydides devotes much attention to the event, by citing the Spartan speeches at length (4.15–22). Dionysius is displeased (*Thuc.* 15.2):

(... I cannot imagine why he attached more importance to the Spartan than to the Athenian embassy (πρεσβείαν), more to the later embassy than to the earlier, to the embassy of strangers (τὴν ἀλλοτρίαν) rather than that of his own city (τῆς ἰδίας), to the one sent because of lesser sufferings rather than the one sent because of greater sufferings.

This passage, which criticizes Thucydides for a lack of chauvinism, shows the continuity in thought between the *Letter to Pompeius* and *On Thucydides*. The language used in the two relevant passages reveals that same continuity. In the *Letter to Pompeius*, Dionysius complains that Thucydides focuses on the failures of the Athenians, while ignoring their successes, mentioning them only reluctantly—as if he is "forced" to do so (ἠναγκασμένος, *Pomp.* 3.15). In the treatise, he praises Thucydides' fair portrayals of noble men. But Dionysius then proves his point by offering a list of Athenian generals who are presented favourably by Thucydides: Themistocles, Pericles, Demosthenes, Nicias, and Alcibiades all received the treatments that they deserved (προσήκοντα)—and also other generals about whom he was "forced to speak" (ἀναγκασθεὶς λέγειν, (p. 651) *Thuc.* 8.2). The language of "being forced" (ἀναγκάζεσθαι) connects this passage with the one from the *Letter*. This echo suggests that Dionysius has not at all changed his mind about Thucydides—the truthfulness of the historian is here "proven" by the fact that "when forced" to speak about the most important Athenian leaders he did not yield to his anti-Athenian bias. According to this interpretation, then, the tone of the two passages is different, but the

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underlying view of Thucydides as an anti-Athenian writer is present in both, although more implicitly in the later passage.

Weaire (2005) has suggested a more fruitful approach to this difference in tone, which focuses on Dionysius' professional situation and intended audience. We know nothing about Demetrius, the addressee of *On Imitation*, or about Pompeius Geminus, the addressee of the *Letter to Pompeius*, but they seem to have been Greek intellectuals who worked in similar conditions as Dionysius himself.¹⁰ In writing his treatise *On Thucydides*, however, Dionysius had to take into account the important position of his Roman addressee Quintus Aelius Tubero, who was obviously impressed by Thucydides and dissatisfied with Dionysius' earlier comments in *On Imitation*. In addressing his influential Roman friend, Dionysius had to acknowledge that Thucydides was highly admired at Rome. In "an unusually lengthy and defensive *captatio benevolentiae*" (Weaire 2005, 252) he defends himself against readers who will censure him for stating that "the greatest of historians (τὸν ἀπάντων κράτιστον τῶν ἱστοριογράφων) was occasionally at fault in his choice of subject matter and weak in his powers of expression" (*Thuc.* 2.2). It is plausible that the positive remarks about Thucydides' ἀλήθεια (*Thuc.* 8) are part of the same strategy to win the favour of Tubero and other die-hard fans: before raising his objections against the historian's use of subject matter and style, he first had to acknowledge the generally accepted opinion that Thucydides was a respectable historian, who surpassed his predecessors.

Dionysius on the History of Historiography: From Myth To Truth

So, what does "concern for the truth" mean for Dionysius, if it is not an impartial attitude? In order to understand his praise of Thucydides' ἀλήθεια, we must consider the structure of *On Thucydides* (cf. Grube 1950, 95-100; Pritchett 1975, xxxv):

Chapters 1-4	Dionysius' right to criticize Thucydides
5	The predecessors of Thucydides: early historians and Herodotus
6-7	Thucydides' originality: his focus on one war and his rejection of myth
8	Thucydides' devotion to the truth
9-20	Subject matter

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	(9 chronological arrangement; 10-12 beginning and end; 13-20 elaboration)
21-49	Style (22-24 general; 25-33 detailed criticism of passages; 34-48 speeches; 49 conclusion)
50-51	Arguments in favor of Thucydides and their refutation
52-55	Demosthenes' imitation of Thucydides

(p. 652)

Chapter 8 forms the end of the introductory part of the treatise, which establishes Thucydides' place in the history of historiography (see Toye 1995). Dionysius first lists the early historians, including Hecataeus, Charon, Xanthus, and Hellanicus (*Thuc.* 5.3):

(...) they all had the same aim: to make generally known the traditions of the past as they found them preserved in local monuments and religious or secular records, in the various tribal and urban centres, without adding to or subtracting from them. (...) These accounts contained some stories (μῦθοι) that had been believed from remote antiquity, and many dramatic tales of changing fortunes which men of today would think quite silly.

Next came Herodotus, who “enlarged the scope” of historiography: he did not record the history of one city or nation, but numerous events in Europe and Asia, which he brought together in a single narrative (*Thuc.* 5.5). Dionysius then introduces Thucydides, who is said to differ from his predecessors in two respects (*Thuc.* 6.4-5):

Thus Thucydides differed from the earlier historians firstly in the choice of his subject, which was neither completely monothematic nor divided up into a number of disconnected topics, and secondly by his exclusion of all legendary material (τὸ μῦθον ... μῦθῶδες) and his refusal to make his history an instrument for deceiving and captivating the common people, as all his predecessors had done when they wrote stories like those of female monsters at Lamia rising up out of the earth in the woods and glades (...); and other stories which seem incredible (ἀπίστους) and largely ridiculous to us in these days.

This characterization of Thucydides' work and its rejection of myth clearly echoes the historian's own *Methodenkapitel* (τὸ μὴ μῦθῶδες, 1.22.4). Dionysius in fact cites that famous passage (*Thuc.* 7.3), immediately before recording the general admiration for Thucydides' devotion to the truth (*Thuc.* 8.1, quoted at the head of this chapter): (almost) all rhetoricians and philosophers testify for the historian that he has been most careful of the truth. In Chapter 9 Dionysius then opens his attack, criticizing the chronological arrangement of the *Histories*, its starting point, and the distribution of the speeches. The context of Dionysius' “praise” of Thucydides (*Thuc.* 8.1-2) tells us that the primary

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meaning of “truth” in this context is not “impartiality” or “being unbiased,” but the rejection (p. 653) of legendary tales: Thucydides’ history of the Peloponnesian War honors truth because it omits the incredible stories that his predecessors had included in their histories.

Dionysius' Ambiguous Praise of Thucydides

We have seen that there is no substantial development between the *Letter to Pompeius* and *On Thucydides*: Dionysius has not actually changed his mind about Thucydides' anti-Athenian attitude, even if he presents his case more cautiously in the treatise. On closer inspection, his praise of Thucydides' truthful historiography appears to be subject to various qualifications: the compliment to Thucydides, which concerns the rejection of myth rather than impartiality, forms part of Dionysius' rhetorical strategy to please Tubero and the Thucydideans. A close reading of the opening statement of Chapter 8 will in fact demonstrate its ambiguity (*Thuc.* 8.1):

Μαρτυρεῖται δὲ τῷ ἀνδρὶ τάχα μὲν ὑπὸ πάντων φιλοσόφων τε καὶ ῥητόρων, εἰ δὲ μή, τῶν γε πλείστων, ὅτι καὶ τῆς ἀληθείας, ἧς ἰέρειαν εἶναι τὴν ἱστορίαν βουλόμεθα, πλείστην ἐποιήσατο πρόνοιαν, ...

It is confirmed by all philosophers and rhetoricians, or if not, at least by most of them, that Thucydides showed the greatest concern for the truth, the high priestess of which we desire history to be (...).

The remarkable formulation of this sentence raises three questions. Firstly, who are these philosophers and rhetoricians who agree on Thucydides' truthfulness?¹¹ Secondly, why does Dionysius appear to correct himself by claiming that perhaps not "all" agree, but "at least most of them"? And finally, who are "we" who desire history to be "the priestess of truth"?

As to the identity of 'the philosophers and rhetoricians', scholars have offered different opinions. Aujac (1991, 148) believes that Dionysius must be thinking of Demosthenes, whom he presents at the end of his treatise as an early imitator of Thucydides. Canfora (2006b, 746–47) points to the Peripatetic school of Aristotle and Theophrastus. But given the fact that Thucydides was quite popular in Rome, we should not exclude the possibility that he is in fact thinking of Roman rather than Greek writers. In this context, we should recall Cicero's statement (*Orator* 31, cited above) that "Thucydides is praised by everyone" (*laudatus est ab omnibus*). It is possible that Dionysius is likewise alluding to the Roman imitators of Thucydides, including his addressee Aelius Tubero.

(p. 654) Let us now look at our second question, concerning Dionysius' self-correction. He states that Thucydides' care for the truth is confirmed "by all philosophers and rhetoricians, or if not, at least by most of them" (ὑπὸ πάντων ..., εἰ δὲ μή, τῶν γε πλείστων). By correcting his use of the word "all" (πάντων) Dionysius might be seen to undermine his praise of Thucydides, for his correction raises the question as to who would be the few rhetoricians and philosophers who do *not* agree. It is attractive to suppose that Dionysius is here making an exception for himself: by using the passive voice (μαρτυρεῖται, "it is confirmed," "it is testified") in the first part of the sentence and

then correcting “all” into “most” men, Dionysius leaves open the possibility that he himself is not one of the rhetoricians who praises Thucydides’ truthfulness.

In the second part of the sentence, however, Dionysius switches to the first person plural: “we desire” (βουλόμεθα) that history should be the high priestess of truth. This brings us to the third question, concerning the identity of the “we” who hold this belief. Whereas Dionysius does not commit himself to the first claim about Thucydides, he does include himself in the group of people who believe that history should honor the truth. We have indeed seen that this position agrees with Dionysius’ statements at the beginning of his *Roman Antiquities* (1.1.2) about histories, “in which we assume that truth, being the source of prudence and wisdom, should be enshrined” (ἐν αἷς καθιδρῦσθαι τὴν ἀλήθειαν ὑπολαμβάνομεν ἀρχὴν φρονήσεως τε καὶ σοφίας οὔσαν).

Who else belongs to “we”? The religious discourse that portrays truth as a goddess and history as her priestess resonates with the language of several voices in the ancient theory of historiography (Avenarius 1956, 40–46). Cicero (*De oratore* 2.36) refers to history as *lux veritatis*, “the illuminator of reality,” but Dionysius’ words correspond more closely to Diodorus Siculus’ characterization of history as the “prophetess of truth” (προφήτις τῆς ἀληθείας): it is noteworthy that Diodorus (1.2.2) introduces this analogy in a passage that aims to bring out the differences between myth and history—both the formulation and its context are thus very similar to the statement in Dionysius’ *On Thucydides*. The theme of truth as the goddess of history culminates in Lucian’s essay *How to Write History*. Lucian’s goddess of history is still called Truth (ἀλήθεια), but her role seems to have shifted. Unlike Dionysius, Lucian does not understand truth merely as the rejection of myth and folk tales. For him truth seems to be precisely that impartial and unbiased attitude of the historian that Dionysius did not discover in Thucydides: “Even if the historian personally hates certain people he will think the public interest far more binding, and regard the truth as worth more than enmity, and if he has a friend he will nevertheless not spare him if he errs. This (...) is the one thing peculiar to history, and only to Truth must sacrifice be made (μόνη θυτέον τῇ ἀληθείᾳ)” (*Hist. Conscr.* 39–40, trans. Kilburn).

Dionysius and the Truth about Thucydides

On Thucydides can be read as an evaluation report, which mixes positive and negative criticism. Dionysius emphatically presents himself as a fair critic, who suggests that (p. 655) his balanced judgment pays respect to both strengths and weaknesses in his predecessor’s history. This is where we encounter another dimension of “truth” in Dionysius’ treatise: by presenting himself as a critic who is, unlike his colleagues, devoted to the truth—the truth about Thucydides—Dionysius adopts the role of the unbiased historian, thereby suggesting that he can defeat Thucydides as a priest in the religious cult of Alētheia (cf. Weaire 2005, 255–56).

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At the beginning of his treatise, Dionysius defends himself against potential protests of readers who admire Thucydides. He assures his addressee (*Thuc.* 2.1) that “I do this not with you in mind and those like you, who are completely honest in your judgments and value nothing more highly than the truth (ἀλήθεια), but on account of all those others who take great delight in finding fault (...).” Dionysius then claims that he has the right to criticize Thucydides: some readers will censure him for daring to find fault with “the greatest of historians.” But Dionysius emphasizes that his criticism should not be misunderstood as “malice” (κακοήθεια), and he tells his addressee (*Thuc.* 2.4) that “you and other scholars must each judge for himself whether my arguments are true and fair” (ἀληθεῖς καὶ προσήκοντας). Dionysius plays the role of a sincere critic who is devoted to the truth about Thucydides: he will praise the good and disapprove of the bad aspects of the ancient historian’s work. In this respect he is different, he claims, from the contemporary imitators of Thucydides: those who admire the historian immoderately are enchanted by their blind admiration. They are no longer able to see the shortcomings of his narrative, as if they have fallen in love with a pretty face (*Thuc.* 34.4–7):

They are suffering from the same sort of infatuation as a man overcome with an almost frantic love of some face or other. He thinks that the face that has captivated him possesses all the charms that go with a comely form; and those who attempt to criticize any blemishes that it has he accuses of slander and backbiting. In the same way Thucydides’ admirers, hypnotized by this single virtue [sc., the invention of arguments and ideas] also claim for him all the qualities that he does not possess: each man thinks what he wants to think about the object of his love and admiration. But those who keep an impartial mind (ἀδέκαστον τὴν διάνοιαν) and examine literature in accordance with correct standards, (...) do not praise everything alike or find fault with everything, but give due recognition to correct usage and withhold praise from any part that is seriously at fault.

Whereas Dionysius criticizes Thucydides for his bitter attitude, which would reveal his resentment against Athens, he claims for himself an impartial mind: as a historian of historiography, Dionysius presents himself as unbiased and fair. His self-fashioning might surprise some of his modern readers—for it would not be difficult to argue that Dionysius is in fact not always fair towards Thucydides, for instance, when he criticizes the abrupt ending of the *Histories*. But the more important point here is that in writing about Thucydides Dionysius himself adopts the Thucydidean language and discourse of ἀλήθεια, thereby suggesting that he is more impartial and more devoted to truth than the classical historian—Dionysius becomes in other words “the better Thucydides” (Weaire 2005, 255). This strategy wonderfully culminates in the final words of the (p. 656) treatise, where Dionysius once more alludes to Thucydides’ famous *Methodenkapitel*, referring to the familiar contrast between entertainment and truth (*Thuc.* 55.5: see also Weaire 2005, 255–256 and Hunter, in preparation, who notes that Dionysius’ formulation also echoes Nicias’ words in *Thuc.* 7.14.4):

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I might have written you more pleasant things (ἡδίω) about Thucydides, my dearest Quintus Aelius Tubero, but nothing that would be more true (ἀληθέστερα).

The concluding word of Dionysius' *On Thucydides* is "more true" (ἀληθέστερα). It is not only the fitting climax to a theme that has been prominent throughout the treatise, but it also concludes the competition that Dionysius has entered with Thucydides from the first pages of his work. The final sentence of the treatise concludes a complex game of intertextuality. Alluding to Thucydides' well-known characterisation of his history as "less pleasing" but "useful" for future generations (Thuc. 1.22.4), Dionysius claims that his own work is likewise useful rather than pleasant for his Roman addressee. The readers who have studied his treatise carefully, however, will understand that the climactic comparative ἀληθέστερα may carry a second, more suggestive meaning: in comparison with Thucydides' history, Dionysius' own history of historiography turns out to be "more true."¹²

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Notes:

⁽¹⁾ References to the rhetorical works of Dionysius of Halicarnassus in this chapter follow the edition of Aujac (1991 and 1992). Translations of Dionysius' *On Thucydides* are adapted from Usher (1974) and Pritchett (1975). Translations of Dionysius' other rhetorical treatises are adapted from Usher (1974 and 1985). Citations and translations of the *Roman Antiquities* follow Cary (1937).

⁽²⁾ On the reception of Thucydides in Roman and late antiquity, see Canfora (2006).

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⁽³⁾ Woodman (1988) and Fox and Livingstone (2010) examine the connections between Greek rhetoric and historiography.

⁽⁴⁾ This part of my argument builds on the astute observations in Weaire (2005, 255–56).

⁽⁵⁾ For Dionysius' theory of historiography, see Halbfas (1910) and Sacks (1983). For discussions of Dionysius' criticism of Thucydides, see Pavano (1936); Grube (1950); Pavano (1958); Wiater (2011, 130–65) and Hunter, in preparation. For general discussions of Dionysius, see De Jonge (2008) and Wiater (2011).

⁽⁶⁾ Burns (2014) discusses the dispute between Hobbes and Dionysius on Thucydides.

⁽⁷⁾ On Tubero, see Bowersock (1965, 132). Tubero wrote a history of Rome in archaizing, Thucydidean style: see Fromentin (1998, xv) and the references in Weaire (2005, 255 n. 27), whose reading of *On Thucydides* rightly draws attention to the role of Tubero and the sensitivities of Dionysius' Roman audience.

⁽⁸⁾ On the intended audience of Dionysius' *Roman Antiquities* (Greek, Roman, or both), see Luraghi (2003). Weaire (2005, 246) persuasively argues that Dionysius' works were written for "a Greek-literate readership, both Greek and Roman, with particular strategies adopted at different points in the work to appeal to particular segments within that readership."

⁽⁹⁾ See *Pomp.* 3.1 with Fornaro (1997, 163–65); Heath (1989, 71–89); and Wiater (2011, 132–54) offer useful discussions of Dionysius' comparison of Herodotus and Thucydides.

⁽¹⁰⁾ No evidence proves or disproves conjectures that Pompeius Geminus was a freedman of Pompeius the Great (Rhys Roberts 1901, 38) or that he was the author of the treatise *On the Sublime* (Richards 1938), although some of his views are indeed close to those of "Longinus" (De Jonge 2012, 292–95).

⁽¹¹⁾ Diodorus Siculus 1.37.4 observes that Xenophon and Thucydides are "praised for the accuracy of their histories" (ἐπαινούμενοι κατὰ τὴν ἀλήθειαν τῶν ἱστοριῶν).

⁽¹²⁾ This chapter was written during a research stay at the Hardt Foundation at Vandoeuvres. I am very grateful to Daniël den Hengst for his helpful comments.

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