CHAPTER 2

Natural Upheavals in Thucydides (and Herodotus)

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To my favorite historian and a master of nonverbal communication, I dedicate this inquiry: is the physical world a sender of signs? I am sure that Donald Lateiner has his own answers, just as Herodotus and Thucydides had theirs. These authors were free from our environmental guilt and less bombarded than we are by the spectacle of humanitarian tragedies in every corner of the earth. Both of them, however, mention natural cataclysms in connection with human actions and sociopolitical turmoil, most especially war. It is the thesis of this essay that, despite major differences, shared cultural assumptions emerge from the relations Herodotus and Thucydides establish between the natural and the human spheres.

1. World of Men and World of Nature

In his introductory sentence, Thucydides calls the Peloponnesian War and its preliminary a κίνησις . . . μεγίστη for the Greek and partly for the non-Greek world (1.1.2). For most scholars (e.g., Hornblower 1991: 6), this is a reference to the “convulsion” caused by the war, and although Jeff Rusten makes a powerful argument (in this volume) that κίνησις here means “mobilization,”

1. Elsewhere in Thucydides, κινε- words refer, in fact, to unproblematic material transports. In one case, κινεῖ, while retaining its literal sense, is used somewhat abnormally (or, as Rusten shows, poetically) to denote a geological movement (2.8.3; see below, sec. 3).
it would be a mistake to strip the term of all metaphorical undertones. In Aristotle’s (in itself metaphorical) definition, *metaphora* consists in “the carrying over [*epiphora*] of the name [*onomai*] of something to something else” (*Poetics* 21.1457b6–7). In Thucydides, however, the metaphorical conflation between the political and the physical realms carries over well beyond the level of the single “name” κίνησις at 1.1.2. It reappears in a different form in the second introduction of book 1, where Thucydides adds to the survey of various sufferings brought about by the war a parallel list of natural upheavals that occurred in the same period (1.23):

This war went on for a great length of time, and the sufferings [παθήματα] that happened to Greece during it were not comparable to any in an equal amount of time. For never had so many cities ever been taken and evacuated, some by barbarians, others by the parties themselves who were at war with one another (in some cases cities that were captured even changed their inhabitants), never had there been so many banishments and bloodshed, partly during the war itself and partly as a result of civil struggle [ό μὲν κατ’ αὐτὸν τὸν πόλεμον, ὁ δὲ διὰ τὸ στασιάζειν].

Phenomena that were previously reported, but more rarely confirmed as facts, became believable, concerning *earthquakes* of the greatest magnitude, which involved most of the world, and *eclipses of the sun*, which occurred more frequently than those remembered from earlier times, as well as *droughts*, sometimes severe and, as a result of these also *famines*; and, not least damaging and destructive far and wide, the *pestilential disease*. All these things happened at the same time as the war [*σφεσίων τε πέρι, οἱ ἐπὶ πλείον πάντα μέρος γῆς καὶ ἱσχυρότατοι οἱ αὐτοὶ ἑπέσχον, θαλου τε ἐκλείψεις, οἱ πυκνότεραι παρὰ τὰ ἐκ τοῦ πρὸν χρόνου μνημονευόμενα ξυνεβήσαν, αὐχμοὶ τε ἐστὶ παρ’ οίς μεγάλοι καὶ ἀπ’ αὐτῶν καὶ Δικοὶ, καὶ ἡ οὐχ ἦκιστα βλάψεις καὶ μέρος τι φθείρας καὶ ὁμώδης νόσος· αὐτὰ γὰρ πάντα μετὰ τούτῳ τὸν πολέμου ἀμα ξυνεπέθετο]. (1.23.1–3)

What we may call the “subsidiary term” of the κίνησις metaphor at 1.1.2 (the natural realm) is here deployed as a literal reality side by side with the primary term (human society). The man-made παθήματα fall outside the

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2. Unless otherwise specified, the translations in this essay are mine.
routine effects of ancient warfare, just as the concurrent natural events in the next sentence are presented as abnormal. The earthquakes are of unprecedented intensity and extend to “a great part [μέγος] of the earth” (1.23.3), just as, according to the opening chapter, the war involved “Greek states as well as a portion [μέγες] of the barbarians and, so to speak, most of the world” (1.1.2). Here the earthquakes are the objective correlative of the figurative Kivriau; of the war (1.2.1), while eclipses, droughts, and famines, with their connotation of disappearance or lack, correspond to the exiles and depopulation of cities. The summary of natural phenomena enhances the central theme of tremendous suffering. It is not clear, however, what kind of relation, other than contemporaneousness (πολέμου ἄμα ξυνεπέθετο), it means to establish.4

2. Earthquakes and Eclipses in Thucydides

Aside from the plague in Athens, to which Thucydides will devote some of his most famous pages, how frequently and in what contexts does his narrative include natural events? One item that receives great emphasis in the list, namely famines produced by droughts, occurs nowhere else—a point to which we will return later.5 By contrast, we find earthquakes in all but one book of the History. The most important is arguably the great earthquake that struck Laconia (c. 464 BCE), first mentioned in its proper chronological place as a well-known disaster (“the earthquake,” 1.101.2) and referred to retrospectively four additional times by the narrator or speakers. This earthquake had severe material and political consequences as well as troubling the Spartans on religious grounds, but it occurred thirty years or so before the outbreak of the Peloponnesian War.6 Within the period Thucydides has bracketed at 1.23.3, he briefly records six more.7 The first is an earthquake at Delos, mentioned not for its material consequences but because people considered it to have been a sign of the imminence of the great war.8 Subsequently, in the

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5. The term αὖχιμός only appears at 1.23.3. On the use of λυμός at 2.54.3, see below, sec. 4. Elsewhere in Thucydides, λυμός refers not to a natural event but to a circumstantial shortage of food.
6. For the Spartans’ religious interpretation, see 1.128.1. That earthquake is also mentioned at 2.27.2, 4.56, and 3.54.5. On its historical significance, see Cartledge 2002: 186–91.
7. Thuc. 2.8.2, 3.87 and 89 (several episodes of the same seismic phenomenon), 4.52.1, 5.45.4, 6.95.1, 8.6.5.
8. 2.28.2. See below, sec. 3.
fifth and sixth years of the conflict, an objectively catastrophic series of shocks affected large areas of central Greece over a long period of time, from the winter of 427/26 (3.87.4) to the summer of 426 (3.89). Thucydides first reports their inception in a chapter where he notes the return of the plague to Athens that same year and provides a summary count of its disastrous casualties (3.87.1–3). In the following summer, with the disease still raging in the city, the earthquakes prevented the annual Peloponnesian invasion of Attica, and “at about the same time,” inundations (ἐπικλυσεῖς) struck Orobiae in Euboia, leaving part of the city under water and killing some of the inhabitants. The tsunami damaged an Athenian fort and wrecked one of two ships at Atalanta, an island off the coast of Opuntian Locris; at Peparethus, where there was no flooding, fortifications and buildings were destroyed (3.89.1–5). Thucydides concludes this account by expressing the opinion that the earthquake caused the tsunami and that one phenomenon would not have happened without the other. The formulation is emphatic (αἰτίαν δ' ἐγὼν νομίζω ... μοι δοκεῖ), as if designed to counter the idea of a mysterious coincidence.

While the earthquakes and inundations of 427/26 are causally related, the recrudescence of the plague in Athens in the same period is an independent event, and the coincidence seems to matter.9 Similarly, the summer of 424 is marked by both an earthquake and an eclipse of the sun. Thucydides records both events in a single sentence; he provides no particular setting, no description, and no account of damages, and he establishes no connection to the subsequent account of military operations (4.52.1).10 By contrast, the remaining earthquakes of the History are integrated into the narrative and affect the action, although not always in dramatic ways. In the summer of 420, seismic episodes interrupt two different assemblies, thereby preventing, first, the Athenians (5.45.4) and, subsequently, the Corinthians (5.50.5) from being persuaded to break up relations with Sparta and make an alliance with Argos. In the summer of 414, an earthquake forces the Spartan expedition against Argos to turn back (6.95.1); another one in the following winter causes the Spartans to scale down their support of revolting Chios (8.6.5). This second earth-

9. Hornblower 1991: 495. For the spring of 426, Thucydides records also an eruption of Mount Etna (only the third since the Greeks settled in Sicily) at the time of a surge in the Athenian anti-Syracusan operations (3.116.1–2).

10. This may be simply an extension of the indication of time introducing the eighth year of the war (“that was the summer when ...”). See Dewald 2005: 42, 50–53, for the narrative discontinuity created by this type of introduction.
quake is evidently the same that Thucydides, in a later passage, calls "the greatest in living memory" (μέγιστος γε δὴ ὄν μεμνημέθα γενόμενος), noting that it left Meropid Cos ruined and vulnerable to Spartan attacks (8.41.2).

Natural phenomena that produce human suffering, weaken a state, or destroy infrastructures are evidently pertinent to Thucydides' narrative of the war. When they impede military or political actions, the text does not always make clear whether the disruption was due to material danger or to the fact that historical agents interpreted them as signs.\(^\text{11}\) Solar eclipses must have had considerable psychological impact, which made them worth recording.\(^\text{12}\) But Thucydides' statement that they "occurred more frequently than those remembered from earlier times" (1.23.3) is an exaggeration, even if one counts all of the solar eclipses that scientists today attribute to that period.\(^\text{13}\) Thucydides, at any rate, only mentions two: the eclipse of 424, as we have already seen (4.52.1), and another in the summer of 431 (2.28.1), when "the sun took the shape of a crescent and the sky was dark enough that some stars became visible." By specifying that both happened at the new moon, "which is apparently the only time when this is even possible" (2.28.1), Thucydides is noticing an element of regularity in planetary conjunction.\(^\text{14}\) At the same time, standing as they do on their own, divorced from the narrative of the war, the two reports have no apparent raison d'être other than timing and coincidence. While the solar eclipse in 424 coincides with an earthquake, the one that occurred in the summer of 431—when the Peloponnesians will invade Attica for the first time and the Athenians will be forced to evacuate their country homes and farms—counts as one of the natural phenomena that preceded—and, according to some people, announced—the beginning of the war (2.8.3).

The most consequential eclipse in Thucydides' narrative is, of course, the lunar eclipse of 413 BCE, which was interpreted as a divine sign, inducing the Athenians to delay their withdrawal from Syracuse (7.50). The omission of

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\(^{11}\) The unclear cases are at 3.89.1, 5.45.4, and 5.50.5.

\(^{12}\) As Lloyd remarks (1989: 331), eclipses frightened many people even after the correct explanation for their occurrence was available. According to Plut. Per. 35, the eclipse of 431 (reported at Thuc. 2.28.1) occurred when the Athenian naval expedition to the Peloponnesian was about to sail; Pericles allayed the panic of the crews by persuading them that it was a natural phenomenon.

\(^{13}\) See the chart provided in Stephenson and Fatoohi 2001, with exact dates.

\(^{14}\) The scientific information may have come from Anaxagoras (see DK 59 A 42; Guthrie 1965: 304–8), who, according to Plut. Per. 23, also studied lunar eclipses.
lunar eclipses from the list of phenomena at 1.23.3, unless it is due to the chronology of composition, might confirm how much Thucydides wanted to distance himself from that spectacular case of irrational thinking. On that occasion, what we read of the disastrous results of Nicias’ trust in “divination and such” (to use the dismissive Thucydidean phrase) reinforces much other evidence presented in the History that to derive divine guidance from the physical world is impossible. My goal here, however, is not to evaluate the role of religion in Thucydides or his religious views but, rather, to explore in what terms a text that declines to consider transcendent causation and that regularly devalues human attempts to traffic with it also shows an interest in the correlation between the social and the natural spheres. To that end and for the sake of comparison, it will be useful to give a synthetic account of Herodotus’ inquiry into the natural world as a bearer of divine signs.

3. Herodotus and Thucydides on the (One and Only) Earthquake of Delos

Even though Thucydides sometimes mentions natural events seemingly for their own sake, he does so only as part of his narrative of the war. Not so Herodotus, who also discusses synchronically the “nature” (phusis) of lands, rivers, seas, climate, animals, and plants. In his cautiously expressed view, this entire natural apparatus “somehow” (κακώς) shows evidence of having been put in place by a transcendent intelligence—“the providence of the divine” (τότ θεία τή πρόοσοη, 3.108.2)—so as to function teleologically according to material and empirically observable laws. When Herodotus reports how Thales of Miletus had predicted the eclipse of the sun that interrupted a battle between Lydians and Medes (1.74), he places the phenomenon in the realm of physical science, somewhat as when Thucydides notes the normalcy

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15. Thuc. 7.50.4: θεασμώ τε και τώ τοιούτων; cf. 2.47.4; ἱεροῖς ἀ. ἡ ἡ. μαντείας καὶ τῶν τοιούτων. On Nicias and the lunar eclipse, see Plut. Nic. 23; Flower 2009: 13–15. Greek cities housed various types of religious professions, more or less respected (see Flower 2008: 58–71). Thucydides often devalues their activity (see 2.8.2, 2.21.3, 8.1.1) as well as anyone’s dogmatic interpretation of oracles (see 5.24.3; cf. below, sec. 4, on 2.17.2 and 2.54).

16. On Thucydides and religion, see esp. Furley 2006; Rubel 2000: 123–34; Jordan 1987; Marinatos 1981; Oost 1975. Regardless of belief, Thucydides considers the decline of traditional religious customs such as oaths or funerary rituals as a symptom of social deterioration; see, recently, Lateiner 2012, esp. 169–70.

17. Thucydides only uses the word phusis (nature) in reference to human beings.
of solar eclipses "at the new moon" (2.28.1, 4.52.1; see above, sec. 2). We could indeed cite several passages from Herodotus that concentrate on natural processes, without at the same time denying a different level of reality.\textsuperscript{18} Here Herodotus' position appears not so radically different from that of the Hippocratic author of the treatise \textit{On the Sacred Disease}, who states that epilepsy is no more or less "sacred" than any other diseases. Their causes (\(\pi\rho\sigma\varphi\alpha\sigma\tau\epsilon\varsigma\)) depend on their nature (\(\phi\upsilon\sigma\zeta\varsigma\)); at most, all diseases can be called "divine" (\(\theta\epsilon\iota\alpha\)) to the extent that nature as a whole is.\textsuperscript{19}

In the medical writers, however, stipulations of this sort appear in contexts that emphasize their proactive disregard for metaphysical issues. Those writers especially object to religious explanations that interfere with the accurate diagnosis and cure of physical disorders—somewhat as when Thucydides points out cases of the activity of diviners influencing strategy.\textsuperscript{20} Herodotus' notions of causality differentiate him sharply both from the medical writers and from his colleague Thucydides: he considers it part of his task to inquire whether or not specific natural phenomena or pathologies that happened in the past for natural reasons can also be shown to manifest a divine intention. On the one hand, for example, Herodotus, much like the Hippocratic author, seems to regard the "sacred disease" of Cambyses as not particularly sacred, but rather as a congenital disability that, in turn, could well have been the natural cause of his mental insanity. But on the other hand, he also reports as not implausible the Egyptians' opinion that Cambyses' madness flared up as a result of his killing of the Apis bull (3.30.1; cf. 3.33).\textsuperscript{21}

In Herodotus, diseases and material disasters, if they appear to come from the gods, may either be designed to produce particular effects (e.g., punishment) or simply signal that something else will happen in the human world.\textsuperscript{22} As he generalizes from the sufferings of Chios during the Ionian Revolt,

\textsuperscript{18} E.g., Hdt. 2.11–13 (the alluvial formation of the Egyptian delta), 2.20–27 (causes of the floods of the Nile), 7.129.4 (geology of the Peneus valley).

\textsuperscript{19} \textit{Morb. Sacr.} 1.10–12, 2.1–7; cf. \textit{Aer} 22.1–10. Aristotle considers nature as \(\delta\alpha\mu\iota\omicron\nu\alpha\, \alpha\lambda\alpha\epsilon\omicron\nu\) \(\theta\epsilon\iota\alpha\) (Div. Somn. 463b12). On the causes of the plague in Athens as noted by Thucydides and others, see below, n. 41 and corresponding text. On the intersection of Herodotus and the medical writers, see Lateiner 1986; Thomas 2000: 28–74.

\textsuperscript{20} See above, n. 15 and corresponding text; Lloyd 1979: 15–58; Lloyd 1986: 40–42, 128.

\textsuperscript{21} Munson 1991; for divinely induced diseases in Herodotus, see, e.g., 1.19, 4.205, and esp. 1.105.4, where the supernatural explanation of the Scythian "female disease" contrasts with that provided for the same condition by the Hippoc. \textit{Aer} 22. See also Demont 1988. The first attested case of disease as punishment is the plague described in \textit{Iliad} 1.

\textsuperscript{22} For divine intervention and communication in Herodotus, see Munson 2001: 183–206.
There tend to be predicting signs somehow when great misfortunes are about to
strike a city or a people. And, as a matter of fact, before these events also the
Chians received great signs. (6.27.1-3)

Here, the “great misfortunes” (μεγάλα κακά) are hardships that “brought
the city to its knees” as a result of war, while the “great signs” (σημήμα
μεγάλα) are a series of prior catastrophes, including an earthquake and a
plague epidemic. As at 3.108.2, the particle καθως expresses that we are on
speculative territory. Nevertheless, here and elsewhere, Herodotus presents
the time coincidence of material and political events as empirical evidence of
their mutual connection.23

Like Thucydides, Herodotus places himself in the midst of a period char­
acterized by geopolitical turmoil that began with an exceptional natural
event: the shaking of Delos. He reports that at the time of Darius’ expedition
against Athens and Eretria in 490 BCE, when the Persian fleet under the com­
mand of Datis proceeded west from Delos, an earthquake shook the island.
According to Herodotus, nothing of the sort ever happened before or after
“in my time”:

After he sailed away from there, Delos was shaken, as the Delians say, and this
earthquake was the first and the last to my times. 2. And no doubt this was a
prodigy that the god manifested to men of the evils that were going to happen
[μετὰ δὲ τοῦτον ενθεύτεν ἔλαβανθέντα Δῆλος ἐκκινήθη, ὡς ἔλεγον οἱ Δῆλοι,
καὶ πρῶτα καὶ ὅστατα μέγαρ ἐμέ σεισθέα. Καὶ τούτο μὲν κοι τέρας
ἀνθρώποι τῶν μελλόντων ἑσθέθαι κακῶν ἐφήνε οἱ θεοῖ].

For in the times of Darius, the son of Hystaspes, Xerxes, the son of Darius,
and Artaxerxes, son of Xerxes, in these three consecutive generations, more evils
happened to Greece than during the other twenty generations that preceded
Darius, some [of these evils] deriving to Greece from the Persians, others from
the leaders themselves as they were fighting over the hegemony. 3. So it was not
at all out of order that Delos was shaken, having previously been unshaken
[κινηθήναι Δῆλον το πρῶτον ἐούσαν ἁλίνην]. And in an oracle, the following

23. For coincidence as evidence of divine influence, see esp. 7.137.1: δῆλον ὦν μοι ὦτι θείον
ἐγένετο το πρόγαμα; also 2.120.5, where the general rule that becomes “clear” is that the
gods inflict great punishments on great injustices (καταφανές . . . ὡς τῶν μεγάλων
ἀδικημάτων μεγάλαι εἰσί καὶ αἱ τιμωρίαι παρὰ τῶν θεῶν). Besides the one Herodotus
records at 6.98 (discussed below), a divinely motivated earthquake also occurs at 5.85.1-2
(c. 490 BCE) and 8.64.1-2 (480 BCE).
had been written about it: I shall shake Delos, although she is unshaken [κινήσω καὶ Δήλον ἀκίνητον περ ἑῴσαν]. (Hdt. 6.98.1–3)

For Herodotus, the earthquake of Delos “no doubt” (κοῦ) verifies the general principle that the gods “somehow” (κῶς) send “great signs” in anticipation of “great evils” (6.27.1). That most fifth-century audiences would have agreed with his notion of divine communication through nature is confirmed by the passage in which Thucydides himself records an earthquake of Delos as the first in the period bracketed at 1.23.3 (see above, sec. 1). It is this seismic event (and not one that Herodotus assigns to 490) that Thucydides maintains was the first ever in the history of the island. At the time, all of Greece was “up in the air” (μετέωρος) in anticipation of the coming conflict, and “many oracles were recited, and oracle interpreters chanted many predictions”:

[Moreover, shortly before this, Delos was shaken having never before experienced an earthquake in the memory of the Greeks. [Or so, at least] it was being reported, and it seemed to have been a sign for things that were going to happen, and if something else of this kind happened to occur, it was examined in all its aspects.] (2.8.3)

Herodotus’ and Thucydides’ texts use similar formulations, and their intertextuality is not in doubt.24 It is clear from Thucydides that people in mainland Greece in 431 BCE believed Delos to have experienced an unprecedented earthquake “shortly before” and that many interpreted that earthquake as having been a sign that the conflict for which they were eagerly preparing would soon break out.25 Herodotus, for his part, places the unique event two


25. According to Lewis 1960, the epigraphic evidence shows that the Athenians voted the construction of a shrine to Delian Apollo at Phaleron at this time, perhaps as a response to the earthquake.
generations earlier, appealing to a tradition preserved by the Delians. Unless he wrote his passage before 431 and never revised it, or unless he was in Thurii at the time of what he would regard as a second Delos earthquake, Herodotus may be objecting to the widespread view that Thucydides records, if not specifically to Thucydides. This does not mean that Herodotus denies that there was an earthquake that portended the coming of the Peloponnesian War; he simply places such an event earlier and assigns to it a much longer prophetic range, one extending for three generations, from the Persian Wars to all the subsequent struggles of Greeks against Greeks for hegemonic power (Hdt. 6.98.2), including those of the Pentecontaetia and at least part of what we now call the Archidamian War. This passage represents an important expression of Herodotus' overarching view that the events leading to the Persian Wars represented the "beginning of evils" (Hdt. 5.97.3) and that the Persian Wars, in turn, produced the inter-Greek wars, all in the course of a continuous historical period of "evils" that lasted down to his own times.26

Thucydides, of course, divides time differently. While he recognizes the chain of causes and consequences from the Persian Wars to the Peloponnesian War, he essentially conceives of the Pentecontaetia as the great divide between the two conflicts. Like Herodotus, he is clearly aware of the significance of Delos as a symbol of stability and as a geographical marker (center or boundary) of the political life of the Greeks.27 The placement of the earthquake in the historical context he has chosen is consistent with this periodization. Whether or not Delos could have experienced more than one seismic episode,28 Thucydides here also underlines that this was the first ever, thereby confirming the poetic tradition about the hitherto "unshakeable" nature of Delos, a tradition that was vulnerable to rationalistic challenges even in antiquity.29 Although he is poised between ergon and logos — between the earthquake

29. Like the oracle in Herodotus 6.98.3, Pindar (fr. 33c 3-4) calls Delos ἀξιώτητος, although his use of the term no doubt means "no longer floating"; see Verg. Aen. 3.77; cf. Hymn. Hom. Ap. III 14-18 and Callim. Hymn 4.51-54. See Williams 2006: 141-42 on Seneca's polemic against the myth of an unshakeable Delos. The priesthood of Delos encouraged this idea of an unshakeable island, yet in the tradition of Delphi, earthquakes represent a way in which Apollo defends his sanctuary against enemy attacks; see Hdt. 8.37.3 and other sources on Delphi and Delos in Panessa 1991: 1-318-26, 338-41. Rusten (2013) argues that the earthquake(s) of Delos in Herodotus and Thucydides are fictional events entirely derived from the poetic tradition.
itself and the memory, reports, or religious interpretations of others (μέμνηνται; ἔλεγετο δὲ καὶ ἐδόκει)—he includes the event as a matter of fact among those that “happened at the same time” (ξυνέβη γενέσθαι, 2.8.3; cf. πολέμου ἀμα ξυνεπέθετο, 1.23.3), “things previously spoken about by hearsay [ακοῇ μὲν λεγόμενα], but more rarely confirmed in fact” (ἐγγὺς δὲ ἀνεβαινοῦμενα, 1.23.3). The first cosmic convulsion (ἐκινήθη)30 occurred just before the greatest metaphorical κίνησις (Thuc. 1.1.2) and coincided with what Thucydides (differently than Herodotus) regarded as the “beginning of evils” in the human sphere (Thuc. 2.12.3; cf. Hdt. 5.99).

4. The Plague

The preceding brief survey is enough to show that for Herodotus the human and the natural world are ontologically mediated by a rational divine principle, whose intentions are difficult but nevertheless possible, at least retrospectively, to access. Thucydides, however, never, in his own voice, explains events in terms of transcendent mediation, so that the meaning of the concomitance of war and natural phenomena appears to lie beyond the reach of the historian’s opinion. The unintelligibility of Thucydides’ text in this area has led some readers to conclude that there is nothing to understand except for the author’s rhetorical aim to enhance, with rumbles and growls, what he advertises at the outset as the most sensational war narrative of all times.31 More useful is the notion of metaphor invoked at the beginning of this discussion, not merely as a verbal or literary trope, but as a conceptual framework and a cognitive tool, which borrows one domain to make sense of another.32 Thucydides’ two domains are the natural and the political worlds presented side by side at 1.23, where the list of different types of natural disasters—all made up of plural terms—culminates in the verbal crescendo of ἡ οὖν ἡκιστα βλάψασα καὶ μέρος τι φθείρασα ἡ λοιμώδης νόσος, parallel to the singular phonos, the loss of life due to war and stasis.33 Likewise, in

30. For Thucydides’ unique use of kine- in this passage, see Rusten’s essay in this volume and Rusten 2013.


32. See above, sec. 1 and n. 3; Black 1962: 25–47; Black 1979. See also Lloyd 1989: 172–214.

33. For the traditional association between pestilence (loimos) and civil war, see Demont 1990: 153–55.
the historical narrative, the driving force of Thucydides’ tracking of specific earthquakes, inundations, and eclipses is arguably the experience of the plague that ravaged Athens in 430–26, again abruptly mentioned at the outset as the disease (ἡ νόσος, 2.47.3), a phenomenon unparalleled in the memory of men (according to a formulation that recalls his report of the Delian earthquake) and so singular and exclusive that, at the time, it obliterated and absorbed all others (2.49.1).

For the Athenians, the trauma of that epidemic was strictly intertwined with the pragmatic discomfort and the anxieties of a city at war. From this time on, literary sources, especially drama, show a marked increase in the use of nosological references and in the metaphorical application of the notion of disease to dysfunctions of the body politic. Thucydides’ description of the plague and his structural placement of the episode as a sort of factual response to the theoretical formulation of the Epitaphios signals a profound malaise with the internal state of the polis and the external role of Athens in the geopolitical world. It is not merely that the plague, like war and stasis, brings disruption in the social fabric of the community, that is, that nosos extinguishes nomos (2.52–53). The plague, rather, represents the objective correlative of war. It cuts short and, in a sense, replaces or parallels the Spartan invasion, and like that invasion, it comes from the outside; it travels through a great part of the non-Greek world (cf. 1.1.2), “invades” Greece, reaches Peraeus, and finally settles in Athens (2.48.1). At the level of the individual person, its νόσος (2.48.3) follows an opposite course, from the head to the extremities, as it “invades” and “conquers” the space of the body (2.49.2).

Cognitive metaphors work, however, not simply on the basis of analogy

34. Cf. οὕτως ἀνθρώπων οὐδαμοῦ ἐμπνευστὸ γενέσθαι (2.47.3) with πρῶτον οὕτω σεισθέεια ἂφ’ οὐ Ἑλληνες μέμνηνται (2.8.3).
35. See, most recently, Kallet 2013.
36. The connection between the “literal” plague in Soph. OT (see esp. 25–28) and the historical plague in Athens has been famously argued in Knox 1956, even though we have no external evidence for dating the play. Many other metaphorical disease references in tragedy are cited in Mitchell-Boyask 2008 and Brock 2000: 27. On the city as a diseased body, see Thuc. 6.14; Kallet 2013, n. 5 with bibliography.
37. Finley (1967: 159–60) compares Thucydides’ description of the social effect of the plague with his account of the stasis in Corcyra (3.82–83; cf. 3.75.4). The contrast between Pericles’ praise of the Athenian citizen’s autarkia in the Funeral Oration (2.41.1) and Thucydides’ observation that “no physical constitution was autarkes” (2.51.3) establishes another connection. Herodotus applies nosological language to political discord at 6.100.1 and 7.157.2, and he uses a mixed metaphor of rottenness (σκέφθεον) and shaking (διαστείη) at 6.109.5 (Brock 2004: 165).
38. See Parry 1969 for the metaphorical language in Thucydides’ description.
but according to a set of complex interrelations. In many respects, the plague is not at all like the war. Its attack is “sudden” and “without cause” (ἐξειδήπερ, 2.48.1; έξαίφνης . . . ἀτη/ ούδεμιας προφάσεως, 2.49.2).

Thucydides’ self-confidence in identifying aitiai and prophaseis of war for the benefit of posterity (1.22.4–23.6) contrasts with his insistence on the mysteriousness of the disease. He will only be able to provide future readers with a minute and accurate description of symptoms, leaving it to others, be they doctors or laymen, to opine on “their adequate causes” (τὰς αἰτίας . . . ἱκανὰς, 2.48.3). He dismisses the rumor about the Peloponnesians poisoning the Peiraeus wells (2.48.2), and he relegates to the role of aggravating factor the overcrowding in the city as a result of the war policy. In the absence of satisfactory natural explanations, the questions raised by the text (what is it, why here, and why now?) connect the biological and the political body in an utterly aporetic way.

The plague just “strikes”, Thucydides has called it η λοιμώδης νόσος (1.23.3), recalling the Homeric λοιμός (Il. 1.61), and Pericles includes it among things daimonia (2.64.2). This last identification may be in itself a metaphor (denoting an “act of god,” as in modern legal terminology), but many of Pericles’ fellow citizens would have taken it more literally. Some connected it with the Delphic oracle in which Apollo had promised to assist the Spartans in the Peloponnesian War (Thuc. 2.54.4; cf. 1.118.3, 1.123). Thucydides, who never attributes the plague to the gods, reports, at any rate, that the remedies of cult were just as ineffective as the resources of medicine or other human techmai (2.47.4). However, he confirms the factual “basis” of the divine-as-

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40. Thomas 2006; Kallet 2013: 358–59. Aitia and prophasis are also part of the vocabulary of causation of medical writers: see above, sec. 3; Lloyd 1979: 51–58.
41. Thuc. 2.52.1; cf. 2.54.5. Contrast Diod. 12.45.1–2; Plut. Per. 34.4. Thucydides is aware of person-to-person contagion (see Holladay and Poole 1979: 295–98) but is silent on environmental causes; cf. Diodorus 12.45 and 58, citing crowding, rain, foul air, spoiled crops, and lack of wind. See Longrigg 2000; Allison 1983. The reading of 1.23.3 (ἀτη/ αὐτῶν καὶ λίμωι, καὶ η/υχη/στα βλάφασα καὶ μέρος τι θεόφασα η/ λοιμώδης νόσος) as meaning that both the famines and the plague derived from droughts (Demont 1990: 149; Demont 2013: 81–84) is not supported by Thucydides’ narrative of the plague.
43. In the fifth century, δαμάσκης (which does not occur anywhere else in Thucydides) is occasionally used as synonymous with θείος (e.g., Hdt. 2.120.5), but see the distinction made by Aristotle at Div. Somn. 463b12, cited above, in n. 19.
44. See Thuc. 2.54.4–5. Cf. Diod. Sic. 12.58.6; Paus. 1.3.4.
45. Thucydides does not even deign to mention Pericles’ hereditary pollution (1.126–27) as an alleged cause of the plague, although Demont (2013: 77–78) sees the words Thucydides attributes to Pericles at 2.64.1 as an allusion to public opinion on this matter. Thucydides is
cause theory by reporting that the beginning of the plague coincided with the Spartan invasion of Attica (ἐσβεβληκότων ... τῶν Πελοποννησίων) and by insisting on the extent to which the disease targeted only the Athenians both at home and abroad (2.54.5, 2.57, 2.58.2–3).

On the basis of this and other evidence, Lisa Kallet (2013) has recently argued that Thucydides’ entire 430 BCE narrative is designed to suggest to his readers the possibility that Apollo indeed caused the plague. This view seems too specific and leaves unanswered the more general question of whether Thucydides also sees the other natural phenomena he records as possibly responding to human activity. Nevertheless, Kallet’s discussion of the plague narrative confirms Thucydides’ sensitivity to a mysterious causal relation between the natural and the human worlds at a level that is not merely empirical. This inclination emerges even as Thucydides criticizes the procrustean Athenian attempts, at the time of the plague, to read the thought of the divine:

ἐν δὲ τῷ κακῷ οἷά εἰκός ἀνεμνήσθησαν καὶ τούτε τού ἔποιος, φάσκοντες οἱ προσβύτεροι πάλαι ἄδεσθαι

’ήξει Δωρικός πόλεμος καὶ λοιμός ἀμ′ αὐτῷ.’

(3) ἐγένετο μὲν οὖν ἐρὶς τοῖς ἀνθρώποις μὴ λοιμόν ὠνομάσθαι ἐν τῷ ἔπει ὑπὸ τῶν παλαιῶν, ἄλλα λιμόν, ἐνίκησε δὲ ἐπὶ τοῦ παρόντος εἰκότως λοιμὸν εἰρήσθαι· οἱ γὰρ ἀνθρώποι πρὸς ἄ ἐπαυχον τὴν μνήμη ἐποιούντα. ἢν δὲ γε οἶμαι ποτὲ ἄλλος πόλεμος καταλάβῃ Δωρικός τούτε ὅστερος καὶ ξυμβῆ γενέσθαι λιμόν, κατὰ τὸ εἰκός οὕτως ἄδοντα.

[Among other things which, of course [οἷα εἰκός], they remembered in the midst of their misfortune, was also the following verse, with the elders claiming that it was sung long ago:

also silent about various religious remedies, like the importation of Asclepius’ cult from Epidaurus to Athens in 420 (IG II2 4960). He avoids connecting the plague with the Athenian purification of Delos in 426, which was carried out, he says, “according to some oracle” (3.104). Diodorus (12.58.6) regards it as an attempt to appease Apollo, who had promised, from Delphi, to help Sparta in the war (Thuc. 1.118.3; cf. 2.54.2), and most scholars agree that this was at least one of the motives. Cf. Hornblower 1992: 195; Flower 2009: 5–9. Contra Mikalson 1984: 221–22.
'A Dorian war will come and with it pestilence [λοιμῶν]'.

Although a dispute arose among people as to whether in the verse the ancients had really said 'pestilence' [λοιμῶν] or 'famine' [λιμόν], in the present situation—of course [εἰκότως]—the version with 'pestilence' won, for people adapted their memory to what they were suffering at the time. I think that if ever another Dorian war comes upon them after this one, and if a famine happens at the same time, they will of course [κατὰ τὸ εἰκός] sing the verse in that way.] (2.54.2–3)

While Thucydides' "of course" discourse displays condescension toward popular piety, this passage does not constitute a crystal clear display of rationalism either. In an earlier narrative of how Athenians from the countryside crammed into the city according to Pericles' policy and took habitation wherever they could, Thucydides similarly quotes—and criticizes the ordinary interpretation of—another prediction applicable to the same period, this time a Pythian oracle deploring an eventual occupation of the Pelasgian ground (2.17.1–2). That oracle proved true, Thucydides maintains, not because the sacrilegious occupation caused misfortunes for the state (as most people would say), but in the sense that the necessity of the occupation was caused by the unfortunate advent of the war (2.17.1–2). Now, this is a rationalistic explanation. It denies the common assumption that infractions of cult are punished by the gods (consistently with Thucydides' position that cult does not buy divine favors), while at the same time contributing to the pragmatic assimilation of war and plague: the hardships of the war here cause a violation of religious nomos, very much in the same way as the hardships of the plague unsettle funerals and other rituals (2.52–53).

On this model, Thucydides might have rationalized the prediction that "with a Dorian war will come pestilence" by emphasizing the role of war logistics in producing the pestilence or, for that matter, limoi, in the sense of shortages of food.46 He does not do so, as we have seen, perhaps rather preferring to imply causes bigger and more fundamental than these material explanations. For him, the prophecy is "true"—or at least interesting—because it formulates the concomitance of suffering caused by humans and suffering caused by nature, be it pestilence or famine. Thucydides' implicit

46. See above, n. 4.
recognition of the essential equivalence of the two different versions of the prophecy may give us the key to why the last items leading up to the λοιμώδης νόσος (pestilential disease) in his list of unparalleled natural disasters that “happened at the same time” as the war (1.23.3) are famines (λιμοί) that were a natural phenomenon caused by droughts (αὐχμοί), even though, in the narrative of the war, he never mentions them again as actually having occurred. The author of the ancient prediction “With war will come pestilence/famine” need not have had special access to the gods. He might have been one of those poets who envisioned famine, pestilence, and war as parallel responses to impairments in the political sphere:

[Often even a whole city suffers because of an evil man who sins and devises wicked deeds. Upon them Cronus’ son brings forth woe from the sky, famine together with pestilence, and the people die away; the women do not give birth, and the households are diminished by the plans of Olympian Zeus. And at another time Cronus’ son destroys their broad army and their wall, or he takes vengeance upon the ships on the sea.] (Hes. Op. 238–47, trans. G. Most)

Heirs of the tradition that produced these lines are both Herodotus, who puts a just divine principle in charge of causation, and Thucydides, who does not. Thucydides replaces this principle with the professed ignorance of scientists and other intellectuals, including himself. The ignorance he acknowledges is different from the religious simplemindedness he attributes to

47. Oracles and other texts that associate limos and loimos (or hesitate between them) are collected by Demont 1990.
48. See, e.g., the famines in Herodotus 6.139.1 and 9.93.3. At the metaphorical level, Herodotus talks of family lines as of plants extirpated “from the roots” as a result of cosmic balance or tisis (see Lateiner 1989: 142–44).
49. Cf. ἀγνοία at 2.47.4 with σκοπῶν, προειδῶς, and μὴ ἀγνοεῖν at 2.48.3.
most people, but it nevertheless finds meaning in coincidence and implies between cosmic and human behavior a sort of synergy that lies beyond the sphere of what one can analyze, predict, and know. Like the river Scamander faced with the onslaughts of Achilles, nature itself reflects or reacts to human overreaching.\footnote{Hom. II. 21.240-324.}

Works Cited


