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The Complex Depiction of Nicias in Thucydides

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Introduction

At the end of the fifth century BCE, the historian Thucydides wrote a history of the Peloponnesian War between the Greek powers of Athens and Sparta. Thucydides' account serves as the most significant primary source for the war due to its level of detail and its contemporaneity with the war. Further, Thucydides was a general for the Athenians in this war before being exiled for a failed expedition, increasing the usefulness of his history for future historians. Despite the biases that Thucydides' role in the war have imbued in his work, it is still one of the best sources on significant events and figures in Greece at the end of the fifth century BCE.¹

While it is impossible to recover the original historical figures from Thucydides' text alone, an examination of his presentation of the major figures of the war nevertheless reveals some information about them. Thucydides' history offers a contemporary Athenian view of their generals after it has become clear that Athens will lose their war with Sparta. In this paper, I will examine Thucydides' depiction of the Athenian general Nicias, who was an unwilling leader of the Sicilian Expedition of 414 BCE that had disastrous results for the Athenians and resulted in his own death.

Following the death of the Athenian general Pericles in 429 BCE, Thucydides wrote a lengthy eulogy for the Athenian statesman.² Towards the end of this eulogy, Thucydides made a distinction between Pericles, who was successful as a leader, and those who followed him. These later generals, he wrote, were less successful, entrusted decisions to the multitude, and were responsible for

the Sicilian Expedition, which resulted in the ultimate defeat of the Athenians in the war. This would appear to be a condemnation of, among others, the Athenian general Nicias, who took part in this expedition. Nevertheless, Thucydides also described Nicias as “being the least worthy of the Greeks in [Thucydides’] time to arrive at this misfortune [i.e., being captured by the Spartans and Syracusians and being killed contrary to his expectations]” (ἥκιστα δὴ ἄξιός ὢν τῶν γε ἐπ’ ἐμοῦ Ἑλλήνων ἐς τοῦτο δυστυχίας ἀφικέσθαι).³ These two depictions of Nicias seem to be drastically different. I will argue that Thucydides is portraying Nicias in an ambiguous light to show both his strengths and his faults.

I will examine the two speeches to the Athenians during deliberations about the Sicilian Expedition that Thucydides attributed to Nicias and the narrative statements about Nicias made throughout the description of the expedition itself. Thucydides’ own programmatic statements in the first book of his work, in which he made a distinction between narrative and speeches in his history, suggest that both play an important part in his depiction of historical figures. In both the speeches and the narrative of the sixth and seventh books of his history, Thucydides depicted Nicias as a figure who had the best interests of Athens at heart but nevertheless fell short of the standard set by Pericles. The result is a multilayered depiction of Nicias’ character suggesting a complex view of the general.

Previous Views on Thucydides’ Nicias

Due to Nicias’ prominent role in the Sicilian Expedition, many scholars have commented on Thucydides’ portrayal of the general. H. D. Westlake, for instance, argued that Thucydides’ comment on Nicias’ death was merely an expression of pity.⁴ H. A. Murray took this a step further, arguing that Nicias served to elicit pity because of his role as a tragic figure whose flaw was excessive desire for self-preservation and for avoiding the anger of the Athenians.⁵ With this approach, he followed the tradition of Francis Cornford, who saw tragic elements in much of Thucydides’ writing.⁶ A. W. H. Adkins also believed that Thucydides was evaluating Nicias as a tragic figure, arguing that Nicias was successful in demonstrating the qualities of virtue that were expected of an ἀγαθός, a good and honorable man, in tragedy.⁷

Although I do not disagree that pity seems to play a role in the final description of Nicias, and I do see tragic elements in Thucydides’ history as a whole, I believe that such an approach misses many of the complexities in the depiction of Nicias. Further, the ambiguity present in Thucydides’ depiction of Nicias is not limited to the final statement in chapter 7.86, which is the primary focus of these authors.

Other scholars have looked in more detail at the speeches given by Nicias before the expedition sets out for Syracuse. Donald Kagan has reconstructed what must have occurred before the speeches of Nicias and Alcibiades reported by Thucydides and has analyzed what Nicias might have had in mind when

asking the Athenians to repeal the decree for an expedition.⁸ Brian Calabrese described Nicias negatively, calling him deceitful and a fear-monger, while stressing that he was unsuccessful in persuading the Athenians even using these techniques.⁹ Martha Taylor, on the other hand, focused on Nicias as the “tragic warner,” similar to Artabanus in Herodotus’ earlier history of the Persian War.¹⁰

These more general approaches to examining Nicias better capture his character as a whole, but even these are less detailed than a full character study would be. Further, it is evident that there is no consensus on how Thucydides’ Nicias is meant to be viewed, be it as a tragic figure, an unsuccessful demagogue, or the lone voice of reason. As no one appears to have satisfactorily examined the character of Nicias in full detail, this paper will consider the depiction of Nicias throughout the Sicilian Expedition in order to better understand Thucydides’ characterization of him.

Speeches and Accuracy in Thucydides

In order to assess properly the implications of Thucydides’ depiction of Nicias through speeches and through narrative, it is necessary first to examine what Thucydides wrote about his own historical method, particularly with regard to the speeches he incorporated. The programmatic passage in chapter 1.22 on speeches in Thucydides’ history reads as follows:

καὶ ὅσα μὲν λόγῳ εἶπον ἕκαστοι ἢ μέλλοντες πολεμήσειν ἢ ἐν αὐτῷ ἤδη ὄντες, χαλεπὸν τὴν ἀκρίβειαν αὐτῆν τῶν λεχθέντων διαμνημονεῦσαι ἦν ἐμοὶ τε ὧν αὐτὸς ἦκουσα καὶ τοῖς ἄλλοθὲν ποθεν ἐμοὶ ἀπαγγέλλουσιν: ὡς δ’ ἂν ἐδόκουν ἐμοὶ ἕκαστοι περὶ τῶν αἰεὶ παρόντων τὰ δέοντα μάλιστ’ εἰπεῖν, ἐχομένῳ ὅτι ἐγγύτατα τῆς ξυμπάσης γνώμης τῶν ἀληθῶς λεχθέντων, οὕτως εἶρηται. τὰ δ’ ἔργα τῶν πραχθέντων ἐν τῷ πολέμῳ οὐκ ἐκ τοῦ παρατυχόντος πυνθανόμενος ἠξίωσα γράφειν, οὐδ’ ὡς ἐμοὶ ἐδόκει, ἀλλ’ οἷς τε αὐτὸς παρῆν καὶ παρὰ τῶν ἄλλων ὅσον δυνατόν ἀκριβείᾳ περὶ ἐκάστου ἐπεξελθόν. ἐπιπόνως δὲ ἠύρισκετο, διότι οἱ παρόντες τοῖς ἔργοις ἐκάστοις οὐ ταῦτα περὶ τῶν αὐτῶν ἔλεγον, ἀλλ’ ὡς ἐκατέρων τις εὐνοίας ἢ μνήμης ἔχοι.

And as for the things that each said in a speech, either about to make war or already at war, it was difficult to remember the very exactness of the things that were said, both for me concerning those that I myself heard and for those from one place or another who reported [others] to me; things have been said just as I thought each man would speak - the most fitting things based on the current situation - while I kept as close as possible to the overall sense of what was actually said. But as for the events of what was done in the war, I did not deem it right to write them upon learning of them from any chance person nor as they seemed to me, but rather I deemed it right to write those at which I was present and [that I learned] from others after having made an examination concerning each with as much accuracy as was possible. These things have been

discovered with labor, because those who were present at each event did not say the same things about the same things, but they spoke how each one was with regard to goodwill to one side or with regard to memory.¹¹

The exact meaning of this passage, particularly the phrase τὰ δέοντα μάλιστα' in the middle of it, is hotly debated among scholars of Thucydides; different interpretations have vastly different implications for how one reads Thucydides' speeches.

The words τὰ δέοντα μάλιστα', referring to what Thucydides had his speech-givers say, can be and have been translated either as "the most fitting things" or "the most likely things." J. Wilson, for instance, rejected the former translation as "ludicrous."¹² E. C. Marchant, on the other hand, believed that "[τὰ δέοντα refers to] the best arguments that could be found to support the ζύμψασα γνώμη [overall sense] of the speaker."¹³ T. F. Garrity marked a distinction between the form and the content of the speeches provided by Thucydides, stating that:

The elements of language in 1.22.1 in which scholars have identified confusion are actually part of the precise distinction that the historian himself is drawing between the *content* and the *form* in which the speeches are presented. In particular, in 1.22.1 the first clause . . . pertains to the content, while the second clause . . . pertains both to the content and to the form of the speeches.¹⁴

It is clear that this difficult passage can be interpreted in multiple ways.

Interpreting the phrase as "the most fitting things" may cause some dissatisfaction, since this means that the speeches do not necessarily represent what the speaker actually said. Instead, it would suggest that Thucydides might have provided a speech that matched what he thought was the best possible one – that is, the most fitting to the situation. As a result, the speech may not illuminate what actually happened and may mislead readers as to the nature and thoughts of the speaker, as well. Thucydides seems to have stressed the concept of ἀκρίβεια in his writing, given that forms of the word occur twice in this programmatic passage alone, so one might be disinclined to accept any translation of τὰ δέοντα μάλιστα' that suggests that Thucydides gave up on his commitment to accuracy.

On the other hand, while it may be tempting to argue that Thucydides did his best to maintain accuracy by giving what he considered to be the most likely speeches, the word δέοντα does not mean "likely" elsewhere in Greek. Further, the reason that scholars have been inclined to assume that Thucydides has focused on accuracy is this passage itself. There is, however, no reason that Thucydides might not have stated that he would be accurate in order to gain the trust of his reader rather than because it was completely true. As a result, I do not agree with the translation of δέοντα as "likely."

It remains to be determined what sense of "fitting" is implied in δέοντα and so to determine the extent to which it is possible to use Thucydides' speeches to

determine what a speaker actually said. It is clear that the wording provided by Thucydides does not match what the speakers used. In many cases, Thucydides was not present to hear the speech itself; he had already gone into exile by the time Nicias delivered the speeches which I consider below, for instance. The style used in the speeches is also so unnatural that it must not have been what the original speakers employed. Dionysius of Halicarnassus, for instance, claimed that:

τῶν οὕτως διαλεγόμενων οὐδὲ αἱ μητέρες ἂν καὶ οἱ πατέρες ἀνάσχοιντο
διὰ τὴν ἀηδίαν, ἀλλ' ὥσπερ ἄλλοεθνοῦς γλώσσης ἀκούοντες τῶν
ἐρμηνευσόντων ἂν δεηθεῖεν.

The mothers and fathers of those who are conversing in this way would not endure it because of the unpleasantness [of the speeches in Thucydides], but in listening to what is like a foreign tongue, they would need translators.¹⁵

This thought is shared by more recent commentators, as well; R. G. Collingwood stated of Thucydides' language that it "is harsh, artificial, repellent."¹⁶

It is, however, not necessary to assume that the content of the speeches differs greatly from what was actually delivered, either. For many of these speeches, particularly for those that I consider here, there was a sufficient audience that significant changes to the speeches' content would have been noticed and likely decried. Thucydides is unlikely to have changed completely the sense of these speeches, except perhaps for those for which there was no audience who could report the contents of the speech, as in the Melian Dialogue. Instead, I would take τὰ δέοντα μάλιστα' as implying that Thucydides wrote the speeches in his own style, but with content befitting his own opinion of the speaker given the situation in which the speech was delivered. This keeps to the sense of δέοντα without the implication that Thucydides ignored the speaker to give what he thought was the best possible speech.

The implication of this conclusion is that it is not possible to take a speech in Thucydides as exactly what the speaker said. Thucydides' own bias influenced how he viewed each speaker and so what was fitting for the speaker to say, provided that it did not vary too much from what the audience heard. Instead of providing a historical record of what was said, speeches in Thucydides instead provide a means of interpreting Thucydides' views of the speakers.¹⁷ It is, therefore, still useful to do a close reading of speeches in Thucydides' history for the purpose of character analysis, even though the speeches are not what the speakers delivered.

Nicias' Speeches

I will start by examining the two speeches made by Nicias to the assembly of the Athenians in the sixth book of the history. Even though, as mentioned above,

I do not think that it is reasonable to associate the exact contents of a speech, let alone its wording, with what the speaker actually said, the contents of the speech are nevertheless significant for understanding how Thucydides perceived the speaker. Further, what Thucydides said in narrative right before the speech should indicate Thucydides' view of the speaker as well, regardless of the extent to which Thucydides invented the speech.

Shortly before the first speech, Thucydides gave the following as the reason for what Nicias said:

καὶ ὁ Νικίας ἀκούσιος μὲν ἡρημένος ἄρχειν, νομίζων δὲ τὴν πόλιν οὐκ ὀρθῶς βεβουλευῆσθαι, ἀλλὰ προφάσει βραχείᾳ καὶ εὐπρεπεῖ τῆς Σικελίας ἀπάσης, μεγάλου ἔργου, ἐφίεσθαι, παρελθὼν ἀποτρέψαι ἐβούλετο, καὶ παρῆναι τοῖς Ἀθηναίοις τοιάδε.

And Nicias, chosen to rule unwillingly, thinking that the *polis* had not planned rightly, but that it desired all of Sicily – a great task – by a trifling and specious pretense, came forth, wishing to change their minds, and he proposed to the Athenians such things as follow.¹⁸

Based on this explanation of Nicias' motivations, it is possible to propose two different metrics to judge what Thucydides thought of Nicias' speech. First, it is possible to examine the speech based on the truthfulness of Nicias' claims about Sicily and the expedition itself, since Thucydides might implicitly have been censuring Nicias if he was lying to persuade the Athenian people. Second, it is necessary to consider the effect that the speech had on the Athenians, although implications of such effects are complicated.

One reason that Nicias gave for why he wanted to cancel the Sicilian expedition was how the Athenians' mainland enemies would react. He made the claim that *σφαλέντων δέ που ἀξιοχρεῶ δυνάμει ταχεῖαν τὴν ἐπιχείρησιν ἡμῖν οἱ ἐχθροὶ ποιήσονται*, "[the Athenians'] enemies would attack [them] if [they] by chance fail with a sufficiently large force."¹⁹ At first glance, this appears to be the result of the expedition, as well. Shortly after Spartan General Gylippus defeated the Athenian army at Syracuse, Sparta invaded Attica, perhaps constituting the failure implied by *σφαλέντων*.²⁰ On the other hand, the Athenians hardly lost the large number of troops implied by *ἀξιοχρεῶ δυνάμει*. Further, the Spartans had planned to invade Attica before Gylippus' victory,²¹ and it was Alcibiades, present for Nicias' speech and so knowing that this was a fear of Athens, who convinced them to make the invasion.²² As a result, the causality of the Spartan invasion is not completely clear. Certainly, Nicias was correct in suggesting that the Spartans might make an attack if the Athenians fought in Sicily, but the attack occurred primarily due to the splitting of the Athenian forces and the defection of Alcibiades rather than the Athenian loss in Sicily; the narrative that follows Nicias' speech implied that he was only partially correct.

Nicias also made the claim that the best way to maintain fear of Athenian power in Sicily, aside from not going to Sicily at all, would be “if [they] went away after showing their power briefly” (καὶ εἰ δείξαντες τὴν δύναμιν δι’ ὀλίγου ἀπέλθοιμεν).²³ Based on the events of the sixth and seventh books of the history, this statement seems to have been partially confirmed, as well. The initial efforts of the Athenians in Syracuse caused enough fear that the Corinthian commander Gongylus arrived at Syracuse to find them deliberating whether they should surrender to Athens.²⁴ Later on, though, the Syracusians were no longer afraid of the Athenians, “thinking (that which was the case), that due to the present circumstances their situation [was] much superior [to that of the Athenians]” (νομίζοντες ὅπερ ἦν, ἀπὸ τε τῶν παρόντων πολὺ σφῶν καθυπέριτερα τὰ πράγματα εἶναι).²⁵ This change in the Syracusians’ view of the Athenians implies again that Nicias was correct in arguing that it was preferable for the Athenians either not to go to Sicily at all or to leave after a quick show of power.

On the other hand, the Syracusians’ change in perception occurred because of external forces, namely the assistance of the Spartans and Corinthians. These do not seem to be the circumstances under which Nicias imagined a gradual reduction in the fear of the Athenians. Instead, he implied that it is natural that everyone falls short of their reputation in reality and that a test of one’s reputation (πεῖραν . . . τῆς δόξης) will eventually reveal the difference between reputation and reality on its own.²⁶ He argued that this was true not only of the Athenians but also of the Peloponnesians as well, suggesting it as a concept that is true universally. The Athenians were proven to be less than their reputation only when others gave aid against them; without this external aid, there is no evidence in Thucydides to suggest that Athenian reputation would have suffered.

The arguments of Nicias in his first speech appear to have been at least partially true, even though Thucydides’ narrative calls into question whether the events happened for the reasons that Nicias thought that they would. The Athenian audience, however, was ultimately unpersuaded by these arguments. Thucydides wrote that after Nicias’ speech, most of the Athenians who came forward to speak were in favor of the expedition, although there were a few who sided with Nicias.²⁷ After Alcibiades delivered his speech responding to Nicias’ first speech, however, “the Athenians were much more eager to make the expedition than before once they heard him [i.e., Alcibiades]” (οἱ δ’ Ἀθηναῖοι ἀκούσαντες ἐκείνου . . . πολλῶ μᾶλλον ἢ πρότερον ὄρμητο στρατεύειν).²⁸ Nicias’ speech was clearly not convincing enough to overcome both the Athenians’ original bias towards the expedition and the speech of Alcibiades.

With that said, Thucydides did not necessarily consider the opinion of the crowd to be important; pandering to the crowd in fact may have been worse than failing to convince it. Alcibiades, for instance, was more successful than Nicias in persuading the Athenians. Nevertheless, he was later charged with defacing the Herms, religious symbols in Athens, and ultimately sided with the Lacedaimonians; Thucydides did not depict him in a positive light.²⁹ In fact,

Thucydides seems to have blamed both Alcibiades and the Athenian people as a whole more than he did Nicias. The expedition to Sicily that Alcibiades convinced the Athenians to make was unsuccessful and proved Nicias' fears correct. Thucydides also made the claim that, because Alcibiades had many faults and eventually left Athens, the Athenians "caused their *polis* [city] to fall not much later because they turned to others [as leaders]" (ἄλλοις ἐπιτρέψαντες, οὐ διὰ μακροῦ ἔσφηλαν τὴν πόλιν).³⁰ This seems to put blame on both Alcibiades and the Athenian people as a whole, since Alcibiades caused the Athenians to make this mistake. I do not believe that this statement implies that the Sicilian Expedition in particular would have been successful under the leadership of Alcibiades rather than Nicias, as Peter Brunt stated.³¹ The reference could instead be to the end of the war a decade later, when Athens did fall, since οὐ διὰ μακροῦ (not much later) is not overly specific. The *demos* (people) being partially responsible for their own defeat, then, does not free Alcibiades from blame; for this reason, I cannot agree with H. D. Westlake's claim that Alcibiades was the "protagonist" of this episode.³² Additionally, the failings of the *demos* strengthen the argument that Thucydides viewed it as a weakness to pander to them.

Thucydides' view of the *demos* also comes through in its negative treatment of Pericles in book 2. It has been clear to scholars that Thucydides provided a positive depiction of Pericles.³³ Nevertheless, the Athenian people began to blame Pericles soon before his death for the war with the Peloponnesians (τὸν μὲν Περικλέα ἐν αἰτίᾳ εἶχον).³⁴ This happened despite the fact that Thucydides' Pericles was in the right in his judgment of Athenian power and what resources were necessary to fight against the Spartans.³⁵ Thucydides, then, was depicting the Athenian people as being in the wrong, suggesting that their rejection of Nicias' argument was similarly foolish.

Before Nicias' second speech, Thucydides stated that Nicias attempted a different tactic, namely the description of the immense size of the expedition needed for the Athenians to be successful.³⁶ The catalogue of troops and provisions that Nicias claimed would be needed for the success of the expedition constitutes the entirety of chapter 6.22. In addition to enumerating many different things that would need to be provided to maintain the expedition, the catalogue stressed the immensity of the expedition through the repeated use of forms of the word πολὺς (much, many).³⁷ Forms of the word πολὺς occur five times in the passage, three times as an adjective modifying different types of soldiers or the army as a whole, once as a superlative adjective describing how much money needs to be brought on the expedition, and once as an adverb modifying ναυσί . . . περιεῖναι, "to be superior in [the number of] ships." Whether this speech represents the most fitting argument, the most likely argument, or what Nicias actually said, it is clear that anyone who heard this or a similar speech would have understood how great an expedition they were undertaking due to this repetition and the length of this list.

Nevertheless, the Athenians appeared to take this speech at face value and granted Nicias everything he asked for rather than being put off by the requests. One would not expect the Athenians to have changed their minds given their initial biases and that Alcibiades had further won them over. Again, Thucydides' negative view of the *demos* came through here. At the same time, this second speech of Nicias appeared to be less convincing than the first. There does not appear to be any reason why the Athenians would have changed their minds given the size of the army and preparations needed. Due to Nicias himself, the Athenians were at peace with Sparta, no matter how tenuous the peace might have been. Further, Nicias' descriptions placed a heavy burden on the contributions of Athenian allies (τῶν ξυμμάχων).³⁸ This may have made the Athenians more confident because they would not have been bearing the weight of the expedition alone. One could not fault Nicias for having tried a different approach, but his second speech does not seem to have been a strong endorsement of Nicias as a statesman on Thucydides' part.

These two speeches of Nicias combine to present an ambivalent view of the figure. While he correctly predicted that the expedition would result in disaster for Athens, a number of the details within his predictions were incorrect. Although the Athenian mob was prone to making bad decisions, Nicias was not a good enough speaker to convince them to act in their own best interest. Further, his tactic of stressing the size of the expedition by stating that the Athenians would need to rely heavily on their allies seems dubious. We must now turn to the narrative accounts of Nicias in order to confirm what the speeches seem to show.

Nicias in Narrative

The narrative depictions of Nicias are equally complex, demonstrating that Thucydides saw Nicias as virtuous and as a good military commander who nevertheless made mistakes fatal to the success of Athens and to himself. Although one cannot completely trust the accuracy of Thucydides' narrative passages, particularly because he was not in Sicily on this expedition, there is no reason to believe that they are less accurate than the speeches. That is, Thucydides' depiction of Nicias should be clear enough, even if this depiction differs from Nicias' true personality and actions. Further, since there were survivors, Thucydides could not change the story excessively without others knowing.³⁹ As a result, the fact that the narrative passages about Nicias confirm an ambivalent depiction of him lends weight to the analysis of the previous section.

After a major defeat of the Athenian troops, the majority of the Athenians were in favor of leaving Sicily and giving up on the expedition.⁴⁰ Despite the fact the Nicias had been opposed to the Sicilian Expedition in the first place and that he had earlier requested by letter to be relieved of his duties, he was less certain than Demosthenes that giving up on the expedition was the right course of action.⁴¹ Thucydides provided a number of reasons why Nicias was opposed to retreating. His first two reasons were that "he did not want to reveal in speech

the weaknesses, nor that by voting on a retreat openly with many people they be betrayed to the enemy” (τῷ δὲ λόγῳ οὐκ ἐβούλετο αὐτὰ ἀσθενῆ ἀποδεικνύναι, οὐδ’ ἐμφανῶς σφᾶς ψηφίζομένους μετὰ πολλῶν τὴν ἀναχώρησιν τοῖς πολεμίοις καταγγέλτους γίγνεσθαι).⁴² The former, an unwillingness to admit weakness, seems strange given that he wrote on his own accord to Athens to say that they were unsuccessful in the war. More likely, this means that he did not want to make the troops despondent in case they needed to fight again; this reason would then show him as a leader who understood what was needed to keep his troops fighting successfully. The latter also shows an awareness of the need for stealth to get away.

Thucydides gave several other reasons for Nicias’ reluctance to depart. The narrative goes on to state:

τὸ δέ τι καὶ τὰ τῶν πολεμίων, ἀφ’ ὧν ἐπὶ πλεόν ἢ οἱ ἄλλοι ἠσθάνετο αὐτῶν, ἐλπίδος τι ἔτι παρεῖχε πονηρότερα τῶν σφετέρων ἔσεσθαι, ἦν καρτερῶσι προσκαθήμενοι: χρημάτων γὰρ ἀπορία αὐτοῦς ἐκτρυχώσειν, ἄλλως τε καὶ ἐπὶ πλεόν ἤδη ταῖς ὑπαρχούσαις ναυσὶ θαλασσοκρατούντων. καὶ ἦν γάρ τι καὶ ἐν ταῖς Συρακούσαις βουλόμενον τοῖς Ἀθηναίοις τὰ πράγματα ἐνδοῦναι, ἐπεκηρυκεύετο ὡς αὐτὸν καὶ οὐκ εἶα ἀπανίστασθαι.

And what is more, he still held some hope that the situation of the enemy, according to which he had heard more than the others, would be worse off than their own if they [i.e., the Athenians] held out besieging them: they would, after all, wear them out by a lack of money, especially since they now had greater power over the sea with the ships that were at hand. Additionally, there was a group in Syracuse that, wishing to hand over the state to the Athenians, kept announcing to him not to let them depart.⁴³

Thucydides confirmed in the next section that Nicias had precise information on these two points that made it a reasonable option to stay and to maintain the siege.⁴⁴ On the other hand, Nicias was clearly not accounting for all variables, and his decision to delay resulted in disaster for the Athenians. The Athenians generals did not appear to have expected the additional army that Gylippus and Sicanus brought to oppose them in chapter 7.50. Upon their arrival, Nicias immediately changed his mind and believed that the Athenians should leave.⁴⁵ When an eclipse occurred and Nicias decided that the Athenians needed to stay in their camp after all, Thucydides criticized him because “he was too attached to divination and such things” (ἦν γάρ τι καὶ ἄγαν θειασμῶ τε καὶ τῷ τοιοῦτῳ προσκείμενος).⁴⁶ The word ἄγαν (too much) implies that Thucydides did not believe that staying was the right approach in that situation, regardless of the eclipse. Nicias’ hesitation and delaying prevented the Athenians from retreating from what became a hopeless situation.

Later on, the Syracusians took advantage of the fact that Nicias had been in contact with factions within Syracuse more than the other Athenian generals. In order to delay the Athenians' departure, several Syracusians rode up near the Athenian camp and pretended that they were friendly to the Athenians, before asking that Nicias be told not to leave that day; Thucydides explicitly stated that Nicias was accustomed to have messengers from outside the camp come to give him messages.⁴⁷ While Nicias may have had better knowledge because of his willingness to listen to messages from the Syracusian camp, here his willingness backfired, as the Athenians accepted the message as true and stayed, when leaving right away would have allowed them to escape safely.

After Nicias, despite good intentions and a reasonable interpretation of the information he had at hand, ultimately caused the defeat of the Athenian army at Syracuse, he handed himself over to Gylippus, trusting him and the Lacedaimonians due to his own willingness to convince the Athenians to make peace after Pylos.⁴⁸ Instead, those of the Syracusians who had given information to Nicias caused him to be executed. This again shows that Nicias may have miscalculated in his willingness to listen to people other than the Athenians; contrary to his expectations, surrendering himself to the Spartans did not keep him or his troops safe.

As I have mentioned earlier, Thucydides concluded the narrative on the death of Nicias with a statement that many scholars have stated demonstrated pity above all. Nicias, he claimed, was the least worthy of the Greeks in his time to meet such a fate.⁴⁹ In particular, Thucydides claimed that this was the case "because the entirety of his life had been ordered towards virtue" (διὰ τὴν πᾶσαν ἐξ ἀρετῆς νενομισμένην ἐπιτήδευσιν).⁵⁰ This is a surprisingly positive comment for someone who had been responsible for the defeat of Athens at Syracuse and who died because of an excessive inclination towards divination and trust improperly placed in external messengers. The use of the word ἀρετή (virtue) in this explanation suggests that Thucydides believed that, even though the results did not match Nicias' character, Nicias was still one of the most virtuous Athenians of his day. This virtue, however, was unable to procure the necessary results.⁵¹

This examination of the narrative descriptions of Nicias in the second half of book 7 shows a complex depiction of Nicias that is similar to that present in the speeches. Between the eulogy that discussed Nicias' ἀρετή and Thucydides' confirmation that Nicias' reasons for staying to besiege Syracuse were reasonable and based on good evidence, Thucydides depicted Nicias as a general with positive qualities who had his soldiers' best interests at heart. On the other hand, Nicias was mistaken in whom he could trust, was overly focused on divination, and did not foresee what the enemy would do, to such an extent that he doomed his troops and himself by refusing to retreat when it was first proposed. Whether one views Nicias as a tragic figure or not, it is clear that Thucydides stressed a mixture of positive qualities and failures in his depiction of the general.

Conclusion

It should be clear from the above analysis of Nicias' speeches and Thucydides' narrative about Nicias that the depiction of the statesman is complex. The two speeches showed a Nicias who had the Athenians' best interests at heart and had a reasonably good understanding of what would happen if the Athenians undertook the Sicilian Expedition. At the same time, Nicias cannot be interpreted simply as a "tragic warner" because some of his details were actually incorrect. That he was unable to convince his audience to listen to him, despite giving two speeches when Alcibiades needed only one, may imply a negative view of Nicias' ability as a statesman; on the other hand, even Pericles had trouble with the Athenian mob at times, so this may be more of a reflection on them than on Nicias.

Nicias' role at the end of the expedition showed good ability as a general but also demonstrated that he was partially responsible for the Athenian defeat. The narrative portions of the history support Thucydides' depiction of Nicias within the speeches, showing him to have had good ideas and to have wanted what was best for Athens, but also as not having been good enough to effect what he wanted to accomplish. His ἀρετή may have been worthy of a eulogy, but it did Athens no good in the war; the knowledge he gathered about his enemies, while true, backfired and caused the Athenians to stay when leaving would have saved their lives. Nicias was not the only reason for the Athenian defeat, but his actions cannot be excused in favor of his positive characteristics either.

It is true that I have not examined every speech made by Nicias, nor every last mention of him in Thucydides' history. Doing so would add further detail to the portrayal of Nicias that Thucydides presents, but the complexity and ambivalence is not resolved by doing so. Nicias remains a figure with some positive traits and some negative who was ultimately unsuccessful in his goals. Thucydides clearly showed pity for Nicias, but he still did not measure up to Pericles. In spite of the mistakes that Nicias made, Thucydides still deemed him worthy of some respect because of his virtue and interest in what was best for Athens, not just for himself. Nicias may have been one of the best Athenians in his day, but he was still clearly a flawed figure who bore some responsibility for the Athenian defeat. Thucydides' ambiguous presentation of Nicias in both speech and narrative demonstrates clearly this dichotomy.

As I have explained above, Thucydides' representation of Nicias does not allow modern historians to recover the true historical figure. Given the general lack of other texts and archaeological remains to use, however, Thucydides' account of the Peloponnesian War is nevertheless the best tool for such studies. Even if Thucydides' depiction of Nicias is not completely accurate, it still provides insight into how a wealthy Athenian exile viewed a contemporary general—in a manner too complex to be called just "negative" or "positive."

NOTES

- ¹ For information on Thucydides' biases and strength as a source, see: Donald Kagan, *Thucydides: The Reinvention of History* (New York: Viking, 2009), H. D. Westlake, "Nicias in Thucydides," *The Classical Quarterly* 35.1–2 (April 1941): 58ff., and Podoksik Efraim, "Justice, Power and Athenian Imperialism: An Ideological Moment in Thucydides' History," *History of Political Thought* 26.1 (2005): 21–42.
- ² Thucydides 2.65 (following notes shall use abbreviation Th.).
- ³ Th. 7.86.5. All translations are my own.
- ⁴ H. D. Westlake, "Nicias in Thucydides," *The Classical Quarterly* 35.1–2 (April 1941): 58ff.
- ⁵ H. A. Murray, "Two Notes on the Evaluation of Nicias in Thucydides," *Bulletin of the Institute of Classical Studies* 8.1 (December 1, 1961): 33–34.
- ⁶ Francis Macdonald Cornford, *Thucydides Mythistoricus* (London: E. Arnold, 1907).
- ⁷ A. W. H. Adkins, "The *Arete* of Nicias: Thucydides 7.86," *Greek, Roman and Byzantine Studies* 15 (1975): 388.
- ⁸ Donald Kagan, *The Peace of Nicias and the Sicilian Expedition* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981), 159ff.
- ⁹ Brian E. Calabrese, "Fear in Democracy: A Study of Thucydides' Political Thought," (PhD diss., University of Michigan, 2008), 162.
- ¹⁰ Martha Taylor, *Thucydides, Pericles, and the Idea of Athens in the Peloponnesian War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 138. See also N. Marinatos, "Nicias as a Wise Advisor and Tragic Warner in Thucydides," *Philologus* 124 (1980): 305–310.
- ¹¹ Th. 1.22.1–3.
- ¹² J. Wilson, "What Does Thucydides Claim for His Speeches?," *Phoenix* 36.2 (1982): 95.
- ¹³ E. C. Marchant, ed., *Thucydides Book I* (London: Macmillan, 1905), 1.22n.
- ¹⁴ T. F. Garrity, "Thucydides 1.22.1: Content and Form in the Speeches," *The American Journal of Philology* 119.3 (1998): 361–384.
- ¹⁵ Dionysus of Halicarnassus, *De Thucydide* 49.
- ¹⁶ R. G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History* (Clarendon Press: Oxford, 1946), 29. Furthermore, other scholars have tried to read into this complex style. Paula Debnar mentioned in passing, page 20–21 in *Speaking the Same Language*, that Thucydides chose to make his speeches syntactically more complex to give his reader, who would be able to find weaknesses in arguments due to the time to read and reread the speeches, a similar experience to that of the speeches' audience, which was unlikely to have had time to focus on any weak or conflicting details.
- ¹⁷ Or the people they represented, as in the case of unnamed, anonymous speakers; in the Melian Dialogue, for instance, the unnamed speaker, an Athenian, represented Athenians imperialists in general rather than just one speaker.
- ¹⁸ Th. 6.8.4.
- ¹⁹ Th. 6.10.2.
- ²⁰ Th. 7.18–19 details the preparations and the invasion itself.
- ²¹ Th. 6.93 states that they had already had an invasion in mind (οἱ δὲ Λακεδαιμόνιοι διανοοῦμενοι μὲν καὶ αὐτοὶ πρότερον στρατεῦεν ἐπὶ τῆς Ἀθήνας – "the Lacedaimonians, themselves also having it in mind earlier to make an expedition against Athens").
- ²² Th. 6.93.
- ²³ Th. 6.11.4.
- ²⁴ Th. 7.2.1.
- ²⁵ Th. 7.56.4.
- ²⁶ Th. 6.11.4.
- ²⁷ Th. 6.15.
- ²⁸ Th. 6.19.1.

²⁹ It is unclear if Alcibiades was actually responsible for this. In Th. 6.28, Thucydides claimed that Alcibiades' enemies magnified the charges (ἐμεγάλυνον). Further, in Th. 6.29, it is said that they planned to find some greater charge for Alcibiades while he was on the expedition. Thucydides never said that these enemies fabricated the charge, but it may be implied. This ambiguity, however, does nothing to free Alcibiades from the charges, and so in my mind depicts both Alcibiades and those leading Athenians, who magnified the charges, in a negative light.

³⁰ Th. 6.15.4.

³¹ Peter Astbury Brunt, "Thucydides and Alcibiades," *Revue Des Études Grecques* 65.304 (1952): 60–62.

³² H. D. Westlake, *Individuals in Thucydides*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1968), 169.

³³ See, for instance, Josiah Ober, "Thucydides' Criticism of Democratic Knowledge," in *Nomodeiktes: Greek Studies in Honor of Martin Ostwald*, edited by R. M. Rosen and J. Farrell (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press), 97, who claimed that Pericles was the only thing holding together a flawed political system, and Loren J. Samons II, *Pericles and the Conquest of History: A Political Biography*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 175-176. See as well Edith Foster, *Thucydides, Pericles, and Periclean Imperialism*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 119 n. 1, for opinions on the extent to which Thucydides was biased in favor of Pericles.

³⁴ Th. 2.59.2.

³⁵ Foster, *Thucydides, Pericles, and Periclean Imperialism*, 184.

³⁶ Th. 6.19.2.

³⁷ This point was noted by Murray, "Two Notes on the Evaluation of Nicias in Thucydides," 39, although he seems to have assumed that the speech could be directly attributed to Nicias. Murray stressed the vagueness inherent in the expressions with this word.

³⁸ Th. 6.22.1.

³⁹ There is the possibility that those who informed Thucydides were biased for or against Nicias, but the ambivalent depiction of Nicias suggests that, even if this was the case, Thucydides did not succumb to an overly positive or negative view of the general. Since the strengths and weaknesses of Nicias match those present in the speeches given in Athens with a larger and different audience, it seems much more likely that this represents Thucydides' own view of Nicias rather than what Nicias' soldiers thought of him.

⁴⁰ Th. 7.47.

⁴¹ Th. 7.15, 7.48.

⁴² Th. 7.48.1.

⁴³ Th. 7.48.2.

⁴⁴ Th. 7.49.1.

⁴⁵ Th. 7.50.3.

⁴⁶ Th. 7.50.4. In ancient Greece, an eclipse was a type of divine omen and required a near week-long set of rituals in order to appease the gods.

⁴⁷ ὡς ὄντες τῶν Ἀθηναίων ἐπιτήδευοι (ἦσαν γάρ τινες τῷ Νικίᾳ διάγγελοι τῶν ἔνδοθεν).

⁴⁸ Th. 7.86.3-4.

⁴⁹ Th. 7.86.4.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Perhaps Thucydides felt the same about himself, too. It may be the case that this was his view of Pericles as well, since, for all of the positive qualities of Pericles that Thucydides described in chapter 2.65, he was unable to guide the Athenians to victory.