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Something Incurable: Hope and Tragedy in Thucydides

Thucydides claimed to offer not entertainment, but "exact knowledge of the past" to aid readers in interpreting the future. (I.22), yet his account of the war has left most readers with the sense of Greek tragedy. Examining the patterns of references to hope, and particularly its frequency at crises in the narrative, illuminates both Thucydides' understanding of events and our sense of tragedy.

Of 152 explicit expressions to hope or expectation, fewer than one in ten are realized, nearly all battlefield speeches where hopes are based on immediate factors such as weather, training, and tactics. In the context of decision making, Thucydides shows hope as a destructive force. This is more than pessimism. Thucydides does not depict men as at the mercy of luck or fate, and if the future is to be the same or similar to the past, it should be possible to predict the probable future.

Criticizing a bad decision, Thucydides writes "human beings are accustomed to entrust what they long for to unexamined hope, and to push away what doesn't please them with all-powerful reasoning." (4.108). Hope, then, is a universal failure, under the influence of desire, to face facts. Politicians argue that hope is a bad basis for political decisions throughout the history. Perikles (2.62.5) in his final speech assures the Athenians that they can rely on existing resources, a more secure basis for decisions than hope. In the Mitylene debate, Kleon said that the Mytileneans had "hoped beyond their powers," and urged mass executions as a deterrent (3.39f), while Diodotos responded that regardless of punishment, hope and desire are ever-present, incurable forces (3.45.1-5). The Melians are singled out as trusting in hope rather than plain facts: hope may a consolation in danger, but no guide to action. By now, when Thucydides says a decision is based on hope, the reader expects disaster.

Immediately after the fate of the Melians comes the Athenians' decision to invade Sicily. By far the largest number (45) of expressions of hope occur in books six and seven. Alcibiades rouses Athenian hopes of conquering Sicily in order to achieve his own hopes for honor and fortune. We are left in little doubt what Thucydides thought of the decision. As matters deteriorated, Nikias hoped Syracuse would still yield. As circumstances become more desperate, Nikias insists more frantically that there was still hope that "fortune will not be always against us" (7.61). On the retreat, Nikias tries to encourage the survivors, "even in our present circumstances we must still hope on, since some before now been saved from worse things than this.... I have lived my life with much devotion to the gods...I have, therefore, still a strong hope for the future...if we have angered some god we have already been punished sufficiently...and we may now justly expect kinder treatment" (7.77).

Thucydides underscores the disaster: "... the corpses were unburied... the living wounded were abandoned...This was the greatest reverse that ever befell a Greek army" (7.75). Athenian hopes ended in utter disaster, as do all hopes in Thucydides. Aristotle says that what is required for a tragedy is that a basically good man calls down catastrophe on

himself as the result of a *hamartia*: an error. In Thucydides, the source of that error is hope--and hope, in Thucydides, is incurable.