

# Thucydides

## Biography / Overview

Thucydides (born circa 460 BCE, possibly earlier—died after 404 BCE) was an ancient Athenian historian and military strategist, widely regarded as the greatest historian of ancient Greece and a foundational figure in the development of historical writing. He is best known for his monumental work, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, which chronicles the conflict between Athens and Sparta in the 5th century BCE.

Thucydides was born in the Athenian deme of Halimus, the son of Olorus and Hegesipyle, and was likely of Thracian descent on his mother's side. Holding significant property in Thrace, including rights to gold mines opposite the island of Thasos, Thucydides wielded considerable influence and wealth. Though he served as a *stratēgos* (military magistrate) in 424 BCE, his loss of Amphipolis to the Spartans led to a 20-year exile. During this period, Thucydides observed the war from both sides and dedicated himself to writing his history. The circumstances and exact date of his death are uncertain, but it is likely he died shortly after the end of the war in 404 BCE.

Thucydides critically reflected on the nature of justice, morality, and democracy. He viewed human nature as determined by basic desires alongside physical and social environments. Because of this, he was skeptical of justice or morals being implicit to human nature. Thomas Hobbes was an ardent admirer of Thucydides, first translating his writings into English in 1628. His influence extended to 19th-century positivism and modern historiography.

## Bibliography / Primary Sources

*History of the Peloponnesian War* (circa 431–404 BCE, written during and after the war)

Original language: Ancient Greek

Key manuscript sources: Numerous ancient and medieval manuscripts, including the *Codex Laurentianus* and *Codex Vaticanus*; modern critical editions are based on these and other sources.

No other known works survive. All references to other writings are speculative or unverified.

## Birth Date / Death Date

Born: Circa 460 BCE (possibly earlier)

Died: After 404 BCE (exact date unknown)

Publication: *History of the Peloponnesian War* was composed and likely circulated in parts during and after the war, with final sections unfinished due to Thucydides' death.

## **Notable / Best-Known For**

Founder of Scientific History: Thucydides is considered the first historian to apply rigorous standards of evidence and analysis, eschewing myth and legend in favor of factual reporting.

Author of *History of the Peloponnesian War*: His work remains a primary source for understanding the political, military, and social dynamics of ancient Greece.

Political and Moral Analyst: He introduced the concept of political realism, analyzing the motivations and actions of states and individuals with unprecedented depth.

Exile and Perspective: His exile allowed him to observe the war from multiple perspectives, enriching his narrative and analysis.

## **Famous Quotes**

“The strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must.” – *History of the Peloponnesian War*, Book 5, Chapter 89

“Most people, in fact, will not take the trouble in finding out the truth, but are much more inclined to accept the first story they hear.” – *History of the Peloponnesian War*, Book 1, Chapter 20

## **Major Works / Textual Contents**

*History of the Peloponnesian War*

Book 1: Causes of the war; methods and principles of historical inquiry.

Book 2: Early years of the war, including the plague of Athens and the funeral oration of Pericles.

Book 3: Civil strife in Corcyra; military campaigns.

Book 4: Siege of Pylos and capture of Spartans.

Book 5: Peace of Nicias; Melian Dialogue.

Book 6: Sicilian Expedition (Athenian disaster).

Book 7: Continuation and culmination of the Sicilian Expedition.

Book 8: Unfinished account of the later years of the war.

## **Influences / Intellectual Context**

Sophistic Movement: Thucydides was influenced by the intellectual climate of 5th-century Athens, including the Sophists, and may have studied under Antiphon (oratory) and Anaxagoras (philosophy).

Predecessors: He was familiar with the work of Herodotus but sought to distinguish his own approach by emphasizing accuracy and analysis over storytelling.

Athenian Thinkers: His exile and subsequent isolation allowed him to adopt a contemplative approach, aligning him with the intellectual circles that included Socrates and his followers.

## **Legacy and Modern Significance**

Thucydides' work has been foundational for the discipline of history, influencing generations of historians and political theorists. His emphasis on evidence, causality, and the analysis of power remains central to historical and political studies. The concept of the "Thucydides Trap"—the idea that rising powers and established powers are destined for conflict—is widely cited in modern international relations. His writings continue to be studied for their insights into human nature, leadership, and the dynamics of war.

## **Modern Moments / Impact on the 21st Century**

2021: Oxford Scholarly Editions Online released updated digital editions of Thucydides' works.

The Oxford University Press made available the complete *Oxford Classical Texts* of Thucydides and full translations from the *Oxford World's Classics* series, alongside companion volumes such as Gomme's classic work and Hornblower's multi-volume commentary.

Ongoing (2000s–Present): Thucydides' *History of the Peloponnesian War* is listed as core reading in history, political science, and international relations courses worldwide.

Example institutions: Harvard University, Yale University, and the London School of Economics all include Thucydides in undergraduate and graduate syllabi (as evidenced by publicly available course listings).

2012: Launch of the "Thucydides Trap" concept in contemporary international relations discourse.

The term "Thucydides Trap," popularized by Harvard professor Graham Allison, is widely cited in analyses of U.S.-China relations and other great power rivalries. The concept is rooted in

Thucydides' observation that war often results when a rising power challenges an established one.

2015: Publication of *A Handbook to the Reception of Thucydides* by Wiley-Blackwell.

Edited by Christine Lee and Neville Morley, this volume documents the continued scholarly engagement with Thucydides' work in the 21st century, highlighting cross-disciplinary dialogue and new theoretical approaches.

Ongoing (2010s–Present): Digital public-domain editions of Thucydides' *History of the Peloponnesian War* are available on major platforms.

Platforms such as Project Gutenberg, Perseus Digital Library, and the Internet Classics Archive provide free access to his works.

Project Gutenberg: <https://www.gutenberg.org/>

Perseus Digital Library: <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/>

Internet Classics Archive: <http://classics.mit.edu/>

## **Suggested Reading and Resources**

### A. Secondary Literature (Scholarship):

Hornblower, Simon. *Thucydides*. Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987.

Connor, W. Robert. *Thucydides*. Princeton University Press, 1984.

Kagan, Donald. *The Outbreak of the Peloponnesian War*. Cornell University Press, 1969.

Dover, K.J., ed. *Thucydides, Book VI–VII.2*. Oxford University Press, 1965.

Rood, Tim. *Thucydides: Narrative and Explanation*. Oxford University Press, 1998.

### B. Archival or Online Sources:

Perseus Digital Library: Full text of *History of the Peloponnesian War* in Greek and English – <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/>

Project Gutenberg: Free digital editions of Thucydides' work – <https://www.gutenberg.org/>

The Stoa Consortium: Scholarly resources and commentaries on Thucydides – <http://www.stoa.org/>