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Book Author(s): Mary P. Nichols

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Sparta, Brasidas, and the Liberation of Hellas

In the previous chapter, I argued that Thucydides illustrates in his portrayal of Diodotus a politics cognizant of both the advantageous and the just, ennobled by the generosity or liberality that Pericles presented as a defining feature of Athens's excellence. Thucydides highlights this potential of politics by his implicit contrast between Athens and Sparta in the episodes involving Mytilene and Plataea. I also pointed out the ambiguities in Athens's treatment of Mytilene and Plataea. The politics of Pericles does not last—and perhaps cannot last—and in light of Athens's later excesses in Sicily, a case can be made for Sparta's virtues. The view that Sparta is superior to other cities because of its “prudent moderation” is expressed by the Spartan king Archidamus, when he urges his city against a hasty war with Athens.¹ Like Pericles in his funeral oration, Archidamus alludes to his city's superiority to its antagonist: “we are educated with too little learning to look down on the laws, and with such severity that we are too moderate to disobey them. Nor are we overly intelligent in useless

1. For discussion of Thucydides' sympathy for Sparta, see Orwin, *Humanity of Thucydides*, 183–84, 195, 199, 204; Strauss, *City and Man*, 212, 226, 271; Thomas Heilke, “Realism, Narrative, and Happenstance: Thucydides' Tale of Brasidas,” *American Political Science Review* 98, no. 1 (2004): 130–31, 135.

matters.” Consequently, “we alone do not become arrogant when successful.” As such a city, Sparta has been “always free and most highly regarded” (1.84.1–3). Thucydides agrees: the Spartans, more than any he has known, “were moderate in their prosperity, and ordered their city more securely the greater it became” (8.24.4). Moderation, it seems, supports a free regime, by protecting it from the excesses that could lead to its downfall.

When the Corinthians urge Sparta to join them in war against Athens, they contrast the Athenian character, with its spirit of innovation and activity, with Spartan caution and moderation. They nevertheless suggest that Sparta must overcome its characteristic moderation in order to protect its freedom—and indeed promote it in the Hellenic world—against Athenian expansion. Sparta must become, they suggest, more like Athens, or at least combine moderation with daring, even going beyond its old ways of fighting. Through the Corinthians’ advice to their ally, Thucydides raises the question of whether the combination of stability and change required for freedom is possible. In its distinctive way, the more traditional Sparta also faces the difficulty of finding the balance or measure that Thucydides attributes to Pericles’ politics and that made Athens under his guidance a city worthy of wonder—and that was so hard for Athens to maintain.

Thucydides sheds light on Sparta by his account of Brasidas, Sparta’s greatest military hero, who spearheads the liberation of subjected cities from Athens in the name of his city. After discussing Thucydides’ introduction of Sparta through the Corinthians’ attempt to move Sparta to war and the Spartan response, in the remaining sections of this chapter I turn to Thucydides’ account of Brasidas’s exploits, and the relation between him and his city. Those who understand Thucydides as sympathetic toward Sparta—for its moderation, stability, and obedience to law—do not base their view on Brasidas. Indeed, Brasidas has been called “the Athenian among the Spartans.” Thus his surprising success in Thrace is not Sparta’s success.² Brasidas’s very freedom from Sparta, which makes his war of liberation possible, makes him distrusted by his city. His success does allow Sparta to succeed in negotiating the peace with Athens that it desires, inasmuch as Athens wants to stop

2. Strauss, *City and Man*, 213, 222; Connor, *Thucydides*, 134n67, 129; Edmunds, *Chance and Intelligence*, 90; Rahe, “Thucydides’ Critique of Realpolitik,” 138. Hornblower argues that Thucydides’ presentation of Brasidas as isolated and alienated from Sparta is historically implausible, and suggests that Thucydides saw in one of the war’s few military heroes the opportunity to write a heroic and epic *aristeia*, or “perhaps he was seduced by his own romantic picture of Brasidas as a loner or outcast, a Spartan not made like other Spartans.” *A Commentary on Thucydides*, 3 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991–2008), 2.38–61, esp. 39, 60–61.

Brasidas and to have the cities he liberated restored to it. That Sparta succeeds in negotiating peace is a sign of its failure in a deeper sense, for it does not aim at the liberation of Hellas, and even betrays its allies in its separate peace with Athens. Sparta's failure, however, is Brasidas's failure. It is a failure that comes at great cost to those whom he "deceives" about their prospects for freedom. He needs the support of his city to make good on his promises in Thrace.

Because Brasidas's deeds of liberation cannot stand without Sparta's support, those deeds become as questionable as Sparta's. By representing his city, both in his words that describe its intentions and in his deeds that are understood to represent Sparta itself in the larger world, Brasidas is "a liar" (4.108.5, 4.81.2–3). This does not mean, however, that Brasidas is a sort of Machiavellian figure who deceives the cities in Thrace about his city's nobility in order to promote its interest in security, as well as his own reputation for serving his city (see 5.16.1).³ Nor does it mean that Brasidas idealistically—and naively—accepts a noble view of his city that he tries to promote. Heilke criticizes Brasidas on this ground: whether because of a miscalculation of Spartan interests, stupidity, or deliberate or foolish disregard, Brasidas's actions were ultimately futile.⁴ From this perspective, Brasidas is insufficiently a realist concerning politics. I argue, rather, that Brasidas attempts to liberate cities from Athenian rule in spite of his city's interests, aware of the risks he runs, for both the cities he liberates and of course for himself. Brasidas's "crusade" for freedom attempts to force Sparta to live up to its noble reputation. From this perspective, Brasidas is neither a realist who serves Sparta's self-interested goals, nor an idealist who misjudges his city's nobility, even if there is a kind of idealism in his effort to force Sparta to serve liberation.

Spartans want peace in part because the war has made them more vulnerable at home to revolts of their slave population, their Helots, an ancient population of the Peloponnesus whom they subjected (1.101.2). Thucydides indicates the centrality of the Helots to Sparta's politics and way of life. He refers to Sparta's "fear of the intransigence and numbers [of their Helots]," and says "that Sparta's affairs for the most part were always arranged with

3. Westlake raises this possibility, but claims that in the end Thucydides leaves Brasidas's attitude toward his own mission obscure. *Individuals in Thucydides*, 164.

4. Heilke, "Realism, Narrative, and Happenstance," 133, 136. In an interesting twist on this thesis, Timothy Burns argues that Brasidas did understand his city's intentions toward the liberated cities, but he turned away from this knowledge, "lacking the strength of soul to accept it." Thus Brasidas lies to himself. Burns, "Virtue of Thucydides' Brasidas," 518.

a view to protection against the Helots” (4.80.3).⁵ The Spartan regime is supported by the Helots, insofar as their labor freed the Spartans for their famed military training and way of life. This, however, results in the problem that the Spartans cannot go faraway on foreign ventures because they must guard against the ever-present danger from the Helots at home (see 1.118.2).⁶ Sparta’s own tyranny at home over its subject population is in tension with its noble goal proclaimed at the outset of the war—freeing Hellas from Athenian tyranny (2.8.4).

Brasidas’s army in Thrace includes a substantial number of Helots, whom Sparta was eager to send away so as to avoid slave revolts (4.79–81). The Helots therefore contribute to the liberation of the Thracian cities, which Sparta returns to Athens as part of the peace negotiations. Thucydides lets us see this irony. His sympathy is less with Sparta than with Brasidas, in spite of his reservations about Brasidas’s actions in Thrace. Thucydides’ considerable appreciation of Brasidas demonstrates his freedom from the perspective of his own city, even as it demonstrates his ultimate loyalty to the freedom that Athens at its best represents.

Introducing Sparta

Early in book 1, Thucydides gives an account of Sparta’s claim to fame, not simply its power over the Peloponnesus and the formidable allies it leads, but its stability, freedom from tyranny, and laws. Sparta’s very stability has made it a model for free government, and given it the power to defend freedom in the Hellenic world. Sparta has been able to arrange matters in other cities, including putting down tyrants in Athens and elsewhere. And it was Sparta, Thucydides says, who took the lead in the struggle of the Hellenic cities against the Persians (1.18.1–2). Hellas thus looks to Sparta to continue to oppose tyranny, now that it is exercised by the Hellenic city of Athens. In the first event Thucydides describes taking place at Sparta in his history, Corinth sends representatives to ask the Spartans for aid and indeed to join them in war against Athens. The Corinthians appeal to Sparta’s reputation as a liberator.

5. Other Hellenic cities had slaves, but Sparta had more slaves (*oiketoi*) than any single city, Thucydides observes (8.40.2). Sparta’s Helots, at least as reported by Herodotus, outnumbered the Spartans by seven to one in the army at Plataea (Herodotus 9.28–29).

6. According to Strauss, “Sparta was moderate because she had grave troubles with her Helots; the Helots made her moderate.” *City and Man*, 191–92. As Strauss points out, this pattern is repeated in Thucydides’ description of Chios, whom he names second to Sparta in moderation, as well as in the size of its slave population (8.24.4, 8.40.2). Also Orwin, *Humanity of Thucydides*, 84.

Sparta has not lived up to its reputation, the Corinthians claim, for by remaining inactive, Sparta has allowed Athenian power to double. “It is not the one who enslaves who more truly does the deed,” they say, but rather “the one able to stop it who looks on, even if it has the reputation for virtue as the liberator of Hellas” (1.69). Moreover, Sparta’s very virtues, they claim, contribute to the desperate state of affairs they face. Spartans’ trust of their own regime, for example, makes them less trusting of what others tell them. This leads to caution and moderation, but also to “ignorance of external matters” (1.68.1). The Spartans do not understand how “completely different” they are from their antagonists. The contrast the Corinthians draw between Athens and Sparta is stark. The Athenians are innovators, quick both to conceive and to execute, whereas the Spartans are quick to preserve (*sōzein*) what they have, to decide nothing, and to act only when necessary. The Athenians never shrink from action, and are always away from home. The Spartans delay, and stay at home. Least of all do the Athenians enjoy what they have because they are always acquiring (*ktasthai*). Whereas the Athenians are born to have no peace, nor to allow any to others, the Corinthians say, the Spartans have “old-fashioned ways” (*archaiotropa*). Whereas “unvarying customs” (*akineta nomima*) serve a city at peace, cities compelled to act require artful invention (*epitechnēsis*). As in the arts, improvements prevail (1.70.2–71.3; see Aristotle, *Politics* 1269a20–24). The Corinthians attribute to the Spartans what Aristotle was later to designate the work of women—that of preserving—while they attribute to the Athenians the work of acquiring that Aristotle attributed to men (*Politics* 1277b24–25).

The Corinthians’ appeal to Sparta requires, of course, that their description of the city not be perfectly accurate, for they are asking the Spartans to go to war against Athens, which requires their leaving home. It is the very thing the Spartans decide to do when they vote for war. The description the Corinthians give of Athens, moreover, facilitates their purpose: an Athens whose nature is never to be at peace is not one with whom Sparta might easily negotiate a compromise that preserves the peace. For Athens, they imply, there is no peace. As a consequence, there is none for anyone else. Like the Spartans themselves, the Corinthians speak in terms of necessity. They tell the Spartans that there is no choice, or that there are no options, just when they are asking them to make a choice, and to follow the option they set before them.⁷

7. Similarly, if the Corinthians have “rightly” described Athens as never at peace, their attempt to prevent its alliance with Corcyra would have been futile. And yet they make that attempt, an attempt that almost succeeds (1.44.1). In this instance as well, the Corinthians act as if there is more flexibility than their contrast between the two cities suggests.

The Corinthians do not merely know antagonists who are so completely different from each other, they themselves are not “completely” different from either of them. Earlier in the first book, when the Corinthians spoke at Athens in an attempt to urge the Athenians against the alliance the Corcyreans propose, they appeal to Corcyra’s obligations as their colony toward its mother city. Corcyra has not paid Corinth the respect it is due (1.38). Unlike the Corcyreans, whose first word in their speech at Athens refers to “what is just,” the first word of the Corinthians’ speech refers to “what is necessary” (1.32.1, 1.37.1). The latter give advice to the Athenians as “the elder” to “the younger” (1.42.1). To the Athenians Corinth must seem like Sparta, who is Corinth’s close ally and neighbor on the Peloponnesus.

In Sparta, in contrast, the Corinthians appeal to the arts over the law. Their statement that change prevails in both cases reveals their city’s affinity with the innovative Athens rather than with law-abiding Sparta. Their reproach of Sparta’s ways as “old-fashioned” is similar to the complaint of the Unjust Speech in Aristophanes’ *Clouds* that the Just Speech is out of date (e.g., *archaios*, *Clouds* 889). Corinth is progressive. Like Athens and unlike Sparta, Corinth is a city of commerce, conveniently located for trade both by land and by sea (1.13.2–5). Corinth is the city in which it is said the first triremes were built, and it has one of the largest navies in the Hellenic world (1.13.2, 1.36.3). In book 1, we keep meeting the Corinthians “away from home,” speaking first at Athens in response to Corcyra, then at Sparta in order to urge war, and at Sparta again at a meeting of the Peloponnesian league (1.120–24). The conflicts with Athens that bring Corinth to Sparta to ask for aid involve Corcyra, Corinth’s colony to the west, and Potidaea, its colony to the east. Corinth has colonized all over the map. The Corinthians give more speeches in direct discourse in book 1 than the representatives of any city in all of Thucydides’ history. And if Sparta does not decide to speedily invade Athens, the Corinthians threaten, Corinth will acquire new allies (1.71.4–6).⁸ Corinth is flexible. To the Spartans, Corinth must seem like Athens. Perhaps they are too flexible to be trustworthy.

The Corinthians themselves recognize that the Spartans have difficulty trusting them when they try to allay that mistrust by tracing it to the Spartans’ trust in their own regime—which they claim makes them distrust advice from others. When the Corinthians threaten to find new allies, they

8. A number of years later, after Sparta signs a peace treaty with Athens, Thucydides recounts negotiations between Corinth and Argos, an old rival of Sparta for ascendancy in the Peloponnesus (e.g., 5.37.1–2, 5.38.1, 5.48.1–3). Sparta finally forces Corinth to seek other allies.

also insist that they have “affinity” with Sparta (*sunēthēs*) (literally, share the same habits). They conclude their speech by appealing to the gods, to the oaths of alliance they have sworn, and to their ancestors (1.71.4–7). Do the Corinthians, then, integrate Athenian openness to change with Spartan stability, or do they merely appear one way in contrast to Athens, another in contrast to Sparta, and one way at Athens, another at Sparta?

Thucydides’ presentation of events and speeches in book 1 that lead to the war suggests that both stability and change, rest and motion, are necessary to freedom. Athenians who happen to be there speak next to caution Sparta against war with such a formidable antagonist as Athens. The Spartan king, Archidamus, urges against immediate war by defending the Spartan character of moderation, and the freedom that Sparta has maintained for so many years by acting in accord with it. Sparta’s acting in conformity to its character and ways frees it from the compulsions of time and events, such as those that the Corinthians urge upon it. Indeed, doing so, Archidamus implies, allows for action rather than reaction, inasmuch as one’s actions proceed from who one is. The Corinthians, however, have reproached Sparta for allowing the power of Athens to grow. To refuse to react to circumstances is ultimately slavish, for it is to refuse to act. Freedom is manifest and realized in action, and its loss is threatened by inaction just as much as it is by constant change in response to circumstances. From this perspective, Sparta’s inaction does not manifest its freedom. It endangers it. It is not surprising that the vote in the assembly is a divided one.

In speaking against an immediate declaration of war, Archidamus appeals to his experience in many wars, which cautions him against believing that war is either safe or advantageous. He asks the Spartans who are of a similar age and experience to remember war’s dangers (1.80.1). He defends the old-fashioned ways in which Spartans are raised. Although his advice seems to confirm Corinth’s reproach of Sparta for delay and caution, he is not cowed from giving it; he advises his city to strengthen its material preparations, acquire further allies, and gain time—even two or three years—by asking the Athenians to arbitrate the differences between themselves and the Corinthians (1.82.1–3). Archidamus favors not inaction, but sufficient preparation for action. Sparta’s “slowness and hesitation” are not shameful, he claims, for haste in fighting now will only delay the end of the war if Sparta is not prepared (1.84.1). Such care demonstrates the moderation, respect for the laws, and discipline that Spartans have inherited from their ancestors and that have made them a “free and famous city.” It is these qualities that distinguish Spartans from others, for they prevent them from becoming hubristic in success, and help them endure in misfortune (1.84.1–85.1). He knows the force that Sparta must face in Athens’s wealth, resources, allies, ships, and naval capacity.

The Spartan strategy of invading Attica and devastating the Attic countryside, he warns, may not produce an easy end to the war. Perhaps he suspects Pericles's plan to move the Athenians to safety within the walls of the city, and to rely on its sea power. Athens's indomitable spirit, he points out, will keep it from becoming slaves of its land (1.80.2–81.6). He at least is not as ill informed about Athens as Corinth accuses Spartans of being.

Archidamus thus appeals to the stability, law-abidingness, and good government that Thucydides attributes to Sparta from early times (1.18.1–2). Thucydides also mentions in this same place, however, Sparta's long-standing reputation for resisting tyranny, and serving freedom. And the Corinthians have just appealed to Sparta to liberate Hellas from Athenian tyranny when they asked Sparta to join them in war against Athens. Archidamus, however, refers to the war Corinth proposes as one "carried on for the sake of private interests" (1.82.6). Does he ignore the Corinthians' noble purpose, or does he simply recognize Corinth's interest in maintaining its status and power in the Hellenic world? Is he wary about risking Sparta's freedom to pursue freedom for others?

The Spartan ephor Sthenelaidas responds, and urges immediate war. Whereas Archidamus combines moderation with intelligence, one of the virtues Pericles attributes to Athens, the daring that Pericles also attributes to Athens exists in Sthenelaidas with neither of Archidamus's virtues (cf. 1.79.2 with 1.144.3). Athens is doing injustice to the Peloponnesians and their allies, he proclaims, and it is no time for deliberation. Deeds must answer deeds. It is possible that by helping Corinth in the matter of Potidaea, the Spartans would be striking a blow for freedom from Athenian rule, but Sthenelaidas's concern is to strike a blow against Athens, who has wronged them. In the two Spartans who speak, Thucydides shows us cautious understanding versus unreflective action. Sthenelaidas claims not to understand the "long speech" the Athenians delivered after the Corinthians spoke, because it praised Athens without denying the Corinthians' charges. His claim not to understand the Athenians' speech calls into question whether he understands the subtleties of the Corinthians' similarly long speech. It is Archidamus who understands it, and attempts to answer it when he opposes following their advice.

After Sthenelaidas concludes his short speech, the Spartans choose between Archidamus's and Sthenelaidas's advice "by shouting rather than by voting," for this is how Spartans "make judgments," Thucydides tells us.⁹ Sthenelaidas

9. The Spartans nevertheless understand their shouting as "voting," for in concluding his speech Sthenelaidas asks his addressees "to vote" for the war, and Thucydides describes him as "calling for a vote" (1.86.5–1.87.1). In Thucydides' history, "shouting" (*boē*) more typically refers to the noise troops make during battle (e.g., 4.34.2, 4.34.3, 4.35.2, 4.125.5, 4.127.1, 7.70.7).

claims that the “shouting” is so loud on both sides that he must ask those who support him to move to one side, and those who support Archidamus to the other, for he wants them to declare their position openly. The majority is on his side in favor of war (1.87.1–3). Sthenelaidas’s is the last speech of a Spartan at Sparta in Thucydides’ work. Spartans do not typically reflect on themselves as part of their public discourse, as the Athenians do—not only Pericles, but also Cleon and Diodotus, Nicias and Alcibiades. Archidamus does so only when his city is criticized by its allies. His is a defensive speech, prompted by others, even though it aims at preserving Sparta’s freedom.

War nevertheless does not come at once. The Spartans assemble their allies to discuss the matter, the Corinthians speak again, and a vote is taken in favor of war. Although Sparta does not ask for the arbitration that Archidamus proposes, it does send delegations to Athens making a number of demands that Athens resists. It is not until the Peloponnesian ally Thebes invades Plataea that the war actually breaks out. Although Archidamus’s proposal to delay the war lost in the assembly, Sparta proceeds in the cautious manner he advises. In the meantime, Sparta resolves to make overtures to Persia for an alliance against Athens (2.7.1). Soon after Thucydides recounts this fact, he observes that the Hellenic world had greater goodwill for Sparta than for Athens, inasmuch as Sparta proclaimed itself the liberator of Hellas (2.8.4). Thucydides does not say what form this “proclamation” takes, or who makes it on behalf of the city. When soon thereafter Archidamus encourages his troops in the field, he speaks to them of the widespread goodwill for Sparta, which he attributes only to the hatred of Athens (2.11.2).

Introducing Brasidas

Thucydides centers events of the first few years of the war on Athens, Pericles’ funeral oration, the plague, and Pericles’ death. Each spring, the Spartans lead a force against Attica, and ravage the countryside. In the third year, however, the Peloponnesians move instead against Plataea, and in the war’s fourth year, Mytilene revolts, as I discuss in the previous chapter. While these are the major events in these early years, we do briefly meet Brasidas, a Spartiate,¹⁰ in command of a small force, who comes to the aid of Methone on the southern Peloponnesian coast against an Athenian assault. As the Athenians are besieging the walls of the city, Brasidas with his hundred hoplites “runs

10. A Spartiate was a full citizen of Sparta, and a member of its highest military class.

through” their ranks, enters the city, and saves it (2.25.2).¹¹ For his “daring” at Methone, Brasidas is “the first” to be commended at Sparta during the war (2.25.1–2). Although Thucydides says that Brasidas is the “first” to be commended by the Spartans, he is the only one ever mentioned by Thucydides to be so commended. The military action, however, is only the first of Brasidas’s daring exploits that Thucydides goes on to describe.

After serving as an adviser for several Spartan generals and having no decisive influence on events (2.87, 2.93–94, 3.79.3),¹² Brasidas commands his own ship in a Peloponnesian fleet sent to rescue Pylos on the southern coast of the Peloponnesus from Athenian occupation. The Spartan fleet faces the Athenians ensconced in their own territory, and attacks the Peloponnesus from the sea, as the Athenians are wont to do. Thucydides observes the strange reversal of customary tactics, with the land power proceeding to make a naval attack, and the naval power defending itself on its enemy’s own soil (4.12.3). When the Peloponnesians hesitate to land in fear of wrecking their ships, Brasidas shouts out to them to run their ships aground rather than allow Athens a foothold on the Peloponnesus for the sake of “saving timber” (4.11.4). Brasidas “compels” his own steersman to do so (4.12.1)—words do not seem sufficient—until he himself faints from the many wounds he receives in the attempt, and falls back in the bow of his ship. Presumably he meant to be among the first to step on shore had a landing taken place. Whether any of the commanders of the other ships are persuaded to follow Brasidas’s example, Thucydides does not say, observing only that the rest were unable to land (4.12.1–2).

Although Brasidas plays no further role at Pylos, Thucydides’ brief account of his dramatic exploit stands in the background of Spartan misadventures there. The Peloponnesians place four hundred of their hoplites on the island of Sphacteria, opposite Pylos, in an attempt to prevent Athenian ships from entering the narrow straits to relieve the Athenians who are holding Pylos. But when the Spartans fail to block the Athenian ships that arrive,

11. Connor points out that Thucydides describes Brasidas as “running” “in a surprising number of passages,” a “characterization all the more striking when the reader remembers the repeated criticism of the Spartans for their slowness.” Connor cites Brasidas’s running through Thessaly (4.78.5, 4.79.1), “overrunning” the country outside of Amphipolis (4.104.3), running with his troops into Torone (4.112.1), and running at top speed against the Athenians led by Cleon at Amphipolis (5.10.6). *Thucydides*, 128n45.

12. As Westlake says of Brasidas’s early assignment in the war as adviser to Spartan commanders, he “did his best to infuse into his superiors something of his own enterprising spirit.” And it “must have been a frustrating experience.” *Individuals in Thucydides*, 149.

the Spartans on the island are trapped without sufficient food or provisions. So great is the Spartan sense of the disaster that they negotiate a truce in the field and send representatives to Athens to try to bring an end to the war. Just as Brasidas's deeds at Pylos stand in contrast with the deeds of the other Spartans there, so too does his brief but daring speech to his men contrast with the cowering speech that the Spartans give in Athens. With the exception of Brasidas's stirring and persuasive speeches in Thrace that Thucydides later records, this is the last Spartan speech in his work. The Spartan speech at Athens highlights Brasidas's very different speeches as well as his deeds.

The Spartans minimize their own failure at Pylos as much as possible—and therewith Athenian success—by attributing both success and failure in war to chance.¹³ To save themselves from blame, they deprive the Athenians—and thereby human beings in general—of praise. They have come to their present predicament, they say, not because of their lack of power, nor because they have arrogantly overreached, but because they failed in judgment (*gnōmē*), a failure “to which all alike are susceptible” (4.17.5–18.2). Not only are all subject to fortune, but judgment does not distinguish one human being from another, for all are subject to its mistakes. Pericles, in contrast, earlier praised Athens for relying “more on judgment than on chance, more on daring than on power” (1.144.3). The Spartans do not only depreciate virtue, but they depreciate the very virtue in which Athens takes pride and which Pericles couples with daring itself.

So too, the Spartans continue, Athenians should not suppose from their present strength and resources that “chance will always be with [them]” (4.18.3). In other words, Athenians should grant peace out of recognition that they too could suffer disaster if the war continues. Should this happen, the Spartans warn them, they will be thought to have enjoyed what they now have because of chance, whereas if they end the war now they will have “a reputation for strength and intelligence that cannot be endangered” (4.18.5). The Spartans thus offer the Athenians the opportunity to secure a reputation that must by their own reckoning be a false one, inasmuch as reputation depends on chance. They warn the Athenians not to trust to *eupraxia*, a word that means both acting well and doing well or prospering, as if it were interchangeable with good fortune (*eutuchia*). So too they use “experience,” which Thucydides earlier used to refer to the source of Athens's greater skill

13. As Rood observes, “Disparagement of the enemy's success is apt in an exhortation to the defeated troops, not in an appeal to peace.” *Thucydides: Narrative and Explanation*, 40. On the Spartan speech in Athens, see also Strauss, *City and Man*, 173.

at sea (e.g., 2.85.2; cf. 2.89.2) to refer to the experience that teaches Athens and Sparta alike not to trust to “prosperity” (4.17.5).

Finally, the Spartans ask the Athenians to demonstrate their “virtue” in the present circumstances by accepting the very proposal they offer (4.19.2). Virtue lies in not taking advantage of fortune. This will also be advantageous to the Athenians, as Sparta will exercise toward them such “virtue” in turn. Thus Athens and Sparta will become “firm friends” in not exploiting the opportunities chance presents. They should act now, before “something irreparable comes between [them],” and produces “eternal enmity.” Indeed, if Athenians accept Sparta’s proposal of peace, they will gain the gratitude of the Hellenic world now engaged in war, for they will effect a “cessation of evils” (4.19.3–20.3). Of course, Corinth might not be grateful for Sparta’s capitulation, or suppose easily “reparable” Athens’s treatment of the Corinthian colony Potidaea (2.67.4, 2.70). More generally, the Spartans claim the end of war means the “cessation of evils,” as if unaware that the evil that prompts at least some of Sparta’s allies is the domination, even tyranny, of Athens.¹⁴ Those allies, such as Corinth and Thebes, are not present; nor has Sparta consulted the Peloponnesian League in proposing an end of war, as it is careful to do before going to war. If Athens and Sparta are in agreement (literally, “say the same things”), the Spartans say, the rest of Hellas will “honor” the agreement from its weaker position (4.20.4), using a word that can only highlight the lack of honor in their own proposal. Their suit for peace comes to nil when they are denied a request to negotiate the terms of a treaty in private, which is necessary so that they will not be slandered to their allies (4.22). The Spartans are well aware that had they been successful, theirs would have been a separate peace, and a betrayal of the Peloponnesians and those allied with them.

After the Athenians reject the Spartan proposition, for they “want more” (4.21.2),¹⁵ the fighting continues on Sphacteria. Sphacteria finally falls

14. Johnson, *Thucydides, Hobbes*, 48; and P. A. Brunt, “Spartan Policy and Strategy in the Archidamian War,” *Phoenix* 19, no. 4 (1965): 273.

15. Cleon leads the opposition to Sparta’s offer, Thucydides reports, but he does not give Cleon a speech in response to the Spartans. Hornblower finds it “unfair” of Thucydides to deny him a speech and attributes it to Thucydides’ “personal malice” against him. *Thucydides*, 56. He was consequently, Hornblower speculates, “unwilling to dwell on Kleon’s victory in the debate.” *Commentary on Thucydides*, 2.170. By giving no Athenian speech in response, however, Thucydides emphasizes Sparta’s capitulation by letting the Spartans’ speech stand alone. As Rood observes, by writing a repellent speech for Cleon, Thucydides might have made the Spartan proposals more attractive. *Thucydides: Narrative and Explanation*, 42.

because of the well-laid battle plans of the Athenian commander Demosthenes, who uses light-armed troops, archers, and javelin and stone throwers against the heavy-armed Peloponnesians (e.g., 4.32.3–4). After retreating to a fort on the tip of the island, the Spartan forces are surprised by the enemy from the rear. Thucydides is reminded of Thermopylae, for there too the enemy surprises the Spartans from the rear, and they cannot hold out. Thucydides admits that to compare Sphacteria with Thermopylae is “to compare small things with great” (4.36.3). Facing defeat, the forces on Sphacteria send a message to Sparta asking what they should do. After “two or three exchanges,” Sparta sends word that “they should decide for themselves as long as they do nothing shameful” (*aischron*) (4.38.3). After consulting with one another, Thucydides recounts, the soldiers decide to surrender to the Athenians (4.38.3). The Spartans at Thermopylae died fighting (Herodotus 7.223–28), whereas those on Sphacteria agree to what seems a shameful surrender (see 4.40.2). At Thermopylae, the Spartans do what they are trained to do, and what the world expects of them. They do not have to ask anyone what to do. Had the Spartans on Thermopylae received a message like the one Sparta sent her soldiers on Sphacteria, it would have seemed a sufficiently clear statement about what they should do, and they would have died fighting, as in fact they did in the absence of such a message. Of course, they would not have asked for advice in the first place. The Spartans on Sphacteria, in contrast, who ask for advice about what to do, already suppose that there is more than one way of acting. They are able to imagine themselves surrendering. Their discipline and laws, from which Pericles claims that Spartan courage comes, do not determine their actions. If they can ask Sparta what to do, they can ask themselves. The Spartans who advise them to do nothing dishonorable should know that their advice is useless, just as for those at Thermopylae it would have been unnecessary. When the prisoners who surrender are finally returned to Sparta as a result of a peace agreement, Sparta has difficulty trusting them (5.34.2).

Given the Spartans’ reputation for never surrendering, the Hellenes found their capitulation on Sphacteria to be the most surprising thing in the war. Thucydides reports the anecdote of the Spartan prisoner who is asked on his arrival in Athens whether those who died rather than surrender were noble men, and replies that arrows do not distinguish the noble from the base. He makes it clear, Thucydides says, that those who die when hit by stones and arrows die by chance (4.40.1–2). His appeal to chance echoes that of the Spartan embassy that recently sued for peace, and failed (e.g., 4.18.3). Neither he nor they are like Brasidas, who stops fighting only when he faints from his many wounds (4.12.1). Since Brasidas places himself in the forefront of the fighting, it is not merely from chance that he is wounded,

although it may be chance that he survives, and lives to fight again. His speeches and deeds on the Thracian campaign, to which I turn next, constitute one of the most dramatic chapters in Thucydides' account of the war. The division in the Spartan assembly between Archidamus and Sthenelaidas before the onset of the war gives way to a deeper and more fatal one between Brasidas and Sparta itself. Brasidas's collision course with his city, I argue, calls into question Sparta's status as the free city that Archidamus praised, and ultimately Brasidas's own freedom as well.

Brasidas's Thracian Campaign

The capture of its men on Sphacteria leaves Sparta demoralized. When Athens sends its navy against Corinth, there is no mention of Sparta's helping its ally (4.42–45). Athenian forces proceed to threaten the nearby city of Megara. Because Brasidas "happens" to be around Corinth, he plays a major role in the defense of Peloponnesian interests there. By leading a large Corinthian contingent, other allies, and the men he himself had already assembled for an expedition to Thrace, he produces a standoff with the Athenian forces near Megara's port of Nisaea. Once again, as at Methone, Thucydides presents Brasidas's exploits as if they come from his own initiative (4.70–74.1).

Although it is chance that Brasidas's presence in Corinth coincides with Athens's ventures in the area, he is there for a purpose, raising a force for an expedition against Athenian interests in Thrace, an expedition that succeeds in liberating several cities there from their subjection to Athens. The mission begins with Brasidas "wishing it," and with the request of revolting Chalcidians for Spartan help. Perdiccas, the king of Macedonia, offers to contribute funds for the expedition, inasmuch as he would like the army's help in subduing the Lyncestians. Because the Athenians still hold Pylos, the Spartans want to divert them from operations in the Peloponnesus by threatening them elsewhere, and agree to the expedition. It is also the case, Thucydides tells us, that once Brasidas succeeds in liberating cities in Thrace, the Spartans are able to exchange the "liberated" cities in their peace negotiations with Athens (4.81.1–2).

Moreover, the expedition gives Sparta an excuse to send away some of its Helots as hoplites in the army, lest with Pylos captured the Helots might start an insurrection (4.79.3–81.1).¹⁶ Sparta eagerly sends seven hundred of

16. The word for "starting an insurrection" that Thucydides uses here is *neōterizein*, meaning literally "to attempt something new," or to make a political change or revolution. The Spartans fear the new, just as they fear the class they enslave.

its Helots with Brasidas to Thrace (4.80.4–5). Chalcidice’s “eagerness” for help to come is matched by Sparta’s “eagerness” for the Helots to go—for its own safety at home. Inasmuch as Brasidas is reputed to be a force for action (*drastērion*)—this is why the Chalcidians request him in particular (4.81.1)—one may suspect that Sparta’s sending Brasidas along with the Helots also serves its safety. In addition to the Helots, the rest of the force Brasidas himself must recruit for pay (4.80.5). From Thucydides’ account, Helots and mercenaries and one Spartiate, Brasidas, are on their way to Thrace to become the liberators of Hellas.¹⁷

When describing Sparta’s dispatch of the Helots with Brasidas, Thucydides relates an anecdote about Sparta’s dealing with its subject population that took place at some undetermined date in the past.¹⁸ Sparta announces that the Helots who have done best against Sparta’s enemies should come forth to receive their freedom, in order to test them. Those who think themselves worthy of freedom would be most likely to revolt, the Spartans assume, on account of their proud thoughts. About two thousand are selected and crowned with garlands, and celebrate “in the belief that they are free.” Soon thereafter, “the Spartans make them disappear, and no one perceives in what way each of them perished” (4.80.3–4). Because Thucydides describes this event in the course of telling us about the seven hundred Helots Sparta sent with Brasidas to Thrace, he lets us imagine that Brasidas’s forces might have been almost three times their number, and might have included the bravest and the best of Sparta’s subject peoples—the ones that Sparta “made disappear.”

En route to Thrace, Brasidas and his forces meet opposition to their passage through Thessaly, where many are favorably disposed to Athens. Although Brasidas agrees that they will pass only if the Thessalians are willing, he does not wait to find out. At a run, he and the army proceed before a large enough force can be gathered to stop them (4.78.2–5). Thucydides’ tale raises the question of whether the deceived Thessalians would allow Brasidas and his troops return passage through their country. We have seen Brasidas attempt at Pylos to wreck his ship in order to land, cutting himself and his men off from an easy retreat. Later, when Sparta finally sends reinforcements to Thrace, Thucydides tells us, the Thessalians do not allow their passage and

17. Graham Wylie notes that Brasidas was given no Spartiate troops apparently because those in control at Sparta at the time “chose to treat the expedition as a semi-private venture.” “Brasidas: Great Commander or Whiz Kid?” *Quaderni Urbinati di Cultura Classica*, n.s. 41, no. 2 (1992): 78n7.

18. Connor, *Thucydides*, 131.

they return home (4.132.2). Brasidas cut off an obvious route between his forces and his city.

Tension soon occurs between Brasidas and the Macedonian king, Perdiccas, who is funding part of Brasidas's army. Perdiccas has in effect hired an army, and wants it to do his bidding against his own enemies. In particular, Perdiccas wants to subdue the Lyncestians, whereas Brasidas wants to arbitrate between them and gain Lyncestis as a Spartan ally. Perdiccas objects that he did not bring in Brasidas as a judge or arbitrator (*dikastēs*), but as a destroyer (*kathairetēs*) (4.83.4)—using language that could describe how the Spartan judges in fact act toward the Plataeans. When Brasidas refuses to play his part in Perdiccas's plan, Perdiccas trims the pay of his forces (4.83.6). Soon Brasidas gets reinforcements, not from Sparta, but from the cities he liberates from Athenian rule (4.124.1).

When Brasidas and his army arrive at Acanthus, Brasidas requests that he be admitted into the city alone to speak to the people. "For a Spartan," Thucydides comments, Brasidas is "not incompetent at speaking" (4.84.2). This is his first solo speech in direct discourse in Thucydides' work (see 2.86.6, 4.11.4). Brasidas repeats its drift, Thucydides tells us, with equal success at Torone (4.114.3). He explains that Sparta has sent him and the army to prove true (*epalētheunein*) its claim that it is fighting to liberate Hellas from the Athenians (4.85.1). Although we have heard this claim about Sparta before, this is the first time a Spartan has so clearly made it (1.139.3), as opposed to those who have an interest in its proving true, such as the Mytileneans, the Samians, and the Plataeans. The truth of Sparta's noble purpose will depend on what Brasidas accomplishes.

Although Sparta has been slow to send aid to Thrace because the city was pressed by Athens nearer home, Brasidas tells the Acanthians, he has now come with utmost enthusiasm in support of their freedom. If they offer resistance, however, he will not hesitate to ravage their fields, for they would stand in the way not only of their own freedom but also of that of other Hellenes. Moreover, if Brasidas is turned away by Acanthus, other cities to which he goes will be less inclined to trust him, suspecting that he is too weak to defend them against the Athenians if they attack, or that Sparta is not fully committed to their freedom (4.85.2–6).¹⁹ Thucydides, however, gives us reason to share such suspicions. As evidence that the Acanthians need

19. In speaking to the Acanthians, Brasidas slips from speaking in the first person plural, whether in reference to the Spartans in general or to the assembled force that awaits outside the city walls, to the first person singular (4.85.2–6).

not fear Athenian retaliation, Brasidas claims that the Athenians withdrew at Nisaea, even though their force outnumbered his. Thucydides has already told us otherwise, for the Athenians there do not want to face “the superior numbers” that stand with Brasidas since they have already accomplished their goals (4.73.4).²⁰ Nor does Brasidas now have the army in Thrace that he commanded at Nisaea, as he claims to the Acanthians (4.85.6–7). In fact, after the Athenians depart from Nisaea, the combined Peloponnesian forces under his command “disperse and go home” (4.74.1; see also 4.108.5).

Sparta’s commitment to freedom for cities liberated from Athens is also suspect. Brasidas claims that he has come only after “obtaining the greatest oaths from the Spartans” that the cities liberated from Athens will remain “autonomous” (4.86.1). But Thucydides reports no such oaths taken by Spartans about the liberated cities’ autonomy.²¹ Brasidas has come not to side with one faction or another in the city, he continues. Nor would he truly offer freedom if it would enslave the greater part in their city to the few, or a smaller part to everyone. Such would be harsher than foreign rule, and the Spartans would be to blame for the very thing for which they blame Athens (4.86.4–5). Of course, in enslaving the Helots Sparta has enslaved the greater part to the few, even if Brasidas understandably does not mention this now. Moreover, recent events in Megara call into question Spartan commitment to the autonomy of “oppressed” cities it liberates. Once the Athenians depart from Megara, the Peloponnesian faction within the city executes those most friendly to Athens, and proceeds to turn the city into “an extreme oligarchy” (4.74.3). Megara is therefore an ominous precedent for the cities in Thrace.²² The freedom with which Brasidas tempts his addressees, Thucydides admits later, depends on “a thoroughly unexamined hope” (*aperiskeptos elpis*) to which they turn over their desires (4.108.4).

Should Sparta deceive in its promises of liberation, Brasidas concludes this line of argument, the charge of depriving others of freedom would be even “more hateful” against Sparta than against a city that makes no pretense to

20. Thucydides is very careful to list the forces Brasidas commands at Nisaea: twenty-seven hundred Corinthian hoplites, four hundred Phliasians, six hundred Sicyonians, as well as the troops he himself had assembled for the Thracian campaign (4.70.1). In addition, they are joined by twenty-two hundred hoplites and six hundred cavalrymen from Boeotia, numbering six thousand hoplites alone (4.72.1–2). See Connor, *Thucydides*, 132, 138.

21. Hornblower admits that Brasidas’s claim that the Spartans took such oaths “would be hard to believe” without collaboration from the narrative, but finds it at 4.88.1, where Thucydides reports that the Acanthians made Brasidas pledge to stand by those oaths. *Commentary on Thucydides*, 2:47.

22. Gomme, *HCT*, 3:554; Connor, *Thucydides*, 133; Orwin, *Humanity of Thucydides*, 79n20.

virtue. So too would it be “even more shameful” for those with good reputations to pursue their own gain by deceiving others than it would be for those who openly use force to rule (4.85.6–86.6). To the extent that Sparta does not live up to its title of liberator, Brasidas by implication hates his own city, and he is ashamed of it. Sparta lets the world think it fights for freedom.

Seduced by Brasidas’s words and fearing for its crop, which is ready to harvest, Acanthus yields (4.88.1). Unlike Alcidas in going to assist Mytilene’s liberation, Brasidas has perfect timing. Like that of the Athenian rhetoricians whom Cleon criticizes (3.38.2, 3.38.7), Brasidas’s rhetoric is “seductive” and offers what is “pleasant for the moment” (4.108.5–6; see also 4.88.1). After Acanthus is persuaded by Brasidas, Stagiros revolts (4.88.2). Amphipolis, an Athenian colony against which Brasidas next campaigns, also comes over to Brasidas when it hears his moderate terms: those in the city wishing to remain, Amphipolitan or Athenian, can do so, keeping their property and privileges of citizenship, while those who want to leave can do so with their property (4.105.2). The loss of Amphipolis in particular causes great alarm in Athens, given that city’s strategic location and material resources, such as timber and other revenues it provides (4.108.1). Hearing of the “mildness” shown by Brasidas and his proclaiming “everywhere” that he was sent to liberate Hellas, other cities in the region become encouraged “to make a change” (*neōterizein*) (4.108.1–3). Brasidas is now able to induce in these other “subjects” what the Spartans fear from their own subject population (4.80.2). Among his successes is Torone, to whom he offers similarly mild terms, while making clear the consequences of not accepting them. Brasidas tells the Toroneans in good Diodotean fashion that he “pardons” them for their past opposition to Sparta, for they cannot be blamed for an alliance into which they were forced by a stronger power. As for the present and future, however, he will hold them responsible for their errors (4.114.5). Pardon is both an act of generosity and good policy, for the past is past, but Brasidas offers it only in the context of making clear that he will hold them responsible if they do not grasp their freedom now.²³

Brasidas’s message about Sparta is so powerful that it wins the goodwill of the Hellenic world for Sparta for years to come. Even after the Sicilian expedition, years after Brasidas’s death, “his virtue and intelligence, experienced

23. Burns argues, in contrast, that Brasidas contradicts himself in recognizing the force of necessity (and hence the need to pardon) while appealing to freedom. Following Orwin’s interpretation of Diodotus (as I discuss in chapter 2), Burns understands Diodotus to avoid this contradiction by appealing to the full force of necessity. “Virtue of Thucydides’ Brasidas,” 516, 520, 521.

by some and believed from hearsay by others,” caused goodwill for the Spartans among the Athenian allies. He is the first Spartan who went out from the city who seems good in all respects, and he left a firm hope that other Spartans would be so as well (4.81.2–3). In book 1, Thucydides tells us of another Spartan who went out from his city, Pausanias, as commander of the Hellenic forces in their alliance against Persia. He became so corrupt and acted so violently—more like a tyrant than a general—that he turned the allies against Sparta toward Athens (1.94–96).²⁴ Brasidas is not the “first” Spartan to go out to represent his city in the eyes of the world, but the first who goes out and seems good to the larger world. He has replaced the memory of Pausanias, and replaced it with something “new.”

Like Pericles, Brasidas depicts a noble view of his city to the world, but he never speaks before the Spartan people. When after several successes, he asks Sparta for reinforcements, his request is denied. This is due in part to the envy of Sparta’s leading men (literally, its “first men”), and in part because Sparta is occupied with the return of its soldiers who surrendered on Sphacteria to Athens and with ending the war (4.108.7). Thucydides describes Pericles as “the first man” of Athens, but Sparta has several such men, and Brasidas is not among them. He is in no position to speak for Sparta. In contrast, Pericles is able to interpret Athens to herself as well as to the world. However much Athens’s deeds fall short of Pericles’ noble words, Pericles can present Athenians with a view of themselves that they can imagine may be true. They do not laugh at his boasts, as on another occasion they laugh at Cleon’s (4.28.5). Like Pericles when he speaks to both Athenians and foreigners about the virtues of his city (2.34.4, 2.36.4), Brasidas occupies a world stage. His speeches may have a greater impact on the Hellenic world as a whole than Pericles’ speeches, but unlike Pericles, who occupies a world stage by holding the stage in his home city of Athens, Brasidas’s stage is never in Sparta.

Brasidas’s success in Thrace causes sufficient alarm in Athens that Athens becomes willing to offer Sparta a one-year truce in the fighting to allow time for negotiating the terms of a peace (4.117). The truce demonstrates the extent to which Brasidas’s representation of his city to the world falls short

24. Connor observes that Thucydides uses similar language in describing Brasidas and Pausanias, so that Brasidas serves as “an apparent refutation of the generalization that when Spartans go abroad they observe neither their own *nomina* nor those of the rest of Greece (1.77.6).” *Thucydides*, 130n52, 139n79. The irony of the contrast of the Spartan who impresses others as virtuous, and even mild (4.108.2), and the one who impresses others as violent (1.95.1), however, is that it is not clear which of the two acts more contrary to the *nomina* (laws or customs) of his city.

of the truth. Sparta is more interested in stopping Brasidas, lest his successes make ending the war more difficult, than in supporting his war of liberation (4.117).²⁵ The truce isolates Brasidas from his city even further, as he continues to receive cities that revolt, first Scione and then Mende, contrary to the terms of the truce.

When Brasidas arrives at Scione, he praises the revolting Scionians for their strides toward freedom, especially given their vulnerability due to their location on Pallene, cut off from the mainland by the Athenian occupation of Potidaea. After hearing what Brasidas has to say, the elated Scionians place a gold crown on his head as the liberator of Hellas and deck him with garlands (4.120.3–121.1). When Brasidas takes the place claimed by Sparta as the liberator of Hellas, he reaches his highest moment. But he has already cut himself off from his city, if only by violating its truce with Athens. He is acting as an independent agent. The garlands with which he is decked ominously recall the garlands of the two thousand Helots at Sparta who come forward to receive their freedom and instead meet their deaths.²⁶ And in spite of his message to the revolted cities that they are safe from Athenian retaliation, he plans, as Thucydides reports, to proceed with the help of the Scionians to Mende and Potidaea, cities north of Scione on the way to the mainland, “before the Athenians arrive” (4.121.2).

When commissioners from Sparta inform Brasidas about the truce, he refuses to surrender Scione. He claims that the city came over to Sparta before the agreement, although Thucydides thinks the truce preceded the revolt of Scione by two days (4.122.1–6). When Mende then revolts, encouraged by Brasidas’s support of Scione, Brasidas receives the Mendians as well. Cleon incenses the Athenians against what seems like Brasidas’s clear violation of the truce, and they make preparations against Scione and Mende (4.122.3–6). Although Brasidas recognizes the danger, removes the women and children from both cities to safety, and sends troops to fortify the cities, he nevertheless takes some of his forces to join Perdiccas in his expedition

25. Brunt speculates that Sparta had no expectation that Brasidas could succeed: given Perdiccas’s “notorious infidelity,” it was likely that he would cut off his support and even prevent reinforcements coming to Brasidas. Nor could it be foreseen that Brasidas “would have secured in the Greek cities new bases and sources of supply,” inasmuch as only minorities in those cities supported revolt from Athens. Indeed, Brasidas’s army was small, “an expendable force.” “Spartan Policy,” 275–77.

26. Connor is also reminded of the Helots at Sparta, but believes that Thucydides is foreshadowing the fate of the Scionians: “their enthusiasm at their freedom was as ill-founded as that of the Helots.” *Thucydides*, 136. But it is Brasidas who is crowned—like those Helots. Thucydides suggests that Brasidas is as problematic for Sparta as its Helots are. Both threaten “change” or “revolution” (*neōterizein*), which Sparta fears.

against the Lyncestians (4.123.1–124.1). It seems an inopportune time for him to leave the protection of the revolted cities in the hands of others. Presumably he needs the pay that Perdiccas still provides for his mercenaries.²⁷ The gap between the noble purpose Brasidas proclaims and military and political conditions necessary for its success seems all the greater when Sparta's reluctance to provide that support compels him to turn to Perdiccas. Brasidas's dependence on what he cannot control makes the liberation of Hellas impossible. Because he cannot depend on Sparta, he must depend on Perdiccas. But of course he cannot depend on Perdiccas either. It is not surprising that the Athenians make gains in his absence in the very territory he has liberated. His Lyncestian campaign is the beginning of the end of his Thracian one.

Liberation Unravels

Things do not go well for Brasidas when he joins Perdiccas. Although they enjoy an initial victory, mercenaries whose help they expect side with the enemy, and Brasidas and Perdiccas decide to retreat. When Perdiccas's troops experience an inexplicable panic during the night and take off for home (4.125.1), Brasidas must lead his army in retreat, abandoned in enemy territory, and facing superior numbers of barbarian forces. Brasidas arranges his retreating hoplites in a hollow square, with light-armed troops in the center so that they can "run out" to reinforce the hoplites wherever the enemy attacks. Brasidas himself chooses three hundred of his men to accompany him at the rear of his army in order to ward off the approaching enemy (4.125.2–3). Once again he is in the ranks that first meet the enemy, even if now those ranks are in the rear. Brasidas's army may appear to be in retreat, but it is also poised to fight as it moves toward safety. Although the enemy is fast approaching, Brasidas takes the time to address his army before they retreat, offering them what he calls a "true teaching" about their opponents' weakness and their own strength. The enemy gives a terrifying appearance, he tells them, with their huge numbers of weapons waving and the almost unbearable din of shouting. Unlike the hoplites who protect one another by their battle formation, however, the barbarians do not form ranks. Their fighting on their own (*autokrator*) provides a ready pretext to flee. They therefore threaten only "from afar," and will not hold out if they meet resistance (4.126).

27. Gomme, *HCT*, 3:612.

Enemy forces become a threat only when they occupy a pass in Brasidas's path of retreat. Discovering the situation, Brasidas commands his own three hundred men at the rear to break order and "run as fast as they can" to take one of the hills that guard the pass (4.128). With this success, Brasidas leads his army to safety. In confronting superior numbers and enemy forces both front and rear, Brasidas's troops are like both the Spartans at Thermopylae and those on Sphacteria. Thucydides does not explicitly remind us of Thermopylae now, or compare another small thing to a great one (see 4.36.3). Comparisons are left to us. Neither does Brasidas lead his army to their deaths, as did the Spartan commander at Thermopylae; nor do Brasidas and his troops surrender, as did the Spartans on Sphacteria. This replay of Sphacteria, as it were, can hardly redeem "Spartan" honor, for Brasidas's is a Spartan army only in name—composed of the Helots he brought from Sparta, the mercenaries he can still afford, and the new allies he has assembled from the rebel cities (see 4.124.1). Because of his confidence-inspiring speech, his disciplined arrangement of his soldiers, and his quick and forceful action, Brasidas retreats with no loss of honor. His command represents a combination of daring and judgment that characterizes Thucydides' own city at its best.

Brasidas's success nevertheless occurs in retreat, his alliance with Perdiccas shattered, and his accomplishments in Thrace unraveling. His rupture with Perdiccas leads the latter to ally himself with Athens. While Brasidas is away, Athens takes back Mende, and makes preparations to retake Scione (4.129.1, 4.130). In capturing the hill that guards the pass in his retreat in Lyncestia, Brasidas may occupy the "heights" (*meteōra*) (4.128.3) in more senses than one. It seems that there is nothing left for him to do but to descend, unless it is to find a way to make one last run.

When Brasidas returns to Thrace, he stations himself at Torone, where he watches over the city and "is quiet," or "at rest." He cannot go to the relief of Mende or Scione, which lie on the Pallene peninsula, cut off from the mainland by Potidaea, which is under Athenian control, while the Athenian navy cuts off any approach by sea (4.129.1). The verb that Thucydides uses to describe Brasidas, *hesuchazein*, is the one he often uses for being "at peace," or "at rest," the same verb used by the Corinthians, for example, when they claim that the Athenians are never "at peace," and never allow others to be so (1.70.9). Although "remaining still" is associated with Sparta, the verb, Westlake notes, is not "naturally associated with Brasidas."²⁸ Brasidas's work is

28. Westlake, *Individuals in Thucydides*, 158n2; see also Burns, "Virtue of Thucydides' Brasidas," 517.

soon thwarted in another way: Sparta sends “rulers” for the cities of Torone and Amphipolis, so that command would not be left “to any chance person” (4.132.3). These men owed their positions and loyalty entirely to the Spartan government, Kagan observes, not to Brasidas, and unlike Brasidas “could be expected to follow orders.”²⁹ Later in the war, another Spartan commander in the field, Agis, makes a decision on his own authority, and Sparta once again attempts to bring him under control.³⁰

Thucydides mentions—very briefly—a futile effort by Brasidas to take Potidaea from the Athenians, arriving at night, and placing a ladder against the wall, but on being discovered he quickly leads away his troops (4.135).³¹ As Westlake observes, the act, “a flagrant breach of the truce, seems to have been the outcome of desperation on the part of Brasidas, who had no other means of helping Scione, where the [Athenian] blockade was now complete.”³² When Brasidas is absent from Torone, Athenian forces, led by Cleon, take that city as well (5.3). Brasidas then returns to Amphipolis, whose surrender to him earlier had posed such a threat to Athens. There Brasidas wins a battle, but loses the war. His death in battle at Amphipolis opens the way for a peace treaty between Sparta and Athens, one that returns the cities he liberated to Athens.

The Athenian forces that attempt to take Amphipolis are commanded by Cleon. Cleon had already led his troops against Torone, but only after learning that Brasidas was not there (5.2.3). He has no plans to attack Amphipolis as long as Brasidas is present in the city, at least not before sufficient reinforcements arrive for them to surround the city. When he leads his impatient men toward the city, he goes only “to look around” (*kata thean*) (5.7.1–3). Because he does not see that Brasidas is in fact watching his movements from high ground (*meteōrou*) outside the city, Cleon does not suspect an imminent attack (5.6.3–8.3, esp. 6.3 and 8.3).

29. Kagan, *Archidamian War*, 315–16. See also Connor, *Thucydides*, 138; Westlake, *Individuals in Thucydides*, 160–61, with 161n1.

30. When Agis accepted an Argive offer of a truce and withdrew his army from an imminent battle without the consent of the majority and without deliberating with anyone (5.60.1), the Spartans vehemently blamed him for not subduing Argos at what they thought was an opportune moment. They are inclined out of anger to demolish his home and to fine him ten thousand drachmas. Instead, however, they “made a law for the present that they had never had before—choosing ten Spartiates as Agis’s advisers, without whose authority he could not lead an army from the city” (5.63). Spartan innovation in the law has the effect of constricting, rather than opening up, possibilities.

31. Thucydides speaks as if there were only one ladder for the assault on the city. Gomme finds no need to emend it to the plural, for “it hardly means one ladder only.” *HCT*, 3:626.

32. Westlake, *Individuals in Thucydides*, 158.

Brasidas's plan for the battle depends on hiding from the Athenians how poorly trained his own troops are in comparison to theirs, and hiding their inferior numbers by holding back some of his troops, and then causing a panic when they surprise the Athenians (5.8.3–4, 5.9.8). He proves victorious, Thucydides says, because of his stratagem, or art (*technē*) (5.8.2). He explains his plan in an address to his men before battle. Once Brasidas and his forces have fallen on the Athenians, Clearidas, the Spartan sent to rule Amphipolis, must lead a second attack to cause panic. He exhorts Clearidas to show himself a brave man (*agathos anēr*), like (*eikos*) the Spartiate he is, and the allies to follow bravely, for on this day they will become either free allies of Sparta or slaves of Athens, suffering an even harsher slavery than before, and hindering “the liberation of Hellas” (5.9.4–9). For Brasidas, courage and art serve freedom, and even a Spartan is free, in that he may or may not act “like a Spartiate.” In encouraging Clearidas to do so, Brasidas continues even to the last to construct an image of his city to which free men can ally themselves. And he himself “will demonstrate that what he advises others he can accomplish in deed” (5.9.10). In other words, he will lead the way. Brasidas is seen sacrificing near a temple just before the battle, Thucydides reports (5.10.2). Perhaps he suspects that this battle will be his last.

Cleon finally recognizes the danger into which he has led his troops, and orders retreat. The retreat not being fast enough for him, he turns his right wing back contrary to the order of retreat, leaving his men vulnerable (5.10.2–4). Seeing the Athenians “in motion,” Brasidas speaks once again to his men, telling them that the Athenians will not stand their ground, as he knows “from the way in which their spears and heads are moving” (5.10.5). Brasidas has seen the much-reputed motion of the Athenians, but that motion, instead of causing fear in others, now reveals their own fear. Brasidas orders that the gates be opened “for me,” he says, and that “with confidence we proceed out against them as swiftly as possible.” After what turn out to be his last words in Thucydides' work, Brasidas “dashes out in a run” (Thucydides speaks here in the singular), and routs the center of the retreating army panic-struck from its own disorder and its astonishment at Brasidas's daring (5.10.6). Brasidas does not even need Clearidas and his men to create panic with a second attack, although they come according to plan. Six hundred Athenians die in the retreat, one of them Cleon. Only seven of their adversaries are killed, and one of them is Brasidas (5.10.7–11, 5.11.2). In dying “like a Spartiate,” Brasidas once again represents his city. Presumably both Cleon and Brasidas die running, the one in retreat, the other in pursuit.

By his suicide, if it is indeed a suicide, Brasidas chooses to represent a noble or idealized Sparta to the very end.³³ Had he lived on, he could have hardly continued his almost one-man show in Sparta's name against Athenian tyranny. Athens had already sent its military might against him—Mende and Scione had already fallen, and Amphipolis was threatened. Sparta was negotiating peace. His one-man show would have appeared just that, and he would be seen as a traitor to his city. His misrepresentation of Sparta would be clear. He died as he lived—for the sake of a Spartan nobility of which he was the best, perhaps the only, representative in Thucydides' history.

Brasidas's last battle illustrates his intelligence and daring, just as it shows both lacking in the Athenian Cleon who commands the forces opposed to his. The virtues that were once the pride of Athens have passed to Brasidas. As Shanske observes, in Brasidas the Athenians "encounter their own best selves."³⁴ To this extent it is true that Brasidas is "the Athenian among the Spartans."³⁵ And it is "near" Athena's temple that Brasidas is seen sacrificing before the battle in which he dies (see also 4.116.2).³⁶ But Brasidas is not an Athenian, nor does he live "among the Spartans." Brasidas has no home, no people. Even if he dies in service to Sparta, he dies less like a Spartan than like himself.

The wounded Brasidas is carried into Amphipolis, and is informed of the victory before he dies (5.10.11). He is given a funeral at public expense in the marketplace, Thucydides tells us, reminding us of the only other public funeral in his work, in which Pericles delivered his famous oration. The Amphipolitans sacrifice to Brasidas "as a hero," honor him in the games and annual sacrifices, and consider him the founder of their colony. They also tear down all the memorials to their Athenian founder Hagnon, in effect erasing the past and starting anew (5.11.1). Brasidas has found a home, if only in death.

With the deaths of Cleon and Brasidas, the two men on each side of the struggle most opposed to peace, Athens and Sparta sign a peace treaty (5.16.1). The terms of the "Peace of Nicias"—as tradition calls it, after its

33. Burns also recognizes that Brasidas's noble death is "not altogether unlooked for." He understands it primarily as an effort "to flee or overcome a life that must be mixed with evils." According to Burns, Brasidas could not resign himself "to the need of his own city to attend to her own good"—such as bringing an end to the war to attend to matters closer to home—"nor face the prospect of being an accomplice to her treacherous ways." "Virtue of Thucydides' Brasidas," 521.

34. Shanske, *Thucydides and the Philosophic Origins*, 56.

35. Strauss, *City and Man*, 213.

36. Rahe, "Thucydides' Critique of Realpolitik," 138.

leading advocate at Athens—include the return to Sparta of the men taken on Sphacteria, as well as the return to Athens of Amphipolis and Acanthus. In the case of Scione, it is specified in the treaty that the Athenians can proceed however seems best to them (5.18.5, 5.18.8). Connor finds Athens's destruction of Scione—putting the men to death and enslaving their women and children (5.32.1)—“one of the most notorious events of the war.”³⁷ Cleon dies, but his spirit lives on, for the very punishment that he proposes for the revolting Mytileneans and that is successfully opposed by Diodotus, Athens now inflicts on the Scionians.

One of the more lasting results of Brasidas's Thracian campaign involves the Helots who accompanied him in his army, for Sparta votes to give them their freedom (5.34.1). Thucydides does not tell us any self-interested motives Sparta's action might have had, thus leaving open the possibility that the Spartans award the Helots freedom as a reward for their service.³⁸ Brasidas's liberation of Hellas from Athens has shrunk into the liberation of his loyal soldiers from their servitude to Sparta. When these freed Helots later serve Sparta again in the battle of Mantinea, they bear the names of Brasideans (5.67.1, 5.71.3). Clearidas, whom the Spartans placed in command of Amphipolis, resists returning the city to the Athenians in compliance with the treaty (5.21.1–3). He has come to act not “like a Spartiate,” but like Brasidas.

In his presentation of Brasidas, Thucydides illustrates the daring and intelligence that Pericles attributes to Athens itself. These virtues are obviously not dependent on a specific regime for their existence, inasmuch as they are possessed by Brasidas. But they are dependent on a regime for support—Brasidas needs military reinforcements and diplomatic engagements to protect the gains he makes. Without that support, the cities he encourages to revolt run the risk of destruction, as happens to Scione, the very city that crowned Brasidas as the liberator of Hellas. While Brasidas does not need Sparta in order to act with daring and intelligence, he needs Sparta for his daring and intelligence to be truly good. Thucydides surely admires Brasidas's virtues, but by showing the limited, even pernicious, results of their exercise, he questions their ultimate goodness. Brasidas transcends his city in trying to make true its noble purpose of liberation, but Thucydides shows

37. Connor, *Thucydides*, 136.

38. Andrewes speculates that the performance of the Helots with Brasidas may have encouraged the Spartans to create the neodamodeis, a class of freed Helots that served Spartan military purposes. Gomme, *HCT*, 4:35–46.

us how much his actions depend on the necessities that Sparta provides. In politics, no one can be a one-man show.

At the same time that Brasidas acts as if he were freer than he is, he may concede too much to necessity when it comes to Sparta. Although Brasidas encourages the cities that he liberates to revolt, or “to do a new thing,” he never speaks at Sparta to Spartans. Brasidas could succeed in speaking for Sparta only if he could speak to Sparta as well. It might seem as if Sparta would have to do, in effect, a “new thing” if it were to support Brasidas’s efforts to make true its claim to fight for the liberation of Hellas. The Corinthians nevertheless had some success in urging Sparta to war, to act in effect contrary to the character they attribute to it. Moreover, at the outset of the war, Sparta did commend Brasidas for his action in battle. It would not be simply a new thing, even if it goes against the grain, for Sparta to continue commending distinction, which in effect recognizes the freedom of its own citizens. Without freedom to act on Sparta’s behalf, Brasidas could not have succeeded in leading its forces in the field. Sparta depends on Brasidas’s ability to act independently. Sparta supposes that what is true in the case of Pausanias, and perhaps also in the case of Agis—that it cannot trust what it does not control—is true generally. Whereas Sparta acts as if it were freer than it is, and thereby allows Athens’s power to grow, it is afraid to allow too much freedom to its own citizens. Trusting that the harsh necessities, as Archidamus says (1.84.4), will make good men, Sparta yields too much to necessity. While Brasidas gives a “true teaching” to his retreating soldiers about their strength and their enemies’ weakness (4.126.4), this is the “true teaching” that Brasidas gives to Thucydides. It has more to do with his side’s weakness and his enemy’s strength. Both teachings are confirmed by the deeds Thucydides reports.

Brasidas and Thucydides

Although the signing of the treaty between Sparta and Athens in 421 BCE might seem like the end of the Peloponnesian War, Thucydides insists that there is only the appearance of peace. Several of Sparta’s allies refuse to accept the treaty, including the Corinthians (5.17.2), and even those who sign on do not comply with all its provisions. Each side tries to injure the other as much as possible, the Thracian cities remain hostile, and Boeotia and Athens have a truce that is renewed for ten-day periods (5.25–26.2). The war does not really end until seventeen years later, when the Peloponnesians finally defeat Athens (5.26.1–4).

In arguing that the war lasted twenty-seven years, Thucydides mentions that he lived through the whole of it, having been exiled from Athens “after his command at Amphipolis” (5.26.5). When Brasidas first approached the city with his moderate terms of accommodation, Thucydides had charge of a small fleet on the nearby island of Thasos. He is sent for to prevent the fall of Amphipolis, but discovers that the city capitulated before his arrival. He never really commands *at Amphipolis* (4.104.5–106.4). Thucydides does not mention the grounds for his exile; nor does he claim that his sentence is an unjust one. He tells us that as a result of his exile he is at leisure, or at peace (*kath’ hēsuchian*), that he is able to be present with both sides in the war, especially the Peloponnesian, and that he observes matters all the better (5.26.5). Denying that the Hellenic world is in truth at peace after the signing of the treaty by Sparta and Athens, Thucydides claims this description for himself.

It is possible that incompetence, or even timidity, explains Thucydides’ failure to come to the relief of Amphipolis.³⁹ As a result of his delay, however, Amphipolis, a city in a region in which his family has business interests, remains for a time at peace, its inhabitants are allowed to keep their property, whether they decide to leave or to stay, and they are freed from Athenian rule (4.105.4–106.2). Thucydides arrives too late—not too late to save Amphipolis from capture, but to prevent Brasidas from saving Amphipolis. Whatever his intention, which we cannot know with any certainty, his late arrival serves the cause of freedom, at least as Brasidas presents it to the cities he approaches. It is also possible that Brasidas appears to Thucydides, as he does to scholars, as Athens’s own best self. It is rather Cleon, in Thucydides’ account, the man who comes to Amphipolis to undo the work that Brasidas has done there, who wants to avoid confronting Brasidas out of timidity (5.7). Like Cleon at Amphipolis, Thucydides travels in the Hellenic world in order “to look,” but unlike Cleon he is able to see what he goes to see. Surely that includes Brasidas, who in opening the gates of Amphipolis for Athenians to leave the city if they so desire would have opened them for Athenians to enter as well.⁴⁰ As Thucydides says, he was present on both sides, especially that of the Peloponnesians.

39. For speculation, see Wylie, “Brasidas: Great Commander or Whiz Kid?” 84; John R. Grant, “Toward Knowing Thucydides,” *Phoenix* 28 (1974): 91.

40. Westlake emphasizes the “abundant information” that Thucydides has about Brasidas’s achievements: “at several points [his account] betrays knowledge of motives which can have been disclosed only to a few persons,” and thus “may have well been derived largely from personal contacts with Brasidas himself, or at least with one of his subordinates, when Thucydides was in exile.” *Individuals in Thucydides*, 148; see also 153.

Once the peace is signed, the intrigues and shifting alliances of the period bring Alcibiades to the forefront of Thucydides' history, for they seem to be his natural habitat. Alcibiades is an Athenian; indeed, Pericles was his uncle and guardian. But before the war is over his stage of operations reaches as far as Persia. His intrigues find no limit in law, and he seems free of all conventional political loyalties. At different times he offers his services to Athens, Sparta, and Persia. He seems to act like a free agent, but once he is exiled, he has difficulty finding a base of operations and obtaining his recall to Athens. Unlike other characters (e.g., Pericles, Diodotus, and Brasidas), Alcibiades rarely mentions freedom. Rather, he is thought to aim at tyranny (6.15.4). In the next chapters, I explore what place Alcibiades has in Thucydides' reflections on freedom, first in his advocacy of the Sicilian expedition, and then in his attempt to return home. Alcibiades' expansion of freedom—beyond the confines of any particular city—turns out to restrict its exercise.