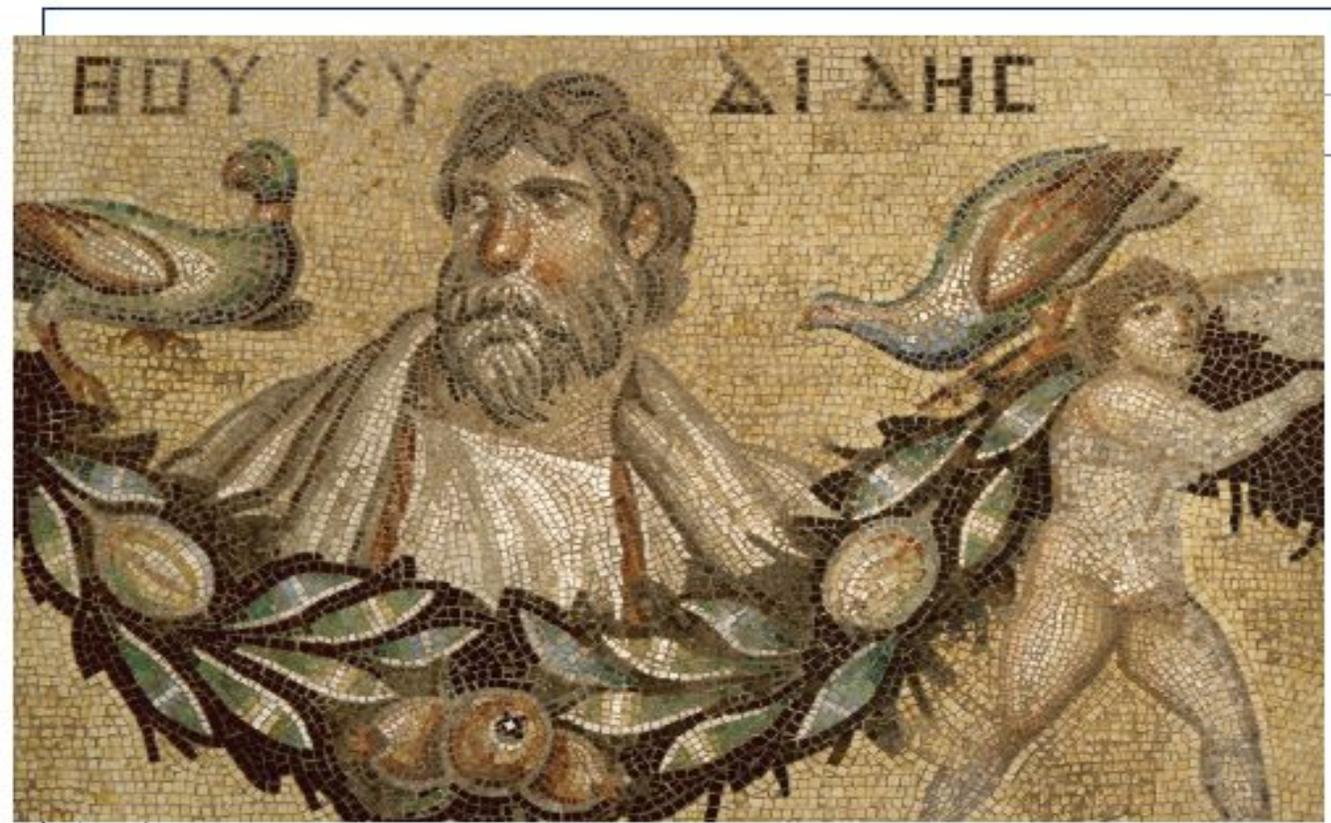


Wiley Blackwell Handbooks to Classical Reception

A HANDBOOK TO THE  
**RECEPTION OF  
THUCYDIDES**

EDITED BY CHRISTINE LEE AND NEVILLE MORLEY



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# **A Handbook to the Reception of Thucydides**

Edited by

**Christine Lee and Neville Morley**

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# Introduction

## *Reading Thucydides*

Christine Lee and Neville Morley

Over the last two decades, Thucydides has been one of the most frequently cited thinkers in debates about Western foreign policy and military intervention, especially in the United States. Irving Kristol, *éminence grise* of American neoconservatism, referred to Thucydides' history as "the favourite neoconservative text on foreign affairs." The question of the connection between Thucydides and neoconservative thought is perhaps most forcefully raised by the career of the ancient historian Donald Kagan: father of one of the cofounders of the Project for a New American Century, a signatory of the original declaration along with such figures as Dick Cheney and Paul Wolfowitz, and author, with his other son, of the wake-up call, *While America Sleeps*. Kagan has devoted almost his entire academic career to Thucydides, and his more popular works, including *Pericles of Athens and the Birth of Democracy* and *Thucydides: The Reinvention of History*, reveal that his reading of American politics and his reading of Thucydides are mutually inextricable. The continued relevance of Thucydides is likewise undeniable for Victor Davis Hanson, another prominent public figure associated with the neoconservative milieu. Hanson has not only returned repeatedly to Thucydides in his accounts of the importance of warfare in the triumph of the West but also invokes him regularly in his journalistic writing, most notably in the series of columns in *National Review* in the aftermath of 9/11 emphasizing the need for a swift, firm response against America's enemies (Hanson 2002). At the

other end of the spectrum of conservative thought, no profile of Colin Powell is complete without reference to the (spurious) quotation that hung on his office wall as chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff - "Of all manifestations of power, restraint impresses men most" - supposedly a legacy of the place of Thucydides in the curriculum at military training establishments like West Point and the Naval War College (where the *History* was introduced in the 1970s in part as a means of wargaming the Cold War without reopening the wounds of Vietnam).

Yet Thucydides is not merely a puppet for the right, and more recent developments, including the limited success of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, have not led to the rejection of Thucydides as a source of political wisdom. On the contrary, rival schools of thought on global politics have reinforced their critique of the neoconservative project by offering their own readings of Thucydides' work; arguing, for example, that the central message of the *History* is not that great states have the capacity to direct affairs and define reality in their own terms and interests but that such imperialistic hubris tends to lead to disaster (the Melian Dialogue is, after all, followed shortly afterwards by the Sicilian expedition), or that all foreign policy decisions need to be made on a rational, realistic basis rather than relying on excessive optimism or other emotions. Just as the end of the Cold War, in which Thucydides had been read as the key text for understanding a bipolar world, led not to the abandonment of the text but to its reinterpretation as a crucial text for understanding a multi-polar, anarchic world, so the failure of a foreign policy sanctioned by Thucydides has led not to the abandonment of the text but to its re-appropriation and redeployment in new contexts for new purposes. General Martin Dempsey, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff since 2011, invokes Thucydides in order to support a policy toward Iran of diplomatic engagement

rather than aggression, on the basis that all states are rational and driven by fear, honor, and interest (<http://thinkprogress.org/security/2012/03/01/435346/dempsey-iran-rational-actor/>). On the other side of the world, Chinese Premier Xi Jinping acknowledges the risk of the “Thucydides trap,” the idea that an established power and a rising power are liable to push one another into war (<http://berggruen.org/topics/a-conversation-with-president-xi-at-big-s-understanding-china-conference>).

It is easy to dismiss the Thucydides of the American neoconservatives and the proliferation of references in journalism and foreign policy discussions as the product of a naive, partial, and entirely dehistoricized reading of the text – or, more likely, to judge from the limited range of reference of most of these, of a few isolated passages like the Melian Dialogue. However, this misses the point: the idea of Thucydides, however far removed it may be from a complex reality, has continuing power and currency, shaping ideas about how the modern world should be run and serving to legitimize them. This is by no means a new phenomenon; readers of Thucydides have been recognizing their own times and situations in his account since his work was reintroduced into Western Europe in the fifteenth century, and he played a prominent role in debates about inter-state relations even before Thomas Hobbes – generally dismissive of the wisdom of the ancients, but devoted translator of the *History of the Peloponnesian War* (Hoekstra 2012). Moreover, study of the history of his reception makes it clear that Thucydides the International Relations Theorist is not the only version with the power to influence debates; Thucydides the Political Theorist has been a significant figure in the analysis of the workings of democracy and demagoguery and the ideas and ideals of citizenship, and Thucydides the Model Historian, the exemplar of critical practice or the purveyor of