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Critiquing a Faulty Use of Positive Hystography in the Athenian Plague with Logic

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Thucydides' *History of the Peloponnesian War* is the only known surviving written account of the Athenian plague. The Athenian plague was an epidemic in fifth century BCE that occurred in Athens. Given this lack of primary sources, historians are forced to decide to what degree and in what way should Thucydides' work influence the understanding of the Athenian plague. Robert Littman's article *The Athenian Plague: Smallpox* interprets Thucydides' work highly positivistically and is convinced the Athenian plague was a strain of smallpox. Analyzing this author's use of evidence provides an example of how positive historiography used alone neglects to form logically convincing conclusions and lends itself only to weaker arguments from probability. In order to prove this, this paper will provide context on positive historiography and sketch Littman's argument. Then, this paper will introduce flaws with Littman's argument assuming positive historiography is valid and finally critique positive historiography as a method in this case itself.

Positivism is a central topic in this debate. Positive historiography is a paradigm for interpreting historical objects which is "independent of any kind of interpretation" and which encourages taking the author's writing as literal and factual (White, 1987, p. 77). In *The History of the Peloponnesian War*, Thucydides describes a laundry list of symptoms: "burning inside them," "severe ulceration," "uncontrollable diarrhea," "[loss of] their eyes," "total amnesia," and more (pp. 48-49). A positivist would believe that all these symptoms occurred exactly as they are written. John Marincola writes in his paper *A Companion to Ancient History*, that many historians are convinced they can prove a concrete "truth" rather than settling for versions of history that have a strong probability (2009, p. 15). This introduces another aspect in the positivism debate— whether history is a matter of induction or deduction and what level of certainty is possible when writing history.

Robert Littman's paper *The Athenian Plague: Smallpox* uses positive historiography to deduce from Thucydides' work that the Athenian Plague was caused by smallpox. He concludes, "Thucydides' description of the Athenian plague is compatible with smallpox in its sudden onset, duration, severe toxemia, and constitutional symptoms. Most important, the appearance of a vesicular rash and pustules makes the case very strong" (Littman, 1969, p. 273). The warrant for Littman's belief that smallpox is the disease of the Athenian plague is the similarities between modern understanding of smallpox and Thucydides' list of symptoms. Archeological and other scientific sources are notably missing from Littman's evidentiary support. Even while assuming the contents of the object are true, there are more than a few problems with how Littman handled *History of the Peloponnesian War*. There are other diseases besides smallpox that could align with Thucydides' description, and there are symptoms like dehydration that Littman ignores. This is a textbook presentation of confirmation bias, minimizing points that do not support an idea and hyper focusing on ones that do.

Already, the case for Littman's work seems to weaken. However, one must also consider the fact that Thucydides likely used nonliteral rhetorical devices or had motives beyond accurately capturing the historical moment (Marincola, 2009, p. 15). Understanding this, it becomes impossible to assume his work is wholly true. Littman's argument in favor of smallpox is valid but inductively uncogent at best. It makes logical sense that if Thucydides wrote about a vesicular rash with pustules that have a sudden onset, and smallpox presents in this way, that the disease *could* be smallpox, so his argument is inductively valid. Nevertheless, his work is probabilistic rather than certain (and, therefore, inductive not deductive) because even if one assumes the truth value of the historical object, Littman's own conclusions are not a logical necessity. To be cogent, the premises must have a high likelihood of being true. This is not the

case for Littman. The heart of this argument's problem is Littman seems to fall victim to fallacy which emboldens him to dress up his conclusions as "compatible" and stronger than they really are.

This is a case of positive historiography gone wrong. There is a place for positive historiography. It would be useful when used in conjunction with other pieces of evidence. If a positive reading of a historical object was added to a scientific study of the pathogen's genome, a local archeological record, and another strong text, it could only help make the case for a certain disease. However, when a single source stands alone, a positive reading only hurts the argument because it prevents the author from making a necessary defense of the shortcomings of the article which need to be addressed. An argument like this could only ever be one of probability and never even hope to approach certainty.

References

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