

A CONJECTURE ON [LONGINUS] DE SUBLIMITATE 25

τοιούτος ἐν τοῖς πλεῖστοις Θουκυδίδης.

In the short chapter 25 of the treatise *Περὶ ὕψους* the author discusses the use of the historic present. According to the anonymous author the effect of the historic present is that the account is no longer a *διήγησις* ('narrative'),¹ but an *ἐναγώνιον πρᾶγμα* ('thing of immediate urgency', Russell). In order to illustrate this, the author quotes a passage from Xenophon's *Cyropaedia*. The closing sentence of the chapter

1) D. A. Russell, *Longinus: On Sublimity*, Oxford 1965, ad loc.

is transmitted in the codex unicus P (Par. gr.2036) as τοιοῦτος ἐν τοῖς πλείστοις Θουκυδίδης. It is this phrase to which I would like to draw attention.

Commentators are silent as to the meaning of the phrase itself.² Translators can be roughly divided into three groups. The first of these takes ἐν τοῖς πλείστοις as ‘in most places in his work’.³ The second group interprets the phrase as ‘very often’.⁴ But on both interpretations there are problems. On the first interpretation the author states that Thucydides almost exclusively uses the historic present rather than the historic imperfect and the aorist,⁵ which is so evidently untrue that we cannot suppose that this is the author’s intention. On the second interpretation the superlative ἐν τοῖς πλείστοις is taken absolutely. But the Greek ἐν τοῖς πλείστοις does not admit of the interpretation ‘very often’; if the author had wished to express this, he would have used a phrase like ἐν πολλοῖς, or maybe even ἐν πλείστοις, but not ἐν τοῖς πλείστοις.

Rhys Roberts and Rostagni are representatives of the third group. They take the phrase as indicating that Thucydides uses the historic present most frequently of all authors.⁶ Thus they interpret the superlative in the same way as the first group of translators, but, in contrast to these, they do not imply that the historic present is found in the large majority of places in the whole of Thucydides’ work. But if the phrase ἐν τοῖς πλείστοις is indeed used to compare Thucydides with other authors,

2) With regard to the content, Russell remarks: “In fact, Thucydides has far fewer instances than Xenophon.” C. M. Mazzucchi, Dionisio Longino: *Del Sublime*, Milan 1992, notes: “Con l’accenno a Tucidide Longino tocca un argomento molto sentito dai contemporanei (v. Dionigi d’Alicarnasso, *De Thucydide* 24 = pp. 360,25–364,2 vol. I Us.-Rad.)” But in the passage mentioned by Mazzucchi Dionysius does not speak explicitly about Thucydides’ use of the historic present.

3) J.Ph. Hoogland, Longinus: ‘Over het verhevene’, Groningen 1936: “Evenzoo in de meeste gevallen Thucydides.” [= ‘Similarly in most cases Thucydides.’] W. E. J. Kuiper, Longinus: *Over het verhevene*, Amsterdam 1980: “Evenzo Thucydides in het grootste deel van zijn werk.” [= ‘Similarly Thucydides in the largest part of his work.’] Mazzucchi (see n. 2): “Così per lo più fa Tucidide.” R. von Schelha, *Die Schrift vom Erhabenen*, dem Longinus zugeschrieben, Berlin 1938: “In dieser Art schildert Thucydides meist.” L. Vaucher, *Études critiques sur le traité Du Sublime et sur les écrits de Longin*, Geneva / Paris 1854: “Telle est la forme que Thucydide donne le plus souvent à ses récits.”

4) Some instances: R. Brandt, Pseudo-Longinus: *Vom Erhabenen*, Darmstadt 1966: “Bei Thucydides ist diese Figur ganz gebräuchlich.” M. op de Coul, Longinus: *Het Sublime*, Groningen 2000: “Bij Thucydides komt dit heel vaak voor.” [= ‘In Thucydides this occurs very often.’] W. H. Fyfe / D. A. Russell, in: Aristotle: *Poetics*; Longinus: *On the Sublime*; Demetrius: *On Style*, Cambridge (Mass.) / London 1995: “Thucydides uses such effects very often.” G. M. A. Grube, Longinus: *On Great Writing (On the Sublime)*, Indianapolis 1965: “Thucydides writes in this way as often as anyone.” H. Lebègue, Longinus: *Du Sublime*, Paris 1939: “Cette figure est familière à Thucydide.” Russell (see n. 1): “This is common in Thucydides.”

5) Cf. J. S. Rusten, *Thucydides: The Peloponnesian War*, Book II, Cambridge 1989, 21–22.

6) W. Rhys Roberts, Longinus: *On the Sublime*, Cambridge 1907: “This construction is specially characteristic of Thucydides.” A. Rostagni, Anonimo – *Del Sublime*, Milan 1945: “Così, più spesso di tutti, Tucidide.”

it can only mean that Thucydides' work contains the largest number of historic presents in the absolute sense. And this is unlikely, because there are many authors whose complete œuvre is much larger than that of Thucydides.

Rather, the author seems to mean that Thucydides is the author who relatively uses the historic present most frequently (which, obviously, is also what Rhys Roberts and Rostagni mean with their translations). In order to get this meaning, it is sufficient to make a simple correction in the transmitted text. Read ἐν τοῖς πλείστοις instead of ἐν τοῖς πλείστοις. One of the many ways of reinforcing the superlative is the addition of the words ἐν τοῖς before the superlative.⁷ For the predicative use of πολὺς in the sense 'often' see LSJ s. v. πολὺς I 1 ad fin.⁸

Russell's remark ad loc., "In fact, Thucydides has far fewer instances than Xenophon", has already been quoted (n. 2). And therefore our interpretation, too, is in contradiction with the real state of affairs. But it is much easier to assume that the author had a mistaken impression about the distribution of the historic present in Thucydides in comparison with Xenophon (and other authors), than that he believed that in Thucydides the historic present is used much more frequently than the other narrative tenses.

7) See R. Kühner / B. Gerth, Ausführliche Grammatik der griechischen Sprache, Zweiter Teil: Satzlehre, Hannover ³1898, I 28–29; E. Schwyzer / A. Debrunner, Griechische Grammatik, München ⁴1977, II 185; LSJ s. v. ὁ, ἡ, τό A.VIII.6.

8) Professor Stefan Radt (whom I thank heartily for commenting on an earlier draft of this note) tells me that he prefers reading ἐν τοῖς πλείστον, because the phrase ἐν τοῖς πλείστοις is archaic. He refers to his note on Strabo 477,9 (at the press; Professor Radt kindly allows me to quote his note here): in Strabo, the phrase ἐν τοῖς πρώτων is transmitted twice (300,28; 589,1–2), and corrupted into ἐν τοῖς πρώτοις in eight other places (179,23; 260,7; 296,26; 477,9; 504,9; 575,5–6; 581,10; 810,4). Radt states: "Ursprünglich schloss πρώτος sich in dieser Wendung an das Subjekt an (...); doch hat sich dann, vermutlich unter dem Einfluss von ἐν τοῖς μάλιστα, ein undeklinierbares ἐν τοῖς πρώτων herausgebildet, vgl. bereits Thuc. 7,24,3 ἐν τοῖς πρώτων ἐκάκωσε ... ἡ τοῦ Πλημμυρίου λήψις." But in the two places in Thucydides where ἐν τοῖς πρώτοι (with the nominative) is transmitted (1,6,3; 7,19,4), the word πρώτοι has its literal meaning 'first'; in the two places where ἐν τοῖς πρώτων is transmitted the phrase means 'in the first place'; at 8,89,2 ἐν τοῖς πρώτοις is Bekker's conjecture for the transmitted ἐν τοῖς πρώτοις; in view of what I have said about the difference between ἐν τοῖς πρώτοι and ἐν τοῖς πρώτων I wonder whether it would not be better to read ἐν τοῖς πρώτων at 8,89,2 as well. For a case of ἐν τοῖς with the nominative in later Greek see Cassius Dio 17,57,50 ὅτι ὁ Μασινίσσας ἄλλως μὲν ἐν τοῖς κράτιστος ἀνήρ ἦν, which proves that the idiom had not become altogether obsolete. – Nevertheless, it is possible that in our passage, too, ἐν τοῖς πλείστον was the original reading. However, I prefer ἐν τοῖς πλείστοις, because the predicative use of ἐν τοῖς πλείστοις, while aptly continuing the predicative τοιοῦτος in the same sentence, refers to Thucydides' remarkable preference for the historic present rather than to the number of occurrences of this phenomenon (which is nicely brought out in Rhys Roberts' translation "This construction is specially characteristic of Thucydides."). Moreover, ἐν τοῖς πλείστοις is closer to the transmitted ἐν τοῖς πλείστοις than ἐν τοῖς πλείστον (cf. n. 11), and the author may intentionally imitate Thucydides (cf. below, with n. 10).

As Kühner-Gerth remark, ἐν τοῖς with the superlative is especially found in Plato and Thucydides.⁹ This may have induced the author to use the phrase here. There are other cases in Περὶ ὕψους where the author uses words or phrases characteristic of the author under discussion: for instance, at 13,3, when speaking about the way Plato imitates Homer, he uses the rare word ἀποχετευσάμενος, which occurs at Pl. R. 485d.¹⁰

That the phrase ἐν τοῖς πλείστος should have been corrupted in the transmission was only to be expected: nothing is easier than inadvertently changing the idiomatic ἐν τοῖς πλείστος into the very frequent ἐν τοῖς πλείστοις.¹¹

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9) For ἐν τοῖς with the superlative in Thucydides, see 1,6,3; 3,17,1; 3,82,1; 7,19,4; 7,24,3; 7,27,3; 7,71,3; 8,89,2; 8,90,1. – In Περὶ ὕψους itself ἐν τοῖς with the superlative is transmitted in ch. 40,1, ἐν τοῖς μάλιστα; the adverb μάλιστα is less susceptible to corruption than adjectives as πλείστος.

10) Russell ad loc. aptly remarks: “Pl. *Rep.* 485D: ὡσπερ ῥεῦμα ἀποχετευμένον, clearly the source of L’s ἀποχετευσάμενος.”

11) For similar corruptions, see for instance Pl. *Smp.* 178c1 ἐν τοῖς πρεσβύτατος codd.: ἐν τοῖς πρεσβυτάτοις Stobaeus; Thuc. 7,19,4 ἐν τοῖς πρώτοι ci. Bekker (but see above, n. 8): ἐν τοῖς πρώτοις codd. The corruption is most easily made in places where (as in our passage and in the instances just quoted) the nominative masculine of the superlative occurs, because -ος and -οι are very similar to -οις in both sound and shape. – The phrase ἐν τοῖς πλείστοις is actually found in Περὶ ὕψους 40,2: καθάπερ ἄλλοι τε πολλοὶ καὶ Φίλιστος, Ἀριστοφάνης ἐν τισιν, ἐν τοῖς πλείστοις Εὐρύπιδης; but here the transmitted reading should be kept, because ἐν τοῖς πλείστοις contrasts with the immediately preceding ἐν τισιν.