

History, Aitiology and the Death Drive

Narrative history as an evidence-based discipline in the west begins with Thucydides' *History of the Peloponnesian War*. His topics are the causes (*aitiai*) and consequences of a war that was "more worth writing about than any preceding it" (1.1.). Early in the work, he attributes the outbreak of the war to the Spartans' fear (*phobos*) of Athens' growing power (1.23). These passages have been the subject of intense scholarship, focused primarily on Thucydides' methodology. In this paper and for this panel, I propose a Freudian reading of the *History* in light of two of Freud's works: *Reflections on War and Death* (1918) and *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920). Together, these track the emergence of the death drive in explaining the unchecked destructiveness of modern warfare. In the former, Freud refers to the "blind fury" of World War I that was – in words that echo Thucydides' -- "more destructive than any war of other days." But what is the cause of this fury and its destructive potential? The answer – tentatively proposed by Freud in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* -- is the death drive, defined as the desire to return to a prior inanimate state. Thus, what Thucydides attributes to a seemingly rational emotional response to specific historical circumstances, Freud attributes to an unconscious urge comprising both somatic and psychic processes. In practice, he witnesses the death drive among the survivors of WWI in their repeated return to its traumatic scenes. Two related points frame my discussion. First, that war, as both a political and an historical event, is the dominant expression of the human drive toward destruction in Freud's account; in Freud's words, war aims at "the reinstatement of lifelessness." And second, that the drive is manifested in the symptoms of individuals as survivors. Survival, in other words, is the paradoxical (or not?) precondition of the death drive. How do these points pertain to the writing of history in general and to Thucydides' *History* in particular? History writing is simultaneously a creative

and a repetitive form, where repetition (the narration of past traumatic events) comprises both justification and explanation (*prophasis*). As a defining feature of Greek narrative history, moreover, aitiology is also a symptom of the death drive. The desire to discover the causes of a given war – to return to a time before its beginning – recapitulates the desire to return to a prior inanimate state. At the same time, aitiology is compensatory; it amounts to a formal disavowal of the primacy of the human drives. The *History* also pays tribute to the historian as a survivor of war and its consequences. Thucydides contracted the plague in Athens. He was then exiled from the city after the Battle of Amphipolis. These few biographical details locate the death drive in a relationship of individual to collective (historical) experience. The first-person speeches – a principal feature of the *History* – animates this relationship. Following a discussion of these expressions of the death drive in the *History*, I will offer some brief remarks on the history of Classics as a discipline which, in Lorraine Daston's words, is a form of necrophilia driven by an impossible progression "from surviving fragment to lost whole" (2021, 59).

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