

## John VI Kantakouzenos' Use of Thucydidean Paradigms and Passages in His Plague Description

Logan M. Biren

College of St. Benedict St. John's University

Email: [lbiren001@csbsju.edu](mailto:lbiren001@csbsju.edu)

**Περίληψη:** Το άρθρο αυτό διερευνά και αξιολογεί την πολύπλευρη στόχευση της χρήσης παραδειγμάτων, αποσπασμάτων και παραλληλισμών, τα οποία αντλεί ο Βυζαντινός αυτοκράτορας Ιωάννης ΣΤ΄ Καντακουζηνός από την περιγραφή του Θουκυδίδη για τον λοιμό των Αθηνών και εντάσσει στη δική του περιγραφή για τη βουβωνική πανώλη. Μεταξύ των πολλών Βυζαντινών συγγραφέων, που δανείζονται ιδέες, αποσπάσματα και λογοτεχνικά σχήματα από τους κλασσικούς Έλληνες και Ρωμαίους συγγραφείς, θολώνοντας τα νερά της πραγματικής ιστορίας, ο Ιωάννης ΣΤ΄ Καντακουζηνός χρησιμοποιεί υπεύθυνα αυτά τα δάνεια από τον Θουκυδίδη και τα ενσωματώνει στο δικό του έργο, τη δική του εποχή και τη δική του ιστορία αποσπώντας τα από το αρχικό τους πλαίσιο. Με αυτόν τον τρόπο τοποθετεί την περιγραφή του για τη βουβωνική πανώλη και τη θνησιμότητά της στο ίδιο επίπεδο με την περιγραφή του λοιμού των Αθηνών. Επιπλέον διαπιστώνουμε ότι χρησιμοποιεί ένα θουκυδίδειο απόσπασμα για να εισαγάγει την έντονη αντίθεση μεταξύ των επιπτώσεων μιας επιδημίας στην πίστη και την κοινωνία της Αθήνας του 430 π.Χ. και των επιπτώσεών της στην Κωνσταντινούπολη, πάνω από μιάμιση χιλιετία αργότερα, προσθέτοντας ταυτόχρονα μια χριστιανική οπτική στο θουκυδίδειο μοντέλο.

**Abstract:** This article investigates and evaluates the various effects of Byzantine Emperor John VI Kantakouzenos' use of paradigms, passages, and parallels of Thucydides' description of the Athenian plague within his own description of the bubonic plague. Among the many Byzantine authors who borrow ideas, passages, and literary forms from classical Greek and Roman writers, muddying the waters of factual history, we find that John VI Kantakouzenos not only responsibly employs these Thucydidean borrowings but incorporates them into his own work, his own time, and his own history without the original context. In doing so, he places his description of the bubonic plague and its mortality on the same level as that of the Athenian Plague; moreover, we find that he employs a Thucydidean passage to introduce the stark contrast between the effects of a plague on faith and society in 430 BCE Athens and the effects in Constantinople over a millennium and a half later while placing a Christian spin on the Thucydidean model.

## Introduction

Byzantine era historiography can often be mistaken as true accounts for those wishing to study the era. Cyril Mango, in his inaugural lecture at the University of Oxford entitled *Byzantine Literature as a Distorting Mirror*, articulates how authors of the Byzantine world would attempt to imitate ancient authors of the classical world by patterning their composition and structure, using ancient vocabulary for people and places, and borrowing entire passages from classical authors.<sup>1</sup> Subsequently, classicists wishing to study those texts must wade through the waters of distorted facts. Fourteenth-century Byzantine Emperor John VI Kantakouzenos and his description of the bubonic plague that stroke Constantinople in 1347 CE in his fourth book of history<sup>2</sup> does imitate classical authors. However, he does so responsibly using Thucydides' description of the Athenian Plague of 430 BCE<sup>3</sup> to mold his account. Kantakouzenos indeed borrows passages and models from Thucydides but does not distort the facts – at least not excessively. Moreover, he uses a Thucydidean paradigm to introduce the observation of the increase of faith and virtue caused by mortality and fear, which is in direct contrast to Thucydides' observations of the effects of mortality and fear on Athenian society. Emperor Kantakouzenos draws upon the similarities and differences between 1347 CE Constantinople and 430 BCE Athens to investigate his contemporary society and describe the disease.

This article aims to investigate and interpret the similarities of literary construction and form between Thucydides' description of the Athenian plague and that of John VI Kantakouzenos' of the bubonic plague's effect on Constantinople's society, as well as the consequences of those parallels. As such, I am not interested in an epidemiological study of these two pestilences. Pertaining to this article, all that is necessary to know regarding the diseases themselves is that they were clearly not the same.<sup>4</sup>

## Similarities of epidemiological descriptions

Let us divide the passages that John VI Kantakouzenos borrowed from Thucydides into two categories, disease and society. Of the passages within Kantakouzenos' work borrowed

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<sup>1</sup> Cyril Mango, *Byzantine Literature as a Distorting Mirror* (Inaugural Lecture as the Bywater and Sotheby Professor of Medieval and Modern Greek in the University of Oxford, Oxford 1965): p.3-18.

<sup>2</sup> *Ioannis Cantacuzeni eximperatoris Historiarum Libri IV*, 3 vols., ed. L. Schopen (Bonn 1828, 1831, 1832) [hereafter, Kant. With book and chapter, then volume, page and line]. Plague description: Kant. 4.8 (III p.49,15-p.53,1).

<sup>3</sup> *Thucydides: Historiae*, 2 vols. (Henry Stuart Jones and J. E. Powell 1942), Oxford University Press. [Hereafter, Thuc. With book and chapter, then section] Plague description: Thuc. 2.47.1-2.54.5.

<sup>4</sup> The Athenian epidemic could not have been the bubonic plague simply because of Thucydides' account. The description of the symptoms by Thucydides does not match the symptoms of the bubonic plague. Thucydides does not have any mention to buboes, and the blistering and swelling he describes happens all over the body and not in the specific places the bubonic plague ails: the jaws, groin, and under arms. See J. F. D. Shrewsbury, "The Plague of Athens," *Bulletin of the History of Medicine*, vol. 24, no. 1, (1950): p.1-25.

from Thucydides and deal with the disease's symptoms and biological effects, only one bears inaccuracy to the nature of the bubonic plague.<sup>5</sup> In addition to being a naive inclusion of false information (that those who survived the disease were confident because the disease never infected the same person twice, at least not to the point of death),<sup>6</sup> it was transferred into the text almost verbatim:

δις γὰρ οὐκ ἐπελάμβανεν, ὥστε καὶ κτείνειν (Kant. 4.8 [III p.51, 12-13])

δις γὰρ τὸν αὐτόν, ὥστε καὶ κτείνειν, οὐκ ἐπελάμβανεν. (Thuc. 2.51.6)<sup>7</sup>

In comparing the background information Kantakouzenos aims to give readers, we find that both found it important to note the year's record of diseases:

ἄνοσον μὲν γὰρ ἦν ἐκεῖνο τὸ ἔτος παντάπασιν εἰς τὰς ἄλλας ἀσθενείας (Kant. 4.8 [p.50, 4-6])

τὸ μὲν γὰρ ἔτος, ὡς ὠμολογεῖτο, ἐκ πάντων μάλιστα δὴ ἐκεῖνο ἄνοσον ἐς τὰς ἄλλας ἀσθενείας (Thuc. 2.49.1)

It's not necessary to be fluent in Greek to see the similarities between the two excerpts and understand that John IV Kantakouzenos borrowed this passage. We find a few more instances where Kantakouzenos borrowed from his classical predecessor; whatever disease one would contract, it would end in the plague,<sup>8</sup> and drinking either more or less had the same effect on the infected that suffered from thirst and fever. In the latter Kantakouzenos has once again copied from Thucydides rearranging the word order:

καὶ ποτὸν τό τε πλέον καὶ τὸ ἔλασσον ἐν ὁμοίῳ καθειστήκει (Kant. 4.8 [III p. 50, 22-23])

καὶ ἐν τῷ ὁμοίῳ καθειστήκει τό τε πλέον καὶ ἔλασσον ποτόν (Thuc. 2.49.5)

### Similarities in societal descriptions

Having provided evidence for Kantakouzenos' mostly responsible use of Thucydidean passages to describe the bubonic plague, let us turn our attention to the uses of Thucydidean style pertaining to the non-biological observations, namely, observations of the effect on their respective societies. First and foremost, both Kantakouzenos and Thucydides state

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<sup>5</sup> See Timothy S. Miller, "The Plague in John VI Cantacuzenus and Thucydides", *Greek, Roman, and Byzantine Studies*, vol. 17, no. 4 (1976): p.385-395.

<sup>6</sup> Kant. 4.8 (III p.51, 12-13).

<sup>7</sup> In the hopes of saving the reader from the labor of translating an arduous amount of Greek, only the passages which the similarities of vocabulary, word order, and grammatical construction can be drawn upon will be given verbatim. Citations for the passages and a paraphractical translation will be given for the rest.

<sup>8</sup> Kant. 4.8 (III p.50, 6-7) *cf.* Thuc. 2.51.2.

that neither doctors nor any skill was of help in warding off the disease.<sup>9</sup> Both authors place this observation early in their description, evoking the feeling and understanding of the futility of hope early on for readers. In keeping with the demoralizing aspects of the disease, we find a near-verbatim statement:<sup>10</sup>

καὶ ἕτερος ἀφ' ἑτέρου θεραπείας ἀνεπίμλαντο τῆς νόσου, καὶ τὴν πλείστην φθορὰν τοῦτο ἐνεποίει. (Kant. 4.8 [III p.51, 19-21])

καὶ ὅτι ἕτερος ἀφ' ἑτέρου θεραπείας ἀναπιμπλάμενοι ὥσπερ τὰ πρόβατα ἔθνησκον. καὶ τὸν πλεῖστον φθόρον<sup>11</sup> τοῦτο ἐνεποίει. (Thuc. 2.51.4)

Save for Kantakouzenos' omission of Thucydides' zoomorphic simile, the two observations are nearly identical and, by today's standards, would be seen as blatant plagiarism. By borrowing passages from Thucydides which state the hopelessness of the plague, Kantakouzenos helps readers conclude that the bubonic plague in Constantinople made people suffer mentally in a very similar manner and magnitude to the Athenian plague.<sup>12</sup> Further descriptions of the loss of hope for the people of Constantinople followed:

Ἐλπίς οὐδεμία σωτηρίας ὑπελείπετο, ἀλλὰ πρὸς τὸ ἀνέλπιστον τραπόμενοι, προΐεντο σφᾶς αὐτοὺς καὶ ἀπέθνησκον ἐν τῷ αὐτίκα (Kant. 4.8 [III p. 52, 1-3])

πρὸς γὰρ τὸ ἀνέλπιστον εὐθὺς τραπόμενοι τῇ γνώμῃ πολλῶ μᾶλλον προΐεντο σφᾶς αὐτοὺς καὶ οὐκ ἀντεῖχον (Thuc. 2.51.4)

The most significant distinction between Kantakouzenos' and Thucydides' societal observations during their plagues is that the Athenians turned away from their cultic beliefs and practices, while the people of Constantinople further embraced their faith. Thucydides explains this breakdown of societal order, increased lawlessness, desecration of temples, and blasphemous funeral rites to have been caused by the great mortality rate of the

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<sup>9</sup> Kant. 4.8 (III p.50, 7-9) *cf.* Thuc. 2.47.4.

<sup>10</sup> Kant. 4.8 (III pg. 50 7-9) *cf.* Thuc. 2.47.4.

<sup>11</sup> It would be remiss of me not to bring further light to the closeness of the statement by explaining Kantakouzenos' use of φθορά instead of φθόρος, which Thucydides uses. The masculine meaning is stated to be equivalent to ὄλεθρος, meaning *pestilent fellow*, but more often as an equivalent to φθορά, meaning *death*. Perhaps the feminine variation of the noun was more common in Kantakouzenos' time. Further research will need to be done in order to prove so. Henry George Liddell and Robert Scott, *A Greek-English Lexicon with revised supplement*. Oxford; New York, Clarendon Press, 1996.

<sup>12</sup> A detailed analysis of higher education throughout Byzantine and Medieval Constantinople exceeds the scope of this article. The number of educated elites, those who would continue the in-depth secular study of ancient Greek texts, in Constantinople from the ninth to fifteenth century was miniscule at an estimation of around 300 at any time. Though any person with a higher education in Kantakouzenos VI's time and beyond would be well acquainted with Thucydides, it is the few educated elite who could draw these philological comparisons. Thus, it is not unreasonable to believe these almost verbatim excerpts were placed to do so. For understanding the educated elite in the Byzantine and Medieval periods see Mango, p.8-9.

disease.<sup>13</sup> Kantakouzenos, however, makes use of a Thucydidean paradigm to introduce this contrast:

τὸ μὲν οὖν τῆς νόσου εἶδος τοιοῦτον κρεῖσσον λόγου ἦν (Kant. 4.8 [III p.52, 4-5]).  
 γενόμενον γὰρ κρεῖσσον λόγου τὸ εἶδος τῆς νόσου (Thuc. 2.50.1)

This is the only instance where Kantakouzenos borrows from Thucydides and employs it uniquely to aid his writing. Thucydides uses this quote to introduce the odd nature of it affecting animals, which has not previously been observed in a disease, effectively killing any animal living with humans.<sup>14</sup> Kantakouzenos, however, utilizes this phrase to introduce his observations of the disease's divine nature and origin and the faith boost among the people of Constantinople. This loan of a Thucydidean model is a relatively rare<sup>15</sup> and responsible use of an ancient source in Byzantine authors. Kantakouzenos adopts a passage from Thucydides and utilizes it by forming it into his own work, time, and *History*, separating it from the original context. This use of Thucydides' passage paradigm for the purpose of introducing the divergence between Thucydides' and Kantakouzenos' societies is further reinforced by his previous observation regarding the disease's effect on animals.<sup>16</sup> By borrowing and placing prior in the text the postcedent of Thucydides' observation, the plague's effect on animals, and replacing it with Kantakouzenos' own observation, the divine nature of the disease, Kantakouzenos effectively adopts and implements the model to fit his own argument.

Kantakouzenos ends his description of the bubonic plague's effects on Constantinople with further observations of the divine nature of the disease and the increased faith it brought about. He says that not only those who survived the plague, but also those fortunate enough not to get sick at all decided to leave all vices behind, better themselves and repent in hopes of saving their souls before dying; in fact, some distributed their wealth among the poor even before getting sick.<sup>17</sup> This is in direct contrast to Thucydides' observations of the societal effects of his plague. Thucydides observes the lawlessness and immorality of men, sick and healthy alike, people abandoning their gods once they saw that the pious and impious all died alike and indulging in present pleasures.<sup>18</sup> This vivid contradiction to this history's ancient inspiration is the secondary purpose of his writing. Kantakouzenos does not state his purpose for writing down his observations as Thucydides does,<sup>19</sup> but one can surmise that while his purpose was similar to Thucydides',

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<sup>13</sup> Thuc. 2.51-53.

<sup>14</sup> Thuc. 2.50.1-2.

<sup>15</sup> See Mango.

<sup>16</sup> Kant. 4.8 (III p.51, 22).

<sup>17</sup> Kant. 4.8 (III p.52, 6-17).

<sup>18</sup> Thuc. 2.53.

<sup>19</sup> Thuc. 2.48.3.

he also wanted to put a Christian spin on his model.<sup>20</sup> In doing so, Kantakouzenos follows suit by embracing a poetic style to emphasize the divine power of the Christian God, the great faith of Christians in Constantinople, and the mortality of the disease.<sup>21</sup>

### Prior uses of Thucydides' plague model

As stated before, and much further argued by Cyril Mango, the use of Classical authors and works by Byzantine writers was common and could often shroud the truth on account of the borrowings. Within the sixth-century historian Procopius' *History of the Wars*<sup>22</sup>, we find a much earlier use of Thucydidean passages and models to describe a plague. These adopted models and passages, which do not affect the truth and are only used superficially,<sup>23</sup> do not include direct transplants of clauses and sentences nearly as often as within Kantakouzenos' works. In fact, Procopius is more prone to borrow vocabulary and phrases and modify them, implementing them to show contrast with Thucydides.<sup>24</sup>

λεγέτω μὲν οὖν ὡς πη ἕκαστος περὶ αὐτῶν γινώσκει καὶ σοφιστῆς καὶ μετεωρολόγος (Proc. 2.22.5)

λεγέτω μὲν οὖν περὶ αὐτοῦ ὡς ἕκαστος γινώσκει καὶ ἰατρὸς καὶ ἰδιώτης (Thuc. 2.48.3)

Procopius, by putting himself in contrast with *sophists* and *astrologers* instead of *doctors* and *laymen* as Thucydides did, poses himself as a more trustworthy source. This further reinforces his previous claim against the soundness of those who “fabricate outlandish theories of natural philosophy” (Proc. 2.22.1).

Kantakouzenos is not alone in using Thucydides' plague description as a model in order to construct his own description of a contemporary plague. In fact, it is plausible that Kantakouzenos was influenced by Procopius's specific uses of Thucydides, as Procopius also contrasts the ensuing lawlessness of the 5<sup>th</sup> Century BCE Athenian Plague with the 6<sup>th</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> I am not well versed enough in the study of Christian faith during the bubonic plague to stand firm on whether Kantakouzenos' observations are true; nevertheless, the scope of this article does not include the veracity of Kantakouzenos' observations on faith and Christianity, but merely an analysis of the uses and effects of Thucydidean paradigms and parallels.

<sup>21</sup> For Thucydides' plague description's poetic style see: Thomas E. Morgan, “Plague or Poetry? Thucydides on the Epidemic at Athens.”, *Transactions of the American Philological Association*, vol. 124 (1994): p.197–209.

<sup>22</sup> *Procopius. History of the Wars, Volume I: Books 1-2*. Translated by H. B. Dewing. Loeb Classical Library 48. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1914. [Hereafter, Proc. With book and chapter, then section] Plague description: Proc. 2.22.1 – 2.23.21.

<sup>23</sup> D. Ch. Stathakopoulos, *Famine and Pestilence in the Late Roman and Early Byzantine Empire*, Routledge, 2004, p.135.

<sup>24</sup> For a more in-depth analysis of Procopius' use of Thucydidean passages and models within his description of the Justinian Plague of 542 see, Jessica Moore, “Plague in the Time of Procopius: Thucydides, Intertextuality, and Historical Memory”, Society for Classical Studies annual meeting 49.6, January 2015.

Century CE Justinian Plague: “those who previously used to take delight in devoting themselves to works both shameful and wicked, shaking off the lawless mode of life they precisely exercised piety” (Proc. 2.23.14).

Emperor John VI Kantakouzenos is not pioneering by incorporating Thucydides in his description of the bubonic plague, especially in reference to Procopius’ writings some 800 years prior to his life. In fact, it seems that Kantakouzenos was influenced both by Thucydides and by the Thucydidean loans in Procopius’ writings. However, Kantakouzenos differs from Procopius by including more “copy and paste” passages while providing an accurate historical account.

## Conclusion

Emperor John VI Kantakouzenos wrote his description of the bubonic plague in 1347 CE in Constantinople using Thucydides as a model. He borrowed the order, construction, and certain passages from Thucydides’ description of the 430 BCE Athenian plague. This is not uncommon in the late Roman and Byzantine world as the trend of the time was to copy and imitate classical Greek and Roman authors even to the point of misguiding the reader away from the facts.<sup>25</sup> Emperor Kantakouzenos, however, while being inspired and borrowing from Thucydides, managed to do that responsibly. He employed Thucydidean passages, that did not falsify his writings (save once), by following Thucydides’ construction and order of description in a poetic matter which emphasized the mortality of the disease. He also adopted one Thucydidean passage and successfully implemented it into his own work to contrast the societal effects of his plague, in particular the great increase in faith and virtue among many, with those of Thucydides.

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<sup>25</sup> See Mango.

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