

CHAPTER ONE • An Overview of the
Archidamian Narrative
Structure (ii.1–v.24)

Thucydides structures the first book of his *History* to provide a relatively complicated overview of long-term and short-term causes for the Second Peloponnesian War, the war that he himself lived through and that engulfed the whole Greek world between 431 and 404 B.C.E. The narrative of the war proper starts at the beginning of what we call book ii, where Thucydides also sets out the basic narrative strategy he intends to follow:

And now, from this point, begins the war between the Athenians and the Peloponnesians and the allies on both sides, during which they no longer communicated with one another without heralds and, once they started, fought continuously. This has been written in the order that events occurred, divided into summers and winters.

ἀρχεται δὲ ὁ πόλεμος ἐνθένδε ἤδη Ἀθηναίων καὶ Πελοποννησίων καὶ τῶν ἐκατέρους ξυμμάχων, ἐν ᾧ οὔτε ἐπεμείγνυντο ἔτι ἀκηρυκτεὶ παρ' ἀλλήλους καταστάντες τε ξυνεχῶς ἐπολέμουν· γέγραπται δὲ ἐξῆς ὡς ἕκαστα ἐγίγνετο κατὰ θέρος καὶ χειμῶνα. (ii.1)

The first ten years of the war, books ii–v.24, are often given a name of their own: the Archidamian War, after the Spartan king who led the first invasion of Attica in 431. Thucydides' account of the Archidamian War is quite distinctive in the systematic way that the text is organized to carry out the claim of ii.1. If we look closely

at its narrative construction, we see that in ii–v.24 Thucydides has written a series of independent, discrete short narratives that follow one upon another “in the order that events occurred, divided into summers and winters” (ἐξῆς ὡς ἕκαστα ἐγίγνετο κατὰ θέρος καὶ χειμῶνα, ii.1). Thucydides marks the structural integrity and topical distinctiveness of the individual narrative units by beginning each new unit with a formulaic introductory sentence that includes the following items: a new personal subject, an active verb, an indication of place, and a marker of time.¹

This chapter will give a general overview of how the units of action that comprise the narrative of ii.1–v.24 work, sketching both the nature and importance of their distinctive introductory sentences and also the structural patterns of the units themselves. Chapter 2 will consider the formulaic nature of the introductory sentences in more detail, chapter 3 will consider more closely how the narrative material inside the units is organized, and chapter 4 will consider how the Archidamian units are organized into larger thematic patterns that help us understand significant aspects of the war as a process. The basic assumption pervading this study is that form and function are interrelated. By examining the formal construction of the narrative attentively, we can see some of what Thucydides wanted his narration of the first ten years of the war to communicate. To begin with a brief overview of how the units work in sequence, separate but resonating with each other, this chapter will look briefly at the organization of the first year of the war, and then at the very schematic narrative of year six.

The narration of the first event of the war proper, the invasion of Plataea by the Thebans in the summer of 431 B.C.E., has an especially elaborate introductory sentence. It starts with an extensive identification of time, listing the number of years that have elapsed in the thirty-year truce between Athenians and Peloponnesians, the length of time during which Chrysis had been priestess of Hera at Argos, the relevant ephorate at Sparta, and the eponymous archonship at Athens, as well as the phrase that Thucydides will use thereafter regularly, “at the beginning of spring” (ἤρι ἀρχομένῳ). Then come the subject of the sentence (“just over three hundred Thebans,” *Θηβαίων ἄνδρες ὀλίγω πλείους τριακοσίων*), an active verb (“entered,” *ἔσηλθον*), and finally the place (“into Plataea,” *ἐς Πλάταιαν*). With this sentence Thucydides serves notice that the Peloponnesian War has formally begun.

The Plataean narrative that begins year one takes up about five Oxford pages, and it is followed by a number of diverse narratives concerning other activities at other places: preparations on both the Lacedaemonian and the Athenian sides for war; the lining up of allies; an Athenian naval expedition to the Peloponnese; another to Locris and Euboea; the expulsion of the Aeginetans; an eclipse; proceed-

ings in Thrace; more movements of the Athenian fleet; Athenian and Corinthian involvement in Acarnania; and finally, a public funeral at Athens.² There are seventeen discrete segments of narrative in all, each narrated as a separate entry in Thucydides' account of the first year's summer or winter, and each marked with its own distinctively introductory first sentence.

As the narrative continues, the succession of small and discrete narrative units of actions begins to suggest larger ongoing thematic patterns, as various people, places, or topics appear and reappear, forming discontinuous sequences over several years' worth of narrative, and also appearing in new combinations of contiguity with one another. For instance, in the rest of the narrative of year one, after the completion of the first highly dramatic narrative of the nighttime takeover of an unsuspecting city at peace, Thucydides drops the topic of Plataea and introduces a series of other events that happened that same summer, carefully introducing each new account that narrates some new aspect of the summer's activities. A formulaic sentence firmly sets out each new unit's actors, the activity undertaken, an indication of time, and an indication of place. After the Theban attack in year one, the fate of Plataea fades as a principal focus; it recurs, however, in the accounts of years three, four, and five. The final narrative of the Plataea story occurs in year five. It begins: "And around the same time in this summer, the Plataeans . . . came to terms with the Peloponnesians in the following way" (*ὑπὸ δὲ τοὺς αὐτοὺς χρόνους τοῦ θέρους τούτου καὶ οἱ Πλαταιῆς . . . ξυνέβησαν τοῖς Πελοποννησίοις τοιῶδε τρόπῳ*, iii.52). The narrative unit ends bleakly and quite formally: "This was how matters ended for Plataea, in the ninety-third year after it became the ally of Athens" (*καὶ τὰ μὲν κατὰ Πλάταιαν ἔτει τρίτῳ καὶ ἐνενηκοστῷ ἐπειδὴ Ἀθηναίων ξύμμαχοι ἐγένοντο οὕτως ἐτελεύτησεν*, iii.68).

As we shall see at greater length in chapter 2, the regularity of the introductory sentences that mark one unit off from another throughout the Archidamian narrative is very striking; they distinctively define each new change of subject. The account of year six, iii.89–116, demonstrates the general format particularly clearly. It is not one of the more exciting in the Archidamian narrative; in fact, arguably it forms a prosaic breather, sandwiched in between the very dramatic accounts of Mytilene, Plataea, and Corcyra in year five and Pylos and Corcyra in year seven. But its organization is quite schematic and shows the underlying narrative principles that organize the whole of books ii–v.24. Thirteen narrative units occur in sequence, each set off at its start from the preceding narrative by a complete change of subject matter and by a distinctive introductory sentence of the sort just described. The first sentence of each unit is listed below, in order of occurrence in the text.

YEAR SIX

iii.89.1: In the following summer, the Peloponnesians and their allies went as far as the isthmus intending to invade Attica . . . [topic of unit: aborted invasion because of earthquakes]

τοῦ δ' ἐπιγιγνομένου θέρους Πελοποννήσιοι καὶ οἱ ξύμμαχοι μέχρι μὲν τοῦ Ἴσθμοῦ ἦλθον ὡς ἐς τὴν Ἀττικὴν ἐσβαλοῦντες. . .

iii.89.2–5: During this period when earthquakes were prevalent, the sea at Orobiae on Euboea retreated from what was then the coastline, and forming a wave it returned over much of the city . . . [topic of unit: inundations]

καὶ περὶ τούτους τοὺς χρόνους, τῶν σεισμῶν κατεχόντων, τῆς Εὐβοίας ἐν Ὀροβίαις ἢ θαλασσα ἐπανελθοῦσα ἀπὸ τῆς τότε οὐσσης γῆς καὶ κυματωθεῖσα ἐπῆλθε τῆς πόλεως μέρος τι, καὶ τὸ μὲν κατέκλυσε, τὸ δ' ὑπενόστησε.

iii.90: During the same summer there was various fighting in Sicily, according to individual situations, both by the Siceliot themselves . . . and by the Athenians along with their allies . . . [topic of unit: Athenian exploits in Sicily]

τοῦ δ' αὐτοῦ θέρους ἐπολέμουν μὲν καὶ ἄλλοι, ὡς ἐκάστοις ξυνέβαιεν, . . . καὶ αὐτοὶ οἱ Σικελιώται . . . καὶ οἱ Ἀθηναῖοι ξὺν ξυμμάχοις . . .

iii.91: In the same summer, the Athenians sent thirty ships around the Peloponnese under the command of Demosthenes . . . and Procles . . . and sixty ships . . . against Melos . . . Nicias . . . was their commander . . . [topic of unit: various exploits of Athenian fleet]

τοῦ δ' αὐτοῦ θέρους οἱ Ἀθηναῖοι τριάκοντα μὲν ναῦς ἔστειλαν περὶ Πελοπόννησον, ὧν ἐστρατήγει Δημοσθένης . . . καὶ Προκλῆς . . . ἑξήκοντα δὲ ἐς Μῆλον. . . ἐστρατήγει δὲ αὐτῶν Νικίας . . .

iii.92–93: Around the same time, the Lacedaemonians founded Heraclea . . . [topic of unit: motive for founding and initial stages]

ὑπὸ δὲ τὸν χρόνον τοῦτον Λακεδαιμόνιοι Ἡράκλειαν . . . καθίσταντο . . .

iii.94–98: In this same summer, around the time the Athenians were occupied at Melos, the Athenians . . . ambushed and killed some guards at Ellomenus in

Leucadian territory and then moved against Leucas with a bigger expedition
. . . [topic of unit: Demosthenes in Aetolia]

*τοῦ δ' αὐτοῦ θέρου, καὶ περὶ τὸν αὐτὸν χρόνον ὃν ἐν τῇ Μήλῳ οἱ Ἀθηναῖοι
κατείχοντο . . . ἐν Ἑλλομενῶ τῆς Λευκαδίας φρουρούς τινὰς λοχήσαντες
διέφθειραν, ἔπειτα ὕστερον ἐπὶ Λευκάδα μείζονα στόλῳ ἦλθον . . .*

iii.99: Around the same time, the Athenians off Sicily sailed to Locris and . . .
defeated the Locrians . . . [topic of unit: Athenians in Sicily again]

*κατὰ δὲ τοὺς αὐτοὺς χρόνους καὶ οἱ περὶ Σικελίαν Ἀθηναῖοι πλεύσαντες
ἐς τὴν Λοκρίδα . . . Λοκρῶν ἐκράτησαν . . .*

iii.100–102: During this same summer, the Aetolians . . . won support for their
request to send an expedition against Naupactus . . . [topic of unit: response to
Athenian aggression in Aetolia]

*τοῦ δ' αὐτοῦ θέρου Αἰτωλοὶ . . . πείθουσιν ὥστε σφίσι πέμψαι στρατιὰν
ἐπὶ Ναύπακτον . . .*

iii.103: In the following winter, the Athenians in Sicily, along with their
Hellenic allies . . . came up to Inessa . . . [and] made an attack . . . [topic
of unit: Athenians in Sicily again]

*οἱ δ' ἐν τῇ Σικελίᾳ Ἀθηναῖοι τοῦ ἐπιγιγνομένου χειμῶνος ἐπελθόντες
μετὰ τῶν Ἑλλήνων ξυμμάχων . . . ἐπ' Ἴνησαν . . . προσέβαλον . . .*

iii.104: In the same winter, the Athenians purified Delos . . . [topic of unit:
background, procedures of purification]

τοῦ δ' αὐτοῦ χειμῶνος καὶ Δῆλον ἐκάθηραν Ἀθηναῖοι . . .

iii.105–114: In the same winter, the Ambraciots . . . took the field against
Amphilochian Argos . . . [topic of unit: Demosthenes in Ambracia again]

*τοῦ δ' αὐτοῦ χειμῶνος Ἀμπρακιῶται . . . ἐκστρατεύονται ἐπὶ Ἄργος τὸ
Ἀμφιλοχικὸν . . .*

iii.115: In the same winter the Athenians in Sicily made a landing . . . in the
territory of Himera . . . [topic of unit: Athenians in Sicily again]

*οἱ δ' ἐν τῇ Σικελίᾳ Ἀθηναῖοι τοῦ αὐτοῦ χειμῶνος ἐς . . . τὴν Ἴμεραίαν
ἀπόβασιν ἐποιήσαντο . . .*

iii.116: At the very beginning of this spring, the fire streamed out of Aetna . . .
[topic of unit: eruption of Aetna]

ἑρρῦή δὲ περὶ αὐτὸ τὸ ἔαρ τοῦτο ὁ ῥύαξ τοῦ πυρὸς ἐκ τῆς Αἴτνης . . .

The year ends in that same paragraph (iii.116), with a formulation that Thucydides often uses to conclude the account of a year: “These were the events of this winter, and the sixth year ended of this war that Thucydides recorded” (*ταῦτα μὲν κατὰ τὸν χειμῶνα τοῦτον ἐγένετο, καὶ ἕκτον ἔτος τῷ πολέμῳ ἐτελεύτα τῶδε ὄν Θουκυδίδης ξυνέγραψεν*).

The scene of action in year six ranges from Sicily to Melos and Delos, Heraclea, and Acarnania. The geographical spread of the units is equaled by the variety of the subjects treated and the various ways in which they are presented. In thirteen units of action there occur two accounts of natural events, an antiquarian excursus, a succinct overview of the foundation of a city, four extended descriptions of campaigns in which Demosthenes takes part, four balder accounts of campaigns in Sicily and the Aegean, and two statements a sentence each in length about the Peloponnesian march on Attica and the Athenian campaign in Sicily.

For all its variety of subject matter, year six is not chaotic in arrangement. The units narrating Demosthenes’ campaigns take up twelve of the seventeen Oxford pages devoted to year six. He is mentioned at the beginning of the unit about Melos in iii.91, is followed to Leucas in 94, reappears in 102, and his winter activities are brought triumphantly to a conclusion in 105–114. Sicily is another recurring focus in year six. It is introduced in iii.90, briefly referred to in 99, introduces the narrative of the winter of the year in 103, and provides the last military event of the year in 115. Aetna’s eruption, the topic of the last unit of all, is also of course Sicilian in setting, but the thematic link is perhaps stronger with the other natural events of the year, the inundations in iii.89.2–5, and the earthquakes that cause the Peloponnesians to turn back at the Isthmus in iii.89.1, the first unit of the year.

Natural phenomena certainly hold an abiding interest for Thucydides, and he tends (as in ii.102–103, iii.87, iii.88, or iv.52) to place units of such material at either the beginning or the end of a season. In year six, a special attempt seems to have been made both to introduce and to end the year with natural events. As Gomme notes ad loc., the earthquakes of iii.89 form part of the seismic disturbances mentioned for the previous winter (iii.87);³ they could easily have been included there, just as the account of Heraclea in iii.92–93 anticipates events of later years to round out the narrative of the foundation. However, in the text as actually written, the

earthquakes that caused the Peloponnesian army to turn back at the beginning of spring are narrated separately from those of the earlier winter, perhaps because Thucydides wished in year six to continue the pattern established in years two, four, and five (and alluded to at the beginning of year three), by beginning or ending a season with such material, or because he wished natural phenomena to form a frame for year six, providing a distinctive beginning and conclusion for the year. The arrangement he chose performs both functions.

Even those events of year six that are introduced abruptly and apparently without context are given sufficient attention in other years to assure that their appearance in year six is not isolated and mysterious. For instance, the antiquarian material in iii.104 is new to the reader, and different in tone from the other units in the year, but it is not completely surprising. Thucydides' interest in such material is already familiar, from the Archaeology in i.2–19, and from ii.29, ii.68, and ii.102. In the rather abrupt narratives in year six concerning events in Sicily and Melos, on the other hand, topics emerge that later become important for the *History* as a whole. Without drawing particular attention to themselves, they allow the reader (especially, perhaps, the rereader) a glimpse into the initial thematic threads of what will later become grippingly significant events. It is important to see that much of this is Thucydides' choice, as narrator: Sicily would in any historian's hand presumably be important and might be mentioned early, but the appearance of Melos in the narrative of year six points toward the distinctively Thucydidean treatment of that small island at the end of book v.⁴

A brief look at the narrative units of action that comprise year six shows something of the kind of units that Thucydides uses throughout his narrative of the first ten years of the war. The thirteen units of year six fall into five separate patterns, as described below; following the description of each pattern is the name I will use for this kind of unit in the more extended consideration of the different unit types in chapter 3.

1. Three units (iii.89.1, iii.99, and iii.116) each focus on a single event: the abortive Peloponnesian invasion of Attica, the Athenian fleet sailing to Locris, and the eruption of Aetna respectively, in what amounts to a bald declarative statement seven lines long or less. Thucydides is in effect making an entry in a journal of events or diary (= *simple picture unit*).⁵
2. Two units extend the description of a single event, to focus more extensively on at least one aspect of it. The unit iii.89.2–5 surveys at some length the reach of the floods, and iii.92–93 considers the focal event, the founding of Heraclea,

from several angles: the Spartan reasons for founding it, but also the fears of the Athenians and the neighbors of the Heracleans. Jacqueline de Romilly calls this kind of description characteristic Thucydidean behavior: an event is “rotated on its axis,” so that the point of view splits, to provide the maximum number of angles from which to view what is happening (= *developed picture unit*).⁶

3. A third structural pattern is formed by iii.90, iii.91, iii.103, and iii.115. The narrative does not focus on a single event; instead, one set of actors is followed from one activity to another, so that the sequence of activities undertaken forms a listlike series. This structural pattern is almost always used in its simple form to describe a military campaign: iii.91, for instance, concerns an expedition under the command of Nicias that leaves Athens, goes various places briefly and sequentially described, and returns home (= *list unit*).

4. The three accounts of Demosthenes’ exploits in year six, iii.94–98, iii.100–102, and iii.105–114, provide a more complicated narrative that contains both some of the features of the simpler account with a single focus and some resembling those found in the listlike narrative of an expedition. In these units, the scene shifts from place to place and therefore resembles the description of military expeditions like those of iii.91. But one set of actors is not always followed; instead, the linear motion of the list is added to the shifts among various actors that we also see in more complicated single-focus picture units like iii.92–93. All three units of this fourth structural type include shifts in focus from Demosthenes to his enemies and back again. They are complicated as well by a substantial increase in narrative detail—terrain, motives of all the actors, and even mythology (iii.96.1) (= *extended narrative unit*).

5. The final kind of narrative organization found in the units of year six is the most intricately constructed; one example occurs in year six, iii.104. Here, the structure of the unit consists of a framing topic that begins and ends the narrative, with a different kind of narrative contained in the middle. In iii.104, an excursus containing antiquarian material about Delos, including parts of the Homeric Hymn to Apollo, forms the center of the unit, but the unit as a whole both begins and ends with a focus on the event that happened in year six. It begins: “In the same winter, the Athenians purified Delos, certainly in accordance with an oracle of some sort” (τοῦ δ’ αὐτοῦ χειμῶνος καὶ Δῆλον ἐκάθηναν Ἀθηναῖοι κατὰ χρησμὸν δὴ τινα, iii.104.1); it ends: “but the [earlier] arrangements for games and most of the festival were discontinued because of misfortunes, as is natural, up to this time when the Athenians established contests and equestrian races, something not held previously”

(τὰ δὲ περὶ τοὺς ἀγῶνας καὶ τὰ πλεῖστα κατελύθη ὑπὸ ξυμφορῶν, ὡς εἰκόσ, πρὶν δὲ οἱ Ἀθηναῖοι τότε τὸν ἀγῶνα ἐποίησαν καὶ ἵπποδρομίας, ὃ πρότερον οὐκ ἦν, iii.104.6). Thus iii.104 makes an *a-b-a* arrangement, with the Athenian establishment of a new festival in year six occupying the beginning and end of the unit, and description of earlier events, less directly related to the war, in the center (= *complex unit*).

These are the five kinds of building blocks out of which Thucydides constructs the whole Archidamian narrative. There is no particular mystery to them as patterns; they represent several reasonable ways of treating the narrative of a discrete event: as a simple and static picture; as a more extended but still unitary description; as a list focusing on the sequential movements of a single actor or group of actors; as a shifting focus from one set of actors to another that also contains a change of setting; and, finally, as an arrangement resembling any one of the above four, but with the addition of an excursus containing material of quite a different sort set in its middle.

The introductory sentences are crucial in allowing a sequence of such distinctively constructed units to arrange themselves into a coherent ongoing narrative. They provide for the reader a reassuring impression of narrative order, because of their formal repetitiveness. That is, despite the wide (and potentially confusing) variety of unit topics and elaborations of narrative structures found in the longer Archidamian units, as each new introductory sentence begins a new unit, its relatively formulaic nature helps us adjust to the fact that another discrete piece is being added to the ongoing construction of the Archidamian narrative as a whole. Initially each new unit demands to be understood on its own terms as a discrete entry; only in retrospect does it begin to take its place as part of the larger ongoing narrative. Moreover, in the intensity of their idiosyncratic particularity and variety as narrative structures, the individual units present themselves as the work of an author also struggling to understand the precise nature of immediate events rather than prematurely forcing them into a larger interpretive pattern. As readers of the *History* as a whole, we know how the Peloponnesian War will end and the kinds of error in judgment that will lead to Athens's defeat. Already in the relatively neutral year six the significant topics of Melos and Sicily emerge, as well as intimations of Athenian claims to the leadership of Ionia, in the antiquarian excursus on Delos—themes that books v through viii will explore more fully and bleakly. But in year six Thucydides does not try to anticipate later events or point a moral in the initial narratives of these long-term themes. He rather narrates the precise nature of events unfolding in this particular year, in all their quiddity.

So the units of action provide the building blocks of Thucydides' Archidamian

narrative—the individual panels, as it were, in an ongoing frieze of considerable variety—and they also point toward the overall structural complexity of the narrative as a whole. Thucydides' ability to see patterns and combinations of patterns in events allows him to use a variety of units, themselves shaped quite differently from one another, to form larger narrative clusters that also resonate with one another in a number of different ways. As the narrative of the war continues, change will occur both in the way the units of action themselves are constructed and in the kinds of combinations they make with other units. This process begins in the last years of the Archidamian narrative, intensifies in the rest of book v, and undergoes a radical transformation in books vi through viii, as Thucydides moves away from the Archidamian unit of action as a basis for constructing his narrative.

The rest of part 1 of this study examines the Archidamian narrative: the introductory sentences of units of action (chapter 2), the five types of unit that are the building blocks of the Archidamian narrative (chapter 3), and the larger ongoing patterns formed by clusters of units (chapter 4). In both the introductory sentences and the units themselves Thucydides explores a wide variety of occasional stylistic choices but regularly also returns to a few preferred patterns.