

THUCYDIDES' SOURCES AND THE SPARTAN PLAN AT PYLOS

To W. K. Pritchett

ABSTRACT

Thucydides' account of the Spartan-Athenian conflict at Pylos contains topographical inaccuracies that demonstrate that the historian had not visited the site. Emendation is unwarranted, in part because the historian's erroneous account of the topography harmonizes with his account of the Spartans' plan to block the entrances to Navarino Bay. The actual topography, however, makes the reported plan impossible. The Spartans apparently intended to fight a *naumachia* with the Athenians inside the bay and therefore stationed hoplites on the island of Sphakteria. Thucydides' misconceptions stem from his failure to visit the site and his reliance on tendentious Peloponnesian sources.

Thucydides' description of the Spartan-Athenian conflict at Pylos and Sphakteria in the southwestern Peloponnese in 425 has elicited great interest and a good deal of consternation.¹ The detailed but problematic narrative raises important questions about Thucydides' use of autopsy and sources.² W. K. Pritchett, the foremost scholar of Greek topography and warfare, recently has concluded from his examination of the account that "Thucydides took part in some part of the engagement and wrote from personal autopsy."³ On the other hand, no less a student of Thucydides than A. W. Gomme concluded that the historian had never visited the site.⁴

1. I must thank Jeffrey Henderson, Joseph Roisman, and Robert Strassler for useful suggestions and vigorous criticism of my views. I owe special thanks to James Sickinger, who not only improved the paper with criticism and suggestions, but also served as a most patient and knowledgeable guide to the site. I also hope (despite his different views on the subject at hand) that I can acknowledge my great debt to W. K. Pritchett for the inspiration he has provided and the imposing standards he has set in the fields of Greek

topography, warfare, epigraphy, finance, and calendars.

2. The bibliography on the Pylos campaign is large, beginning with the important works of Grundy 1896 and Burrows 1896, and their subsequent publications, discussed in Pritchett 1965, pp. 6–29. The latter, along with Pritchett 1994, pp. 145–177, supplants earlier work on the topography, on which see also McDonald and Rapp 1972 and Davis 1998. Other important discussions include Wilamowitz 1921; Gomme 1937, pp. 125–131; 1956,

pp. 482–489; Westlake 1974; Kagan 1974, pp. 218–259; Wilson 1979; Bauslaugh 1979; Lazenby 1985, pp. 113–123; Strassler 1988; 1990; Roisman 1993, pp. 33–41; and Rubincam 2001.

3. Pritchett 1994, p. 176.

4. Gomme 1956, p. 484; see also Westlake 1974 and Rubincam 2001. Grundy and Burrows disagreed on the same point, with Grundy (1896, p. 21) writing that "any one who has seen the neighborhood of Pylos can have no reasonable doubt that Thucydides had never been there himself," while

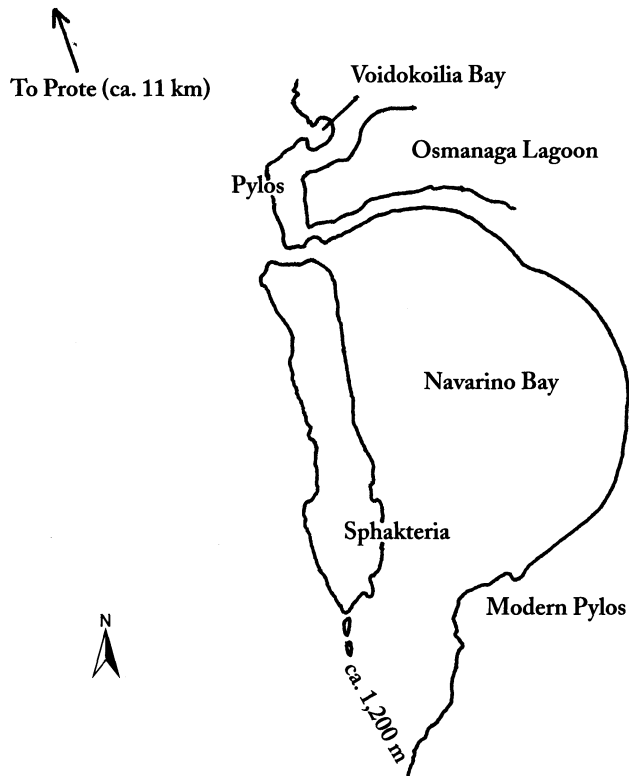


Figure 1. Map showing Pylos, Sphacteria, and Navarino Bay. After Pritchett 1965, p. 143, pl. 1

Such radically different conclusions by scholars of this caliber offer cold comfort to anyone intending to enter the debate. In fact, one must admit that the text as it stands contains elements that suggest the use of detailed firsthand accounts (if not personal autopsy) *and* topographical and narrative anomalies of a quality and quantity to cast doubt on this conclusion (or on the text itself).⁵ For example, Thucydides fails to make any mention of the small bay (Voidokoilia) located north of Pylos, a bay that offered potential access (friendly or hostile) to Demosthenes' troops and therefore must have figured into any alleged Spartan plans to defeat the Athenians (Fig. 1).⁶ Because of such anomalies, described in detail below, scholars have often tried to explain Thucydides' account either by attempting to interpret the text via the topography or by emending the text so that it conforms to the locale.⁷

I wish to approach the problem from a different angle, taking my lead from a suggestion made by Gomme in his study of the battle of Marathon. Gomme maintained that, in attempting to reconstruct the battle, we should first accept in Herodotos's account what those who took part in the campaign and whom Herodotos could have interviewed would have

Burrows (1896, p. 76) concluded that "Thucydides does indeed describe the last battle so exactly that he can hardly have failed to have been on the spot" (cf. Burrows 1897, p. 9).

5. Cf. Grundy 1896, pp. 42–47.

6. Cf. Gomme 1956, p. 484. Pritchett (1994, p. 160) does not believe Voi-

dokoilia to have been a factor in the campaign, noting that its shallow depth allowed him to "wade across the center of it in 1960–63." He makes a similar observation (pp. 170–172), however, about the northern entrance to Navarino Bay ("just east of the . . . channel proper"; p. 170), which cer-

tainly played a role, and this would therefore not seem to be a compelling reason to discount the need to control Voidokoilia (and to mention it in any account of the tactical situation); see also n. 21, below.

7. See respectively, e.g., Strassler 1988 and Bauslaugh 1979.

known (or believed) actually happened.⁸ Following Gomme, I wish to begin with what all those who served at Pylos would have known, and then ask how Thucydides could have written the account we possess given these "facts" known to his informants. The basic facts that we possess about this episode are that an Athenian force occupied the rocky headland of Pylos, the Spartans and Athenians then fought a sea battle in Navarino Bay, and the Spartans were defeated. This defeat resulted in the stranding of a large group of Spartan hoplites on the island of Sphakteria, where they had been stationed before the battle.

Gauging what we are told by Thucydides against what we may assume his informants knew and the topography itself, I argue here that Thucydides' account suggests that the historian relied at least in part on tendentious Peloponnesian sources (who themselves possessed firsthand information) and that the historian himself had no firsthand knowledge of the topography or of the campaign. I also hope to demonstrate that the Spartan strategy at Pylos relied on a plan to engage the Athenians in a *naumachia* within Navarino Bay rather than a plan to block the harbor as Thucydides records.

THUCYDIDES' ACCOUNT

In 425 the Athenian fleet with Eurymedon, having deposited the former general Demosthenes and a small force on the promontory of Pylos, continued northward to Zakynthos.⁹ The approach of Peloponnesian ships, which had avoided notice of the Athenian navy, then caused Demosthenes to send a message to his compatriots in the fleet. Thucydides relates the episode as follows:

Δημοσθένης δὲ προσπλεόντων ἔτι τῶν Πελοποννησίων ὑπεκπέμπει φθάσας δύο ναῦς ἀγγεῖλαι Εὐρυμέδοντι καὶ τοῖς ἐν ταῖς ναυσὶν ἐν Ζακύνθῳ Ἀθηναίοις παρῆναι ὥς τοῦ χωρίου κινδυνεύοντος. (4) καὶ αἱ μὲν νῆες κατὰ τάχος ἔπλεον κατὰ τὰ ἐπεσταλμένα ὑπὸ Δημοσθένους· οἱ δὲ Λακεδαιμόνιοι παρεσκευάζοντο ὥς τῷ τειχίσματι προσβαλοῦντες κατὰ τε γῆν καὶ κατὰ θάλασσαν, ἐλπίζοντες ῥαδίως αἰρήσειν οἰκοδόμημα διὰ ταχέων εἰργασμένον καὶ ἀνθρώπων ὀλίγων ἐνόντων. (5) προσδεχόμενοι δὲ καὶ τὴν ἀπὸ τῆς Ζακύνθου τῶν Ἀττικῶν νεῶν βοήθειαν ἐν νῷ εἶχον, ἦν ἄρα μὴ πρότερον ἔλῳσι, καὶ τοὺς ἔσπλους τοῦ λιμένος ἐμφάρξαι, ὅπως μὴ ἢ τοῖς Ἀθηναίοις ἐφορμίσασθαι ἐς αὐτόν. (6) ἡ γὰρ νῆσος ἡ Σφακτηρία καλουμένη τὸν τε λιμένα παρατείνουσα καὶ ἐγγὺς ἐπικειμένη ἐχυρὸν ποιεῖ καὶ τοὺς ἔσπλους στενοὺς, τῇ μὲν δυοῖν νεοῖν διάπλουν κατὰ τὸ τεῖχος τῶν Ἀθηναίων καὶ τὴν Πύλον, τῇ

8. Gomme 1962, p. 34: "[of Herodotos's account of Marathon] we should believe, if possible—if it makes sense, that is—what all who took part at Marathon would have known." I would add that we are not licensed to discard any element of the battle

accounts by Herodotos or Thucydides simply because it does not "make sense" to us (and I do not believe Gomme meant to imply that we should do so). Inexplicable events do occur, and thus other factors (such as the narrative's internal consistency) must also be

brought to bear on apparently senseless items in any account.

9. For Demosthenes' formal position here, cf. Hornblower 1991, p. 516; 1996, p. 152 (general elect); and Gomme 1956, pp. 437–438 (probably a private citizen).

δὲ πρὸς τὴν ἄλλην ἡπειρον ὀκτῶ ἢ ἐννέα· ὑλώδης τε καὶ ἀτριβῆς
 πᾶσα ὑπ' ἐρημίας ἦν καὶ μέγεθος περὶ πέντε καὶ δέκα σταδίους
 μάλιστα. (7) τοὺς μὲν οὖν ἔσπλους ταῖς ναυσὶν ἀντιπρώροις βύζην
 κλήσειν ἔμελλον· τὴν δὲ νῆσον ταύτην φοβούμενοι μὴ ἐξ αὐτῆς τὸν
 πόλεμον σφίσι ποιῶνται, ὀπλίτας διεβίβασαν ἐς αὐτὴν καὶ παρὰ
 τὴν ἡπειρον ἄλλους ἔταξαν. (8) οὕτω γὰρ τοῖς Ἀθηναίοις τὴν τε
 νῆσον πολεμίαν ἔσεσθαι τὴν τε ἡπειρον, ἀπόβασιν οὐκ ἔχουσιν
 (τὰ γὰρ αὐτῆς τῆς Πύλου ἔξω τοῦ ἔσπλου πρὸς τὸ πέλαγος ἀλίμενα
 ὄντα οὐχ ἔξιν ὅθεν ὀρμώμενοι ὠφελήσουσι τοὺς αὐτῶν) σφεῖς
 δὲ ἄνευ τε ναυμαχίας καὶ κινδύνου ἐκπολιορκήσιν τὸ χωρίον
 κατὰ τὸ εἶκος, σίτου τε οὐκ ἐνόντος καὶ δι' ὀλίγης παρασκευῆς
 κατειλημμένον. (9) ὥς δ' ἐδόκει αὐτοῖς ταῦτα, καὶ διεβίβαζον
 ἐς τὴν νῆσον τοὺς ὀπλίτας ἀποκληρώσαντες ἀπὸ πάντων τῶν
 λόγων. καὶ διέβησαν μὲν καὶ ἄλλοι πρότερον κατὰ διαδοχὴν, οἱ δὲ
 τελευταῖοι καὶ ἐγκαταληφθέντες εἴκοσι καὶ τετρακόσιοι ἦσαν καὶ
 Εἴλωτες οἱ περὶ αὐτούς· ἦρχε δὲ αὐτῶν Ἐπιτάδας ὁ Μολόβρου.

Before the Peloponnesian fleet sailed in, Demosthenes found time to send out unobserved two ships to inform Eurymedon and the Athenians on board the fleet at Zakynthos of the danger of Pylos and to summon them to his assistance. (4) The ships hastened on their voyage in accordance with the message of Demosthenes, but the Lakedaimonians prepared to assault the fort by land and sea, hoping to capture with ease a work constructed in haste and occupied by a few men. (5) Meanwhile, as they expected the Athenian ships to bring aid from Zakynthos, they intended, if they failed to take the place before, to block up the entrances to the harbor, so that it might not be possible for the Athenians to anchor inside it. (6) For the island called Sphakteria, stretching along in a line close in front of the harbor, at once makes it safe and its entrances narrow, with a passage for two ships on the side nearest Pylos and the Athenian fortifications, and for eight or nine on that side next to the rest of the mainland. The whole island was trackless and covered in woods through not being inhabited and its length was about 15 stades. (7) The inlets the Lakedaimonians intended to close with a line of ships placed close together, with their prows turned toward the sea. Meanwhile, fearing that the enemy might make use of the island to operate against them, they carried over hoplites onto it and stationed others along the mainland. (8) In this way the island and the mainland would be hostile territory to the Athenians, as there was no point of disembarkation (for since the parts of Pylos itself outside the entrance on the side of the open ocean had no harbor, [the Athenians] would not have a place from whence starting out they might help their own men), and they themselves [the Spartans], without either a sea battle or danger would in all likelihood take the place [Pylos] by siege, there being no grain there and the place having been occupied with meager preparations for war. (9) This being determined they carried over to the island the hoplites, chosen by lot from all the companies.

Some others had crossed over before in successive parties, but these last, the ones cut off, were 420 in number and their helot attendants. Epitadas the son of Molobros commanded them.¹⁰

Thucydides informs us that the Spartans, taking stock of the situation after the Athenians had occupied the promontory of Pylos, intended to take the hastily built and weakly garrisoned fortifications by storm. Failing this, since they expected an Athenian fleet bringing aid to arrive shortly, the Spartans planned to block up both entrances to the harbor in order to prevent the Athenians from coming to anchor in it.¹¹ There follows a description of Sphakteria and the two supposedly narrow entrances to the bay within: the (northern) entrance, near the site of Pylos, was large enough to admit two ships sailing in together, the (southern) passage, eight or nine (8.6). The Spartans wished to block these entrances with ships placed side by side and tightly packed.¹² But fearing that the Athenians might “make war” from Sphakteria against them, they disembarked troops on the island, so that both the mainland and the island would be “hostile territory” to the Athenians.

The Spartan strategy as presented by Thucydides is self-explanatory and practicable given the small size of the entrances to the bay as recorded in the text. Yet the account contains several major (and minor) topographical anomalies. The first major anomaly, as we have seen, is the historian's failure to mention the small bay of Voidokoilia—located just north of Pylos—which needed to be blocked off if the Athenians were to be isolated. A second anomaly relates to Thucydides' conception of the tactical importance of the island of Sphakteria (see below). Finally, a major error appears in his description of the southern entrance to the harbor: the distance between the southern end of Sphakteria and the mainland,¹³ so far from admitting entrance for only eight or nine ships, is actually ca. 1,200 m and “could not have been blocked even by the whole Peloponnesian fleet.”¹⁴

10. Thuc. 4.8.3–9 (OCT); translation based on that of R. Crawley, rev. T. E. Wick, New York 1982.

11. Here I follow the standard view that the *limen* to which Thucydides refers is in fact Navarino Bay itself, although Strassler (1988) has argued that the term should be understood to refer to a kind of small “cove” southeast of Pylos. On the usage of *limen* here, and the likelihood that this “cove” was even smaller in antiquity, see Pritchett 1994, pp. 149–151, 153–154, 158. I would emphasize that Thucydides' report that the Spartans ultimately intended to *fight* “in the *limen*” suggests a large area. Strassler has suggested to me (pers. comm.) that the term *limen* might be used to refer to the bay and the cove (alternately) in the account, which is strictly possible; but Thucydides'

account never indicates any kind of additional “inner” harbor. As noted above, Strassler and others have attempted to explain what might have happened given the topography of the area. Conversely, I am attempting to ascertain how Thucydides could have come to write the report we possess. Since mistakes and oversights in the text as it stands suggest that the historian did not visit the site himself, some confusion results when we compare the actual topography with Thucydides' report.

12. For the controversy over the meaning of βούζην, see Gomme 1956, p. 444, and Wilson 1979, pp. 73–75, who effectively counters Gomme's view that the ships were to be sunk after being placed “prow to prow” (ἀντιπρόποις). Pritchett (1994, pp. 147–149) clearly demonstrates that the word

refers to ships “closely packed,” with prows facing outward, toward the enemy.

13. Scholars' estimates of the width of the channel have ranged from ca. 1,200 to 1,300 m: see Pritchett 1965, p. 22, and Bauslaugh 1979, p. 2, n. 4, who collects the scholarship and notes that the official 1:100,000 map of Greece supports the lower figure.

14. Gomme's view (1956, p. 443; see also Burrows 1896, p. 74), quoted here, rested in part on his mistaken belief that the Peloponnesians intended to sink their vessels in order to block the entrance (see n. 12, above). But his opinion regarding the Peloponnesian fleet's inability to block the channel will stand despite his error on this point and on either the longer or shorter estimates of the southern entrance's width (see n. 45, below).

Robert Bauslaugh has proposed an attractive emendation of this passage, rescuing the historian from this major topographical error by suggesting that he refers to an entrance of “eight or nine stades” rather than one wide enough for “eight or nine ships.”¹⁵ Catherine Rubincam, however, has shown that this emendation results in a text that “violates Thucydides’ idiom and practice in giving measurements of distance.”¹⁶ Moreover, this emendation does not solve the problem of the alleged Spartan strategy reported by the historian. (Nor does it account for the historian’s mistaken description of the northern entrance, which is also significantly wider than he allows, or his mistake regarding the length of Sphakteria itself, which is about 24 stades in length rather than “about 15.”)¹⁷ The southern entrance is still far too wide for the Spartans to have closed it up and thus taken Pylos “without a sea battle.”¹⁸

Thus, emending the historian’s text to reconcile it with the actual topography is not licensed in this case, first, because it results in a text that is inconsistent with standard Thucydidean practice and, second, because the other topographical errors, omissions, and anomalies in his account suggest that his reports about the site were inaccurate (and thus, as Gomme noted, we should not arbitrarily “correct” one mistake).¹⁹ Finally, and most important, emendation of this passage is methodologically unsound because it is only Thucydides’ mistaken belief that the southern entrance was relatively narrow and thus *could* be blocked that supports the Spartan strategy that the historian reports. Any emendation that corrects Thucydides’ mistake about the size of the southern entrance to the harbor results in a text presenting a patently absurd plan to block a relatively wide entrance with an insufficient number of triremes. To put it differently, the Spartan strategy that Thucydides describes depended completely on the existence of narrow entrances to the bay.²⁰ The reported plan thus confirms that the text originally stated that the southern entrance was narrow enough to make this plan understandable, while emending the text makes nonsense of the rest of the historian’s account of the strategy. Therefore, since we are not licensed to emend the text and since the reported Spartan plan was in fact impossible given the actual topography, we must conclude that the historian did not possess an accurate account of the Spartan strategy for the campaign.²¹

15. Bauslaugh 1979; accepted by Pritchett 1994, pp. 167–175, and Hornblower 1996, pp. 159–160.

16. Rubincam 2001, p. 79.

17. Width of the northern entrance: Wilson, p. 75; length of the island: Gomme 1956, p. 443, with Pritchett 1965, pp. 21–22.

18. Contrast Rubincam (2001, p. 78), who notes that “most scholars would now accept . . . that there is no topographical impediment to accepting [Thucydides’] description of the respective strategies of the two sides in the campaign: the Peloponnesians intended to station ships in each channel

facing outwards towards the open sea, so as to contest any attempt by the Athenian fleet to sail into the bay.”

In fact, Thucydides’ text does not speak of the Spartans “contesting” the Athenian fleet, but rather of avoiding a sea battle altogether (see below).

19. Gomme 1956, p. 443.

20. See also Schwartz [1929] 1960, p. 292, and Burrows 1896, pp. 74–75. Though he later came to accept Bauslaugh’s emendation, Pritchett (1965, p. 22) recognized that Thucydides connected the “narrow entrances” (4.8.6) with the plan to block them (8.7), and that this problem “cannot be explained

merely as a matter of the numbers in Thucydides.” Rubincam (2001, p. 79) rejects Bauslaugh’s emendation not only on the grounds that it “violates Thucydides’ idiom and practice” but also because Thucydides’ qualifying expressions in the passage demonstrate his own reservations about the figures given, and because of her view that “there is no valid reason for assuming that Thucydides’ topographic description rests on autopsy of the area.”

21. Wilson (1979, pp. 73–84) maintained that Thucydides (or his source) confused the southern entrance to Navarino Bay with the entrance to the

Bauslaugh has argued that 55 or so Peloponnesian ships arrayed in the southern entrance “would leave hardly enough room for even a single trireme to pass without touching the oars of the flanking ships.”²² But 55 ships could not actually *block* this passage, and the scenario that Bauslaugh envisions would allow sufficient room for Athenian tactics.²³ Thus the alleged Spartan plan for a blockade remains an anomaly given the real topography, and this is particularly troubling since most have agreed that Thucydides, if not present at Pylos himself, received a good deal of his information about the campaign from those who were present, including Demosthenes.²⁴ As the commanding officer on the spot, Demosthenes must have had some idea of what the Spartans had intended, and certainly after the Spartan prisoners were taken alive he could have learned something about the Peloponnesian plan. Thucydides himself also spent time among the Peloponnesians after his exile in 424/3 (5.26.5), and so one must assume that the historian questioned the Spartans about their intentions at Pylos.²⁵ Yet the disaster of the Pylos campaign for Sparta was so great that it would not be surprising if some Spartans attempted to exculpate themselves by coloring the facts, perhaps presenting a story that in some way made their defeat more explicable.²⁶

Before exploring this possibility, let us state some general assumptions. First, the Spartans would never have occupied the island of Sphakteria if they thought they would lose control of the surrounding waters, for this would mean the isolation of their men on the island (the very thing that happened after the Athenians defeated them in the naval battle in the bay: 4.13–14). Second, the Spartans can never have intended to “block up” (ἐμφορῆσαι: 4.8.5) or “close” (κλῆσειν: 4.8.7) the southern entrance to the bay, an impossible operation. Third, the Spartans cannot, therefore, have formed any plan that required closing the harbor to the Athenians. Fourth, since they cannot have blocked the harbor’s southern entrance, they cannot have expected to take the place “without a sea battle or danger” (4.8.8); at most they may have planned to meet the Athenian fleet in the relatively more constricted waters²⁷ between the southern end of the island and the

small Voidokoilia Bay, just north of Pylos (see n. 6, above; see also Wilson and Beardsworth 1970, and cf. Grundy 1896, pp. 21–22). Voidokoilia’s entrance, however, would not allow eight or nine triremes abreast to enter its waters: see Pritchett 1994, pp. 160–161, who writes that “passage may have been difficult” into this bay due to a lower water level in 425 and protruding rocks. Such difficulty, however, would not have prevented assistance or resupply (even if inconvenient) of the men at Pylos via Voidokoilia unless the Spartans blocked the landings.

22. Bauslaugh 1979, p. 4.

23. Strassler 1988, p. 202. For Athenian tactics and the number of ships necessary to block an area, see n. 45, below.

24. See, e.g., Schwartz [1929] 1960, pp. 293–294; Gomme 1956, pp. 485–486; Silhanek 1970; Westlake 1974, p. 213; and Pritchett 1994, pp. 174–176. Wilamowitz (1921) argued that Thucydides’ account was restricted to Athenian sources.

25. That he would not have questioned them would require a lack of curiosity psychologically inconsistent with the decision to “write the war” (1.1.1) in the first place. Gomme (1937, pp. 125–131) demonstrated the necessity of Spartan (as well as Athenian) informants for the campaign. Hornblower (1996, p. 160) refers to “much free ascription of motive to the Spartans” in this account and to the possibility that this may stem from “conjecture” on Thucydides’ part (p. 167).

26. Schwartz ([1929] 1960, pp. 292–294) reached a similar conclusion; cf. Burrows (1896, pp. 74–75; 1897, p. 9), who believed that the *captured* Spartans themselves invented this “excuse” for their dilemma. This scenario seems to me extremely unlikely: the Spartans who returned to Sparta needed a plausible explanation for the failed plan, while those captured and held in Athens wanted an excuse for their *surrender*, not for the tactic of placing them on the island.

27. Cf. Hdt. 8.60, Thuc. 1.74.1, and Aesch. *Pers.* 412–414 on this tactic at Salamis. This aspect of the battle in 480 was obviously well known: see Kennelly 1994, p. 64.

mainland and try to prevent any attempted entrance *by battle*. Fifth, we should presume that the Spartans knew an Athenian fleet would eventually arrive to relieve the men at Pylos; Thucydides tells us that they were expected (4.8.5), and even if the Peloponnesians did not expect the fleet from Zakynthos with Eurymedon and Sophokles to return as swiftly as it did, they surely knew that Athenian ships would arrive from some quarter.

Thucydides implies that the Spartans believed they might capture the enemy garrison at Pylos before any Athenians arrived to help them, and it does seem that the fleet with Eurymedon returned much sooner than the Spartans had anticipated. Thucydides reports that the Spartans had sent ships to fairly distant Asine for wood (for siege machines) just as the Athenian fleet arrived (ἐν τούτῳ: 4.13.1–2).²⁸ The quest for wood implies that the Spartans thought that they had time to construct and employ such equipment, while the dispatch of their ships indicates that they did not expect an Athenian fleet to arrive quickly. Perhaps they did not know that Demosthenes had managed to send two ships out with messages just before Pylos was cut off, or they did not know the precise location of the Athenian fleet, expecting that it had continued northward from Zakynthos (4.8.3). But if the Spartans believed that they had enough time to build and employ siege equipment, why did they station forces on Sphakteria? After all, what possible advantage could accrue to the Spartans from placing these men on the island?

THE TACTICAL IMPORTANCE OF SPHAKTERIA

That stationing Spartans on Sphakteria was ill conceived has been maintained by Schwartz, Kagan, and Gomme. Gomme, however, later came to believe that the plan to occupy the island was not “so wrongly conceived, though it turned out badly,” arguing that the move could be justified because of the necessity to provide safe landing places for the triremes (i.e., not simply a place for disembarking troops, but a place where the boats might be beached and dried).²⁹ There were, however, almost none of these landing places on Sphakteria—only one on the landward side of the island, which explains why the Spartans stationed there had no ships—and certainly not enough to provide either the Athenians or the Spartans with “a base” where they might drag ashore numerous triremes.³⁰ Since the Athenians could not launch triremes from Sphakteria, how could their control of the island harm the Spartans? Even Athenians armed with missile weapons on Sphakteria could do little more than harass any Spartans sailing or anchoring close enough to the island to offer them targets.

Thus, an Athenian force occupying Sphakteria could neither aid its compatriots at Pylos nor attack the Spartans, despite Thucydides’ report of Spartan fears about this contingency. Indeed, these “fears” may well have been invented to help explain how the men were stranded on the island (see below). The vagueness of Thucydides’ language (4.8.7, cf. 8.4) about Spartan fears that the Athenians might (literally) “make war on them” from Sphakteria, in an otherwise very detailed account, suggests

28. Asine lies on the western shore of the Messenian Gulf: see Gomme 1956, p. 450, and Hornblower 1996, p. 167. Literary evidence and the modern sea trials of the reconstructed trireme *Olympias* suggest that ancient triremes could sustain speeds of at least 5–7 knots. Thus, a 105-km journey in one day would have been (strictly) possible: see Morrison, Coates, and Rankov 2000, pp. 102–106, 259–267. See also Strassler 1990 for distances and travel times for this campaign.

29. Gomme 1937, pp. 125–131, esp. p. 130, with n. 1 (for the quotation), and pp. 200–201; Schwartz [1929] 1960, pp. 290–293; Kagan 1974, pp. 230–231.

30. See Strassler 1988, p. 201; cf. Wilson 1979, pp. 106–109, and Pritchett 1965, p. 27.

that Thucydides himself had no clear idea precisely how an Athenian occupation of the island would threaten the Peloponnesians.³¹

Pritchett has written that "the strategic importance of Sphakteria is often overlooked," citing examples from the Greek War of Independence.³² But I do not think that this 19th-century campaign (predicated on modern long-range missile weapons) is entirely analogous to the situation in antiquity. Hoplites, peltasts, or archers stationed on Sphakteria could no more command the entrance to Navarino Bay or attack the mainland than they could attack the Athenians at Pylos. A trireme, moreover, is only a weapon when afloat and in motion, and the Athenians could sail from Prote, the small island to the northwest, to Pylos to launch an attack with only a small loss of time. In any event, the manning and launching of any Athenian triremes on Sphakteria (had this even been possible) would have been observed from the mainland. The tactical and strategic situations in 425 B.C. seem significantly different from those in A.D. 1827.

It is of course possible that a Spartan force initially occupied Sphakteria in order to gather wood, water, or other materials, and that some hoplites were present simply to oversee the work of the helots.³³ However this may be, it is certain that the Spartans needed to station at least some small forces on Sphakteria to act as lookouts against enemy vessels approaching the area and to provide information about the Athenians occupying the high ground of Pylos itself.³⁴ The heights of northern Sphakteria provide the best vantage point for both types of information-gathering, and thus their occupation (by a few men) was necessary if the Spartan commander wished to have this kind of intelligence.

Nonetheless, supposed Spartan fears about the Athenian use of Sphakteria "to make war on them" clearly present a conundrum in Thucydides' account. Like the mistake about the southern entrance to the harbor and the omission of Voidokoilia Bay to the north, this issue is tied to the historian's conception of the topography and its relation to the Spartan strategy. But since Spartans on Sphakteria could neither prevent the Athenians from entering the harbor nor attack the men at Pylos, and since any Athenian force there would have faced the same limitations, occupation of the island must have rested on some other strategic or tactical consideration unreported by Thucydides.

Again, we must ask ourselves what advantage the Spartans on Sphakteria provided. Without ships, the Spartans on the island were cut off from the other Peloponnesian forces, and thus could offer no naval assistance. To the argument that they were there to prevent an Athenian landing on

31. Unless the placement of the sentence implies a fear that the Athenians on the island might assail the putative blockading vessels: cf. Strassler 1988, p. 201, who believes such a blockade a real possibility.

32. Pritchett 1965, p. 23.

33. Thucydides (4.8.6 and 29.3) called the island "wooded and trackless," so the idea that some Spartan forces went there (as well as to Asine)

to gather wood is not unreasonable. For changes in the foliage since antiquity, see Pritchett 1965, p. 27. As a referee for this paper noted, however, the large size and special nature (chosen by lot) of the Spartan force ultimately stranded on the island suggest that this force was there for reasons other than overseeing helots (see n. 50, below).

34. I owe this observation to my wife, Jamie, who during our visit to

the site noted the necessity of posting a lookout on the high ground at the northern end of Sphakteria. I cannot accept, as do some (e.g., Lazenby 1985, p. 118), that the Spartans "failed to post watchers along the coast to warn of the approach of the Athenian fleet" and thus were surprised by the Athenians. The Spartans on Sphakteria would have had an excellent view of almost the entire theater of operations.

the island, one may raise two objections: (1) such a landing, as we have seen, would have offered the Athenians no material advantage (in terms of relieving their comrades at Pylos), so it is unclear why they would have attempted a landing or the Spartans put themselves to the trouble of opposing it; and (2) the Spartans did not in fact attempt to prevent the Athenians from landing or even post guards at any potential landing sites on the island.³⁵ Thus, the Athenians landed in secret and with apparent ease before the final battle on Sphakteria (4.31.1).

The Athenians had already been taking their lunches on the island before this point (4.30.2), for that is how the fire that eventually burned Sphakteria began.³⁶ Indeed, it seems difficult to imagine that a force of only 420 hoplites (4.8.9, 38.5) and their helot attendants could have prevented a landing of Athenians in force on an island as large as Sphakteria.³⁷ Of course, Demosthenes did not at first know how many Spartans occupied Sphakteria. While Thucydides reports that Demosthenes initially thought that the number of enemy troops was smaller than it eventually proved to be (4.30.3), he nonetheless describes the Athenians' original view of the mainland and the island as "full of hoplites" (4.13.3). Demosthenes, therefore, may have believed that a very large force occupied the island, and thus did not attempt a landing (where Spartan hoplites would have the advantage over the Athenians) during the sea battle in the harbor.³⁸

In short, the Spartan force stationed on Sphakteria could not prevent an Athenian landing on the island (as Thucydides implies it was meant to do) nor could it assist in the alleged Spartan blockade plan, which was impossible. I conclude that the Spartans stationed a significant force of hoplites on Sphakteria for some other reason.

THE SPARTAN PLAN

The above discussion suggests that the Spartan forces on Sphakteria formed part of a Spartan plan (other than blocking the bay's entrances) about which Thucydides was misinformed. Recalling Gomme's principle, let us return to Thucydides' description of the events themselves. After receiving a request for aid from Demosthenes, the main Athenian force, having arrived at Pylos from Zakynthos and finding "the mainland and the island full of hoplites,

35. Of course, as one referee of this paper noted, the situation changed after the Spartans lost the naval battle in the harbor and their men were cut off on the island. Preventing an Athenian landing at that point was crucial—where it had not been before—because now the men on the island could receive no assistance from the Spartan fleet. We can only assume, therefore, that the Spartans had concluded that the force stationed on the island was insufficient to prevent an Athenian landing.

36. Thucydides (4.30.2) character-

izes the fire as unintentional (ἄκοντος); see Gomme 1956, pp. 472, 488–489.

37. Cf. Wilson 1979, p. 107, on the difficulties. A few men stationed here and there could not prevent a landing on the long island of Sphakteria in the way that Demosthenes' men held off the assault on Pylos itself (Thuc. 4.9–12).

38. Later, perhaps wishing to palliate the effects of the fire on his decision to land Athenian forces, Demosthenes may have said that only after he saw that the Spartans were *even more numerous than he had thought* did he decide

to make a landing (4.30.3). Demosthenes understandably would not want to imply that he launched his attack only after the fire had allayed his fears that the Spartan force might be relatively large. (On the fire and its possible effects on Demosthenes' plans, see Roisman 1993, pp. 37–39.) In any case, Demosthenes could take his time before attempting a landing, since the Spartan forces on Sphakteria (whatever their number) posed no threat to the Athenians at Pylos, and in the end were attacked and captured for political and strategic, not tactical, reasons.

and the [Spartan] ships in the harbor and not sailing out, at a loss as to where they might come to anchor," spent the night on the desert island of Prote, "not far off" (Thuc. 4.13.3).³⁹ Although Spartans stationed on Sphakteria undoubtedly could have seen the Athenian fleet approaching Pylos for several kilometers before its arrival, the Peloponnesians made no effort to effect their supposed blockade plan on this day. Indeed, as Thucydides reports, even on the next morning the Lakedaimonians attempted neither to block the entrances of the bay nor to sail out and meet the Athenian forces on the open sea, but rather, "having neglected to close up the harbor," manned their ships and prepared "if anyone sailed in, *to fight in the harbor*" (4.13.4; emphasis added).

Now we must imagine a Spartan force of extreme laziness or ineptitude if we believe that even after the Athenian ships reached the area on the previous day they took no trouble to effect their putative plan "to block" the bay.⁴⁰ By not sailing out of the harbor to meet the Athenians, the Spartans risked the possibility of an Athenian landing on Sphakteria (and the Athenians did eventually land on the seaward side of the island: 4.31).⁴¹ As the Spartans did not take the time to convey their troops back to the mainland during the night that the Athenians spent on Prote, we can only conclude that they did not feel that the Athenian fleet's presence posed an unacceptable threat to the men on Sphakteria. As we have already concluded, they would not have left those men on the island unless they believed that the bay would remain safe territory for Peloponnesian ships (which could therefore reach their troops on the island) and the only way to ensure Spartan control of the bay was by naval battle.

The decision to leave the Spartan force on Sphakteria, therefore, suggests that the Spartans intended to do precisely what everyone knew they had done—engage the Athenian fleet in a naval battle within the bay. Perhaps they planned to close with the Athenians in the relatively constricted area between the southern end of Sphakteria and the mainland, and thus take advantage of a situation that would render somewhat more difficult the standard Athenian naval tactics of outflanking (the *periplous*) or breaking the line (the *diekplous*) and ramming amidships.⁴² The Athenians' actions at Naupaktos and Phormion's speech (Thuc. 2.86–92, especially 89.8) show that even a fairly broad area such as the entrance to the Gulf of Corinth (more than a kilometer and a half wide) could be considered constricted enough to disadvantage Athenian forces.⁴³

39. Prote (ca. 11 km from Pylos) may be seen from the Pylos promontory and Sphakteria: Pritchett 1994, p. 160, n. 27.

40. One might hypothesize that the Athenians attacked so early in the morning that the Spartans were caught off guard. However, the Spartans' occupation of Sphakteria and their excellent view of the area (n. 34, above) make this extremely unlikely. Moreover, Thucydides does not actually say that they were surprised. Cf. Westlake 1974, pp. 212, 216, who sees the problem, but

concludes that Thucydides implies that the Spartans were surprised (although he admits that they would have had ample warning of the Athenian fleet's approach and attack). Roisman (1993, p. 36) also concludes that the Spartans were surprised.

41. This was a negligible factor, however, since there would have been little reason for the Athenians to give up their superiority aboard ship to risk a land battle with the Spartans on Sphakteria: in the event of a successful naval engagement, they would cut off

the Spartan forces on Sphakteria, and in the event of a defeat, their own forces would be trapped on a hostile island.

42. Cf. Pritchett 1994, pp. 172–173, and Morrison, Coates, and Rankov 2000, pp. 67–68. For the tactics, see n. 45, below.

43. Phormion's tremendous victory there (in disadvantageous waters) surely made most Lakedaimonian commanders leery of sea battles with the Athenians: see Strassler 1990, pp. 111, 115.

The Spartans may have concluded that the bay itself was small enough to hinder the Athenians; in any case, it is smaller than the open ocean and had the added advantage of the surrounding shores, against which Athenian ships and troops might be driven. Given the Spartan occupation of Sphakteria, all of this shoreline (with the exception of the southern bit of Pylos) was now “hostile territory to the Athenians” (4.8.8 and above). That this apparent advantage proved illusory can tell us nothing, for we must confront the possibility that the Spartans overestimated their ability to defeat the Athenians in a sea battle by making use of the minor advantage that their position gave them.

In short, a naval battle must have been part of the Spartan plan, Thucydides’ assertion to the contrary notwithstanding. He relates an impossible Spartan plan to close up the harbor and prevent Athenians from anchoring there, informing us that the Spartans thought that “in all likelihood they would take the place [Pylos] by siege without a sea battle or danger” (σφεῖς δὲ ἄνευ τε ναυμαχίας καὶ κινδύνου ἐκπολιορκήσιν τὸ χωρίον κατὰ τὸ εἶκος, 4.8.8).⁴⁴ As we have noted, even if the Spartans had arrayed 58 of their 60 vessels abreast in the southern channel, there would have been enough room for the Athenian fleet to engage them and to effect the *diekplous*, though the operation would have been more difficult than in open waters.⁴⁵ A battle of some type—it must be emphasized again—could not be avoided by this putative Spartan strategy. Indeed, some scholars have recognized that the Spartans must have planned to fight to prevent easy access to the bay for the Athenians, despite Thucydides’ description of a plan explicitly designed to avoid such combat.⁴⁶

44. Wilson (1979, pp. 81–82), emphasizing that the phrase κατὰ τὸ εἶκος applies to the whole clause, suggests that Thucydides means only that the Spartans “hoped” or “thought they would probably” avoid a battle. The phrase is stronger than that, implying a degree of confidence based on probability and should be rendered “in all likelihood” (*vel sim.*). Wilson also maintains that after the Athenian squadron sailed away to Prote on the first day, the (now apparently very sanguine) Spartans may have believed that they “had gone for good” (p. 82). Wilson writes that this was not so unreasonable since the Athenians “would have to enter (by one entrance only, if the Spartans had blocked the Sikia [northern] channel) a λιμὴν the shores of which were (apart from the small area at Pylos) manned by Spartan hoplites, in face of a fleet half as large again as their own [*sic*]. It would not be clear to the Athenians that they would have anywhere to anchor their ships, or what they would gain by entering the λιμὴν” (p. 81). In

all this Wilson fails to allow for Athenian confidence in their naval superiority (60 Peloponnesian vessels hardly forming an insuperable obstacle to 50 Athenian ships: see Thuc. 2.86–92 for Phormion’s victories over fleets of 47 and 77 ships with a force of only 20 triremes) and to appreciate the Athenian position: to rescue the men on Pylos the Athenians *had* to force their way into the bay and defeat the Peloponnesian fleet (Westlake 1974, p. 216, n. 4). Since the Spartans must have realized this, they cannot have believed that the Athenian fleet had “gone for good” or that in all likelihood there would be no *naumachia*.

45. For the number of vessels necessary to block an area, see Morrison, Coates, and Rankov 2000, pp. 58–59; Wilson and Beardsworth 1970; and Wilson 1979, pp. 73–76. Allowing ca. 15 m per trireme, including oarsweep and a healthy margin for error, it would take about 80 triremes to fill a channel ca. 1,200 m wide. Even in this case the channel could only be said to be “blocked”

loosely, and the action would hardly qualify as κλήσειν (4.8.7). On the *diekplous*, in which ships attempted to sail through their opponents’ line in order to turn on their flanks, cf. Morrison, Coates, and Rankov 2000, pp. 43, 53–54; Lazenby 1987; and Holladay 1988. For the *periplous*, cf. Whitehead 1987, although I cannot accept his conclusion that the *periplous* was the tactic employed by the Athenian vessel that turned around a stationary merchantman in order to ram a trireme in pursuit (Thuc. 2.91). In Whitehead’s view, no third vessel or other obstacle was necessary to effect the maneuver. On the contrary, the merchantman prevented the pursuing trireme from maintaining its speed and making for the (now exposed) side of the turning Athenian ship, which would necessarily lose forward momentum in the act of coming about.

46. E.g., Pritchett 1994, p. 173, n. 42: “If we are to give any credibility to Lakedaemonian generalship, their purpose was to keep the Athenians

If the Spartans planned to fight in the bay, we can finally understand the reason for the contingent left on Sphakteria. During the sea battle in the bay, it would be their duty to present a shore at once friendly to their own forces and hostile to the Athenians (4.8.8). In this way they resembled the Persian force on the island of Psyttaleia at the battle of Salamis (Hdt. 8.76, 95).⁴⁷ Athenian ships or stragglers swimming from wrecks would thus have no safe place to retreat to during the battle, while the Peloponnesians might make their way to the nearest possible shore. Thus, the plan of the Spartans may have shared two elements with the battle of Salamis: control of a nearby island and naval engagement in a relatively constricted area.⁴⁸

Such a plan may also help explain the anomaly in Thucydides' text over closing the entrances of the bay, for a Spartan plan to fight in the harbor, especially in the southern passage, would benefit from blocking the smaller northern entrance. This action would prevent Athenian vessels from outflanking the Spartan fleet arrayed in the southern entrance. It seems unlikely, however, that the Spartans failed to see this necessity or to effect this part of their plan, and that therefore the Athenians "proceeded against them by *each* inlet" (4.14.1, emphasis added), gaining an immediate tactical advantage that helped decide the issue in their favor. Indeed, the failure of the Spartans to block the northern entrance, despite the obvious importance of doing so to force an engagement in the southern passage, suggests that the Spartans intended to fight the battle within the harbor itself rather than within the southern entrance.⁴⁹

It was a piece of bravado on both sides: the Spartans willing to risk their hoplites on the island as part of a plan to seek a naval victory against the Athenian fleet, and the Athenians sailing into a bay with shores almost entirely controlled by the enemy, where the wreck of any ship would mean almost certain disaster for all the men aboard. The Spartan plan proved the weaker, perhaps because the Spartans were not as quick as they might have been in manning their vessels and meeting the Athenians in the more constricted waters between Sphakteria and the mainland (if this was their plan), or more probably, because the bay itself (in which they intended to fight) offered the Athenians enough room to employ their superior naval skills. The upshot of the Spartan defeat was the isolation of the *homoioi* on Sphakteria, an event that must have been all the more execrable to the

from entering the bay." He also writes (p. 173): "Fifty eight ships . . . with prows facing the enemy . . . would have presented a formidable array. At the least, the position was better than fighting in the open sea off Sphakteria or in the bay itself, the only alternatives."

47. On the possible disinformation surrounding the Athenian action on Psyttaleia, see Fornara 1966. Land troops were not infrequently used to support naval forces: e.g., Thuc. 2.90.3–6, 7.70.1; see Morrison, Coates, and Rankov 2000, pp. 60, 75–76.

48. Of course there were great differences between the two battles. Thucydides implicitly compares the Athenians on Sphakteria with the Persians at Thermopylai (4.36.3: the Spartans in 425 are explicitly compared with Leonidas's forces); cf. 7.71.7 for a comparison of the Athenians at Syracuse with the Spartans at Pylos.

49. It is also possible that the Spartans wished to fight the Athenians in the northwest corner of Navarino Bay, just in front of their position assailing the southeast corner of Pylos. (A planned engagement here would in

some ways resemble Strassler's conception [1988] of a plan to protect the so-called cove harbor southeast of Pylos; see n. 11, above, and cf. Wilson and Beardsworth 1970 for the tactical significance of this area.) A successful landing by the Athenians here, after all, would have allowed the rescue of Demosthenes' forces, and the area was more constricted than the bay itself or the southern entrance. Thucydides, however, does not report such a plan, and its estimated usefulness (based on the actual topography) cannot explain the problems in Thucydides' account.

Peloponnesians because it could have been prevented by removing the men on the previous night. The decision not to remove these men can only be explained by a Spartan plan to risk a sea battle with the Athenians in the bay.⁵⁰

If one accepts this conclusion, it remains only to explain Thucydides' view of the Spartan plan, for we must face squarely the inadequacy either of the account the historian received or of the presentation of his own research. Thucydides himself can have had little reason to mischaracterize the Spartan plan, especially as the reaction to the Pylos campaign (in the form of Athenian refusals of Spartan peace offers) demonstrates so perfectly Athens' "over-reaching," a portentous theme of the account.⁵¹ That his likely informant Demosthenes slanted his report is suggested above, but it is hard to see why he would have invented a false Spartan strategy that added little to the glory of the Athenians or their commander.

Let us, therefore, return to the Spartans themselves, upon whom Thucydides may have relied for a good deal of his information about the battle. As an Athenian exile Thucydides would have had difficulty visiting Pylos to examine the topography as long as the site was held by the Athenians, who did not relinquish it until 409.⁵² Thucydides' sojourn in the Peloponnese and his expressed *modus operandi* (1.22, 5.26), however, assure us that he supplemented the account he received from Demosthenes and other Athenians with data from Peloponnesian informants, who, in turn, had both the motive and the opportunity to mislead him about their intentions at Pylos.⁵³ (All the more was this true in the period before the Spartiates captured on Sphakteria were returned as a consequence of the peace and subsequent alliance of 421.) Among the Spartans the reasons for the tremendous disaster at Pylos—involving the death or capture of so many hoplites—must have been widely discussed. It would not have been odd if blame ultimately came to rest not on the hoplites that had surrendered (who were still invaluable to the state) or the men that had failed to rescue them, but rather on the Spartan general staff or the commander himself. These men (or this man), in turn, needed a defense for their (his) apparent folly.⁵⁴

One must recognize the crucial problem faced by the Spartan leaders involved in the loss at Sphakteria: how to explain why the Spartiates

50. It may be that the Spartan plan to fight in the bay did not crystallize until the Athenians arrived (probably sooner than expected) on the day before the battle. In that case, the hoplites may have been positioned on Sphakteria for other purposes (e.g., as lookouts; see n. 34, above), but were left there overnight (perhaps with their forces augmented) as part of the plan to fight it out in the harbor on the next day should the Athenians offer battle. In any event, the fact that the final troops stationed on Sphakteria were "chosen by lot from all the companies" (4.8.9)

implies that they had a specific (and dangerous?) mission (see n. 33, above). Lazenby (1985, p. 114) discusses the possibility that units (*enomotiai*) rather than individuals were selected by lot.

51. See 4.17.4, the words of the Spartans, repeated by Thucydides himself at 21.2 and 41.4.

52. Diod. 13.64.5–7; cf. Xen. *Hell.* 1.2.18, with Gomme 1956, p. 484.

53. See Schwartz [1929] 1960, pp. 292–293: "Ist die Annahme nun wirklich so unerhört, dass er durch einer schlechten Bericht getäuscht

wurde? Etwa durch einen peloponnesischen, der die Besetzung von Sphakteria rechtfertigen wollte, die eine Torheit war, wenn der athenischen Flotte nicht die Zugänge zur Bucht versperrt wurden?" On Corinthian sources for Thucydides, see Stroud 1994.

54. Perhaps it was the nauarch Thrasymelidas (4.11.2) who decided to risk a sea battle with the Athenians in what appeared to him advantageous waters. Brasidas served only as a trierarch here (4.11.4).

captured by the Athenians had been left on this island in the first place. Admitting that they had intended to fight a *naumachia* with the Athenians exposed (in retrospect) their great hubris and poor judgment, if not a violation of Spartan policy.⁵⁵ Since, then, the commanders could not justify an actual *plan* to risk engagement with a large number of Athenian ships—a plan that led ultimately to the death or surrender of so many Spartiate hoplites—the Spartan leaders perhaps maintained that they had intended to block up the harbor, and take Pylos “without a naval engagement or danger.” This kind of plan comported with the apparently standard Spartan practice at that time of avoiding *naumachiai* with Athens (except in cases of overwhelming numerical superiority), and made the generals’ (or their subordinates’) mistake one of execution rather than of premeditated folly, risking *homoioi* in a foolhardy attempt to beat the Athenians at their own game and thus gain the glory attaching to such a victory.⁵⁶

It is disturbing to conclude that Thucydides, presented with inaccurate information by an elite Spartan source or sources (perhaps after first interviewing Athenians such as Demosthenes), failed to substantiate the Peloponnesian account by visiting the site himself or by interviewing additional Spartan or Athenian informants (or that if he did conduct such interviews, he was unable to correct many aspects of the Spartan report that he had already received). Of course, Thucydides might have altered the Pylos/Sphacteria narrative in the process of completing his work, perhaps after he had finally visited the site himself. The account’s relatively polished nature, however, forces us to consider the possibility that the historian had given the piece its finishing touches.

In the end, it seems most reasonable to conclude that the major problems in the narrative stem from Thucydides’ failure to examine the area. Handicapped by his inability to visit Pylos and gather the topographical information that would have exploded the Spartan story, Thucydides reported a seemingly reasonable plan to block up the two supposedly narrow entrances to the harbor. However, the actual topography of the region and the 420 Lakedaimonian hoplites marooned on the island of Sphacteria tell a different tale.

55. Strassler (1990, p. 115) argues that official Spartan naval strategy in this period centered on avoiding “open-water battles of maneuver with Athenian triremes,” and notes that on the one occasion when the Peloponnesians engaged in such a battle (Thuc. 3.76–79), they enjoyed an overwhelming numerical superiority and still adopted defensive tactics. If such a policy of avoiding certain kinds of naval battles existed, it would provide another reason the Spartan commanders needed an

explanation for their failed plans at Pylos.

56. Thus, I very much disagree with Westlake (1974, esp. p. 214), who concludes that there is “no trace of information obtained from anyone closely associated with [those] responsible for the direction of operations on the Peloponnesian side.” I would agree, however, that Thucydides understood the difficulty of obtaining “trustworthy and complete” evidence (p. 226) from his sources (including those from Sparta).

REFERENCES

- Bauslaugh, R. 1979. "The Text of Thucydides IV 8.6 and the South Channel at Pylos," *JHS* 99, pp. 1–6.
- Burrows, R. M. 1896. "Pylos and Sphacteria," *JHS* 16, pp. 55–76.
- . 1897. "Pylos and Sphacteria: A Reply to Mr. Grundy," *CR* 11, pp. 1–10.
- Davis, J. L., ed. 1998. *Sandy Pylos: An Archaeological History from Nestor to Navarino*, Austin.
- Fornara, C. W. 1966. "The Hoplite Achievement at Psytaleia," *JHS* 86, pp. 51–54.
- Gomme, A. W. 1937. *Essays in Greek History and Literature*, Oxford.
- . 1956. *A Historical Commentary on Thucydides* III, Oxford.
- . 1962. *More Essays in Greek History and Literature*, Oxford.
- Grundy, G. B. 1896. "An Investigation of the Topography of the Region of Sphacteria and Pylos," *JHS* 16, pp. 1–54.
- Holladay, A. J. 1988. "Further Thoughts on Trireme Tactics," *GaR* 35, pp. 149–151.
- Hornblower, S. 1991. *A Commentary on Thucydides* I, Oxford.
- . 1996. *A Commentary on Thucydides* II, Oxford.
- Kagan, D. 1974. *The Archidamian War*, Ithaca.
- Kennelly, J. 1994. "Thucydides' Knowledge of Herodotus" (diss. Brown Univ.).
- Lazenby, J. F. 1985. *The Spartan Army*, Warminster.
- . 1987. "The Diekplous," *GaR* 34, pp. 169–177.
- McDonald, W. A., and G. R. Rapp, eds. 1972. *The Minnesota Messenia Expedition: Reconstructing a Bronze Age Regional Environment*, Minneapolis.
- Morrison, J., J. Coates, and N. B. Rankov. 2000. *The Athenian Trireme*, 2nd ed., Cambridge.
- Pritchett, W. K. 1965. *Studies in Ancient Greek Topography* I (University of California Publications in Classical Studies 1), Berkeley.
- . 1994. *Essays in Greek History*, Amsterdam.
- Roisman, J. 1993. *The General Demosthenes and His Use of Military Surprise* (*Historia Einzelschriften* 78), Stuttgart.
- Rubincam, C. 2001. "The Topography of Pylos and Sphacteria and Thucydides' Measurements of Distance," *JHS* 121, pp. 77–90.
- Schwartz, E. [1929] 1960. *Das Geschichtswerk des Thukydides*, 3rd (unaltered) ed., Hildesheim.
- Silhanek, D. K. 1970. "Pylos Revisited: Thucydides' Primary Source," *CW* 64, pp. 10–13.
- Strassler, R. B. 1988. "The Harbor of Pylos," *JHS* 108, pp. 198–203.
- . 1990. "The Opening of the Pylos Campaign," *JHS* 110, pp. 110–125.
- Stroud, R. S. 1994. "Thucydides and Corinth," *Chiron* 24, pp. 267–304.
- Westlake, H. D. 1974. "The Naval Battle at Pylos and Its Consequences," *CQ* 24, pp. 211–226.
- Whitehead, I. 1987. "The Periplous," *GaR* 34, pp. 178–185.
- Wilamowitz-Moellendorf, U. von. 1921. "Sphacteria," in *Sitzungsberichte der Preussischen Akademie der Wissenschaften*, Phil.-Hist. Klasse, pp. 306–318 (= *Kleine Schriften* III, Berlin 1969, pp. 406–419).
- Wilson, J. B. 1979. *Pylos 425 B.C.: A Historical and Topographical Study of Thucydides' Account of the Campaign*, Warminster.
- Wilson, J., and T. Beardsworth. 1970. "Pylos 425 B.C.: The Spartan Plan to Block the Entrances," *CQ* 20, pp. 42–52.

Loren J. Samons II

BOSTON UNIVERSITY

DEPARTMENT OF CLASSICAL STUDIES

745 COMMONWEALTH AVENUE

BOSTON, MASSACHUSETTS 02215

ljs@bu.edu