



The Topography of the Pylos Campaign and Thucydides' Literary Themes

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THE TOPOGRAPHY OF THE PYLOS CAMPAIGN AND THUCYDIDES' LITERARY THEMES

ABSTRACT

Thucydides' account of the Spartan defeat at Pylos in 425 B.C. has long been plagued by supposed topographical errors for which there is no agreed-upon explanation. A comparison of the Pylos episode in Book 4 with the description of Phormion's sea battles in Book 2 suggests that certain literary themes, namely, the respective characterizations of the Athenians and Spartans, might have led the historian to alter several topographical details in order to support his attributions of motive to the Athenians and Spartans at Pylos.

INTRODUCTION

Thucydides' account of the Pylos campaign of 425 B.C. (4.1–41) has long troubled modern students of his work because of supposed errors in topographical details, as well as deliberate distortions, or perhaps overemphases, in the narrative.¹ Since F. M. Cornford first proposed that Thucydides embellished the element of chance (τύχη) in his narrative, many scholars have taken up this notion, suggesting numerous possible reasons for the distortion, or questioning whether such a distortion in fact exists.² Several solutions for the topographical problems have been offered, ranging from manuscript errors, to lack of autopsy on the part of the historian, to suppositions that the errors either do not exist or have been grossly exaggerated by modern scholarship.³ It has been recently argued in this journal that disingenuous Spartan sources are to blame for Thucydides' errors.⁴ As it stands, there is no clear consensus.

1. Hunter R. Rawlings III provided much guidance and many helpful comments for earlier drafts of this paper. I also benefited from discussions with Jack Davis while visiting Pylos with members of the American School of Classical Studies at Athens in October 2007. Finally, I would like to thank

Hesperia's editor and anonymous reviewers for their valuable suggestions.

2. Cornford 1907, pp. 82–109; for additional commentary and bibliography on the role of chance, see Hornblower 1996, pp. 149–150.

3. For a discussion and bibliography of the scholarship concerning the

topography, see Gomme 1956, pp. 482–486; see also Pritchett 1965, pp. 6–29; 1994, pp. 145–179; Bauslaugh 1979; Wilson 1979 (where the entire episode, including the topography, is discussed in detail); Strassler 1988; and Rubincam 2001.

4. Samons 2006.

As a historian, Thucydides was concerned with demonstrating the paradigmatic nature of his work, and indeed of history itself. In the “Archaeology” (1.2–19), he reveals for the reader the painstaking methods he employed in researching his subject, with the intention of making the account that follows seem as accurate as possible. Human nature being what it is (κατὰ τὸ ἀνθρώπινον), Thucydides goes on to say, a thorough examination of this accurate account can be used to recognize the nature of similar occurrences (τοιούτων καὶ παραπλησίων, 1.22.4) in the future. To demonstrate this principle, Thucydides provides several clear comparisons between events occurring during the span of the Peloponnesian War, and indeed some occurring in prior times, to show that they are parallel.⁵ It all seems to fit together splendidly: if events within the scope of Thucydides’ own inquiry are manifestly equivalent in essential character, it follows that events in the future, even infinitely into the future, will fall within the paradigmatic template laid out by means of the Peloponnesian War.

Although strong similarities do exist between historical events, even those separated by millennia, they are usually not as strictly parallel as Thucydides’ doctrine contends. In the face of such discrepancies between a philosophical ideal and a *de facto* reality, Thucydides seems at times constrained to embellish events in his narrative to fit the paradigm. Indeed, in the Pylos episode, the correlation between the topographical anomalies and certain narrative features might explain the “errors” in his account. Thucydides organizes his history throughout by certain themes, many of which have been clearly demarcated by scholars, while certainly others remain latent. I contend that the errors in the description of the topography around Pylos enhance Thucydides’ characterization of the Spartans and Athenians, and as such need not be seen as errors at all, but as examples of literary license, liberties taken with the historical and geographical truth in order to improve the characters and story line of history.

TOPOGRAPHICAL PROBLEMS

Long ago G. B. Grundy brought to the fore what he believed to be serious topographical errors in Thucydides’ account of the Pylos campaign.⁶ The most notable of these have been usefully summarized by A. W. Gomme.⁷ A wide array of scholarship has been generated concerning the topography of the region (Fig. 1), yielding disparate conclusions that to my mind have left no satisfactory explanation for several problems.⁸ For the purposes of this article I will largely omit discussion of the nature of the Athenian fortifications and the terrain of Pylos itself; the existence in antiquity, or lack thereof, of the Osmanaga lagoon; and other questions regarding possible landing and encampment sites of the respective forces. Instead, I will focus on the three problems that deal with measurements in particular and lend themselves to possible literary explanations:

1. The Bay of Navarino, which Thucydides describes as a λιμὴν and contrasts with the εὐρυχωρία of the open ocean (4.13.3–4), is extremely large.
2. Thucydides gives 15 stades as the length of Sphacteria (4.8.6), which in reality is over 24 stades.

5. The bibliography for such a complex subject is accordingly vast. See especially Rawlings 1981 for the argument that Thucydides saw the Peloponnesian War as two parallel 10-year wars, and that had he completed his history, it would have consisted of two parallel groupings of five books each.

6. Grundy 1896.

7. Gomme 1956, pp. 482–486.

8. See above, n. 3.

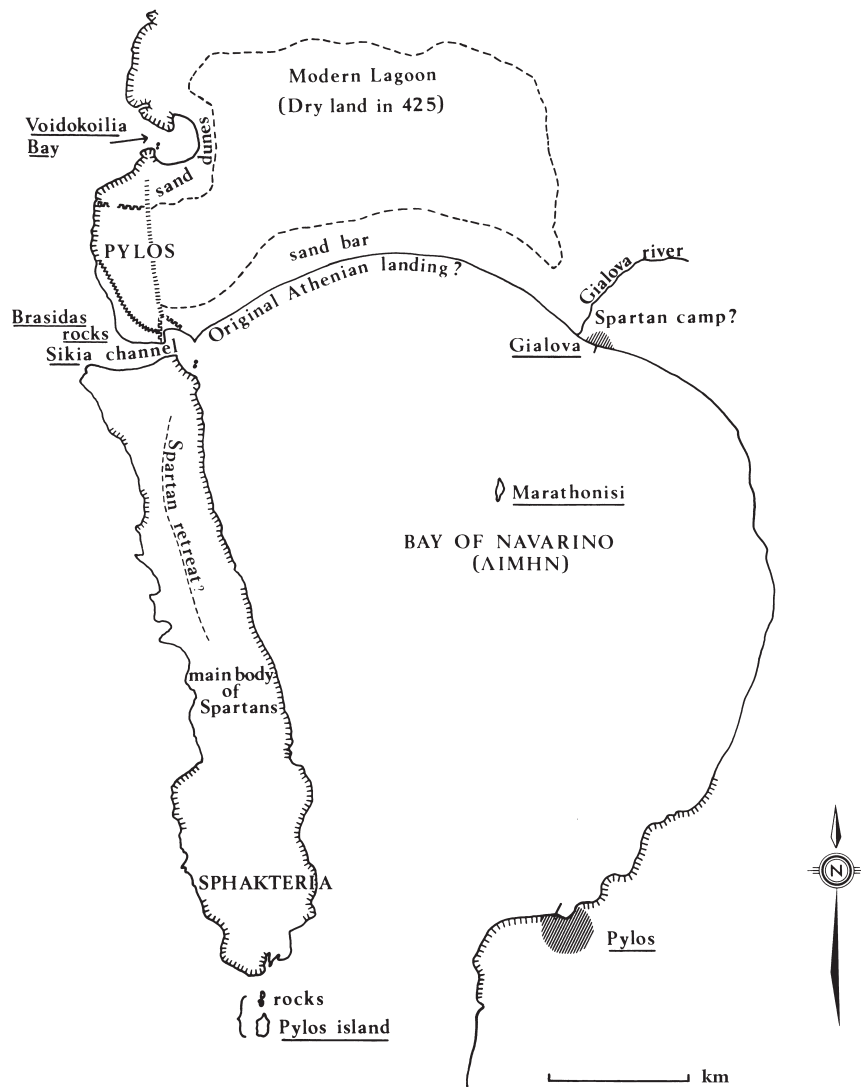


Figure 1. Map of Pylos and Sphacteria. After Wilson 1979, p. 143, map B, courtesy Aris & Phillips and Oxbow Books

3. Thucydides claims that the Spartans wished to block the southern channel into the harbor, which had room for eight or nine ships to sail through (4.8.5–6), though in reality the channel is well over a kilometer wide and would be impossible to block effectively.

The first problem has been tackled in various ways. Gomme is of the opinion that the Bay of Navarino, or Thucydides' λιμήν, can in no way be described as a harbor since it is more accurately an arm of the sea that would offer no suitable protection for ancient ships. Moreover, this bay would have "provided εὐρυχωρία almost as well as the open sea."⁹ Pritchett directly counters this view, arguing that the Bay of Navarino would have provided adequate shelter for ancient ships, as modern vessels of equivalent size to those in use in 425 are able to anchor in the bay quite well.¹⁰ He also challenges the notion that Thucydides could not have used the term λιμήν to describe such a significant body of water, and offers numerous examples of similar usage in Thucydides and other authors.¹¹ It is not the terminology with respect to the size of the body of water that is problematic, but rather Thucydides' comparison of the bay with the εὐρυχωρία of the

9. Gomme 1956, p. 483.

10. Pritchett 1965, pp. 16–17.

11. Pritchett 1965, pp. 16–17; 1994, pp. 149–151.

open sea (4.13.3). This implies that in terms of a naval battle, the open ocean would provide the Athenian fleet ample room for maneuver *as opposed to* the bay, while in reality an ancient fleet of considerable size would, for all practical purposes, enjoy an equivalent area for maneuver in the bay. Pritchett's comments may be valid with respect to both the shelter afforded by the Bay of Navarino and its description as a λιμὴν, but Thucydides' contrast between the bay and the εὐρυχωρία of the open ocean has yet to be explained.

Several explanations have been offered for the second difficulty, namely, the length of Sphakteria. As there is such a great disparity between Thucydides' measurement of 15 stades and the actual length of the island, nearly 10 stades greater, many scholars have placed the blame on the manuscript tradition rather than on the historian, and have accordingly suggested an emendation to the text.¹² Recently, Catherine Rubincam has argued that Thucydides is merely estimating the length of the island, signified by his use of both περί and μάλιστα as qualifiers for this measurement (4.8.6).¹³ She additionally stresses that ancient measurements in general were not as accurate as modern ones, and that it is unreasonable to hold ancient historians to modern standards of accuracy. To my mind, even in spite of the use of the qualifiers, Thucydides' measurements are so inaccurate as to require additional explanation.¹⁴

The third problem is by far the most vexing. In 4.8.6, Thucydides, while giving a description of the island of Sphakteria, states that the northern channel into the harbor has room for two ships to sail through, while the southern has room for eight or nine. Although his measurement concerning the northern channel is reasonably accurate, the southern channel is well over a kilometer wide and would have had room for dozens of ships to sail through. The problem becomes still more acute when Thucydides attributes to the Spartans a detailed plan involving blocking the entrances to the harbor, a plan that is entirely unfeasible given the width of the southern channel. Thus, the error is no longer one of mere measurement but may entail serious implications for our understanding of Thucydides' attributions of motive to his characters.

As in the case of the length of Sphakteria, some editors have proposed an emendation to the text. Recently, Robert Bauslaugh has suggested the addition of a single word, σταδίων, to the description, arguing that Thucydides meant to convey a width of two ships for the northern channel, but eight or nine *stades* for the southern.¹⁵ Pritchett, who had initially argued that the width of the southern channel was indeed an error, albeit the only one in Thucydides' description of Pylos, was later convinced by Bauslaugh's suggestion.¹⁶ J. B. Wilson has cleverly posited that Thucydides' error was one neither of measurement nor of Spartan motive, but rather one of location. The Spartans, according to his reasoning, had intended to block the entrance to Voidokoilia Bay (Fig. 1), a small bay to the north of the Athenian fortifications wide enough only for eight or nine ships, rather than the southern channel into the harbor.¹⁷ This suggestion is carefully argued, yet we are still left with a significant error on the part of the historian.

12. See, e.g., Wilson 1979, pp. 52–53.

13. Rubincam 2001, pp. 81–82.

14. Also discussed, with bibliography, in Pritchett 1965, pp. 21–22.

15. Bauslaugh 1979; see also Hornblower's discussion (1996, pp. 159–160). This emendation has been incorporated into the text of P. J. Rhodes's 1998 edition.

16. For his former view, see Pritchett 1965, p. 29; for the latter, see Pritchett 1994, pp. 167–169.

17. Wilson 1979, pp. 73–84.

LITERARY THEMES

Before returning to a discussion of the topographical difficulties, let us explore the literary themes that Thucydides may have wished to emphasize in this episode. Following Cornford, chance, *τύχη*, undeniably plays a vital role in the entire affair, often to seemingly absurd lengths.¹⁸ Moreover, it is an unmistakable force throughout both Thucydides' narrative and the speeches of his characters. Some interventions of *τύχη* are truly incredible, most notably the fire on Sphakteria that allowed the Athenians to see the Spartan positions. In the previous year of the war, Demosthenes, the Athenian general at Pylos, had suffered a great loss of his best hoplites at the hands of light-armed Aitolians in a thick wood (3.94–98). Thucydides tells us that Demosthenes had this very disaster in mind when he attempted to formulate a plan of attacking the Spartans on the island, yet he was apprehensive about suffering disaster by again fighting in an unfamiliar wooded area. It was only the fire, started initially by an Athenian who had landed on the northern tip of the island in order to cook a meal, that cleared the island of wood and emboldened Demosthenes (4.29.2–30.2). It strains credulity to imagine that Demosthenes, meditating on the lessons of the Aitolian disaster, did not deliberately set the fire that in large part led to his success.¹⁹ Likewise, the collaboration between Kleon and Demosthenes at Pylos seems too perfect to have come about by mere chance, particularly in Nikias's relinquishing of command to his rival by a spur-of-the-moment decision in the assembly (4.27.5–28.4). This has led some to suggest that careful calculations and a prior arrangement between Kleon and Demosthenes molded events into a shrewd, preestablished plan.²⁰

As a result of these oddities, scholars have explored a wide range of possible motivations on the part of Thucydides. Cornford proposes that Thucydides meant to show *τύχη* as a personified actor in the episode.²¹ E. C. Woodcock suggests that the element of *τύχη* is overplayed in order to diminish the success of Kleon, for whom Thucydides had overwhelming enmity.²² Virginia Hunter attempts to demonstrate that in this episode the considerable *γνώμη* of Athenians such as Phormion has been replaced by *τύχη*, which certainly places Demosthenes in an unfavorable light. The loss of Athenian *γνώμη* would have its fullest effect in the Sicilian disaster.²³ Lowell Edmunds insists that the element of chance highlights Thucydides' disdain for the Pylos campaign, and that it is the victory of the Spartans at Mantinea that reestablishes the proper order of things. There, the Spartans demonstrate to the Greek world that they were beaten by mere *τύχη* in the past, while their *γνώμη* is revealed to be the same as ever (5.73.3).²⁴ In the face of such claims, W. R. Connor argues that it is neither animosity nor an overemphasis on chance that dictates the unusual, and perhaps inaccurate, style of the account, but rather dramatic considerations. The overwhelming aspect of the entire affair, according to Connor, is the absolute surprise that the outcome engenders. This surprise is amplified in the minds of Thucydides' readers as they are led through a string of fast-paced, seemingly random occurrences that eventually collide to produce the greatest paradox (*παρὰ γνώμην*) of the entire war.²⁵

18. See above, n. 2.

19. For the notion that Demosthenes planned the fire, see Woodcock 1928, p. 101; Stahl 1966, p. 151; Best 1969, p. 21; Hunter 1973, p. 72; Hornblower 1996, p. 189.

20. The idea was first suggested by Grote 1851, pp. 476–481; see further Gomme 1956, p. 486; Kagan 1974, p. 242; van de Maele 1980, pp. 121–124; Hornblower 1996, pp. 188–189; Rhodes 1998, p. 229; Lazenby 2004, p. 75.

21. Cornford 1907, pp. 82–109.

22. Woodcock 1928.

23. Hunter 1973, pp. 68–81.

24. Edmunds 1975, pp. 178, 183–184.

25. Connor 1984, pp. 109–116.

Although some scholars maintain Thucydides' "innocence" with regard to any possible distortions, however small, of historical reality, the weight of the evidence indicates that some literary license is at play here.²⁶ In spite of all the ideas that have been advanced, two central themes, readily discernible in other passages in the work, have been overlooked with respect to his account of the Pylos affair. The Spartans are consistently portrayed, at least during the early years of the war, as inept in executing plans, however carefully laid. Furthermore, they are shown to be incapable of dealing with any unforeseen twists of fortune that may arise in the course of carrying out such plans. The Athenians, by contrast, not only appear more capable in the formation of plans, but they also excel at responding decisively to whatever turn of events, positive or negative, they find themselves confronted with in the course of a military action. Nowhere are these themes more evident than in Phormion's stunning naval victories in the Gulf of Corinth (2.79–92). In keeping with his paradigmatic program, Thucydides carefully develops these themes throughout his account of the Athenian success at Pylos. Yet in order to do this effectively, he is compelled to alter some key topographical details of the region, namely, the size of the Bay of Navarino, the length of Sphacteria, and the width of the southern channel.

PHORMION'S PARADIGM

Near the end of his second book, Thucydides vividly illustrates two spectacular naval victories of the Athenian admiral Phormion.²⁷ In the first engagement, the Athenians caught a much larger Peloponnesian fleet off guard as it attempted to transport troops across the Gulf of Corinth (2.83–84). The Peloponnesians, relying on their superior numbers, did not expect the Athenians to attack and so were forced to fight in open water (εὐρυχωρία). This gave the skilled Athenian sailors room to maneuver as they pleased. Demonstrating a marked lack of skill with respect to naval matters, the Peloponnesians formed a tight circle with their ships, effectively trapping their fastest and most capable vessels in the middle (2.83.5). The Athenians, under the expert leadership of Phormion, exploited the situation brilliantly, making use of their own naval skill as well as favorable weather conditions to force the enemy ships into an ever-tighter circle until they ran afoul of one another (2.84). In the end, several Peloponnesian ships were destroyed and many were captured along with their crews.

This first battle aptly demonstrates several aspects of the themes in question. First of all, the Peloponnesians failed to plan for the possibility of an Athenian attack, and so were caught by surprise. Second, when it was apparent that they would be forced to engage the enemy, the measures taken were flawed and demonstrated a "curious failure to understand the proper use of 'fast' ships in battle."²⁸ This failure of naval tactics cannot be explained away by Sparta's inexperience on the sea, since the fleet on this occasion was made up primarily of Corinthians, no strangers to naval warfare. Conversely, the Athenians not only crafted and strictly adhered to an expert plan, but they also made full use of the local weather conditions.

The second engagement is even more instructive. In response to the initial defeat, the Spartans sent a board of advisers to the Peloponnesian admiral Knemos and his fleet. They were to prepare carefully for another

26. Pritchett is the arch-defender of the Greek historians Herodotos and Thucydides. See his especially polemical denunciation of Thucydides' critics, 1994, pp. 146–147, n. 1.

27. For an excellent discussion of Thucydides' artful battle narratives, especially some of the literary elements in play in the account of Phormion's victories, see de Romilly 1956, pp. 123–150.

28. Morrison and Coates 1986, p. 71.

battle, even sending for additional ships to supplement their already large fleet (2.85). This time, there would be no lack of preparation on the part of the Peloponnesians. Their plan was as follows: the fleet, now 77 ships strong, working in conjunction with the large land army that had arrived for support, would refuse to sail out into the open water and, by sailing toward the Athenian base at Naupaktos, would attempt to lure the Athenians into narrower waters where their superior maneuverability would be of no use (2.90.1). It was a clever plan in theory, and, as the initial part of the battle would show, it nearly achieved success. For his part, Phormion, addressing his troops, said that as far as he could help it (*ἐκὼν εἶναι*), he would not sail into the narrower waters (2.89.8). Yet he acknowledged implicitly that necessity might force the Athenians to fight in less-than-favorable conditions, which in fact it did.²⁹

After several days of stalemate, the Peloponnesians, finally deciding to force Phormion into the narrows, sailed in careful formation toward Naupaktos. Phormion, against his will (*ἄκων*), embarked and sailed to defend the place. At this moment, the Peloponnesian plan swung into full effect: their ships turned in an instant and bore down upon the Athenians, who were sailing in single file, driving them toward the shore. Eleven Athenian ships managed to escape the net, making for open water, but the remaining ships were effectively pinned down. It seemed a clear victory for the Peloponnesians, who sent 20 ships to pursue the fleeing Athenian vessels (2.90). At this point, 10 of the Athenian ships reached Naupaktos and turned, ready to face the enemy. The last remaining Athenian ship, closely pursued by a Leukadian vessel while the rest of the following Peloponnesians were singing the victory paean, quickly circled around a skiff that happened (*ἔτυχε*) to be anchored offshore and rammed its pursuer amidships, sinking it. Such an unexpected twist of fortune (*γενομένου τούτου ἀπροσδοκίτου, παρὰ λόγον*) struck fear into the hearts of the Peloponnesians, who were sailing in disarray (*ἀτάκτως*) in the elation of victory (2.91). The Athenians, taking courage at the sinking of this ship and falling upon the surprised enemy, who offered only a brief resistance, turned a likely defeat into an astonishing second victory (2.92).

Here Thucydides' theme is starkly apparent. The Peloponnesians had crafted a shrewd plan and were able to draw the Athenians unwillingly into a situation in which they were nearly destroyed by a well-conceived Peloponnesian formation. Yet the Peloponnesians displayed their ineptitude by failing to remain disciplined until victory was completely assured. The Athenians, by contrast, maintained order despite suffering a crushing initial blow and effected a brilliant reversal by capitalizing on an unforeseen twist of fortune, namely, the anchored skiff. In the first engagement, the Athenians had demonstrated their capability in crafting and executing a clever plan. In the second, although forced against their will into an unfavorable situation, they showed that in the absence of such a plan, they were still able to overcome ill fortune and utilize any and every bit of good fortune to their advantage. The Peloponnesians, despite having formulated a useful plan, and despite having implemented it successfully in the initial stages of the battle, were unable to follow the plan through to victory. Additionally, they proved incapable of dealing with any unforeseen setback, however small, without falling apart. Thucydides thus presents a clear dichotomy between the two sides.

29. See de Romilly 1956, pp. 138–150, on the phenomenon of the two speeches affording a preview of the actual battle.

THE SPARTANS AND ATHENIANS AT PYLOS

Although there are significant differences between the accounts of Phormion's victories and the Pylos episode, the Spartans' ineptitude and the Athenians' resourcefulness are highlighted in both. One should hesitate in assigning only one, or even two or three, exclusive themes to any of the narratives of a writer as complex as Thucydides. By the same token, it is reasonable to assume that the element of chance could be playing a larger role in the Pylos episode for particular reasons, as could the element of dramatic surprise, and so forth. Furthermore, perhaps Thucydides does have a political point to make in this passage, criticizing the likes of Kleon—and even Demosthenes, as some would say.³⁰ Be that as it may, the Athenians' ability to capitalize on their good fortune and cope with setbacks, and the Spartans' inability to carry out any plan, no matter how reasonable, or deal with unforeseen reversals, are features of the Pylos episode and fit neatly within the paradigm established by Phormion's victories in Book 2.

Early in the narrative, Thucydides outlines the Spartan plan for assaulting the Athenian fortifications on Pylos and dealing with the fleet that would surely come to the Athenians' aid from Zakynthos (4.8.4–9). It was a complicated scheme that involved attacking the fortifications from both land and sea, as well as denying the approaching Athenian fleet a base of operations either in the harbor or on the island, which would allow the Spartans to defeat the Athenian troops at Pylos by siege if necessary. It is here that Thucydides gives his topographical description of the island of Sphakteria and of the entrances to the harbor. A key element of the Spartan plan was to prevent the Athenians from having access to the harbor, and in order to do this they had decided to block the channels around Sphakteria. This aspect of the plan seems carefully reasoned and indeed quite plausible, given Thucydides' description of the channels as wide enough only for two ships and eight or nine ships, respectively.

Thucydides informs us that when the Athenian fleet arrived, their intention was to engage the Peloponnesian ships in the open sea (ἐς τὴν εὐρυχωρίαν), but they were nonetheless prepared to fight in the harbor if the Peloponnesians were unwilling to come out to meet them (4.13.3). This intention is reminiscent of Phormion's desire to fight in the open as much as he could. And yet a key aspect of the Athenian plan in both instances is that they were prepared to fight in less-than-ideal circumstances if compelled. In order for this parallel to be established, Thucydides leaves the impression with his readers that the harbor *did not* offer the εὐρυχωρία of the open sea for the purposes of a naval engagement.

When the naval battle commenced, the Spartans were preparing to meet the Athenians *inside* the harbor and neglected to block the entrances despite their earlier intentions (ἃ διενοήθησαν). Seeing this, the Athenians sailed in by both entrances, capturing several ships and disabling others before the Spartans were even prepared to fight. This caused a panic among the Spartans, who feared for their men on the island, and they rushed headlong into the sea in full armor to rescue the ships that the Athenians had begun to drag away. In spite of a valiant effort on the part of the

30. See, e.g., Woodcock 1928.

Spartans, the Athenians carried the day by taking full advantage of their good fortune (βουλόμενοι τῇ παρουσίᾳ τύχῃ ὡς ἐπὶ πλεῖστον ἐπεξεληθεῖν), achieving naval supremacy. The Spartan soldiers were effectively trapped on Sphakteria, around which the Athenians began to sail, establishing a makeshift blockade (4.14).

The leaders in Sparta saw these events as a great misfortune (ξυμφορὰ μεγάλη). In response, they decided to seek an armistice with the Athenians at Pylos and then to send envoys to Athens to sue for terms (4.15). In accordance with the agreed-upon armistice, the Spartans surrendered all of their ships in Lakonia, about 60 in number—an enormous concession. Their envoys at Athens stressed the vicissitudes of fortune (ξυμφορὰ, τύχη) throughout their entire speech, calling on the Athenians to be reasonable and make peace with Sparta with the aim of becoming co-masters of Greece (4.17–20). In response to this speech, Kleon, grasping for more (ὠρέγοντο), first countered by demanding that the prisoners be brought to Athens and previous Athenian territorial losses to Sparta be returned (4.21.3). When the Spartans at first made no reply and instead desired to enter into backroom negotiations with Athenian notables, the fiery Kleon refused to relent, continuing to press home (πολύς ἐνέκειτο) the Athenian victory. He thus drove the Spartans out of Athens before an agreement was made (4.22). The armistice promptly came to an end, although the Athenians held the Spartan ships on a technicality, and the siege continued for several weeks until Kleon later arrived with reinforcements.

It is in this naval battle and its immediate aftermath that the themes in question are most readily apparent. The Spartans had crafted a clever plan, much as they had done for the second battle near Naupaktos. Yet again, for reasons not fully explained, the plan failed in its implementation, or in this case, its non-implementation. Although the Spartans had planned to block the entrances to the harbor, the measure fell through at the critical moment, further demonstrating the Spartan inability to effectively execute such a plan in its entirety. The Athenians, on the other hand, seeing that their best-case scenario, with the Spartans coming out to face them in the εὐρυχωρία, was not going to happen, were nonetheless ready to sail into the harbor and confront the Spartan fleet in unfavorable conditions. Furthermore, in the course of the battle, Thucydides explicitly tells us, the Athenians did not fail to take full advantage of their initial good fortune, and pressed on to total victory much as they had done after the sinking of the Leukadian vessel described in Book 2. The presence of fortune as a key player throughout the Pylos narrative is undeniable, but Thucydides gives equal emphasis to the Athenian ability to capitalize on good fortune.

At the loss of but a few ships, the Spartans were panic-stricken by what they saw as a great disaster and were willing to make huge concessions to the Athenians in the terms of the armistice. They additionally were willing to sue for peace and even friendship with the Athenians. Westlake attempts an explanation, arguing that although the Spartan defeat in the Bay of Navarino was far from total—they still had over 60 ships to concede—they simply exploited this opportunity to seek the peace they had wanted all along.³¹ One can never be sure whether this was the true Spartan motive. In light of the paradigm established by the account of Phormion's victories,

31. Westlake 1974.

however, it seems that Thucydides means to portray the Spartans as unable to cope with any unanticipated setback. They thus overreacted.

Many scholars have cited Kleon's refusal to grant the Spartans peace, or any concessions for that matter, as evidence of Thucydides' criticism of Athenian overconfidence and reckless greed. The failure on the part of Athens to make use of their good fortune in moderation would later return to haunt them in the Spartan victory at Mantinea and ultimately in the Sicilian disaster.³² Yet here, Kleon is admirably seeking to take full advantage of the Athenians' good fortune. The verb used to illustrate his vitriolic response to the Spartans, ἐγκεῖσθαι, is used by Thucydides elsewhere to describe an army pressing home the victory against a defeated foe.³³ Kleon aims for a total rout of the Spartans, and in the end the Athenians achieve one of the most stunning successes of the entire war in their capture of nearly 300 Spartan prisoners. Again, the Athenians are shown to be experts in making full use of whatever advantage, foreseen or otherwise, happens to come their way.

CONCLUSIONS

The "botched" topographical details of the region are essential to Thucydides' characterization of the Athenians and Spartans in the early part of the Pylos episode. First of all, the harbor must be conveyed as distinctly lacking in εὐρυχωρία in order to highlight Athenian versatility in terms of a willingness to fight in disadvantageous conditions. In reality, the bay is an expanse of several square kilometers in which even the storied Battle of Navarino was fought during the Greek War of Independence in the 19th century between much larger ships of the line. Triremes of the 5th century B.C. would have had ample space in which to maneuver as extensively as the skill of their crews would allow. Second, by portraying Sphacteria as significantly shorter than it is, Thucydides gives the impression of a smaller island blocking the entrance to an accordingly smaller harbor. Finally, the description of the southern channel around Sphacteria as wide enough only for eight or nine ships to sail through gives credibility to the Spartan plan of blocking the harbor entrances—a plan that in all probability never existed—and thus compounds the Spartan failure to carry it out.

It is true that for the actual measurements Thucydides adds qualifiers: in the case of the southern channel, he says eight *or* nine ships, indicating an imprecision; and for the length of the island he adds both περί and μάλιστα, further stressing the imprecision.³⁴ Also, he states that the λιμὴν is by no means small (οὐ μικρός, 4.13.4). Yet even if the latter is a case of

32. According to Hunter (1973, pp. 70–81), Thucydides means to convey that for the Athenians τύχη has replaced γνώμη in this episode, leading to hubris in the form of πλεονεξία in the Athenians as a group and Kleon in particular; this hubris would only intensify until culminating in the Sicilian

expedition. Finley (1963, p. 195) argues that Thucydides was against Athens' post-Periklean commitment to a war of expansion; thus, Kleon should have accepted Sparta's terms.

33. The use of this verb in a military context is pointed out by Rhodes 1998, p. 221; see the following relevant pas-

sages: 1.49.7; 2.79.6; 2.81.8; 3.98.1; 5.73.3. Among historians, it is debated whether or not Kleon was strategically right to reject the terms; Lazenby (2004, pp. 73–74) thinks that he probably was.

34. For these qualifiers, see Rubincam 2001, pp. 81–82.

litotes, in effect calling the harbor quite large, the indelible impression left on his readers is the contrast made between the λιμὴν and the εὐρυχωρία of the open sea. This is especially poignant in light of the earlier account of Phormion's victories in which such a contrast is central. Scholars fervently debate whether or not Thucydides had ever visited the region himself.³⁵ Most recently, Loren J. Samons II has argued that a reliance on faulty and disingenuous Spartan sources is to blame for the errors.³⁶ According to Samons, Thucydides' Spartan sources, aiming at presenting themselves in a more favorable light, wished to convey to the historian that they had indeed crafted a credible plan at Pylos. This view, however, is difficult to square with the absolute failure of the Spartans to carry out the plan, which would have discredited them even further. A lack of autopsy might suggest that Thucydides used qualifiers because he had to rely on data from sources impossible to confirm. It has also been used to explain the great topographical errors in the first place, since many would argue that Thucydides could never have made such errors himself. On the other hand, Thucydides seems to claim a detailed knowledge of events at Pylos, and his account is rife with minute and striking detail, suggesting that he had been there at some point, perhaps even as part of the campaign itself.³⁷ This notion has led some scholars to come to Thucydides' defense by variously explaining away the mistakes in the narrative.³⁸ In any case, the topography as it is in our text fits Thucydides' paradigm perfectly. This suggests that he either tailored the imprecise information gathered from sources to fit his scheme or deliberately chose to give his readers a false impression of terrain he knew quite well. The presence of qualifiers allows the great historian to save his credibility, affording him "plausible deniability," so to speak.

It is not my intention to call into question the fundamental credibility of the great historian. It is important, however, in light of the literary character of Thucydides' work, to acknowledge the possibility that he has embroidered some elements of history to fit his literary program. Essentially, I think we can trust Thucydides for the general truth of the historical events he portrays. For instance, I am sure that the actions at Pylos transpired much as Thucydides presents them. The motives of his characters, however, are likely to have been embellished, and the sequence of events presented in a highly artificial way in order to highlight the points he wishes to make and elicit the desired response in his readers. Few, if any, scholars would deny certain literary distortions on the part of Thucydides. Yet when statements of fact, such as troop numbers or measurements, are called into question, we encounter a slippery scholarly slope. I am sympathetic to the position that one should trust a historian such as Herodotos or Thucydides unless proof positive can be provided to show that the facts as presented are wrong. Otherwise we risk throwing away too much when it comes to deciphering questions of ancient history. At the same time, in light of the lack of scholarly consensus concerning the topographical errors in question, and in light of the near-perfect coincidence of the errors with some of Thucydides' main themes, one must at least consider the possibility that the historian has deliberately doctored the numbers. Although Thucydides may be largely correct about the infinite recurrence of similar events as dictated by human nature, sometimes events may not have fit neatly into his clever paradigm.

35. For a discussion of this point, see Gomme 1956, pp. 485–486.

36. Samons 2006.

37. Wilson (1979, p. 52) argues that Thucydides at least "*claims* accurate knowledge" of the region. Pritchett (1994, p. 174) goes one step further, arguing that Thucydides probably took part in the expedition himself, which is evinced by certain striking details in the narrative.

38. Pritchett, in both 1965 (pp. 6–29) and 1994 (pp. 145–178), meticulously explains away every error. In the former work, he had conceded that only the width of the southern channel was an error (p. 29), but he rescinded this concession in the latter (pp. 167–168).

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