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## The Spartans “at Sea”

When one thinks of Sparta, many things come to mind: the harsh upbringing that promoted obedience and homogeneity, the large subject population that simultaneously underpinned and endangered the ever-shrinking body of full Spartiate citizens, and the most professional and successful army in the Greek world until its defeat at Leuctra in 371. Naval power would likely not make its way onto such a list, given Sparta’s traditional reputation as a *polis* both indisposed toward and unskilled in τὰ ναυτικά. Modern scholarship has followed suit in its general dismissal of Spartan naval power before the end of the fifth century BC. As Paul Cartledge, for example, has argued, many factors played into the Spartans’ reluctance to take to the sea, let alone to take on Athenian naval power. The Spartans’ inland location, lack of developed public finance and a convertible currency, and success at hoplite warfare, among other things, “conspired to make the Spartans the landlubbing power par excellence”<sup>1</sup>.

Indeed, these and other impediments, such as the Spartans’ ostensible security problems vis-à-vis the helots, naturally militated against Sparta’s pursuit of a serious naval program and ability to challenge Athenian sea power before the last decade of the fifth century. As Caroline Falkner has shown, the Spartans remained oriented toward the land throughout most of the fifth century and until the later stages of the Peloponnesian War “preferred to make use of allied contributions and allied bases rather than spend money on improving their own naval strength”<sup>2</sup>. It was not until 413 that the Spartans decided to build their own navy (cfr. Thuc. VIII 3) and not until 407 that a Spartan fleet was stationed in its harbor at Gytheum (cfr. Xen. *Hell.* I 4, 11)<sup>3</sup>.

Nevertheless, a careful perusal of two key fifth-century sources on Spartan naval activity suggests that we should question the now standard assumption that the

<sup>1</sup> Cartledge 1987, 47-48; cfr. Cartledge 2009, 51, 53. *Contra* Falkner 1992b; Strauss 2009, 35, who (39) recognizes the various factors that inhibited the development of a Spartan navy. See also Pareti 1961, 1-19.

<sup>2</sup> Falkner 1992a, 501.

<sup>3</sup> See Falkner 1992a, 498-500.

Spartans, to use an English expression, were hopelessly “at sea” when it came to naval matters. Herodotus’ *Histories*, the first work under consideration, shows that a number of Greek and non-Greek states in the sixth and early fifth centuries viewed the Spartans as capable of rendering aid by sea. His text also reveals that the Spartans were both capable of and willing to undertake such naval missions, even if they had few ships of their own and employed their allies’ ships for overseas expeditions. The evidence that Herodotus provides on Spartan sea power makes it clear that the Spartans’ increased naval activity in the fifth century was not an entirely new development. From the middle of the sixth century, the Spartans demonstrated an interest in overseas influence and even expansion – an interest that grew in strength in tandem with the Spartans’ struggle with Athens for hegemony in the Aegean<sup>4</sup>.

As we shall see, however, Herodotus repeatedly downplays or undermines the Lacedaemonians’ achievements at sea – slight as they might be. In this essay I will argue that Herodotus’ seeming adherence to the stereotype of the Spartan “landlubber” reflects those same Athenian constructions of Spartan and Athenian power that shaped Thucydides’ polarization of Athens and Sparta in his *History*, the other work under investigation. On one end of this dichotomy, which Thucydides makes explicit at VIII 96, 5, sits Athens as the progressive, technologically advanced sea power that saved Greece from Persian enslavement. At the other end Sparta emerges as the old-fashioned and impoverished land-based power that failed to meet the challenges posed by Athens’ new brand of power. While Barry Strauss rightly sees this “emphasis on the conservative nature of Sparta’s land power and comparison of it to the dynamic sea power of Athens” as caricature, Herodotus’ and Thucydides’ largely negative representations of Spartan naval activity have proved influential, as most modern accounts of ancient Lacedaemon clearly demonstrate<sup>5</sup>.

### 1. Herodotus’ Seafaring Spartans

Throughout his account of the Persian Wars, Herodotus portrays the Spartans as an insular people either unwilling or unable to commit themselves to far-flung enterprises. The *Histories* is replete with accounts of beleaguered Greeks and non-Greeks who either unsuccessfully seek aid from the Spartans or receive such aid after much delay and occasionally to no avail. The former group includes the Aeolian and Ionian envoys who sought Spartan aid against Cyrus ca. 546 (I 152); the ousted Samian Maeandrius, whose endeavor to bribe the Agiad king Cleomenes I led to his expulsion from Lacedaemon ca. 515 (III 148); and the Milesian tyrant Aristagoras, whose attempts at bribery likewise failed to win support from Cleomenes I in 499 (V 38, 2; 49-51).

The Lydian king Croesus proved more successful in his acquisition of a pact

<sup>4</sup> Cfr. Strauss 2009, 37, who argues for the existence of “a maritime party with grander ambitions of expanding Spartan power overseas and perhaps of building a substantial navy”. See also Pareti 1961, 1-19.

<sup>5</sup> Strauss 2009, 35.

*The Spartans “at Sea”*

of friendship and alliance with Sparta ca. 548/7 (I 69-70, 1). Nevertheless, the Lacedaemonians, ostensibly because of their struggle with the Argives over the Thyreatis, were not able to prepare a force in time to raise Cyrus’ siege of Sardis and to save Croesus (I 82-83). Perhaps to add insult to injury, Herodotus claims that the Spartans even failed to deliver the huge bronze bowl they had made for Croesus, either because they lost it to Samian raiders at sea or because they decided to sell it in Samos after they learned of Croesus’ defeat (I 70; cfr. III 47, 1). The Samian exiles who induced the Spartans to send an expedition against Polycrates ca. 525 (III 39, 1; 44-48, 1; 54-57, 1), in turn, managed to procure such aid only at their second meeting before the Spartan authorities, at which they turned their long speech into a more easily comprehensible visual display (III 46).

Through such accounts of Spartan foreign policy in the early books of the *Histories*, Herodotus sets the stage for his largely negative depiction of the Spartans’ sluggish responses to their fellow Greeks’ pleas for aid during the Persian Wars, especially in his treatment of the later stages of the war. In the run up to his account of the battle of Plataea in 479, he claims that the Spartans were unwilling to leave the protection of their wall across the Isthmus. According to Herodotus, it was their fear concerning oracles predicting their eviction from the Peloponnese at the hands of the Athenians and Medes that made the Spartans send envoys to Athens to persuade the Athenians not to come to terms with Xerxes (VIII 141, 1). After being reassured of Athens’ loyalty to Hellas, the Spartans immediately returned to their insular policy and agreed to send out a force only after they considered the possibility of Athens’ rapprochement with the Persians (IX 7-10).

As I have argued elsewhere, we should approach Herodotus’ overall treatment of Lacedaemon with caution. Many of the tropes that run through the aforementioned accounts of Spartan foreign policy – such as the easily bribable Spartan and the Spartan philistine unable to understand long speeches – were the product of fifth-century Athenian democratic ideology, which shaped Herodotus’ depiction of Spartan society<sup>6</sup>. This ideology underpins Herodotus’ insistent focus on Spartan insularity and his conclusion that the Athenians, through their ability and brave decision to resist the Persians by sea, were responsible for the Hellenes’ victory (VII 139). More specifically, Herodotus’ portrait of Spartan insularity reflects Athenian attitudes concerning the rival cities’ roles in the Persian Wars, which Thucydides illustrates in the speech he ascribes to the Athenian envoys attending the debate at Sparta in 432 (Thuc. I 73, 2-75, 2).

Despite the tendentious nature of such accounts of Sparta’s conduct of interstate relations, we need not entirely dismiss the *Histories’* treatment of Spartan foreign policy in the sixth and fifth centuries. Throughout this work Herodotus provides information that counters such ideologically charged representations of

<sup>6</sup> See Millender 1996, 1999, 2001, 2002a, 2002b.

insularity. Herodotus, in fact, suggests that the Spartans in the sixth and fifth centuries neither were viewed as “landlubbers” nor shied away from overseas ventures that necessitated transport by sea and likely would have involved naval combat.

What is immediately striking about the passages mentioned above is the number of peoples or leaders in the eastern Aegean who specifically seek Spartan aid. Granted, Herodotus does not specify the nature of the support that these people requested, and one might assume that they all – like Croesus (cfr. I 53, 3; 56, 1-2; 69, 1-2) – sought aid and/or alliance from Sparta because of its reputation as the most powerful of the Greek city-states. Nevertheless, it seems safe to assume that they all approached Sparta with the belief that the Lacedaemonians had the ability to undertake such expeditions, to transport the necessary forces, and to be of service to both islanders and those on the coast.

While it is true that the Spartans often denied such requests for aid, such decisions did not necessarily reflect concerns about long-range naval expeditions. In the case of the Ionians and Aeolians, for example, the Spartans rejected their envoys but still sent men in a penteconter to Phocaea ostensibly to learn about Cyrus’ activities in Ionia (I, 152, 2). Herodotus reports that the Spartan envoy who was then sent to Sardis proclaimed that the Lacedaemonians would punish Cyrus if he harmed any Greek city – a threat that Cyrus ostensibly mocked and dismissed (I 152, 3-153, 1). Even if we reject the less credible aspects of this episode, it indicates that the Spartans’ hesitation to aid the Ionians and Aeolians likely arose from their need to acquire more information concerning Cyrus’ intentions toward Ionia. More important, this account suggests that the Spartans at that time were already concerned with the growth of Persian power and interested in asserting their influence in the eastern Aegean<sup>7</sup>.

The Spartans, it is true, later refused to aid their fellow Greeks in the eastern Aegean who attempted to free themselves from Persian rule. Herodotus, however, reveals that their decision had little or nothing to do with the issue of sea travel in his account of the Milesian tyrant Aristagoras’ mission to Lacedaemon in 499 to gain the Spartans’ support for the Ionian Revolt (V 38, 2; 49-51). According to Herodotus’ Lacedaemonian sources, Aristagoras brought to his meeting with the Agiad Cleomenes I a map of the world engraved on bronze that showed both all the seas and rivers (V 49, 1). With the help of the map, Aristagoras gave Cleomenes a lesson in Persian geography that induced the Spartan king to consider the Milesian’s request for aid. Although Cleomenes ultimately refused to give support to Aristagoras and ordered him to leave Sparta immediately, the tipping point for the Spartan king was not the lengthy expedition by sea to the Ionian coast but rather the three-months’ journey inland to Susa (V 50).

<sup>7</sup> On the possibility of a long-term anti-Persian policy in Sparta, see Cartledge 2002, 126, 128-129.

### *The Spartans “at Sea”*

The Spartans, moreover, occasionally agreed to render such aid – even if their support proved less than beneficial or they failed to deliver on their promises, as in the case of the unfortunate Croesus (I 83). For example, the Lacedaemonians sent an expedition to Samos ca. 525 in support of the Samians exiled by Polycrates (III 39, 1; 44-48, 1; 54-57, 1). The Corinthians, of course, likely supplied the bulk of the naval component of the force that the Lacedaemonians brought to Samos (cfr. III 48-49)<sup>8</sup>. The Lacedaemonians’ forty-day long siege of Samos, moreover, proved unsuccessful; and they departed without achieving the deposition of Polycrates (III 54-56, 1). As if this failure were not enough of a blot on the Spartans’ reputation, Herodotus reports the story that Polycrates bribed the Spartans with gilded lead coinage to leave Samos (III 56, 2). He then describes the Spartans’ departure as an abandonment of their Samian allies (III 57, 1). The Spartan expedition to Samos, it would seem, ended both unsuccessfully and ignominiously.

Despite Herodotus’ long-standing reputation as a key source on Samian history and institutions, we need to treat his conclusion of this *logos* with care, given how packed it is with fifth-century Athenian-based constructions of Sparta<sup>9</sup>. While Herodotus may dismiss the story of Polycrates’ bribery as rather idle in nature (III 56, 2), its inclusion cannot help but refer the reader to the Spartans’ reputed susceptibility to corruption, a trope that runs through the *Histories* and other works of this period, including Thucydides’ *History*, as we shall see below<sup>10</sup>. Herodotus’ claim that the Samians perceived that the Spartans were leaving them in the lurch (III 57, 1), in turn, brings to mind both the aforementioned Athenian attacks on Spartan insularity and the Lacedaemonians’ reputation for perfidy<sup>11</sup>.

Even with its tendentious elements, Herodotus’ account of the Spartan expedition to Samos should make us beware of dismissing the expedition, *qua* Cartledge, as an inauspicious “start to a programme of maritime expansion, if such a programme there was”<sup>12</sup>. While the Lacedaemonians ca. 525 do not appear to have had either the intent or the ability to become a naval power, they agreed to render aid to exiles from an island on the other side of the Aegean. More importantly, the Spartans managed to send a large force all the way to Samos (III 54, 1). Finally, they conducted a siege for forty days and apparently would have taken Samos if they had fully exploited their victory over the Samians and mercenaries that they routed at the upper tower (III 54, 2-55, 1). We should also keep in mind that the Spartans gained such – albeit limited – success against none other than

<sup>8</sup> Cfr. Cartledge 1982, 258; 1987, 47; Strauss 2009, 37.

<sup>9</sup> On Herodotus’ relationship with Samos, see Tölle-Kastenbein 1976; Cartledge 1982.

<sup>10</sup> See Millender 2002b, 36-39.

<sup>11</sup> On the Spartans’ reputation for perfidy, see Bradford 1994; Millender 1996, 199-208, 320-332.

<sup>12</sup> Cartledge 1987, 47. Cfr. Cartledge 2002, 123. For a more positive reading of the Spartans’ expedition to Samos, see Falkner 1992b, 18-21.

the Samian tyrant Polycrates, who had acquired a large fleet with which he carved out a naval empire in the eastern Aegean (III 39; cfr. III 44.2).

As for the Spartans' motives, Herodotus reports the Samian claim that the Spartans were reciprocating the Samians' earlier naval assistance against the Messenians. He also mentions the Spartans' claim that they were avenging the theft of the bowl that they had sent to Croesus and the corselet that Amasis had sent to them (III 47, 1). Cartledge has attributed this expedition, in part, to ties of *xenia* between Spartan and Samian aristocrats that extended at least into the late fifth century BCE<sup>13</sup>. The Spartans, however, may also have been pursuing a larger anti-Persian policy that entailed the deposition of tyrants who had ties to the Persians<sup>14</sup>. We may have evidence of this same policy in the Spartans' successful deposition of the Naxian tyrant Lygdamis (Plut. *Mor.* 859d; cfr. 236c), likely during the expedition to Samos ca. 525, and their later attempt to depose the Athenian tyrant Hippias ca. 512 (Hdt. V 63; cfr. Arist. *Ath. Pol.* 19, 5; Plut. *Mor.* 859d) – again via a naval expedition<sup>15</sup>.

While none of this naval activity, aside from the expedition to Samos, took place on a significant scale, we must keep in mind that Sparta was like most Greek states of the period in its limited access to ships and recognition of the importance of sea power<sup>16</sup>. And though it is equally true that the Spartans had not covered themselves with glory through such overseas ventures, the Greek states that joined them in the Hellenic League still awarded them command of the Greek forces both by land and by sea during the Persian Wars of 481-479 (VII 159-162; VIII 2-3). We first hear of the Spartans' actual contributions to the allied naval effort in Herodotus' account of the battle of Artemisium in 480 (VIII 1-21). Although the Spartans contributed only ten ships (VIII 1), the fleet was under the command of a Spartan, Eurybiades, as stipulated by the other members of the Greek confederacy (VIII 2, 2). Under Eurybiades' leadership the Greek ships, despite the fact that they were both far fewer in number and slower than their Persian counterparts, managed to get the better of the Persian fleet for the first two days of the battle and inflicted more damage on the Persians than they sustained (VIII 7-16). According to Herodotus, the Greeks initially decided to withdraw after assessing their losses but left only upon receiving the news of the Persian victory at Thermopylae (VIII 18-21).

<sup>13</sup> Cartledge 1982. Falkner 1992b, 21 argues that the Spartans were even more influenced by “the prospect of action, repayment and possible booty”.

<sup>14</sup> On this possible motive, see Cartledge 1982, 256-257; 2002, 123.

<sup>15</sup> For this dating of Lygdamis' deposition, see Cartledge 2002, 125. See also Leahy 1957. For these various expeditions, see Strauss 2009, 37. On the Spartans' attempted deposition of Hippias by sea, see Falkner 1992b, 27-28.

<sup>16</sup> Falkner 1992a, 496-497; 1992b, 47. Cfr. Cartledge 1983.

*The Spartans “at Sea”*

Although the Greeks under Spartan leadership had achieved a surprising degree of success at Artemisium, Herodotus undercuts this achievement through his hostile portrayal of Eurybiades as the stereotypical Spartan in both his selfish insularity and his receptiveness to bribery<sup>17</sup>. He likely has Eurybiades (and the other Peloponnesians in the force) in mind when he describes the Greeks' initial panic at the size of the enemy fleet and deliberations concerning flight from Artemisium into the inner parts of Greece (VIII 4, 1; cfr. VIII 18). He then specifically notes that it was Eurybiades who refused to remain long enough to allow the desperate Euboeans to evacuate their children and servants. If we believe Herodotus, Eurybiades decided to stay and fight only after being bribed by the Euboeans via the far more heroic – if equally venal – Athenian Themistocles (VIII 4-5). Even more striking is Herodotus' apparent attempt to rob Eurybiades of the success he eventually earned as leader of the fleet at Artemisium. Before he even gets to his account of the battle, Herodotus suggests that responsibility for the Greeks' successes at Artemisium really belonged to an otherwise unknown Scyllias of Scione. This Scyllias ostensibly deserted the Persian cause, made his way to Artemisium from Aphetae, and provided the Greek commanders with information concerning the Persians' disposition and tactics (VIII 8).

In his later account of the battle of Salamis, Herodotus once more focuses on Eurybiades' insularity. Here, however, he portrays the Spartan as the main advocate of a policy that was popular among his fellow Peloponnesian commanders and that would have entailed the abandonment of Athens in favor of defending the Peloponnese at the Isthmus (VIII 49-50, 1; 56-64, 1; cfr. VIII 74, 79, 2-4). And again, Themistocles, following the advice of yet another otherwise unknown figure – an Athenian named Mnesiphilus, managed to convince Eurybiades to change his mind and remain at Salamis (VIII 57-63). After the Greeks' success at Salamis, however, Eurybiades apparently reverted to his insular stance in his opposition to Themistocles' proposal to sail to the Hellespont in order to break the bridges there (VIII 108).

While Eurybiades may indeed have pursued a more insular policy than Themistocles, we should cautiously approach Herodotus' overwhelmingly negative portrayal of this Spartan naval commander. After all, as Herodotus himself reveals, the Peloponnesians in general believed that the defense of Greece at the Isthmus was a sound policy (cfr. VII 139, 4). Eurybiades, moreover, had good reason to be concerned about a Persian army trapped in Greece, given the lack of cohesion among the Hellenes. More importantly, the members of the Hellenic League not only insisted that the Spartans be in charge of the allied fleet from the very beginning of the war (VIII 2-3) but also demonstrated their approval of Spartan leadership with their appointment of another Spartan, the Eurypontid king Leotychidas II, to succeed Eurybiades as commander of the navy in 479 (VIII 131,

<sup>17</sup> On Herodotus' portrait of Eurybiades, see Falkner 1992b, 69-73; cfr. 66.

2-3).

It was under Leotychidas' command and apparently at his insistence (cfr. IX 91), moreover, that the Greeks – at the behest of another Ionian embassy – undertook the last sea battle against the Persians and soundly defeated the barbarians at Mycale (IX 90-105). It should perhaps come as no surprise that Herodotus concludes his account of Mycale with the assertion that it was the Athenians forces who were primarily responsible for winning this victory. The Lacedaemonians, it would seem, merely arrived at the end of the battle and helped to finish off what was left of the resistance (IX 102, 2-103, 1; cfr. IX 105). Herodotus later claims that it was the Peloponnesians who countenanced the abandonment of Ionia and the resettlement of the Ionians on the Greek mainland (IX 106, 2-3). Soon thereafter he reports the decision made by the Peloponnesians under Leotychidas to sail back to Hellas, while the Athenians under Xanthippus crossed over to the Chersonese and laid siege to Sestus (IX 114, 2).

This apparent volte-face in policy may signal the decline of what Strauss has called a “maritime party” in Sparta that was long interested in expanding Sparta's sphere of influence<sup>18</sup>. The waning influence of this group in Sparta may also explain Leotychidas' later fall from grace, thanks, once again, to the Spartans' seeming penchant for bribery and corruption<sup>19</sup>. After ostensibly receiving a large bribe to suspend his campaign against the Thessalians, Leotychidas was brought to trial and was banished after being caught red-handed with a glove stuffed with silver (VI 72). Even more spectacular, if not coincidental, was the fall of his successor as commander of the Greek fleet, the Agiad regent Pausanias, as recorded by Thucydides (I 128, 3-135, 1). Pausanias likely supported overseas expansion both as commander of the Greeks' naval activities in the Hellespont and later in his unofficial activity in the eastern Aegean (Thuc. I 128, 3-131, 1)<sup>20</sup>. According to Thucydides, the regent eventually met his death in Sparta apparently on account of his corruption, medism, and tyrannical aspirations.

Despite the well-known problems in his treatment of Pausanias' medism, Thucydides demonstrates Pausanias' – and likely his supporters' – continued interest in asserting Sparta's status in the eastern Aegean and curbing Persian power by sea<sup>21</sup>. Diodorus claims that a majority of Spartans later tried but failed to pass a proposal to go to war with Athens to regain their command at sea (Diod. XI 50)<sup>22</sup>. Herodotus, however, provides no such evidence on Spartan naval policy

<sup>18</sup> Strauss 2009, 37-38. Cfr. Cartledge 1987, 47-48.

<sup>19</sup> On this episode as yet another example of the trope of the easily corrupted Spartan, see Millender 2002b, 38.

<sup>20</sup> On Pausanias' naval activity and interest in expansion, see Cartledge 2002, 182-183; Strauss 2009, 38.

<sup>21</sup> On Thucydides' account of Pausanias, see Millender forthcoming b, which includes a full bibliography on earlier scholarship on this topic.

<sup>22</sup> On this passage, see Ste. Croix 1972, 170, who believes that “the narrative rings true”.

### *The Spartans “at Sea”*

after Leotychidas’ return to Hellas and thus concludes his account with the Spartans maintaining their same essential lack of interest in military involvement in the Aegean.

As we have seen, Herodotus proves surprisingly consistent in his negative treatment of Spartan sea power, which continually deprives the Spartans of any naval success, naval policy, or naval acumen. In order to make sense of Herodotus’ skewed treatment of the Spartans at sea, we should consider his equally unrelenting need to remind his audience of Athens’ preeminence as a naval power. Herodotus, for example, has the Athenians themselves laud their navy as the finest in the Greek world in his account of their exchange with the Sicilian Gelon (VII, 161, 2-3). Herodotus himself, moreover, harps on the number of ships the Athenians contributed during the war (VIII 1; 14; 42, 2; 44, 1) and Athens’ reputation as the greatest Greek naval power (VIII 10, 3; 61, 2; 136, 2-3). Most striking, however, is Herodotus’ explicit claim that the Persians could only have been defeated at sea and that the Athenians, rather than the insular Peloponnesians, were responsible for saving Greece (VII 139). We thus already see in Herodotus’ *Histories* the sharp dichotomy between Athens as the quintessential seafaring *polis* and Sparta as the “landlubbing power par excellence” (*qua* Cartledge) that was a centerpiece of fifth-century Athenian propaganda, as Thucydides demonstrates in his *Histories*.

#### *2. Thucydides’ Athenian Nautikoi and Lacedaemonian “Landlubbers”*

Indeed, it is Thucydides who most fully articulates this opposition between Athenian *nautikoi* and Lacedaemonian “landlubbers”, not only at VIII 96, 5 but also throughout his account of the Peloponnesian War<sup>23</sup>. In his *Archaeology* Thucydides demonstrates his belief in the dynamic nature of sea power, through which more progressive societies like Corinth (and, Athens, presumably) acquired wealth and outstripped their more traditional peers – like Sparta (cfr., esp., I 13-15, 1)<sup>24</sup>. This implicit contrast between Athens and Sparta becomes more explicit in Thucydides’ later description of the debate held at Sparta in 432 (I 66-87), especially in the angered Corinthians’ attack on Sparta’s incapacity for innovation. The Corinthians’ contrast of an old-fashioned Sparta and an ever-enterprising Athens likely includes a critique of the Spartans’ failure to challenge the Athenians at sea (I 68-71)<sup>25</sup>. The Athenian envoys present at the debate build upon the Corinthians’ assessment of Athens’ unique dynamism in their speech (I 73-78). In a

<sup>23</sup> For Thucydides’ generally negative treatment of Spartan/Peloponnesian naval achievements, see Falkner 1992b, 95; Millender forthcoming a.

<sup>24</sup> On Thucydides’ implicit suggestion that Athens belonged among the more progressive societies that acquired land and power through their fleets, see Taylor 2010, 8.

<sup>25</sup> For this reading of the Corinthians’ critique, see Millender forthcoming a.

statement highly reminiscent of Herodotus' claim at VII 139, the Athenians recount their decision to abandon their *polis* and to fight the Persians from their ships (I 74, 2-3). The Athenians' characterization of themselves here echoes Thucydides' brief, yet striking, description of their development as a sea power near the conclusion of his *Archaeology*. There he tells us that the Athenians, in response to the looming Persian invasion, decided to break up and abandon their city, embarked into their boats, and became nautical (I 18, 2: ναυτικοί)<sup>26</sup>.

The Athenians' and Corinthians' portraits of the development of Athenian sea power resonate throughout the rest of Book One of the *History*. Athens' nautical evolution, for example, figures prominently in Thucydides' description of the Athenian leader, Themistocles, who effected the Athenians' redefinition of themselves as a seafaring people in their struggle against the Persians (I 93, 3). It was Themistocles who urged the Athenians "to cleave to the sea" (I 93, 4) and repeatedly reminded the Athenians that their survival lay in those very ships that had replaced their city and enabled them to save the rest of Greece (I 93, 7)<sup>27</sup>.

Thucydides' Pericles goes even further in his speech at I 140-144, where he exhorts the Athenians to reimagine themselves as "islanders" (νησιόται) and to understand that their survival depends entirely on the sea (I 143, 5)<sup>28</sup>. In his final speech, Pericles again instructs the Athenians to weigh their devastated lands against the sea, the real source of their power (II 62, 2-3)<sup>29</sup>. In both of these speeches, Thucydides' Pericles, like Thucydides himself at I 13-15, emphasizes the differences between land-based and sea-based power and outlines the benefits that the latter confers in the form of wealth and freedom from dependence on local resources (I 141, 2-143; II 62, 2-3). Even more important, perhaps, is his confidence in the Athenians' vast experience of the sea in comparison with their rivals' lack of naval expertise. How, he asks, can the Peloponnesians hope to compete on the seas with Athens' ever improving sailors and to acquire the naval skill (τέχνη) that demands much study and time (I 142, 5-9; cfr. I 141, 3)?

In Thucydides' account of the debate at Sparta in 432, the Eurypontid king Archidamus II reveals a strikingly similar understanding of the advantages that Athens enjoys as a sea power (I 80-81). The Eurypontid king also comprehends the monumental challenge faced by the Spartans in terms of their own limited finances (I 80, 4; 82, 1; 83, 2; cfr. I 121, 3-5), reliance on traditional tactics (I 81), and need to prepare for a different kind of war predicated on the development of a strong Peloponnesian fleet (I 81, 3-4; 82, 1; cfr. I 121, 3-4)<sup>30</sup>.

Despite these dire predictions, Thucydides himself reveals that the Spartans

<sup>26</sup> On this passage, see Foster 2010, 40-41.

<sup>27</sup> See Taylor 2010, 33; cfr. 25, 154-155. See also Forde 1989, 25.

<sup>28</sup> On Pericles' even more radical reconceptualization of the Athenians, see Taylor 2010. Cfr. Foster 2010, 146-149, 180-181, 188-190.

<sup>29</sup> See Taylor 2010, 76-78.

<sup>30</sup> Moxon 1978; Foster 2010, 92-93; Taylor 2010, 29-30, 42.

*The Spartans “at Sea”*

were soon active at sea and began to challenge Athens’ naval supremacy in the opening years of the Peloponnesian War. From the outbreak of the war down to 425, the Spartans put a fleet into action no less than six times: to Zacynthus in 430 (II 66), twice against the Athenians in the Gulf of Corinth in 429 (II 80-92), to both Lesbos (III 15-16; 25-33, 1) and Corcyra (III 69; 76-81, 1) in 427, and to Corcyra in 425 (IV 2, 3; 3, 1). In addition, the Spartans founded a colony at Heraclea Trachinea in 426 not only as a potential naval base against Euboea but also as a base for operations in both western Greece and the Aegean (III 92)<sup>31</sup>.

Thucydides, nevertheless, repeatedly portrays the Spartans as either hesitant to become involved in naval engagements or as hopelessly incompetent when they found themselves forced to fight on the sea. His negative treatment of Spartan sea power is most obvious in his descriptions of Spartan naval activity during the Archidamian War. Especially critical are his accounts of the Athenian Phormio’s masterly defeat of the inexperienced Peloponnesians in the Corinthian Gulf in 429 (II 80-92) and the Spartans’ ineffective expedition under the fearful Alcidas in 427 to aid the Mytilenians’ revolt (III 15-16; 25-33, 1)<sup>32</sup>. Such accounts have led scholars like Cartledge to dismiss wholesale Sparta’s efforts at sea during the Archidamian War<sup>33</sup>.

Granted, the lack of dividends produced by Spartan naval activity in the 420s would seem to validate Thucydides’ view of the Spartans as poor students of naval skill – just as Pericles had predicted (I 142, 5-9). A number of scholars, however, have shown that whatever challenges the Spartans may have faced at sea, Thucydides presents a skewed portrait of Spartan naval policy and practice during this period<sup>34</sup>. Obvious bias, for example, shapes Thucydides’ account of the Peloponnesians’ decision to abandon their planned attack on the Piraeus and to limit their attention to Salamis (II 93-94)<sup>35</sup>. Thucydides attributes their change in plan to concern over an adverse wind and great fear, here using the term *καταδείσαντες*, an emphatic word not often found in the *History* (II 93, 4)<sup>36</sup>. In reality, this decision likely had more to do with the poor state of the ships stored at Nisaea – a factor that Thucydides himself only later notes (II 94, 3)<sup>37</sup>. Thucydides, moreover,

<sup>31</sup> On Spartan strategy *vis-à-vis* this colony, see Falkner 1999b.

<sup>32</sup> See Millender forthcoming a. On Thucydides’ treatment of the battles in the Corinthian Gulf, see Falkner 1992b, 113-119. On Thucydides’ treatment of Alcidas, see Roisman 1987.

<sup>33</sup> Cartledge 1987, 48.

<sup>34</sup> Cfr. Kelly 1982, 53-54; Krentz 1997, 66-67. See also Cawkwell 1976.

<sup>35</sup> For Thucydides’ hostile account of the Peloponnesians’ raid on Piraeus, see Falkner 1992b, 119-123; 1992c.

<sup>36</sup> Falkner 1992c, 149.

<sup>37</sup> On the poor condition of the vessels at Nisaea, see Gomme *HCT* 2.240; Falkner 1992c, 150-152. See also Figueira 1990, esp. 18-21, who additionally notes the importance of the Spartans’ lack of a centrally located base. On Thucydides’ begrudging admission

fails to highlight just how successful the Peloponnesians proved to be in their surprise attack on Salamis, their relief of the naval blockade of Megara, and the panic they produced in Athens (II 93, 4-94, 3)<sup>38</sup>.

This unwillingness to credit the Spartans for their – albeit few – successes at sea is matched by Thucydides' failure to see in the various Spartan naval activities from this period that he records "a consistent interest in weakening Athenian influence in the Gulf and western Greece as well as in the Aegean"<sup>39</sup>. This presumption of Spartan incompetence likewise colors Thucydides' treatment of Spartan naval activities in the later stages of the war, when the Spartans seriously began to challenge Athens' supremacy at sea. Nowhere is his bias more patent than in his account of the Spartan navarch Astyochus' ostensible venality (VIII 83, 3) – following a now long-established trope – and perfidy (VIII 38, 4; 39, 2; 40; 50; 78). Equally problematic is Thucydides' failure both to fully credit Astyochus with the Spartans' successful campaign at Syme and to note the ramifications of this victory in terms of Sparta's rising prospects in southern Ionia (cfr. VIII 41-44; 52.1)<sup>40</sup>.

Indeed, as studies of Spartan sea power have shown, Sparta throughout the Peloponnesian War pursued an active and complex naval policy that was – even before the advent of Lysander – neither as unsuccessful nor as ill conceived as Thucydides would have us believe<sup>41</sup>. Perhaps, then, scholars should express less surprise at the fact that it was old-fashioned, land-oriented Sparta that defied Pericles' prognostications by becoming a maritime power and defeating Athens at its own game<sup>42</sup>. While it is true that the Spartans' maritime empire proved short-lived, coming to an end at the Battle of Cnidus in 394, its very development demonstrated their greater ability to adapt to a new theater of war than their ostensibly more dynamic seafaring foes.

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concerning the seaworthiness of these vessels, see Falkner 1992c, 149-150.

<sup>38</sup> Cfr. Falkner 1992c, 153; Millender forthcoming a.

<sup>39</sup> Falkner 1999b, 53.

<sup>40</sup> See Falkner 1995, 1999a.

<sup>41</sup> See, esp., Moxon 1978; Kelly 1979 and 1982; Falkner 1992c, 1995, 1999a, 1999b; Millender forthcoming a.

<sup>42</sup> Cfr. Cartledge 2009, 53; Strauss 2009, 40.

## The Spartans “at Sea”

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*Ellen Millender*

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*Abstract*

Sparta has long enjoyed the reputation of a *polis* that was hostile toward and incompetent in τὰ ναυτικά. Impediments, including its location and agrarian economic base, made it difficult for Sparta to challenge Athenian sea power before the last decade of the fifth century. Herodotus and Thucydides, moreover, repeatedly offer support for the Athenian-based stereotype of the Lacedaemonian “landlubber”. Both authors, however, provide accounts of Spartan naval activity that question the assumption that the Spartans were “at sea” when it came to naval matters.