

FOUR HUNDRED ATHENIAN SHIPS AT SALAMIS?

Thucydides tells us that at the first Peloponnesian conference (1.67–87) some Athenians, by chance in Sparta on other business, heard of what Corinth had said against their city and got permission to address the Apella themselves, not to rebut the charges but to deter the Spartans from hostilities. In their speech the Athenians boasted of their war record at Marathon and Salamis and made this claim (1.74.1):

...σαφῶς δηλωθέντος ὅτι ἐν ταῖς ναυσὶ Ἑλλήνων τὰ πράγματα ἐγένετο, τρία τὰ ὠφελιμώτατα ἐς αὐτὸ παρεσχόμεθα, ἀριθμὸν τε νεῶν πλεῖστον καὶ ἄνδρα στρατηγὸν ξυνετώτατον καὶ προθυμίαν ἀοκνοτάτην. ναῦς μὲν γε ἐς τὰς τετρακοσίας ὀλίγω ἐλάσσους τῶν δύο μοιρῶν...

The phrase *ναῦς μὲν γε ἐς τὰς τετρακοσίας ὀλίγω ἐλάσσους τῶν δύο μοιρῶν* has disturbed scholars for many years and provoked various textual emendations or a strained grammatical interpretation to make the passage 'fit the facts'.

The facts, not free from controversy themselves, are these. Herodotus reports 378 ships as the sum of the Greek fleet at Salamis (8.48), although the numbers he gives for the individual contingents add up to just 366 (8.43–48). In any case, of these he says the Athenians provided the largest single force, 180 ships (8.44.1). That would make the Athenian contribution at Salamis somewhat under half, not the two-thirds the Athenians in Thucydides claim. On the other hand, Aeschylus (*Persae* 338–9) mentions 310 ships for the Greek navy, and this figure of approximately 300 Gomme (*Historical Commentary, ad loc.*) regards as the "conventional number" (e.g., Dem. 18.238, Nepos, *Them.* 3). If the Athenian contribution were approximately 200 ships (Diod. Sic. 15.78.4; "Themistokles Decree", (Meiggs and Lewis 23) 19, 37; Hdt. 8.44.1: '180'; 8.61: '200'), the "conventional number" for the total fleet would help support the Athenians' contention in Th. 1.74 that they contributed 'a little less than two-thirds' (cf. Isoc. 4. 107)¹).

1) On the problem of the number of ships at Salamis see C. Hignett,

But the real problem is what to do with the expression *ἐς τὰς τετρακοσίας*. A natural rendering of this phrase, by-passed by almost all the commentators, would be to have the Athenians say, "we provided... *approximately four hundred ships*, a little less than two-thirds". *Ἐς* with numerals is usual Greek (and Thucydidean usage: 1.100.1) for numerical approximations. But this rendering would not only make the Athenians (and Thucydides) guilty of a gross exaggeration about the size of the Athenian contingent, it would boost the total of the Greek fleet to 600. Both these figures are impossible and have, accordingly, made this reading of the passage unacceptable. Hence, most have construed the controversial phrase as "we provided *toward the total of 400 ships* a little less than two-thirds"²). Nonetheless, this version would still require an Athenian contingent of about 267 ships, far in excess of what they must actually have contributed in September of 480 B.C. Thus, Poppo and Stahl, to bring the text into line with the conventional figure of around 200 Athenian vessels and 300 ships for all the Greeks, adopted the reading of *τριακοσίας* from the now lost ms. G, still construing *ἐς* as 'toward the total of'³). Dobree cut the Gordian knot and athetized the entire phrase.

In effect this concern with making the numbers in Thucydides square with those in the other sources has obscured a deeper difficulty, one Gomme articulated: "...what is really curious is the use of the phrase *ἐς τὰς τετρακοσίας* or *τριακοσίας* with *ναῦς (παρεσχόμεθα)* to mean not the number of the Athenian contingent but the whole of which the Athenian contingent was a part. This seems impossible..."⁴). While *ἐς* with *παρέχεσθαι* does, of course, occur (e.g., *ἐς αὐτό* in our passage; Th. 6.83; Hyp. 6.40), its use with numbers to mean 'toward the total of' would be very ambiguous, indeed forced and unusual. The difficulty is heightened in our case since the entire phrase from

Xerxes' Invasion of Greece, Oxford 1963, p. 208ff., and the literature cited there. See also A.R. Burn, *Persia and the Greeks*, London 1962, p. 441ff.

2) E.g., Classen-Steup (5th ed.): "zu der Gesamtzahl von 400"; Croiset: "pour parfaire le nombre des quatre cents." Cf. also Burn (above, n. 1) 443; E. Meyer, *Geschichte des Altertums*, Basel 1954 (5th ed.) vol. 4, pt. 1, p. 365, n. 1; G. Grote, *History of Greece*, New York 1886, vol. 5, p. 111 (and note); or such translations as Warner, Crawley, or Hobbes.

3) J. Labarbe, *BCH* 76 (1952) 384ff., at 419 reads *τριακοσίας*, but interprets *ἐς* as "up to", thinking Athens contributed 270 ships.

4) A.W. Gomme, *Historical Commentary to Thucydides*, vol. 1, Oxford 1953, p. 235. Cf. Hdt. 7.60.1: but *ἐς ἀριθμὸν* is a self-contained idiom.

ναῦς μὲν γε on is an appositive, dependent on *παρεσχόμεθα* several words before, making it all the harder to apprehend the putative connection between verb and preposition, 'provide ... towards'. Thus, Gomme suggested either amending *τετρακοσίας* to *διακοσίας*, making this the sum of the Athenian contingent, or else changing *ἐς τὰς τετρακοσίας* to *πρὸς τὰς τριακοσίας*, using the usual preposition for contributing 'to' and making the number the total of the Greek fleet⁵). These readings would not only rescue Thucydides and the Athenians from error, they would bring the passage into line with the traditional view of the size of the Greek forces at Salamis.

However, none of these emendations or interpretations is necessary. On principle, we should beware of altering the text or of bending the grammar to make it fit our preconceived notions⁶). Once the provenance of the speech is fully understood, the passage can stand as received. The prologue to the Athenians' self-justification for empire and assertion of military power derives from the Attic funeral oration tradition, notorious for willful and gross exaggeration of Athens' role in fifth century history⁷). This relationship can be shown in several ways. The most important is the reference to the Athenian stand alone at Marathon (1.73.4): *φαιμὲν γὰρ Μαραθῶνι τε μόνοι προκινδυνεῦσαι τῷ βαρβάρῳ*. It is a typical claim of the funeral oration: Lysias 2.20; Plato, *Menexenus* 240C; Demosthenes 60. 10-11. Yet the Athenians knew very well the Plataeans helped them at Marathon: the Plataeans held the left wing in the battle formation (Hdt. 6.111.3) and were jointly praised with the Athenians at each Great Panathenaea (Hdt. 6.111.2) for their valor and fealty at Marathon. And finally, the Plataeans were clearly pictured in the Stoa Poikile as fighting alongside the Athenians at Marathon (Dem. 59.94-106; Paus. 1.15). Hence,

5) Gomme (above, n. 4) *ibid.* N. G. L. Hammond, "The Battle of Salamis," *JHS* 76 (1956) 32-54, at 41, n. 34a, suggests *πρὸς*, citing Hdt. 8.44.

6) Cf. Grote's classic statement (above, n. 2), on this very crux: "...I protest against altering numerical statements in one author, simply to bring him into accordance with another, and without some substantive ground in the text itself... Such emendations appear to me inadmissible in principle: we are not to force different witnesses into harmony by retouching their statements." That Grote followed Didot's suggestion that the *duo moirōn* are two hundreds out of four is less felicitous; Raubitschek (below, n. 10) 38, adopts it as well.

7) See H. Strasburger, "Thukydides und die politische Selbstdarstellung der Athener," *Hermes* 86 (1958) 17-40.

what we read in Thucydides is a typical historical distortion, one we can be sure he realizes as such, since he has Euphemus in book six (6.83.2) expressly disclaim the usual Athenian propaganda by saying, *καὶ οὐ καλλιεπούμεθα ὡς ... τὸν βάρβαρον μόνου καθελόντες εἰκότως ἄρχομεν...* Further, the Athenians at Sparta proceed to discuss in some detail the battle of Salamis and its aftermath until Plataea in terms conforming to another *topos* from the epitaphic tradition. Their version is much to their own credit, where they brag of their courage in abandoning their homeland and embarking on ship (1.74.3, 4), and to the explicit detriment of the Spartans (1.74.2-4), whose aid was slow in coming both at Salamis and the next year in the months before the battle of Plataea. In fact, there is an instructive parallel between what the Athenians say in 1.74.1 and Lysias' funeral oration (2.42), over Salamis:

Th: *τρία τὰ ὠφελιμώτατα ἐς αὐτὸ παρεσχόμεθα*

- (1) *ἀριθμὸν τε νεῶν πλείστον*
- (2) *καὶ ἄνδρα στρατηγὸν ξυνετώτατον*
(... *Θεμιστοκλέα* ...)
- (3) *καὶ προθυμίαν ἀοκνοτάτην*

Lys: *πλείστα καὶ κάλλιστα ... συνεβάλοντο*

- (1) *στρατηγὸν μὲν Θεμιστοκλέα, ἰκανώτατον*
εἶπεῖν καὶ γνῶναι καὶ πράξει
- (2) *ναῦς δὲ πλείους τῶν ἄλλων συμμάχων*
- (3) *ἄνδρας δ' ἐμπειροτάτους...*

This structure and its contents derive in both cases⁸⁾ from a common funeral oration tradition. It, the Marathon *topos*, and an ill-disguised rebuke of Spartan reluctance to come to the Athenians' aid indicate the provenance of the speech, funeral oration tendenz, and thereby set the tone of their defense: historical distortion, boastful pride in their own exploits, and bitterness at the lack of support from the other Greeks⁹⁾.

In sum, by using such notices Thucydides has deliberately

8) Noted by J. de Romilly, *Thucydide et l'impérialisme Athénien*, Paris 1947, p. 210, who overlooks the implications of the tradition's tendenz. Cf. also Isoc. *Panath.* 51.

9) On Athenian braggadocio see, for example, Dem. 60.1, 11, 18, or Lys. 2.44. On their fear and outrage at abandonment in the Persian Wars see Lys. 2.45; Plato, *Menex.* 245 D; and *Hdt.* 9.7.β.1. Thus, the Athenians in Thucydides reproach the Spartans: *ἐπειδὴ ἡμῶν κατὰ γῆν οὐδείς ἐβοήθει (1.74.2); ὅτε γοῦν ἡμεῖς ἔτι σώοι, οὐ παρεγένεσθε (1.74.3).*

typified the Athenian speech before the Spartans as biased, distorted, and boastful. In this context, the once irksome passage in 1.74.1 fits perfectly as it stands: *παρεσχόμεθα . . . ναῦς μὲν γε εἰς τὰς τετρακοσίας*. The Athenians make an egregious claim about how many ships they contributed at Salamis, “approximately 400”, a claim sure to shock and exacerbate their adversaries. The point is important because it is intrinsic to understanding the tone and purpose of the Athenians’ speech as a whole. Once its tendentious epitaphic provenience is properly taken into account, the approbative judgments of de Romilly and Raubitschek must seriously be doubted: “Donc, quand les Athéniens décrivent le service qu’ils ont rendu à la Grèce, ils ne font manifestement qu’annoncer la vérité”; “It shows Athens at her best, and it gives a true picture of Periclean Athens”¹⁰. To the contrary, the Athenians do not proclaim “la vérité” or show Athens “at her best”. Finally, whether this speech reflects what was actually said, or is Thucydides’ free composition falls under the monumental question of the authenticity of Thucydides’ speeches that cannot be answered here. But on either view my suggestion would hold: the funeral oration *τοποι*, whether fictively inserted here by Thucydides, or in fact spoken by the Athenians either heedlessly or to provoke, imbue the speech with an arrogance that fulfilled the Corinthians’ dour judgment of Athenian character (1.68–71) and was sure to precipitate war.

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10) J. de Romilly (above, n. 8) 208; A. Raubitschek, “The Speech of the Athenians at Sparta,” in *The Speeches in Thucydides*, ed. P. A. Stadter, Chapel Hill, N. C. 1973, 32–48, at 46.