

Thucydides 7.42.3: an Unrecognized Fragment of Philistus

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ὁ δὲ Δημοσθένης ἰδὼν ὡς εἶχε τὰ πράγματα καὶ νομίσας οὐχ οἶόν τε εἶναι διατρίβειν οὐδὲ παθεῖν ὅπερ ὁ Νικίας ἔπαθεν [(ἀφικόμενος γὰρ τὸ πρῶτον ὁ Νικίας φοβερός, ὡς οὐκ εὐθὺς προσέκειτο ταῖς Συρακούσαις, ἀλλ' ἐν Κατάνῃ διεχειμάζεν, ὑπερώφθη τε καὶ ἔφθασεν αὐτὸν ἐκ τῆς Πελοποννήσου στρατιᾶς ὁ Γύλιππος ἀφικόμενος, ἣν οὐδ' ἂν μετέπεμψαν οἱ Συρακόσιοι, εἰ ἐκεῖνος εὐθὺς ἐπέκειτο· ἱκανοὶ γὰρ αὐτοὶ οἰόμενοι εἶναι ἅμα τ' ἂν ἔμαθον ἦσους ὄντες καὶ ἀποτετειχισμένοι ἂν ἦσαν, ὥστε μηδ' εἰ μετέπεμψαν ἔτι ὁμοίως ἂν αὐτοὺς ὠφελεῖν), ταῦτα οὖν ἀνασκοπῶν ὁ Δημοσθένης,] καὶ γινώσκων ὅτι καὶ αὐτὸς ἐν τῷ παρόντι τῇ πρώτῃ ἡμέρᾳ μάλιστα δεινότατός ἐστι τοῖς ἐναντίοις, ἐβούλετο ὅτι τάχος ἀποχρήσασθαι τῇ παρούσῃ τοῦ στρατεύματος ἐκπλήξει. (Thuc. 7.42.3)

“**W**ER DIESE W[orte] mit dem ausführlichen Berichte vergleicht, den Th[ucydides] im 6. Buche und im Anfang des 7. über den Verlauf der grossen sizilischen Expedition der Athener bis zum Erscheinen des Gylippus gegeben hat, muss notwendig im höchsten Grade stutzig werden.” So Steup begins his discussion of this passage.¹ He points out that the Athenians wintered in Naxos as well as Catana (6.74.2, 75.2, 88.3 and 5). Before going to Catana, Nicias and Lamachus undertook numerous small expeditions along the north coast of Sicily, attacked Hybla, and finally attacked Syracuse near the Olympieion and were initially successful. Although Syracusan contempt for the Athenians *before* the attack on Syracuse is mentioned at 6.63.2, after that attack the Syracusans were far from undervaluing Nicias (6.72f, 103.3).

The only remedy for this gross distortion of the Thucydidean account is to attribute it to the irate and polemical Demosthenes. This will not do. G. Donini² has proven beyond cavil that such γάρ

¹ *Thucydides*,³ J. Classen, /J. Steup. edd., VII (Berlin 1908) 254–55.

² Guido Donini, “Thuc. 7,42,3: Does Thucydides Agree with Demosthenes’ View?” *Hermes* 92 (1964) 116–19. K. J. Dover, in A. W. Gomme et al., *A Historical Commentary on Thucydides IV* (Oxford 1970) 419 [hereafter, DOVER], and H. D. Westlake, *Individuals in Thucydides* (Cambridge 1968) 182 n.1 [hereafter WESTLAKE], agree with Donini.

clauses in the indicative represent the opinion of Thucydides. If they are also the opinion of the speaker, Thucydides says so.

No more impressive testimony to the difficulties of the text exists than recent attempts to deal with it. W. Liebeschütz,³ after a thorough analysis of Thucydides' account of the Sicilian Expedition, concluded that "the narrative of the operations before Syracuse . . . by no means suggests that Nicias must have succeeded if only he had started the siege late in 415 instead of in summer 414." Since the narrative shows "that we are *not* justified in deducing from 7,42,3 and 2,65,11 that Thucydides thought the design of capturing Syracuse had reasonable prospects of success but was ruined by Nicias' mismanagement, . . . the passage must be intended to have less wide scope than it would have if considered in isolation or in the context of another author."

K. J. Dover⁴ admits that the passage is grossly out of line with the narrative in Book 6: "If we had lost book vi and knew only that the Athenian expedition arrived in Sicily during the summer of 415, we should infer from this passage that there was no attack on Syracuse until the spring of 414." Dover suggests two alternative interpretations:

(i) "[Thucydides] is condemning the failure of Nicias—and of Lamachos, who was not killed until the summer of 414—to press the advantage they gained by their surprise landing and victory in the harbour, described in vi. 64–71. This interpretation makes the clearest contrast with 'spent the winter in Katane'. It necessitates reference of ἀφικόμενος to the landing in the harbour, not to the Athenians' arrival in Sicily." Dover is right that "this interpretation" provides the only decent contrast with wintering in Catana. To extract this meaning, one must add <ἐς τὸν λιμένα> to the first clause. The meaning which results is false; for the Athenians did attack immediately after landing in the harbour, a surprise attack meant to take advantage of the temporary absence of the Syracusan cavalry. The interpretation is unfair in blaming Nicias for the action undertaken by both Nicias and Lamachus and ignores Thucydides' explicit statement (6.71.2) that the lateness of the season and the superiority of the Syracusan horse were the reasons for the Athenian withdrawal to winter-quarters at Catana and Naxos.

³ *Historia* 17 (1968) 289–306. The quotations are from 301, 289 and 302.

⁴ Dover 419–21. All quotations are from 420.

(ii) “He is condemning the adoption by the three generals of Alcibiades’ plan instead of Lamachos’ (vi. 49). This accords well (cf. vi.49.2) with ἀφικόμενος—φοβερός and with his representation of Demosthenes’ insistence on the importance of seizing the initiative while the enemy’s morale is still affected by his arrival. ὑπερόφθη also accords well with the description (vi.63.2) of how the Syracusans’ courage revived *before* the landing in the harbour. But it means that ‘spent the winter in Katane’ is a compressed and misleading way of saying ‘established a summer base at Katane with the intention of returning there for the winter’ (hence διεχρόνιζεν cj. J. Weidgen, *RhM* lxxvii [1928], 385 f.)” Dover goes on to point out that this interpretation is inconsistent with Thucydides’ account of the Athenian victory near Syracuse and its frustration by the return of the Syracusan horse (6.64–71). He also calls casting the blame on Nicias for the choice of Alcibiades’ plan “rhetorical distortion.” In fact, one cannot assert that Thucydides blamed Nicias for the choice of Alcibiades’ plan after the expedition’s arrival in Sicily. After Lamachus’ speech in 6.49, the historian says clearly: Λάμαχος μὲν ταῦτα εἰπὼν ὁμῶς προσέθετο καὶ αὐτὸς τῇ Ἀλκιβιάδου γνώμῃ. Lamachus, not Nicias, was to blame for the choice of Alcibiades’ plan. The rest of Dover’s note discusses whether or not Thucydides approved Lamachus’ initial plan of 6.49 and muses on what the historian thought Alcibiades would have done had he been in Sicily after the death of Lamachus.

Luschnat’s notion,⁵ that the point of the parenthesis at 7.42.3 is to give us the historian’s personal opinion of the withdrawal from Syracuse in 6.71–72, is supported by Westlake⁶ in his discussion of 7.42.3, which he calls: “An important but strangely neglected passage in the seventh book . . . a long parenthesis criticising Nicias, as though he had been in sole command, for having committed strategic blunders at earlier stages of the campaign.” . . . “There is certainly some confusion of thought, but the main criticism is of the withdrawal from Syracuse, as is shown by the references to the Athenians wintering at Catana and to the Syracusans sending to the Peloponnesians for aid (cf. 6.73.2). This confusion and the ‘rhetorical distortion’ with which Dover charges Thucydides may owe its origin to the fact that

⁵ Otto Luschnat, *Die Feldherrnreden im Geschichtswerk des Thukydides* (Philologus Supplbd. 34/2, Leipzig 1942) 78 n.2.

⁶ Westlake 181–82 with 182 n.1.

⁷ Westlake 181.

the sentence is first and foremost reporting the views of Demosthenes.”⁸

Westlake must ignore the difficulties of the clause ἀφικόμενος . . . φοβερός. The views expressed in 7.42.3 are not confused; they explicitly contradict Thucydides’ account. Further, Donini has shown that these views are first and foremost those of Thucydides. Finally, Thucydides did not disapprove of the Athenian withdrawal of 6.71. Not only are the motives for the withdrawal given in a γάρ clause in the indicative (the presence of ἐδόκει may weaken this argument), but these reasons are in line with Thucydides’ entire analysis and account of the expedition. H.-P. Stahl has shown that Nicias’ predictions in the second debate on the expedition (6.8–24), especially those concerned with horse and money, are fulfilled and that Thucydides goes out of his way to emphasize this.⁹

Let us return to Steup, whose solution involved the insertion of a phrase mentioning Naxos to restore concinnity with the rest of the work. “Die Schwierigkeiten, welche die W[orte] ἀλλ’ ἐν Κατάνηι διεχρίμαζεν hiernach bieten, sind so gross, dass der überlieferte Text unserer St[elle] unmöglich der ursprüngliche sein kann. Die bezeichneten W[orte] sind aber, wie wir sie vor uns haben, auch von allzu seltsamer Beschaffenheit, als dass man daran denken könnte, sie für einen Zusatz von fremder Hand zu erklären.”¹⁰ Here I venture to disagree with the great commentator. What we require is a careful imitator of Thucydides’ style who detested Nicias with the persistency of a Westlake. Such an historian existed. He was widely read in antiquity—Philistus of Syracuse. Indeed, his imitation of Thucydides, attested by the best ancient critics, and his detestation of Nicias are among the most assured parts of our lacunose knowledge of his work.

For Philistus as imitator of Thucydides, see Jacoby, *FGrHist* 556 T 14–21, especially Dionysius Halicarnasseus, *De Imitatione* 3.2: Φίλιστος δὲ μιμητὴς ἐστὶ Θουκυδίδου ἔξω τοῦ ἤθους . . . Cicero, *Ad Q. fratrem* 2.11.4: *Siculus ille capitalis, creber, acutus, brevis, paene pusillus Thucydides*; *De Oratore* 2.57: *Syracosius Philistus . . . maximeque Thucydidem est (ut mihi videtur) imitatus.*

⁸ Westlake 182 n.1.

⁹ Hans-Peter Stahl, “Speeches and Course of Events in Books Six and Seven of Thucydides,” in *The Speeches in Thucydides*, Philip A. Stadter, ed. (Chapel Hill 1973) 66–69.

¹⁰ Steup, *op.cit.* (*supra* n.1) 255.

For Philistus' negative view of Nicias, which on occasion explicitly contradicts Thucydides, the best evidence is Plutarch's *Nicias*, brilliantly analysed by Georg Busolt,¹¹ whom I follow here. The most striking passage concerns the capture of Demosthenes and Nicias at the end of the Sicilian expedition. Pausanias 1.29.12 (= *FGrHist* 556 F 53) explains the absence of Nicias on the casualty list in the Ceramicus of men lost in the Sicilian expedition: "Nicias was omitted for the following reason. I write nothing different from Philistus, who said that while Demosthenes made a truce for the others but not for himself, and when he was captured, attempted suicide, Nicias surrendered voluntarily." The account of the capture of Demosthenes in Plutarch, *Nicias* 27 includes Demosthenes' attempted suicide and a detail on the location (*περὶ τὴν Πολυζήλειον αὐλήν*) that seems, like other bits of local color in Plutarch's account, to derive from Philistus. The strong words at the end of the *syncrisis* of Crassus and Nicias (5.4) reflects Philistus' harsh judgement on Nicias: *ὁ δὲ Νικίας αἰσχρᾶς καὶ ἀκλεοῦς ἐλπίδι σωτηρίας ὑποπεσὼν τοῖς πολεμίοις, αἰσχίονα ἑαυτῷ τὸν θάνατον ἐποίησεν.*

Thucydides' account is very different. The report of the surrender of Demosthenes is sparse, but we have been told earlier that Demosthenes had temporarily yielded to panic and his delay allowed his troops to be surrounded. The account of Nicias' surrender is also brief, but includes Nicias' touching plea to Gylippus, who owed him favors and whom he trusted more than the Syracusans—with reason—to use him as he liked, but to stop slaughtering his men (7.85).

We can discover traces of Philistus and his views of Nicias in the varying accounts of the very incident with which we are dealing, the counsels of the Athenian generals after the arrival of Demosthenes. In Thucydides (7.43.1), Demosthenes has everything his own way at first. There is no sign of dissent or disagreement among the generals. Demosthenes "having persuaded Nicias and the other generals, began to put into effect his plan of an attack on Epipolae." In Plutarch's account (*Nic.* 21), Nicias tries to dissuade Demosthenes from rash action, hinting at secret information he has about dissent and treachery within Syracuse. He is savagely attacked by his fellow generals. "Nicias, by hinting at some of these things [his secret information]

¹¹ *Hermes* 34 (1899) 280–97. See also his *Griechische Geschichte* III.2 (Gotha 1904) 729–36 and then effectively *passim* [hereafter, BUSOLT]. The assertions of Richard Laqueur, *RE* 19 (1938) 2418–28, do not refute Busolt's evidence.

but not being willing to speak openly, gave his colleagues the impression of cowardice. They sided with Demosthenes, saying that this was the same old story from him, the delays and procrastinations and nitpicking with which he had lost the best moment, by not attacking the enemy right away, but becoming stale and despised. Nicias, under compulsion (ἐκβιασθείς) eventually gave in.”

Westlake noted¹² that “The arguments here attributed to Nicias are among those which in Thucydides (vii.48) he uses in opposing withdrawal from Syracuse” and concluded “They appear to have been deliberately misplaced by some writer who wished to represent him as incapable of consenting to offensive action even when it was clearly desirable.” (In *Individuals in Thucydides* this reason is modified to “presumably to accentuate the contrast between Nicias and Demosthenes.”) Whether this plausible reconstruction is true or not, the two passages are parallel. In Thucydides, people are impressed by Nicias’ hints; in Plutarch his intelligence draws down on him abuse and the appearance of ἀτολμία.

The theme of dissent among the Athenian generals appears elsewhere in Plutarch where it is absent from Thucydides, most noticeably in the account of the sea-battle that precedes Demosthenes’ arrival. In Plutarch (*Nic.* 20), Euthydemus and Menander force Nicias into a disastrous sea-battle through φιλοτιμία and ζήλος. In Thucydides’ version (7.36–41) it is the Syracusans who want to attack before Demosthenes arrives, and there is no mention of strife on the Athenian side.

The characterization of Nicias in Plutarch is simple and of a piece. Busolt argued convincingly that the source must be Philistus. Nicias is consistently blamed for delay and disheartening his staff and men, e.g. *Nic.* 14.2; 15.3; 16.7,9; 21.6; 24.1. These passages resemble closely Thucydides 7.42.3 and frequently occur in contexts where there is no corresponding remark or implication in Thucydides. The major sources of Plutarch according to his own account (*Nic.* 1.1) were Thucydides, Philistus and Timaeus. At least some of Plutarch’s account can not be attributed to Thucydides. The source adds local details not in Thucydides and betrays some knowledge of strategy. This latter effectively rules out Timaeus, who, according to Polybius 12.25 (= *FGrHist* 566 T 19.25h) ἀπάσης ὁμολογουμένως ἄπειρος ἐγένετο

¹² H. D. Westlake, “Nicias in Thucydides,” *CQ* 35 (1941) 64 n.2; Westlake 197 n.1.

πολεμικῆς χρείας. Philistus, we know, was an experienced general. Further, like a proper historian, Philistus distributed praise and blame to the deserving: *FGrHist* 556 T 16 b(6)¹³ ἐάν τε ἐπαίνους, ἐάν τε ψόγους διαπορεύηται.

The attribution of Thucydides 7.42.3 to Philistus solves a major problem of Thucydidean scholarship, the seeming approbation given in this passage to Lamachus' plan at the start of the expedition to seize Syracuse immediately. This has seemed to many to contradict Thucydides' explicit statement at 2.65.11, which may imply that the recall of Alcibiades doomed the expedition. In Plutarch, *Nicias* 14 we have a denunciation of Nicias similar in tone to 7.42.3: "[The start of the expedition] was no longer a time for his excessive caution and delay, which resulted in his looking back from the ship like a child and repeating that he had not been defeated with rational arguments and twisting and blunting the courage of those commanding with him and losing the right time for action, but he ought to have attacked the enemy right away and relying on his luck (τύχην) have put it to the test in battle." Busolt¹⁴ deduced that this passage derives from Philistus and indicates that Philistus was the first historian to hold the now popular view that Lamachus was right. Thucydides 7.42.3 is the only passage that suggests that Thucydides thought so and, as Liebeschütz pointed out, it goes against the whole tenor of Thucydides' presentation of the Sicilian Expedition.¹⁵ "A rare but interesting corruption is the addition to a text of a parallel passage originally

¹³ Praise for Nicias' strategy when aggressive is cited by Busolt (*Hermes* 34 [1899] 292–93), e.g. *Plut. Nic.* 16.3, 17.1, 26.4.

¹⁴ Busolt 1305 n.6.

¹⁵ The idea (found twice in 7.42, once in, once just after the parenthesis) that an invading army is most frightening when it has just arrived, is also found at 6.63.2, and this passage may well have influenced 7.42. It is, however, a pseudo-parallel. In 6.63, the Syracusans lose their initial fear of the Athenians when they are not immediately attacked. When the Athenians fail to take Hybla, the Syracusans despise them even more and vote for their generals to lead them against Catana, "as the mob (ὄχλος) is prone to do when it gets its courage up." The Athenians act intelligently. They decoy away the Syracusan horse, attack and win a victory, which they are unable to follow up because of the return of the cavalry (6.63–71). The Syracusan courage after the Athenian failure to attack does not cause them to win when the Athenians do attack. Again, when the Athenians, persuaded by Demosthenes' arguments, attack Epipolae, they are defeated. Thucydides knew that an army is most impressive on its first arrival. He also knew what Philistus and the historians mentioned by Busolt in his n.6 (cited *supra* n.14)—to which we may add Luschnat, Westlake and Dover—have forgotten, that this impression is no assurance of victory. That lies in the hands of *tyche*.

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written in the margin of a book by a learned reader. This may happen in verse or prose. Cases are known from Greek tragedy, and Galen (17[1].634) noticed that it had happened in one of the Hippocratic treatises.¹⁶ The interpolation is a parallel added to explain Demosthenes' thinking in 7.42.4 from a parallel source. Theon, *Progymn.* II, 119,2 Sp. (=FGrHist 556 T 20c), shows that the accounts of the attack on Epipolae in Thucydides and Philistus were compared by ancient rhetoricians. There are other interpolations in Thucydides. Most scholars take 3.84 to be one and many scholars think 3.17 an interpolation, too.

I have bracketed the interpolation in the text printed at the beginning of the article. The last five words, *ταῦτα οὖν ἀνασκοπῶν ὁ Δημοθένης*, were added to accommodate the interpolation to the grammar of the passage. The rest give us our longest quotation from the work of the Sicilian historian and politician, Philistus of Syracuse.¹⁷

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¹⁶ L. D. Reynolds and N. G. Wilson, *Scribes and Scholars* (Oxford 1968) 157. I should adduce the following examples. Eur. *El.* 1097–99 are quoted by Stobaeus after two other lines as from Eur. *Cretan Women* (fr.464 N.*). Denniston *ad loc.* suggested an intrusive parallel to 1090. Epicurus, *Ep.Hdt.* (=Diog. Laert. 10.35–83) contains a mass of incorporated marginal scholia; see Robert Renehan, *Greek Textual Criticism* (Cambridge [Mass.] 1969) 39–41. Julian, *Ep.* 98b 294c warns the devout pagan of the two-fold danger of taking idols for merely wood or stone or for the gods themselves. It is preceded by a violent denunciation of pagans “who are led by the nose by accursed demons.” Horkel saw that this was the attack on Julian of an irate Christian, written first in the margin as a parallel and then incorporated into the text; see Bidez-Cumont, I.1 (Paris 1932) xix; I.2.161–62 (*ap.crit.*). For Thuc. 3.17 and 3.84 as interpolations, see the standard commentaries. Note that C. G. Cobet, *Mnemosyne* n.s. 8 (1880) 143, assigned 3.84 to Philistus. This assertion was denied by S. A. Naber, *Mnemosyne* n.s. 14 (1886) 139. I owe the Theon reference to Professor Calder.

¹⁷ I owe thanks to Nanno Marinatos Kopff for first alerting me to the problems of the passage and for other help and encouragement, and to Sir Denys Page and Professor William M. Calder III for comments and suggestions.