THUCYDIDES ON SEA POWER

BY

CHESTER G. STARR

From the days of Themistocles Athenian power was consciously based upon naval strength: "he first dared to say that they must make the sea their domain" 1). Historically the great sea battles during the Persian invasions served as exemplars and justification for such attention to the sea 2); the profit to Athens arising from its control of the Aegean was tangible in the tribute lists and the bustle of the Piraeus. We might well expect Thucydides, who chose as his subject the war in which that sea-based empire fell, to consider in some detail the utility and limitations of sea power as well as its effects on Athenian politics and culture.

Before seeking to discover whether in actuality he does so, let me establish briefly the fact that Athenians of his generation did indeed meditate on the nature of sea power. It has been observed that "in Athens facts had a way of becoming spiritual problems; and Athenian thalassocracy itself underwent searching analysis both in its presuppositions and its effects" 3). One could scarcely support this dictum from Aristophanes, who gives only casual comments, or the work of Stesimbrotus, lost to us 4); as Momigliano

1) Th. I 93 (hereafter I shall cite Thucydides only by book and chapter in the text and seek to give the major illustrative passages). It is, however, interesting that Hippias thought of fortifying Munychia (Aristotle, Ath. Pol. 19), and there are some signs of increasing Athenian interest in the sea before Themistocles. The effort, however, to derive useful evidence from the Dipylon vases is ill-judged; see G. Ahlberg, Fighting on Land and Sea in Greek Geometric Art (Skrifter utgivna av Svenska institutet Athens 4. 16, 1971).

2) I have collected relevant passages in Why Did the Greeks Defeat the Persians?, Parola del Passato 17 (1962), 321-32.

3) A. Momigliano, Sea-Power in Greek Thought, CR 58 (1944), 1-7 = Secondo Contributo, 58.

points out, Pericles suggests that he himself had not discussed sea power to any degree in his speeches (II 62). Yet the conservative critic of Athenian democracy who is now often called the Old Oligarch (or pseudo-Xenophon) is of great value for our present purposes 5).

In several passages the Old Oligarch comments on sea power in an Athenian context; to facilitate comparison with Thucydides I shall itemize his major points in the order in which they appear in his text: 1) democracy of a radical nature and sea power are intimately connected; “it is only just that the poorer classes and the common people of Athens should be better off than the men of birth and wealth, seeing that it is the people who man the fleet, and have brought the city her power”. 2) In a state relying on naval strength slaves have greater independence “in order that we may get in our slave rents”. 3) Athenians are deeply experienced in rowing skills inasmuch as they have practised all their lives. 4) Control of the sea gives Athens many strategic and financial advantages, viz., a) islands cannot unite against a naval power; b) a naval state can pick the individual points which it wishes to ravage, over as great a distance as it desires; c) a maritime power controls imports and exports, which are vital even to continental states; in particular no one state has all the items necessary for building ships—timber, iron, bronze, yarn, wax—but Athens can gain these materials by sea; d) more generally “the choice things” of all the Mediterranean “are all swept, as it were, into one centre, and all owing, as I say, to their maritime empire”. As a consequence, Athens itself has become cosmopolitan. If only, the Old Oligarch concludes his extensive discussion of the values of sea power, Athens itself were an island 6).

Thucydides’ history begins promisingly, for in discussing the early development of Hellas he sets control of the sea as the most


6) Note that in Th. I 143 Pericles advises the Athenians to act as if they were an island and to give up the land outside their walls.