SICILY AND ITALY IN THE PELOPONNESIAN WAR

A Note on Thucydides II 9 *)

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Thucydides, after narrating the incident which marked the beginning of the Peloponnesian War and the preparations for the conflict undertaken by the two major parties to it, proceeds at II 9 to list the allies who supported the principal combatants, Athens and Sparta. Few historians have been satisfied with this list. A. W. Gomme 1), for example, in his commentary on the passage called it “a meagre and beggarly description” and continued: “It is also to be observed that Thucydides in this chapter says nothing of the allies in the west, either on the Peloponnesian side (above 7.2. and 3.86.2) or on the Athenian (3.86.3; vol. i pp. 198, 365-6); ... It is easy to say that Thucydides is here thinking only of allies ready to take part in the ensuing campaign, though even this does not avoid the disharmony. This chapter in fact looks like a short note (made at the time?) which was never properly worked into the main narrative”.

I intend to show in this paper that at least as regards what Gomme described as “the allies in the west ... on the Peloponnesian side” his criticism is unjustifiable because it is virtually certain that nothing which could be described as ξωμαχία, whatever the exact meaning of the term 2), existed between the western states and the Spartans and their allies until the arrival of Gylippus and the Peloponnesian forces in Sicily in 414 (VII 2, 2). Professor

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1) A. W. Gomme, A Historical Commentary on Thucydides, II (Oxford 1956), 12.
Dover, in his commentary on VI 52, 1, expressed doubts as to the existence of oaths or a formal treaty between Sparta and her friends in the west in 431, but did not investigate the matter further 3). Let us now survey the evidence.

It is clear that, even before the Peloponnesian War began, some people in 433 were able to envisage the involvement of Sicily and Italy in any conflict: Thucydides (I 36, 2) represents the Corcyreans as arguing that in a situation of war Corcyra would be important for the Athenians not only to prevent a fleet coming from the west to the support of the Peloponnesians (N.B. this is before any Spartan initiative of which we know), but also as a base from which to despatch one to the west from mainland Greece. When Thucydides (I 44, 3) recounts the considerations which helped the Athenians to make a decision between the case put by the Corcyreans and that presented by the Corinthians, one of the arguments which swayed them in favour of the former was the fact, mentioned by the Corcyreans, that, since war was bound to come, Corcyra was well-situated on the route to Italy and Sicily 4).

The Corcyreans were not mistaken about the likely course of Spartan policy. In 432, Archidamus suggested to the Spartans that, instead of rushing headlong into war with the Athenians, they remonstrate with them and in the meantime proceed with their own preparations by gaining additional allies amongst Greeks and barbarians in the hope that from somewhere they would increase their naval and financial resources (I 82, 1). No sooner had the Plataean affair precipitated the war than the Spartans and their allies implemented Archidamus' advice: first they sent embassies to the Persian king and other barbarian potentates in the hope that they could gain additional help from some source; they also allied with themselves cities not previously within their sphere of influence (II 7, 1). Thucydides turns, in the next sentence,

4) Contrast G. E. M. de Ste. Croix, The Origins of the Peloponnesian War (London 1972), 75. He suggested that, because Thucydides at I 44, 3 does not explicitly repeat the entire statement made by the Corcyreans at I 36, 2 about the practical advantages of their position, he may have regarded their claim to be able to stop a fleet coming from the west to help the Peloponnesians as an exaggeration.