perί δὲ τῶν ἀνδρῶν γνώμας ἐποιοῦντο, καὶ ὑπὸ ὄργης ἔδοξεν αὐτοῖς ὦ τοὺς παρόντας μόνον ἀποκτείναι, ἄλλα καὶ τοὺς ἀπαντὰς Μυτιληναίως ὤσι ήμοι, πολίος δὲ καὶ γυναῖκας ἀνδραποδίσαι, ἐπικαλοῦντες τὴν τε ἄλλην ἀπόστασιν ὥτι ὦκ ἀρχόμενοι ὡσπερ οἱ ἄλλοι ἐποίησαντο, καὶ προσέχειν ἑλθοντο ὡς ἐλάχιστον τῆς ὄμης οἱ Πελοποννησίων νήσοις ὡς Ἰανίαν ἐκεῖνος βοηθου ἀπολύσασαι παρακινδυνεύσας· ὥς γὰρ ἀπὸ βραχείας διανοίας εἴδόκοι τὴν ἀπόστασιν ποιήσασθαι).

This passage from Thucydides’ account of the revolt of Mytilene has attracted the attention of scholars not only because of its content but also because of the difficulty that ἐπικαλοῦντες ... παρακινδυνεύσα presents to the translator. It is the purpose of this note to offer a new interpretation of the passage.

ὁμὴ here has usually been translated by some word or phrase denoting impulsive response or strength of feeling and taken to refer to the angry reaction of the Athenians described earlier in the passage by the word

Consequently the clause καὶ προσέξινελάβοντο οὐκ ἔλαχιστον τῆς ὀρμῆς αἰς Πελοποννησίων νῆσες εἰς Ἰονίαν ἐκείνον βοηθοὶ τολμήσασι παρακινδυνεύσας has been translated, for example, as follows: “... and what contributed not least to their fury was that the Peloponnesian fleet had dared to venture over to Ionia to their support...” (R.F. Smith).

In this and similar translations the clause is not regarded as part of the charge levelled against the Mytilenians by the Athenians but rather as a piece of information provided by Thucydides. Once this approach is adopted it has to be accepted that τὴν τε ἄλλην ἀπόστασιν is not answered later in the sentence and that the sentence is somewhat loose in structure and provides no clear indication as to what exactly is explained by οὐ γὰρ ... ποιήσασθαι. A further consequence is that the verb προσέξινελάβοντο, the reading of CG(ve)BF, is required to mean with τῆς ὀρμῆς ‘they (the Peloponnesian ships) contributed to their fury’. The meaning ‘contributed to’ is challenged by Gomme who, along with others, favours προσέξινεβάλετο, the reading of AEG(ex corr.)M, or προσέξινεβάλοντο.

A different approach will, I believe, produce a more satisfactory interpretation of the passage. As is seen from 2.11.2 where Archidamus is referring to the sympathy of the Greeks for the Spartan cause, ὀρμῆ in Thucydides can mean ‘undertaking’ or ‘enterprise’.

The meaning ‘undertaking’ is appropriate in 3.36.2. If ὀρμῆ there is translated in this way and if we punctuate without a comma after ἐποιήσαντο, it will be seen that the passage presents no serious problems and is able to include προσέξινελάβοντο, the reading of CGBF, with the meaning ‘they had a share in’. The passage as a whole can be rendered: ‘As regards the men they voiced their opinions and their angry mood led them to decide to kill not only those who were in Athens but also all the adult males of Mytilene and to make slaves of the women and children, bringing as the charge against them both the revolt in general in that they had undertaken it even though they were not held in subjection like the others and also the fact that the Peloponnesian ships that had dared to take on the risk of sailing to Ionia to help them had had no insignificant share in the enterprise. For they believed that it was not on the basis of brief consideration that they had undertaken the revolt.’

τὴν τε ἄλλην ἀπόστασιν clearly means ‘both the revolt in general’ and arouses the expectation of an answering reference to some particular charge. This reference is found in the section καὶ προσέξινελάβοντο ... παρακινδυνεύσας where ὅτι is easily supplied between καὶ and προσέξινελάβοντο. Thus this section is part of the charge and οὐ γὰρ ... ποιήσασθαι explains why the Athenians decided to punish the Mytilenians as severely as they did. The passage as a whole now has a smooth flow: after discussion they decided to inflict severe penalties, bringing a charge of unprovoked revolt and collaboration with the enemy. What lay behind their decision was the belief that there had been considerable premeditation.’

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