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## **Chapter One: Historical Background**

### *Approach*

In this thesis, I will examine the dynamics of power between the Athenian assembly and the three generals assigned to positions of command in the Sicilian Expedition – Alcibiades, Nicias, and Lamachus – and attempt to contextualize Alcibiades’ defecting from Athens to Sparta. I focus on the Sicilian Expedition narrative in Thucydides’ *History of the Peloponnesian War* Books 6 and 7, but also use Plutarch’s *Life of Alcibiades* and *Life of Nicias*, plus the *Life of Coriolanus*.

In the first chapter, after discussing the sources, I examine the personal history of the commanders involved (the Athenians Alcibiades, Lamachus, and Nicias, and the Spartan Gylippus). In my second chapter, I then turn to the governmental structures and military customs of Athens, Sparta, and Sicily, zeroing in on the Athenian Assembly and its military role. In the third chapter, I briefly analyze several short speeches by Nicias and Alcibiades to the Athenian Assembly in Thucydides Books 6 and 7, and compare Thucydides with Plutarch’s *Life of Alcibiades* and *Life of Nicias*. Throughout, I concentrate on the communication between the Athenian generals and their Assembly, and compare this relationship to the one between the Spartan generals and their assembly (as well as the Syracusan commanders’ dealings with the Syracusan assembly). I analyze the difficulties that Nicias faced in trying to lead the Sicilian expedition, and the differences between his approach from that of Gylippus – and the differing results.

In a brief fourth chapter, I argue that the Athenian assembly ruined its leadership through excessive interference, whereas Sparta allowed relative autonomy to generals,

and Syracusan commanders had flexible, realistic relations with that city's assembly. I will conclude that argue that Alcibiades was justified in defecting to Sparta because of the flawed system in which he was forced to operate at Athens, a city that did not appreciate his talents and skills.<sup>1</sup> In a short appendix, I include a chronology of the Sicilian expedition to assist the reader in placing these events in context.

### *Ancient Sources*

Thucydides' *History of the Peloponnesian War* will be the primary source for my analysis.<sup>2</sup> Thucydides, who lived in fifth-century Athens, and who served in the Athenian armed forces, provides a contemporary account of the conflict. His *History* is essential for background as well as for four long speeches to the Athenian Assembly.

However, since Thucydides was in exile, his narrations of these four speeches would have been based on rumor, on transcripts – if they existed – or on what he thought the speakers would have, or should have, said. So, as Thucydides himself says in 1.21 and 1.22, he takes liberties with many speeches:

With reference to the speeches in this history, some were delivered before the war began, others while it was going on; some I heard myself, others I got from various quarters; it was in all cases difficult to carry them word for word in one's memory, so my habit has been to make the speakers say what was in my opinion

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<sup>1</sup> A different view of Athenian democracy and the war: Hanson (2010) 86, speaking of lessons, but not

<sup>2</sup> Cited from Crawley's revised translation (1996).

demanded of them by the various occasions, of course adhering as closely as possible to the general sense of what they really said.

Thucydides also speaks of liberties taken with his narrative:

And with reference to the narrative of events, far from permitting myself to derive it from the first source that came to hand, I did not even trust my own impressions, but it rests partly on what I saw myself, partly on what others saw for me, the accuracy of the report being always tried by the most severe and detailed tests possible.<sup>3</sup>

As K. J. Dover observes, “Thucydides used his imagination only when memory or information was inadequate, never to replace, let alone contradict, what he had reason to think the speaker had actually said.”<sup>4</sup> In the main, the speeches are trustworthy. The same is true of the narrative. In his analysis of Thucydides’ potential sources for the conference between the Athenian generals in Sicily, Dover argues that Alcibiades himself may have served as Thucydides’ informant.<sup>5</sup>

The only other narrative of the war, by Diodorus Siculus, mostly derives from Thucydides. Xenophon’s account, in the first book of his *History of Greece*, begins after the Sicilian expedition. In Thucydides, the narrative of the Sicilian expedition follows the

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<sup>3</sup> Thucydides 1.21-2.

<sup>4</sup> Dover (1973) 21.

<sup>5</sup> Thucydides 6.46.5-50.1; Thucydides 7.46-9.

description of the Peace of Nicias – the fragile armistice signed in 422 BCE – and subsequent skirmishes in the early 410s BCE.<sup>6</sup>

Plutarch's *Life of Alcibiades* provides a biographical sketch of the central figure in my thesis. Secondary scholarship will provide a critical analysis of Plutarch, who lived from 50 AD – 120 AD, and was far removed from the events and figures he writes about in his *Parallel Lives*. Plutarch also has extra-historical, literary aims noticed by scholars such as Marco Gyax.<sup>7</sup> Plutarch's *Life of Nicias* and *Life of Pericles* provide background on the lives and military experience of the other military commanders, Nicias and Gylippus, and afford a contrast between Alcibiades' personality and traits, and those of these two less exceptional figures. *The Life of Coriolanus*, the match for Alcibiades among Plutarch's Roman *Lives*, is, unsurprisingly, relevant for Plutarch's attitude towards *Alcibiades*. Plutarch paired these two men partly because of shared difficulties in dealing with popular assemblies – but perhaps sacrifices accuracy for the sake of a compelling comparison.

One inscription, *Inscriptiones Graecae* I (3<sup>rd</sup> ed.) no. 98, is relevant. It is discussed below.

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<sup>6</sup> See Lendon (2010) for an analysis of the Archidamian War and chronology of events prior to the Peace of Nicias. See Hanson (2010) for background on the Persian Wars and the Periclean era – including Pericles' defensive strategy against Sparta.

<sup>7</sup> Gyax (2006) 484.

*The Athenian Commanders*

Although the Athenian commanders came from similar backgrounds of wealth and prestige, they differed in their political outlooks and strategic preferences, their approaches to the war, and their communication with the Athenian Assembly.

**Alcibiades**

After the death of Pericles, the leading statesman in Athens, Alcibiades had overshadowed Cleon and Nicias and assumed a leading position in the city. Like Pericles, Alcibiades was an aristocrat with a record of military successes. In fact, Alcibiades was raised by Pericles and Ariphron after the death of his parents.<sup>8</sup> However, Alcibiades carved out his own charismatic political style. Alcibiades roused the Assembly to action, whereas Pericles embodied a thoughtful, prudent, middle-aged leader. Alcibiades' willingness to take chances meant that his policy was expansionist, not conservative, and he was willing to send large naval and land forces to distant objectives.

Alcibiades' oratorical skill, which he may have learned partly from Pericles, was crucial to his rise to prominence in the Athenian Assembly, and his prominence allowed him to convince the Assembly to approve the expedition, and eventually grant him co-command. However, his reputation for poor ethics polarized his compatriots into two groups, supporters and opponents.<sup>9</sup> His opposition to the Peace of Nicias did not help his popularity.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Plutarch, *Life of Alcibiades* 1.

<sup>9</sup> Alcibiades was also famed as a *bon vivant*, which led the Athenian people to worry about his ethical standards and behavior (Plutarch, *Life of Alcibiades* 7).

Alcibiades' being charged with impiety in the affair of the Herms effectively removed him from a position of influence and authority in Athens (and would give him reason to flee Athenian jurisdiction later in the expedition). Yet the charge against him was politically motivated, and was never substantiated.<sup>11</sup> If he could be accused of poor ethics, his opponents could be accused of the more serious crime of manipulating the legal system and the Athenians' superstitious religious fears.

The philosopher Socrates shaped Alcibiades' personality insofar as Alcibiades, like Socrates, questioned conventional views and conduct.<sup>12</sup> This atypical approach was one reason for Alcibiades' exceptional success, both politically and militarily.<sup>13</sup> It also was a reason for his habit of switching allegiances among the Athenians, Spartans, and Persians. He was repeatedly in positions of authority, but unable, or unwilling, to maintain any position for long.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Plutarch, *Life of Nicias* 10.

<sup>11</sup> Plutarch, *Life of Alcibiades* 19.

<sup>12</sup> Alcibiades had been involved in a homoerotic relationship with Socrates in his youth, and had been his tent mate at the battle of Potidaea.

<sup>13</sup> An anecdote: Alcibiades cut off the tail of an expensive dog just for the sake of doing it (Plutarch, *Life of Alcibiades* 9).

<sup>14</sup> Note that Plutarch's *Life of Alcibiades* portrays Alcibiades in an overall positive light, but the *Life of Nicias* furnishes negative qualities and episodes for Alcibiades. This should caution the reader against taking an undiscerning view of Plutarch's narratives, because of his tendency to present the main character in each of his narratives in a positive regard.

Plutarch's more favorable narrative presents Alcibiades as so influential and authoritative that it seems that if Alcibiades had remained in command during the entire expedition, the expedition would have succeeded.

## **Nicias**

Nicias was more like Pericles than Alcibiades was, but lacked Pericles' influence. Nicias did not have Pericles' depth of character, Plutarch says, but compensated through use of his wealth.<sup>15</sup> Plutarch also says that Nicias' faint-heartedness reassured the Athenian assembly, which thought this trait appropriate in well-born public servants of the democracy. Yet there was more to Nicias than this pliability. Plutarch portrays Nicias as possessing a "lofty" personality, which, combined with his prudence, made him a natural leader.<sup>16</sup> Consumed with affairs of war, Nicias had been successful militarily.

After Pericles' death, Nicias had established himself as the demagogue Cleon's primary rival. Prominent Athenians wanted to establish him as an "antidote" to Cleon – and helped Nicias achieve his personal goals as well.<sup>17</sup> Later, he was the main architect of the Peace of Nicias, which brought the first phase of the Peloponnesian War to an end.

Nicias' influence diminished in the course of the Sicilian expedition. First Alcibiades overshadowed him, and later the arrival of Demosthenes frustrated his plans. Demosthenes, not Nicias, won the support of the Athenian troops, who had witnessed Nicias' shortcomings during the campaign, especially after Alcibiades left.

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<sup>15</sup> Plutarch, *Life of Nicias* 3.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.



Thus, the multiplicity of command, plus changes in commanders, hampered Nicias, and made it difficult for him to pursue the continuous and prudent path of leadership that he preferred.<sup>18</sup> A political system that was eventually hostile to Alcibiades also undermined this very different leader.

### **Lamachus**

The third commander, the less important Lamachus, illustrated the Athenians' preference that command be shared. Lamachus was daring in battle – a characteristic he shared with Alcibiades – but he was inferior to Alcibiades because of his lack of influence, while he was inferior to Nicias because of Nicias' greater dignity and reputation, and also because of Nicias' greater wealth. Since, as Deborah Hamel notes, the handling of Athenian forces was determined by majority vote of the commanders, Lamachus' support of Alcibiades was another obstacle for Nicias. Late in the campaign, after Alcibiades' departure, Lamachus' death in single combat with a Syracusan cavalryman left Nicias in sole command, until the Athenians could send additional generals to assist Nicias.<sup>19</sup> In Plutarch's opinion, however, this turn of events was not decisive for the outcome of the war. In death as in life, Lamachus was not able to free two bigger men, Alcibiades and Nicias, from the politically generated troubles that beset them.

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<sup>18</sup> For a further negative example of multiplicity of Athenian command within the context of the Sicilian expedition, see Thucydides 7.48-49.

<sup>19</sup> Plutarch, *Life of Nicias* 18.

*The Spartan Commanders***Gylippus**

Gylippus was a member of the Spartan elite. His father Cleandridas served as an ephor and advised the Spartan king Pleistoanax.<sup>20</sup> Although his mother may have been of non-Spartan origin – and Gylippus thus would have been considered a half-Spartan, or *mothax* – this did not prevent him from becoming a leading Spartan officer. In Syracuse, Gylippus' assignment was to guide the Syracusans and to command their forces. This required diplomatic skills as well as military aptitude. Just as Alcibiades and Nicias had to deal with the Athenian assembly, Gylippus had to deal with the assembly and also the military leaders of Syracuse. Although Gylippus had more authority than he would have if he had been a local official, he was still forced to rely on Syracuse for men, materiel, and ships. He did not worry about the authorities in Sparta.

All in all, the biographical element in the military situation was an important one, for it helps to explain the dynamics under which each commander, and his forces, operated. Although each commander had his own political assets and problems, Alcibiades had the most complex background and personality, the most significant relations with an assembly, and the most either to gain or lose. Gylippus was the opposite: a talented, but not flashy, leader with full authority, a diplomat, not an intriguer.

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<sup>20</sup> Plutarch, *Life of Pericles* 22; Thucydides 6.93, with Kennel (2011) 118.

## Chapter Two: Background on Governmental and Military Customs

### *Athens*

During the fifth century BC, Athens' military and political systems were integrated with one another. The Athenian assembly determined the city's administrative policy, elected officials, and military policy.<sup>21</sup> Although the Athenian court system checked the power of the Assembly, the δῆμος – the Athenian citizen body – was the ultimate source of both the courts and the Assembly. If religious factors are put aside, there existed no code of laws that safeguarded Athenians from the consequences of majoritarianism. As long as Pericles was alive, some of these consequences were forestalled. After his death during the plague in 429 BC, jockeying for power among Cleon, Nicias, and others revealed the worst effects of this constitutional weakness.

Although the Athenian assembly ostensibly granted Nicias, Alcibiades, and Lamachus “full and independent powers” in administering the conflict in Sicily, actual Athenian military administration was very different from what this phrase implies.<sup>22</sup> The Athenian top military (and diplomatic) leadership consisted of ten annually elected στρατηγοί, or generals/admirals.<sup>23</sup> Besides electing them, the Assembly obliged them to

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<sup>21</sup> Although the Athenian assembly was an unusually democratic body by the standards of antiquity, it was highly restrictive by today's standards, for only citizen males that had reached the age of thirty were allowed to participate. The issue for military administration is thus not the egalitarian composition of the assembly, but the lack of checks on its power, and its lack of military knowledge.

<sup>22</sup> Plutarch, *Life of Alcibiades* 14.

<sup>23</sup> The concept of ten generals sharing command, as well as the term limits of the στρατηγοί, was designed to prevent one person from gathering too much power and establishing himself as a tyrant over the city, as Pisistratus had done. Many Greek tyrants began as generals, but this problem, although a part of Athenian history, never was part of the history of Sparta.

consult it before making any important decisions, such as peace treaties, the disposition of prisoners, and the implementation of military strategy, even as it provided perplexing instructions in matters large and small. As Hamel says, the Assembly liked “broad definitions of objectives” that could confuse commanders, yet also controlled minutiae, like the exact number of troops and ships.<sup>24</sup>

Furthermore, Athenian generals were forced to undergo evaluations (εὐθῦναι) at the end of their terms, another factor that discouraged making unpopular but essential decisions. Worst of all, the generals were subject to possible prosecution by two altogether different parties. First, the assembly could prosecute them for crimes uncovered, or alleged, during εὐθῦναι. Some of these crimes amounted to accusations that the general had been guilty of being defeated, even in circumstances in which defeat was unavoidable. Furthermore, as Hamel notes, a general could also be prosecuted at his deposition from office.<sup>25</sup> Second, members of the forces which they commanded could prosecute them. In 406 BC, trial of the Arginusae generals would provide a notorious example, as captains of vessels accused generals serving as admirals of the Athenian fleet. The admirals had won the battle, but the prosecutions took place nevertheless, and the resulting convictions decimated Athens’ top leadership. In the course of the fifth and fourth centuries the number of Athenian generals put on trial was remarkably high.

For the period of the Peloponnesian War – for which Hamel says that we have data for between 64 and 67 percent of the generals – between 10.7 and 11.8 percent of

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<sup>24</sup> Hamel (1998) 115-116.

<sup>25</sup> Hamel (1998) 130.

these commanders were prosecuted.<sup>26</sup> Hamel notes that in practical terms, this was roughly equivalent to one prosecution per year.<sup>27</sup> Furthermore, prosecutions often ended with disciplinary action. Hamel notes that for 20 of the 22 trials for which evidence exists between 431/0 and 405/4, as many as 19 ended in conviction – and in fourteen of these cases, the commander was sentenced to death, and nine were actually executed.<sup>28</sup>

Athenian generals could retaliate, and punish their subordinates, but usually after the fact, in Athens. Their powers to discipline subordinates in the field were limited.

As Hamel summarizes, “However far generals marched their troops from the borders of Attica, they did not leave Athens’ *panyx* far behind.”<sup>29</sup> Furthermore, military commanders could be accused years after the time of their command as well, which could affect their political career with uncertainty for the rest of their lives.<sup>30</sup> Nicias especially would take this knowledge with him to Sicily. Alcibiades would take it with him to Sparta, when he took refuge there after quitting the expedition.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Hamel (1998) 131.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Hamel (1998) 133. However, as she notes, ancient speechwriters were often motivated politically to refer to speeches in which severe penalties were awarded, thus providing the possibility for distortion in our analysis of the data.

<sup>29</sup> Hamel (1998) 133.

<sup>30</sup> Conon prosecuted Adeimantos twelve years after his *στρατηγία* of 405/4 BC; see Hamel (1998) 130. Thus, there was not a fixed interval after which a general could be free from prosecution.

<sup>31</sup> Another critical view of the Athenian system: Hansen 345.

*Sparta*

Sparta's government and political structure were intermeshed also. Sparta's kings were responsible for leading the army into battle. Although one king would remain in Sparta to administer the government while the other campaigned, the kings switched roles regularly to allow both men experience in each sphere. Over the course of their reigns, the kings would be able to amass much more command experience than the Athenians were able to, since Athenian generals were often forced to relinquish military command after a year.<sup>32</sup> A similar contrast applied to Spartan officers. Either the kings appointed them for long-term service, or the assembly elected them, but if it did elect them, it was less fickle, and less politically inclined, than the assembly in Athens. As a result, men like Gylippus or Brasidas compiled military resumes with longer, steadier, and more diverse experience than their Athenian counterparts.

Next, the Spartan assembly did not subject kings or other officers to anything like Athenian assembly instructions. They did not interfere as much, and they did not subject officers to end-of-term εὐθῦνα. Instead, ephors accompanied the kings on campaigns. Because of this supervision, Spartan kings seldom took actions that would lead to their being tried, and they never were tried simply for the crime of being defeated. (On the contrary, they would sometimes be tried for failing to risk battle.<sup>33</sup>) If kings were tried at

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<sup>32</sup> MacDowell (1986) 126; Pericles is a notable exception who was able to be continually reelected – and this fact provided continuing in Athenian foreign policy until his death in 429 BCE.

<sup>33</sup> MacDowell (1986) 46.

all, the court was not the assembly, or some similar large panel, but the *γερουσία*, a council of elders that must have included many experienced military officers.<sup>34</sup>

Another difference between the two societies was not institutional, but cultural. The Spartans' unusual customs, traced to the legendary Lycurgus, encouraged a military ethos. The community had a firm religious and ancestral basis for their tradition of prioritizing warfare and military training. This tradition, in turn, affected the conduct and attitude of military officers. They sensed that the community was behind them—the kings, the *γερουσία*, the assembly. If they served with foreign troops, as Gylippus and Brasidas did, they brought their self-confidence with them, and used it to inspire others. Whereas an Athenian officer often found himself at odds with his own government, a Spartan officer found himself supported at home and admired abroad.

Trained, esteemed, protected, the Spartan officers had esprit de corps. Among the Athenian military, no such feeling could exist. Instead an exceptional leader like Alcibiades could build a reputation that reflected his personality, his family prestige, and his philosophical education. He was a unique Athenian. Gylippus, who had an unusual career, was a typically effective Spartan officer.

Spartan society was very law-abiding. Even the two kings were held responsible for obeying the Spartan constitution by the five ephors. These magistrates also were

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<sup>34</sup> The *γερουσία* was composed of 28 men over age 60, in addition to the two kings – for a total of thirty members. They were chosen by acclamation, a method that should have helped those candidates with good military reputations.

charged with the maintenance and oversight of public morals.<sup>35</sup> Athens was law-abiding, but it was also litigious. The difference in ethos was important for military leaders. Spartan attitudes contributed to the authority that officers possessed. In Athens, public attitudes were ambiguous. Successful leaders were admired, but also questioned, and sometimes sued.

### *Sicily*

Early Sicilian government included many tyrants.<sup>36</sup> Although Diodorus' narrative regarding the transition from tyranny to democracy in Sicily is unreliable, it is generally accepted that tyranny fell into disuse with the expulsion of Thrasybulus from Syracuse.<sup>37</sup> (For maps of Sicily and the Greek world, see p. 24)

The next kind of government, democracy, was relatively new, so citizens would not have been well-versed in the positive and negative aspects of organs of democratic government, such as assemblies. As Finley notes, democratic experience prior to the Peloponnesian War were "very limited and unpromising."<sup>38</sup> However, democracy in Syracuse differed from the Athenian version in that the council and civil officials, instead

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<sup>35</sup> The ephors forced the kings to take the oath of loyalty to the constitution each month (Xenophon, *Constitution of the Spartans* 15.7).

<sup>36</sup> Finley (1979b) 45.

<sup>37</sup> Finley (1979b) 59.

<sup>38</sup> Finley (1979b) 58.



of being chosen by lot, were elected.<sup>39</sup> This put a limit on full democracy, and would eventually allow skilled personnel to administer the state.

Sicily's involvement with Athens originated in the 450s BCE when Segesta signed a treaty with Athens, followed by similar treaties between Leontini and Athens, and likewise between Rhegium and Athens.<sup>40</sup> Athens' involvement in Sicily continued with the renewal of its treaties with Rhegium and Leontini in 433 BCE. Athens' military involvement in Sicily began with the dispatch of a force of twenty ships to Leontini in 427 BCE.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Finley (1979b) 62.

<sup>40</sup> Finley (1979b) 66.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

### Chapter Three: The Sicilian Expedition

#### *Thucydides' Perspective as an Athenian*

Thucydides' exile allowed him to witness some conflicts firsthand, but also to learn of important speeches by envoys and others on the Spartan side, and he thus gained some understanding of Spartan as opposed to Athenian war making. For him, the Sicilian expedition illustrated certain Athenian weaknesses, especially weaknesses of the Athenian assembly in its relations with commanders. Plutarch, who has different interests, does not contradict Thucydides on this point.

#### *Athens: The conflict between the generals and the Assembly*<sup>42</sup>

The conflict between the generals and the assembly emerges in several speeches in Book 6 of Thucydides. On one side stands Nicias, trying to restrain the Assembly. On the other stands Alcibiades, trying to spur them on. Who will the Assembly listen to, and why?

Nicias' first speech, which warns against any Sicilian expedition, demonstrates prudence and practicality:<sup>43</sup>

I affirm, then, that you leave many enemies behind you here to go there far away and bring more back with you. You imagine, perhaps, that the treaty which you have made can be trusted; a treaty that will continue to exist nominally, as long as you keep quiet – for nominal it has become, owing to the practices of certain men

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<sup>42</sup> Hammond (1986) 387-400 provides a description of the Sicilian expedition and an analysis of the speeches and political factions present at the debate regarding the expedition.

<sup>43</sup> Thucydides 6.10 et seq.

here and at Sparta...Again, some of the most powerful states have never yet accepted the arrangement at all. Some of these are at open war with us; others (as the Spartans do not yet move) are restrained by truces renewed every ten days, and it is only too probable that if they found our power divided, as we are hurrying to divide it, they would attack us vigorously....<sup>44</sup>

Nicias also raises the possibility that even if the Sicilians were conquered, it would be difficult to dominate them. Failure, he adds, would result in worse consequences than not pursuing the expedition at all. To military arguments he adds diplomatic ones – a natural switch, since Athenian generals doubled as diplomats. Cities including Thebes, Megara, and Elis would possibly turn against Athens once the city becomes distracted by a conflict far away). He concludes by arguing that the Athenians should solidify their control over existing cities before attempting to conquer more. He is a cautious imperialist.

If no one else, the older men in the Assembly ought to accept these arguments. When they do not, the initiative shifts to Alcibiades, who argues for the expedition by appealing to Athenian love of glory, power, and wealth – and the Athenians' duty to assist their allies.<sup>45</sup> This speech demonstrates the effect of Alcibiades' charisma on an audience composed mainly of civilians who lack familiarity with strategic issues raised by Nicias. That is dangerous enough, but more dangerous is Alcibiades' raising expectations in the Assembly for the successes achievable by the Athenian forces. The eventual disappointment of these expectations will contribute to the harsh treatment of

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<sup>44</sup> Thucydides 6.10-6.11.4.

<sup>45</sup> Thucydides 6.18.1-3.

the generals by the Assembly. The Athenians are harming themselves not only in recklessly pursuing the expedition, but also in setting in motion a conflict between the people and their generals.

At Thucydides 6.16 and following, Alcibiades speaks and succeeds in deluding the Athenians:

The cities in Sicily are peopled by motley rabbles, and easily change their institutions and adopt new ones in their stead; and consequently the inhabitants, being without any feeling of patriotism, are not provided with arms for their persons, and have not regularly established themselves on the land; every man thinks that either by fair words or by party strife he can obtain something at the public expense, and then in the event of a catastrophe settle in some other country, and makes his preparations accordingly. From a mob like this you need not look for either unanimity in counsel or unity in action.<sup>46</sup>

Alcibiades deals with Nicias' diplomatic arguments by attempting to shame the Assembly into action. What would Athens say to its allies, he asks? He also misrepresents the diplomatic situation in Sicily by claiming that the Sicilians are too unstable to maintain any anti-Athenian alliances. Again countering Nicias, he claims that Athens' power will increase as a result of the expedition, rather than decrease.

This onslaught, although appealing to several Athenian weaknesses or propensities, is not enough to win the debate, and so Alcibiades co-opts the criticisms made by Nicias by proposing that Nicias and himself be granted the joint command. At

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<sup>46</sup> Thucydides 6.17.2 – 6.17.8

this juncture, a crucial feature of the Athenian system, sharing of command among generals, enters into the Assembly's deliberations. Joint command could lead to confusion and later recriminations, yet Alcibiades presents it as a way for the Assembly to be bold and cautious at the same time. The ploy is shrewd, but the effect could be disastrous.

Trapped, Nicias can do no better than accede to the Assembly's request that he increase the expedition's chance of success by making specific recommendations.<sup>47</sup> His only remaining tactic is make recommendations that reflect the full reality of the difficulties that will face the expedition, and to hope that this exposition will lead the Assembly to reconsider. Since Athens' Sicilian opponents are very powerful – with triremes, hoplites, archers, and dart-throwers, and especially cavalry – Nicias recommends raising a large land army. He appeals to the Athenians' sense of pride in making this request, and argues that he would not want them to suffer humiliation, or be “shut out from the country” of Sicily. Like Alcibiades, he panders to the Assembly's love of glory. At the same time, he implies that Athens, a sea power, is about to start a land war that it will not be able to carry through.

Nevertheless, young and old persist in desiring the expedition. The attempt to beat Alcibiades at his own game has failed. The prolonged struggle between Alcibiades and Nicias leads one more mistake by the Assembly, when they add a third commander to the expedition, Lamachus, who is expected to serve as a unifying figure, but is too weak and inexperienced for the task. They did have to make this mistake, as shown by *IG i<sup>3</sup> 98*, lines 1-5, which show that at some point they wished to send just one commander.

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<sup>47</sup> Thucydides 6.20-5.

The inability of the Athenians to gather and assess military and diplomatic intelligence about Sicily, to formulate a realistic strategy, and to appoint a unified command, all emerge from this opening episode in the Sicilian affair. The effect on Nicias must have been demoralizing. Yet the effect on Alcibiades must have been negative, too. He has to some degree fooled the Athenians, but he could not have more confidence in them for this reason. If, in the future, they turned against him with as little considerations as they had shown when turning in his favor, he might expect the same kind of unreasonable demands to be imposed on him as had already been imposed on Nicias.

Whether or not the affair of the herms ever took place, Alcibiades had already found a reason to defect, should the opportunity arise. When he does defect, later in Book Six, he will explain that one reason was the misconduct of the Assembly.<sup>48</sup> A man of his brilliance and potential would not have want to risk ending to his political career thanks to a Sicilian defeat due to the ignorance of the δῆμος, even if he had exploited this ignorance for his own advantage.

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<sup>48</sup> Thucydides 6.92.



*Sicily: The Consequences of Division and Confusion*

With Alcibiades now gone, Nicias showed how little suited he was to the task of commanding an expedition advocated by a man of altogether different gifts. His slow, cautious approach of circumnavigating Sicily was a characteristic mistake that allowed the enemy to get the better of the Athenian fleet.<sup>51</sup> Nicias was not incompetent: Plutarch approves of Nicias' sailing against Syracuse and his sending a Catanian messenger to trick the Syracusans into coming to Catana to set fire to the Athenian ships. This shrewd maneuver let Nicias bring the enemy out of its city. He was able to take control of the harbors and establish a defensible camp.<sup>52</sup> Nicias' trouble was that his tactical competence could not solve political problems besetting the expedition.

One problem that had arisen before, in Athens, and that now arose again, was the Assembly's overconfidence, and its consequent refusal to take expert advice. Nicias had said the Athenians would need a big land army, and now he said it again, in a letter to the Assembly that Thucydides describes early in Book 7.<sup>53</sup> Nicias' supporters must have been saying the same thing, but their pleas had done no good. Another problem now reappeared: political infighting, as those who were opposed to Nicias delayed sending troops because they wanted him to be unsuccessful.

At length, the Assembly heeded Nicias and sent more troops. However, the delay and disagreement had done some harm, for a new commander, Eurymedon, was sent with

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<sup>51</sup> Plutarch, *Life of Nicias* 15.

<sup>52</sup> Plutarch, *Life of Nicias* 16.

<sup>53</sup> Thucydides 7.11.



only a small fleet. Athens decided not to send a large fleet, under Demosthenes, until the spring. Demosthenes, a successful general with no political baggage, would rank on a par with Nicias. This appointment showed the Assembly's preference for multiple commanders. So did assigning two more commanders to the Sicilian Expedition, Euthydemus and Menander. The Athenians were more willing to send superfluous commanders than to send needed troops.

In the meantime, Nicias and his men found themselves on the defense, unable to throw back Syracusans reinvigorated by local reforms and the Spartan Gylippus. Crucially, Gylippus captured the Athenian garrison at Plemmyrium. That improved the naval position of the defenders, and worsened the naval position of the Athenians. Athenian naval supremacy, which had been taken for granted so far, was now in peril.

Demosthenes arrived, and carried out his own plans, which ended disastrously. This *strategos* nevertheless defended himself against accusations coming from Alcibiades. Even after Alcibiades' defection, the squabbling among the generals continued.

Nicias' letter to the Athenian Assembly marked the culmination of his difficult relations with the Athenian Assembly. In the beginning, he had asked for more than they would give. In the end, he got too little too late. He had ended up leading an expedition he did not want, in partnership with a man, Alcibiades, whom he did not trust. Yet Nicias was not the only victim in the affair. Lamachus died for nothing. Even Alcibiades was a victim of a sort. Although he was the most skilled commander of the expedition, Athens recalled him because of unsubstantiated charges. Then Nicias, the wrong commander for this task, replaced him, and any early chances for success were squandered. The failure

of the Sicilian expedition left Athens with approximately only 10,000 hoplites and 100 triremes.<sup>54</sup>

In yet another way, the Athenian Assembly had victimized itself. First it was overly enthusiastic about the expedition. Then, during the affair of the herms, it panicked, perhaps because of unacknowledged fears about the outcome of the Sicilian enterprise. It poured men and ships into Sicily without a general plan, and lost them. When it sent Demosthenes to Sicily, it was throwing good money in after bad. Yet even then, as disaster for the expedition became more likely, the Assembly might have saved its generals and armies, and itself, by immediately giving Nicias all that he asked for. It failed to do so.

Why? Partly political infighting, partly overconfidence. Mainly, the Assembly was too far removed from the conflict to be effectively concerned. That made it easier for political factions to sway the Assembly. That also made it easier to make the mistake of listening to Alcibiades in the first place, and then make the mistake of effectively dismissing him by threatening him with prosecution.

In short, the Athenian generals were in a very difficult position. On the one hand, they were responsible for making the best and most prudent decision possible in spite of circumstances beyond their control, and on the other hand, they were obliged to appease the Assembly, which could take away their reputations and their lives. This balancing act was one that many Athenian commanders, even those who were brave and skilful, could not perform for long. Pericles was able to, but later commanders were not. Alcibiades was better at deceiving the Assembly than at appeasing them. Nicias was better at

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<sup>54</sup> Chrissanthos (2008) 57.

appeasing them than at performing his military duties. Cleon was a mix. He deceived or demagogued the Assembly, but was incompetent when put in the highest commands.

Defecting to Sparta thus may have seemed very appealing to Alcibiades. This was one way to escape from an Athenian general's predicament, and not to end up dead on the battlefield, as Demosthenes and Nicias would, or exiled after an unfair trial. If Alcibiades realized that, no matter what he or others did, the expedition would fail, and the Athenians would eventually be displeased, he may have felt he had no choice.

### *The Syracusan side of the war*

The Syracusans began the war with 15 generals. The Assembly took an active part in the war. The results, as the Syracusan Hermocrates said, were unsatisfactory.<sup>55</sup> The Athenians had done well in the early fighting and had succeeded in investing the city. Desperate, the Syracusans appealed to Sparta, which refused to send any troops, only a military adviser. This situation was far more grim than any faced by Athens until the very end of the Peloponnesian War.

In response, the Syracusans made important governmental changes. They reduced the number of generals to three, and allowed the military adviser, Gylippus, who had no troops of his own, to act as commander-in-chief. The Assembly took a lower profile, giving Gylippus financial and material support, on the one hand, and tactical autonomy, on the other. Gylippus became the "the independent commander, with full powers," that the Athenians authorized Alcibiades and Nicias to be. The Syracusan assembly

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<sup>55</sup> Thucydides 6.7.2.

established a kind of balance of power between itself and its armed forces. The Assembly set the goal – raising the siege. Gylippus, seconded by the three Syracusan generals, decided how to reach this goal. When asked for supplies, the Assembly provided them promptly, without the delays plaguing the Athenians.<sup>56</sup> For his part, Gylippus mediated between the Assembly and its local allies, and between the Assembly and Sparta.<sup>57</sup>

To contrast Gylippus with the Athenians, he performed well because he had significantly more influence than Lamachus, was not under indictment, like Alcibiades, and did not lack resources, like Nicias. Furthermore, Gylippus was invested with autonomy by Sparta, and was deferred to by the Syracusan forces.

The speech of Hermocrates to the Syracusans touches on several themes developed so far, and deserves to be quoted at some length. In many respects, Thucydides is speaking, not Hermocrates. The Athenians have just defeated the Syracusans in a battle outside the city:

[The Syracusans] had not been beaten so much as might have been expected, especially as they were, one might say, novices in the art of war, an army of artisans opposed to the most experienced soldiers in Hellas. What had also done great harm was the number of generals (there were 15 of them) and the quantity of orders given, combined with the disorder and insubordination of the troops. But if they were to have a few skillful generals, and used this winter in preparing their

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<sup>56</sup> Thucydides 6.93.

<sup>57</sup> Thucydides 6.104.

hoplites,...they would have every chance of beating their adversaries, courage already being theirs.....<sup>58</sup>

These remarks lay out the interrelated themes of professionalism, autonomy, unity of command. Next come the reforms advocated by Hermocrates:

The generals should be few and elected with full powers, and an oath should be taken to leave them entire discretion in their command: if they adopted this plan, their secrets would be better kept, all preparations would be properly made, and there would be no room for excuses.<sup>59</sup>

Now comes the decisive moment. A leader has proposed to the Assembly that it give up some of its own power, and proposed, besides, that most of the generals be dismissed.

Will the Assembly agree?

The Syracusans heard him, voting everything as he advised, and elected three generals, Hermocrates himself, Heraclides son of Lysimachus, and Sicanus son of Execestes.<sup>60</sup>

One task remained, asking the Spartans for a commander, and then accepting the commander when he arrived. Thucydides does not say that the Syracusans made this request, but he does say that they asked for help, and that the Spartans decided to send them Gylippus. Once Gylippus arrives in Sicily, he assumes command immediately.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Thucydides 6.72.3-4.

<sup>59</sup> Thucydides 6.72.5.

<sup>60</sup> Thucydides 6.73.1.

<sup>61</sup> Thucydides 6.88.10; 7.2.1-4.

Thucydides also uses another commander as his mouthpiece. This – ironically—is Alcibiades. He explains to the Spartans why a Spartan must command the Syracusans:

...speedily do as I tell you, and send on board ships to Syracuse troops that shall be able to row their ships themselves, and serve as hoplites the moment they land, and what I consider even more important than the troops, a Spartiate as commanding officer to discipline the forces on foot... The friends that you already have will thus become more confident, and the waverers will be encouraged to join you.<sup>62</sup>

If Gylippus was a μούθαξ, the Spartans ignored this advice about the ethnic identity of the commander to be sent. Perhaps Gylippus' influence meant that his pedigree was irrelevant.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> Thucydides 6.91.4.

<sup>63</sup> MacDowell (1986) 46-51 provides background on the status of μούθακες in Spartan society.

## Chapter Four: Analysis

### *Consequences of Athenian and Spartan political systems*

Because the Athenian armed forces were effectively administered by a board of στρατηγοί elected yearly by the Athenian assembly, the ability to maintain continuous command and strategy day-to-day, or year-to-year, was impaired. The consequences were not as severe as they would have been had Athenian generals, like some other magistrates, been chosen by lot. Instead they were elected, and could be reelected. Both of these factors mitigated the drawbacks of the system. Nicias was a very experienced general, and Alcibiades and Demosthenes were also proven commanders.

More important were other weaknesses. The generals had to fear legal and quasi-legal attacks on their authority. These attacks would not come from a system of military justice, but from civilian courts. Next, they had to fear the interference of the Assembly.<sup>64</sup> Any democratic government must supervise its commanders closely, to prevent treason or dissent, but in Athens the task of supervision was not given to magistrates who would be competent in this particular task. In Sicily, this unwelcome supervision was far away, but it still led to the appointment of too many generals.

In contrast, the systematic training for war in Spartan culture meant that the Assembly, like the officers and magistrates, would have had a realistic view of war. That view would influence how they administered armies and treated generals. One might suppose that Spartan toughness – for example, it was considered shameful to return home

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<sup>64</sup> Roberts (1982) 177-178 agrees with the argument that Athens minimized the effectiveness of its armed forces through the excessive control it exerted over its military personnel, but does not attribute this to impeachment trials.

alive from a battle in which the Spartans were defeated – would lead to micromanagement and harshness towards commanders, yet the opposite was true. The Spartans were less inclined to punish their leaders than the Athenians were. Gylippus, unlike his Athenian counterparts, was not burdened by politically appointed colleagues.

Gylippus, to be sure, is used by Thucydides as a model commander, just as Brasidas was. (Thucydides does not report that Gylippus was eventually tried for taking bribes.<sup>65</sup>) Yet he had a chance to serve as a model. Alcibiades did not.

Furthermore, Sparta's military force was mainly on land rather than at sea. That made it easier to concentrate and control. In the Spartan leaders, there was no element of the privateer or pirate, even if the leader was a good admiral, like Lysander. In the figure of Alcibiades, and in some others, like Themistocles, there was some element of the privateer or free-lance, if not the pirate. Even Pericles was launcher of raids. He preferred them to major battles. His opposite number, King Archidamus, sought a major land battle against the Athenians every spring for a number of years. All this made Athenian commanders harder to trust, and gave the Assembly a reason, or an excuse, to monitor them.

Finally, Sparta's alliances differed from those of Athens. Sparta relied very largely on allies, the exception being subject populations in Laconia and Messenia.<sup>66</sup> This

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<sup>65</sup> After serving under Lysander in 405, Gylippus embezzled 300 talents from the Athenian state's war booty, and subsequently went into exile. (Plutarch, *Life of Lysander* 16). It is also interesting to note that Cleandridas, Gylippus' father, exiled himself to Magna Graecia in 446 to avoid prosecution for allegedly accepting bribes from Pericles – thus leaving Gylippus with a sense of the consequences of financial misdeeds – and yet this did not prevent Gylippus from engaging in similar behavior. (cf. Plutarch, *Life of Alcibiades* 22.)



reliance on allies and neighbors tended to keep the Spartans from embarking on long-range adventures. Although Athens technically had “allies,” the Delian League was less of an alliance than an empire, and so it was easier for Athens to mount long-range expeditions to places like Sicily or Egypt.

Another difference is symbolic. In Spartan warfare, the highest-ranked leaders – such as the kings – would go into battle, whereas many Athenian leaders remained in the city. So, even if one of the kings, plus the *γερουσία* and assembly remained in Sparta, the army in the field was the symbolic center of the community and the alliance. In Athens, the symbolic center was perhaps the Agora, home of the assembly, the Council of Five Hundred, the law courts, and other governmental bodies. Perhaps the symbolic center went with the Athenian fleet into the waters off Salamis in 480 BCE, but that was exceptional. The soul of Sparta marched out of the community and into battle many times.

All these differences would affect the Sicilian Expedition. The Athenian Assembly micromanaged, Nicias was timid, and the Athenian decision-makers were far away. Spartan policy was realistic, Gylippus was trustworthy (at least on the battlefield), and the Spartan alliance worked well. The remaining issue is how these differences affected Alcibiades.

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<sup>66</sup> Lendon (1994) provides a helpful analysis of the terms with which Sparta administered its alliance – calling for majority votes prior to military action. For examples of the “majority-vote covenant,” cf. Thucydides 5.30-31.

*Conclusion: Alcibiades and Athens*

I have suggested that Alcibiades was justified in defecting to Sparta, where he would not be prosecuted, and where he could repudiate the practices and policies that had failed him and failed Athens. I would now like to make this point in a general way: Alcibiades flourished more in a system that allowed him the freedom to use his extraordinary talents than he did in a bureaucratic system where the citizen body interfered with both strategy and tactics. This feature of Alcibiades explains why he left Athens for Sparta, but also why, when circumstances changed, and the Assembly was willing to give more freedom of action, he returned.<sup>67</sup> He was not so much disloyal to Athens, or attracted to Sparta, as interested in pursuing his own military career. His perspective was that of a traveling professional, a soldier of fortune. He was not, however, interested in money, as Gylippus proved to be. He sought glory, κλέος. He was pursuing a Homeric goal in a very un-Homeric military situation, in which military heroes depended on city-states for their advancement.

As an Athenian exile, Thucydides may have felt some sympathy for Alcibiades, also an exile. However, his case against Athens' military mismanagement does not depend on Alcibiades. It is a general case, illustrated by earlier episodes in the Peloponnesian War. Thucydides did not approve of the Athenian Assembly's tendency to make decisions based on impulse or ignorance. He preferred a system administered by skilled men with long-term military experience – men not subject to the whims of a crowd, or to punishment by fickle courts.

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<sup>67</sup> See Plutarch, *Life of Lysander* 3 et seq. for a narrative of Athenian military exploits after the return of Alcibiades to Athens.

Plutarch agrees with this critique of the Assembly. He confirms his view by his handling of the Roman assemblies in the life paired with that of Alcibiades, *Coriolanus*. Here Plutarch repeatedly demonstrates the negative effects of government and popular influence in military administration. Like Alcibiades, Coriolanus is consequently exiled, then recalled. Like Alcibiades, he is tacitly justified for seeking refuge with a hostile foreign power.

Although the Athenian state sent the trireme *Salamina* to bring Alcibiades back to Athens for trial, Alcibiades perhaps could have rallied his troops to mutiny against the Athenian state in his favor. However, the necessity of relying upon Athens for materiel and troops would have rendered such a response useless. As Jennifer Roberts argues, “the Athenians were unquestionably very exacting towards their political and military leaders; no fear of appearing weak or disunited to the world outside inhibited them from exercising their right to discipline officials with whom they were dissatisfied.”<sup>68</sup>

In my view, the Athenians were overly exacting—as emerges from Thucydides, in spite of his biases, his imperfect information, and his ambiguous attitude towards Alcibiades, who was a victim of the Athenians’ weaknesses.

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<sup>68</sup> Roberts (1982) 181.

**Appendix: Chronology of the Sicilian Expedition<sup>69</sup>**

Winter of 416/5 BCE	Athens votes to send a fleet to Sicily
Summer of 415 BCE	<p>Debate in Athenian assembly regarding Sicily, including speeches by Alcibiades and Nicias</p> <p>Debate in Syracusan assembly, including speeches by Hermocrates, Athenagoras, and a Syracusan general</p> <p>Athenian discovery of Egestaeon fraud and poverty</p> <p>Mutilation of the herms</p> <p>Political attacks on Alcibiades</p> <p>The Athenian expedition sets sail for Sicily</p> <p>Alcibiades is recalled from Sicily to face trial, and subsequently escapes at Thurii</p>
Winter of 415/4 BCE	<p>Syracuse requests help from Corinth and Sparta</p> <p>Athens votes to send financial resources and reinforcements to Sicily</p>
Summer of 414 BCE	<p>Athenians sail to Syracuse</p> <p>Gylippus marches from Himera to Syracuse, and is successful in saving Syracuse</p>
Winter of 414/3 BCE	Gylippus persuades the Syracusans to build and train a fleet
Summer of 413 BCE	Athenian reinforcements arrive
Winter of 413 BCE	Athenians are decisively defeated

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<sup>69</sup> Reproduced from information in Strassler (1996) 556-575.

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