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THE MEGARIAN DECREE AND THE BALANCE OF GREEK NAVAL POWER

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I

By 435 B.C., the dispute between Corinth and Corcyra over their joint colony, Epidamnus, had blossomed into full-scale war.[1] Most of the Lacedaemonian allies, with the exception of Sicyon and Sparta herself, were arrayed against the militarily and diplomatically isolated Corcyraeans (Thuc. 1. 27. 2–28. 1). Despite these apparent odds, the Corcyraean fleet convincingly established its superiority at the battle of Leucimme in 435 (Thuc. 1. 29–30). For the next two years, Corcyra was in undisputed control of the Ionian Sea. This dramatic turn of events demonstrated beyond question that Corinth was not a naval power of the first rank. She and her Peloponnesian allies, including states with at least some naval pretensions, such as Elis and Megara, had been able to muster a mere seventy-five warships for the engagement at Leucimme, where they met a Corcyraean fleet of eighty (1. 29. 1). What is more, only thirty of the seventy-five vessels in the Corinthian armada were her own (Thuc. 1. 27. 2).[2] Thirty triremes may not represent the full strength of the Corinthian navy in 435, but I would not place the total very much higher. A. W. Gomme characterizes the Corinthian contingent at Leucimme as "surprisingly small," but perhaps one should not be at all surprised.[3] Even if we go back to the beginning of the fifth century, there is no evidence for a Corinthian fleet of more than forty warships at any time.[4] We must not be misled by Corinth's pre-eminence on the sea in the seventh and sixth centuries, nor by her continued commercial importance in the fifth century. G. B. Grundy is nearer the mark when he describes mid-fifth-century Corinth as "potentially powerful on the sea," which I take to mean that she was not very powerful at all, although she possessed the financial and technical resources to build a formidable navy.[5] (She was little better off

1. A recent full-length treatment of this episode, complete with extensive bibliography, ancient and modern, may be found in D. Kagan, *The Outbreak of the Peloponnesian War* (Ithaca, 1969), pp. 205–227.

2. Thucydides gives the contingents as follows: Megara, 8 ships; Cephallenia, 4; Epidaurus, 5; Hermione, 1; Troezen, 2; Leucadia, 10; Ambracia, 8; and Corinth, 30. This totals only 68 ships, but at 1. 29. 1 Thucydides gives the total as 75. The unspecified number of unmanned ships supplied by the Eleans probably accounts for the difference, i.e., 7 ships. Cf. A. W. Gomme, *A Historical Commentary on Thucydides*, I (Oxford, 1945), 162.

3. Gomme, *loc. cit.*

4. According to Herodotus, Corinth sent 40 ships to Artemisium (8. 1. 1) and the same number to Salamis (8. 43). He also credits her with lending 20 warships to Athens in her war against Aegina in the 490's (6. 89), and this would appear to have been a very substantial proportion of her naval resources at the time. Corinth does not seem to have been involved in any major naval actions between 479 and 435, and so no figures survive for this period. It is of more than passing interest that the so-called First Peloponnesian War dragged on for nearly fifteen years without Corinth's attempting to mount a naval challenge to Athens.

5. G. B. Grundy, *Thucydides and the History of his Age*^{2}, I (Oxford, 1948), 225.

than Athens with respect to supplying her own materials for shipbuilding, as we shall see.)

If the Corinthian fleet was second rate before Leucimme, it was a laughingstock after the battle, having suffered a sound beating and the loss of fifteen of its precious few ships. Yet, in the space of two years, the fifteen Corinthian triremes that survived Leucimme had become at least ninety, and the same coalition of states which had managed to send seventy-five ships to the earlier engagement mustered one hundred fifty at Sybota (Thuc. 1. 46. 1).[6] We might estimate, conservatively, that at least a hundred new triremes had been built and manned by the Peloponnesian states in that short time. The money and energy expended to achieve this remarkable result are eloquent testimony to Corinth's determination to wipe out the shame of Leucimme at all costs. But this achievement had implications which ranged far beyond the bounds of Corinth's war with Corcyra.

It is no exaggeration to rank the rebuilding of the Corinthian fleet in these two years among the most significant military developments of the fifth century. A mere handful of events altered the balance of naval power in the Greek world to a comparable degree: Themistocles' expansion of the Athenian fleet in the 480's; the gradual absorption by Athens of the fleets of her Delian League allies (ultimately including Aegina); the temporary setback and recovery of Athens in connection with the Egyptian disaster of 454. Furthermore, the net effect of all these earlier developments had been to establish and entrench Athens as the premier sea power of the Greek world. But this latest occurrence—the creation of a viable Peloponnesian fleet under Corinthian leadership—tended in quite another direction. Overnight, so to speak, a threat to Athens' naval supremacy had sprung into being, and, considering the pace of construction, a contemporary might well have wondered how much further Corinth was prepared to go.[7]

It is hardly surprising that Athens was deeply disturbed by this turn of events. The Athenians could take little comfort from the fact that this large fleet was being built with one objective in mind, i.e., to overwhelm the distant and politically indifferent Corcyraeans. The prospect of Corinth's almost certain success in achieving that aim must have added to Athens' concern, as it meant that the Corinthian fleet might soon be augmented by the capture of Corcyra's not inconsiderable navy. Corcyra's envoys to Athens in 433 placed major emphasis on these points in their effort to persuade Athens to accept a Corcyraean alliance (Thuc. 1. 33. 3–4, 35. 3–5 and 36. 3), and Thucydides affirms that it was such considerations, coupled with the Athenians' fears of ultimate war with the Peloponnesians, that swung Athenian opinion in Corcyra's favor (1. 44. 2). Corinth's naval policy after Leucimme was altering the balance of Greek sea power fundamentally, and Athens could scarcely ignore this new reality.

The shipbuilding program upon which

6. One must allow that the fleet of 435 may not have incorporated the entire naval strength of the Peloponnesian states, but there are just as likely to have been reserves left at home in 433, so that comparisons between the two fleets are valid. I do not believe that, in either case, the reserves were substantial, especially if we deal with the Corinthian contingents. The building program itself is ample proof that Corinth did not have any considerable number of ships lying idle when the battle of Leucimme was fought.

7. M. Amit, *Athens and the Sea: A Study in Athenian Sea-Power* ("Collection Latomus," LXXIV [Brussels, 1965]), pp. 18–23, traces the size of the Athenian fleet from the beginning of the fifth century to the outbreak of the Peloponnesian War. Thucydides (2. 13. 8) puts Athens' naval strength in 431 at 300 triremes fit for service. She obviously still had a considerable edge on her nearest competitors.

Corinth embarked in 435 would have been impressive under the most favorable circumstances, but it is still more noteworthy when we consider the difficulties she must have surmounted to make a success of it. The naval states of central Greece were largely dependent upon imported timber, pitch, twine, and other wood by-products for their shipyards.[8] This was no less true of Corinth than of Athens. The great forests which fed the Greek fleets in the fifth and fourth centuries were located in Thrace and Macedonia on the Aegean coast, and in Epirus and Illyria on the Ionian Sea.[9] E. C. Semple argues that Corinth had to rely heavily on the timber regions of northwestern Greece: "The numerous colonies planted by Corinth on these coasts in Corcyra (Corfu), Ambracia, Leucas and Epidamnos suggest that the mother city, poorly provided with wood, wished to assure her supply of ship timber for her navy and merchant marine from these western sources. From these she could not easily be cut off by great commercial rivals like Aegina, Euboean Chalcis, and Athens, which lay on the Aegean side of the Isthmus, while Corinth could import the western lumber through her port of Lechaeum on the Gulf of Corinth."[10]

These observations may have a bearing on one of the deeper motives which led Corinth to intervene in the affairs of Epidamnus and to oppose Corcyra (who had sizable timber requirements herself), but the point which must be emphasized in the present context is that the Corcyraean victory at Leucimme deprived Corinth of access to her regular source of timber at precisely the time when she undertook the construction of a huge fleet—probably the largest such undertaking in her history.

It is evident from Thucydides' account of the period between the battle at Leucimme in the summer of 435 and the Athenian-Corcyraean alliance, concluded in June of 433, that the Corcyraean fleet was in full control of the Ionian Sea north of the Leucimme promontory and, until nearly the end of the summer of 434, of the mouth of the Corinthian Gulf as well (1. 30–31).[11] Yet, despite this handicap, the Corinthian building program made great strides:[12] "During the whole year after the sea-fight and the next year the Corinthians . . . kept building ships and preparing a naval armament with all their might" (Thuc. 1. 31. 1).

Corinth had manifestly found a solution to her predicament. She managed to build these triremes without relying on Illyrian and Epirote timber. Where did the needed materials come from? One possibility which must be considered is that Corinth imported timber from the more distant western producers in Sicily

8. E. C. Semple, *The Geography of the Ancient Mediterranean* (New York, 1931), pp. 275–82, with notes at pp. 294–95, has collected the ancient evidence on this point. Cf. A. C. Johnson, "Ancient Forests and Navies," *TAPA*, LVIII (1927), 199–209. H. Michell, *The Economics of Ancient Greece*[2] (Cambridge, 1957), p. 82, states the case succinctly: "That Greece had lost all or most of its forests by the end of the fifth century is undoubtedly true . . . we know with certainty that practically all lumber used in construction was imported."

9. See Semple, *loc. cit.* (n. 8), for the scattered evidence. She notes the existence of some usable timber on both coasts of the Corinthian Gulf and in the interior of Achaea, but believes that it was insufficient to supply the regular needs of Corinth.

10. *Ibid.*, p. 281.

11. I have followed throughout the chronological conclusions of Gomme (*Comm.*, I, 196–98 and 424–25). Diodorus, who misplaces the events chronologically, gives an even more explicit description of the Corinthian naval program: ". . . The Corinthians . . . decided to build a more imposing fleet. Consequently, having procured a great amount of timber and hiring shipbuilders from other cities, they set about with great eagerness building triremes and fabricating arms and missiles . . . and, in particular, triremes, of which they were building some from their keels, repairing others which had been damaged, and requisitioning still others from their allies" (12. 32. 1–2, trans. by C. H. Oldfather [Cambridge, Mass., 1950]). It is, of course, possible that this vivid passage relies on no additional information.

12. All quotations from Thucydides are taken from C. F. Smith's translation (Cambridge, Mass., 1928).

and southern Italy.[13] While the coasting route to the west would have been closed by the hostile Corcyraeans as certainly as the northwestern traffic was sealed off, it would have been impossible for Corcyra to police the route across the open sea from the mouth of the Corinthian Gulf. This solution, however, has considerable difficulties of its own. The hazards of such a voyage, especially with timber cargos strapped to the decks of the none-too-steady merchantmen, would have been great.[14] More seriously, the time of the crisis would have worked against this solution. Wind and weather would have ruled out any resort to the western suppliers in the remainder of 435, after Leucimme,[15] and, although the crossing might have been attempted in the summer of 434, the building program appears to have been well advanced by then. The timber used in the first year of Corinth's naval expansion could not have come from the west. These arguments, while sound, may well be superfluous, for it is difficult to imagine a large-scale timber trade between Magna Graecia and the mother country under any circumstances. The western Greeks may have been relied upon for ships, but not for the raw materials to construct them.[16] The journey was too long and the cargo too cumbersome to make such traffic practical.

If the western suppliers of timber and wood by-products may reasonably be ruled out as the source of the enormous flow of raw materials used by the Corinthians between 435 and 433, we are drawn to the conclusion that the Aegean sources were tapped. But even this solution is not free of complications. Our knowledge of Greek commerce is imperfect, to say the least,[17] and conclusive demonstration of trade relationships is frequently impossible; but I would argue that Corinth was incapable of conducting any sizable trade in the Aegean in the fifth century, without a period of adjustment.[18] There is no evidence, direct or indirect, to suggest that Corinthian merchantmen regularly plied the Aegean in the latter half of the fifth century. The general drift of Greek affairs after the creation of the Delian League, and even more markedly after the Thirty Years' Peace in 445, points to a steady diminution of Corinthian involvement in the east, and a corresponding concentration of her efforts in the west.[19] Corinth's

13. See Semple, *op. cit.*, pp. 282–87.

14. Michell, *op. cit.*, p. 283, comments: "Our knowledge of the transport of timber is imperfect. We know that Hiram of Tyre used rafts, but we can only suppose that for long voyages it was carried as a deck load."

15. M. Cary, *The Geographic Background of Greek and Roman History* (Oxford, 1949), p. 26, states that the Mediterranean was essentially closed to commercial traffic from November to March. Michell, *op. cit.*, pp. 242–43, is more specific: "Rowing round Cape Maleia, or alternately being hauled over the isthmus at Corinth, the voyage west was made in the calm days of early summer and then with their heavy cargoes of grain they caught the Etesian winds, the north-westerlies which blew from about the third week in July to the middle of September . . . With their small ships, square-rigged and with a single mast, they could not sail into the wind . . ."

16. Alcibiades refers to Sicilian timber for the building of new triremes to augment Athens' fleet (Thuc. 6. 90. 3), but there is no suggestion about where the ships might be constructed. The likeliest place would have been somewhere on the island itself, or in southern Italy. At 7. 25. 2, Thucydides describes how a contingent of Syracusan ships sailed to Italy in 413 and "burned some timber in the territory of Caulonia, which was lying there ready for the Athenians to use in shipbuilding." He could have expressed himself more clearly, if the timber was awaiting shipment to the Athenian docks.

17. See M. I. Finley's stimulating assessment of the work still to be done in the field of Greek trade in his contribution to the *Second International Conference on Economic History* (Aix-en-Provence, 1962), pp. 11–35.

18. C. Roebuck, *Ionian Trade and Colonization* (New York, 1959), pp. 128–29, argues that Aegina had replaced Corinth in trade between the Peloponnesian states and the Black Sea coasts by the middle of the fifth century.

19. Kagan, *op. cit.*, pp. 174–75, espouses this widely held view: ". . . The settlement of 446/5 . . . recognized the Athenian empire and the division of the Greek world into two spheres of influence. The Corinthians believed that the Athenians had honestly accepted that settlement and sought no further aggrandizement at the expense of the Corinthians; they interpreted Athenian actions in the west . . . as inoffensive and unambitious . . . The Corinthians, too, accepted the division of the Greek world into two parts as a lasting and workable arrangement." My own view is that, regardless of Athens' ultimate ambitions, Corinth had written off the Aegean in the middle years of the century.

hands-off attitude toward the Samian rebellion in 440 probably represents her inclination to avoid Aegean entanglements, as well as her lack of any significant naval presence there.[20] Her only remaining Aegean contact of any importance was her colony, Potidaea, which continued to accept Corinthian magistrates annually down to the eve of the Peloponnesian War (Thuc. 1. 56. 2). Although we might be tempted to assume that the commercial traffic between Potidaea and Corinth (which could well have included timber) was carried on the latter's ships, there is no evidence to support this assumption.[21] It is equally, if not more, likely that the Potidaeans brought their goods to Corinth. None of this is to suggest that the Corinthian market place was no longer of importance to Aegean commerce—or that the traffic across the Isthmus was less vital—but the role of Corinth's own ships and merchants in the Aegean appears to have been quite small and possibly nonexistent by the period we are examining.

There can be no argument over who controlled the bulk of Aegean commerce in the latter half of the fifth century. The Athenians, through their immense commercial fleet, and their increasing regulation of the trading practices of their allies and subjects in the Delian League, had established a near monopoly.[22] The Athenian emporium had grown correspondingly, and it appears that even Athens' allies were compelled to import strategic commodities through her market, rather than directly from the producers.[23] The only Greek state on the Aegean coast which certainly retained substantial commercial activities free of Athenian control was Megara. We know that she was not merely independent of, but actively hostile to, Athens in the period after 447,[24] and we also know that her Aegean commerce was of considerable volume. Otherwise, it would be difficult to account for the existence of the Megarian Decree (of which we shall have much to say later), or for Megara's bitter complaints concerning it (Thuc. 1. 67. 4).

If this analysis accurately portrays the state of Aegean commerce in the 430's, there appear to be three ways in which Corinth might have obtained large quantities of Macedonian and Thracian timber rapidly. First, she might have relied on the services of Athens and her allies. But this is an extremely remote possibility, for it is hard to imagine the Athenians either performing or assisting in the performance of a service so clearly detrimental to their strategic interests. Second, she might have called upon the only friendly and independent commercial state on the Aegean, i.e., Megara. This seems by far the simplest solution available, especially since Megara was already committed to the Corinthians in the struggle with Corcyra. Finally, if all else failed, Corinth might have attempted to shift her merchant fleet from the Gulf of Corinth to the Saronic Gulf. But this would have involved the dangerous circumnavigation of the Peloponnese, subject to the same wind and weather limitations already noted in

20. See my article, "Samos in the Delian League," *Historia*, XXII (1972), 151, for a discussion of this episode.

21. See, e.g., J. A. Alexander, *Potidaea, Its History and Remains* (Athens, Ga., 1963), for a full discussion of the relations between the two states.

22. This assertion hardly needs documentation. It is one of the fundamental and reiterated points in Thucydides' account e.g., 1. 80, 90–117, 120–25, 141–43; 2. 13, etc., and in ps.-Xen. *Ath. Pol.* (the Old Oligarch).

23. The Methone Decree (*IG* I². 57) passed in 426, which permitted Methone to import grain directly, rather than purchase it through the Athenian market, is often cited as evidence for the tight control the Athenians normally kept over their allies. Cf. J. Hasebroek, *Trade and Politics in Ancient Greece* (London, 1933), p. 143.

24. Megara's *volte-face* and her slaughter of the Athenian garrison at Nisaea toward the close of the First Peloponnesian War was unforgivable (Thuc. 1. 114. 1; Plut. *Per.* 22. 1; Diod. 12. 5. 2). Relations between the two states were poisoned for the next generation. See my article, "Megara and Mytilene," *Phoenix*, XXII (1968), 211–23, for an extended look at Athenian-Megarian relations.

connection with the western sea lanes. (The bulky cargo ships could scarcely have been hauled across the Isthmus along the narrow, paved *diolchos*.)[25] In the long run, Corinth might have assumed the burden herself, but why was it necessary when others could do the job?

To recapitulate the argument, the dispute with Corcyra found Corinth's naval establishment inadequate to meet the challenge. Corinth suffered a humiliating defeat and resolved to avenge it and restore her naval prestige by building a mighty armada. She found, however, that she could not rely upon her traditional sources of naval supplies in the northwest, because the hostile Corcyraeans controlled the Ionian Sea. She had to turn to Aegean sources and employ the services of Megara, the only commercial power on the Aegean which was both sympathetic to her cause and free from Athenian constraints. Athens then watched as a large, modern fleet sprang into being, and, if this development was distressing to her in all its aspects, it must have been particularly galling to witness this armada taking shape out of materials from her own back yard, so to speak. All would agree that the Athenian alliance with Corcyra was the fruit of Athens' unease over the Peloponnesians' new-found naval strength. I would argue that other major Athenian policy decisions after 435 were directly related to her alarm over this turn of events. It is possible that Athens' moves against Potidaea (Thuc. 1. 56 ff.), and her alleged action against Aegina (Thuc. 1. 139. 1)—quite possibly the source of experienced sailors needed to man the new Corinthian fleet (Thuc. 1. 31. 1)—were partly inspired by such fears. But the main concern of this paper is to explore the possible relationship between these events and the Megarian Decree.

II

In essence, the Megarian Decree sought to deprive Megarian ships of access to the ports of the members of the Delian League and to the Athenian emporium (Thuc. 1. 139. 1).[26] Properly enforced, it would have choked off Megara's trade with the Aegean and Pontic states, including her own colonies. For, even assuming that the Megarian traders could gain entrance to a few friendly ports, the long sea voyage out and back, without assurance of frequent portage to obtain water and other essentials, was very risky. To the extent to which historians have concerned themselves with the material and mercantile effects of the decree, they have concentrated on Megara alone, paying little notice to the larger role of Megarian commerce.[27] If that approach were en-

25. There is some disagreement regarding the size of the ships the *diolchos* was intended to transport. N. M. Verdelis (*Illustrated London News*, 19 Oct. 1957, pp. 649–51) envisions teams of slaves hauling empty merchantmen over the 4′ 11″ wide track. He attributes the lack of any reference to ships other than triremes being drawn across to the concentration of ancient writers on the uses of the *diolchos* in time of war. But the majority of those who have considered the question would agree with Michell, *op. cit.*, p. 237: "Undoubtedly it [*sc.* Corinth] received large revenues from the fact that it commanded the isthmus over which goods could be transported and ships hauled on a kind of tramway. But we can only suppose that such were light warships; we can hardly think of heavy merchantmen being got over the four miles with a rise of 160 feet." Cf. M. Cary, *op. cit.*, pp. 82–83.

26. A comprehensive survey of the ancient evidence can be found in E. L. Highbarger, *The History and Civilization of Ancient Megara* (Baltimore, 1927), pp. 160–72. A thorough review of the modern literature is available in Kagan, *op. cit.*, pp. 254–72.

27. J. B. Bury's comment that the decree "spelt economic ruin to Megara," is typical (*History of Greece*[4], rev. by Meiggs [London, 1963], p. 394). Cf. G. Glotz and R. Cohen, *Histoire grecque*, II (1948), 618–19, and G. Busolt, *Griech. Gesch.*, III[2], 810. Thucydides warns us against this narrow view in the speech of the Corinthians at the second Spartan Congress in August 432: ". . . Those who dwell more in the interior and away from any trade-route should be warned that, if they do not aid those who are on the seaboards, they will find it more difficult to bring the products of the land down to the sea and to get in return what the sea gives to the mainland; and that . . . if they abandon the seacoast to its fate, the danger may possibly some day reach them, and that they are deliberating upon their own interests no less than upon ours" (1. 120. 2).

tirely sound, one might legitimately focus exclusively on the hardships the decree imposed on the Megarian economy: a shortage of foodstuffs; the piling up of export goods, including perishables; the ruin of the traders and merchants of Nisaea, Megara's Aegean port. Seen in this context, the decree might have led, ultimately, to the submission of Megara to Athens on some terms, or to Megara's commercial reorientation toward Pegae and the Gulf of Corinth, and, in either case, to her demise as an independent trading state on the Aegean. Indeed, there is no intention to reject entirely the force of such arguments in this paper. But, as we have already shown, Megara was the main economic link between the Peloponnesian states and the Aegean trading area. Any Athenian action which affected Megarian trade adversely could have had a major impact on nearby Peloponnesian states. More to the point, Megara was performing a critical commercial service for Corinth at just the time that Athens chose to enact the Megarian Decree. (We shall later try to arrive at a more precise dating of the decree.) The effect of the decree in these circumstances would have been to prevent timber, pitch, cordage, and other ship-building materials from reaching Corinth via Megara. By means of an act ostensibly directed against the Megarians (against whom Athens could allege any number of military, religious, and diplomatic provocations), the Athenians hoped to frustrate or impede the continued growth of the Corinthian fleet. The effect might have been comparable to that of a blockade of Cenchreae, Corinth's port on the Saronic Gulf, but the means were indirect and, therefore, possibly less inflammatory.

Thus far, a circumstantial case has been built up in support of the view that the Megarian Decree and the Corinthian naval build-up were connected, but there is one piece of direct, contemporary evidence which I regard as direct support for this thesis. This evidence comes from the pseudo-Xenophontic *Constitution of Athens*, conveniently known as "the Old Oligarch."[28] This work, of unknown authorship, is believed by most scholars to have been written either just before the outbreak of the Peloponnesian War, or during the war itself at some time before the occupation of Decelea in 413. The writer's main assertion, stated with the force of a revelation, is that Athens' naval power was the decisive factor in shaping her political institutions and policies. In an often cited passage, whose full significance has somehow been missed, he describes the essence of Athens' naval monopoly in the Greek world and her ability to preserve that monopoly against all threats:

> The riches ⟨derived from the sea trade⟩ they [*sc.* the Athenians] alone among Hellenes and Barbarians are capable of possessing. For if some town is rich in ship-timber, where will it sell it, if it is not allowed to do so by the ruler of the sea. And if a town is rich in iron or copper or flax, where will it find a market, if it is not allowed to do so by the ruler of the sea. In all this, however, I see just the material from which I also get my ships, timber from one, iron from another, copper, flax and wax from yet others.
>
> Further, they will forbid those competing with us to freight to any other port [ἄλλοσε—elsewhere], or the sea will not be open to them [ps.-Xen. *Ath. Pol.* 2. 11–12].[29]

The meaning of the Old Oligarch is so plain in the context we have established that analysis of the passage smacks of redundancy, but its importance is such that we must be doubly sure we grasp it

28. See A. W. Gomme, "The Pseudo-Xenophontic *Constitution of Athens*," *HSCP*, Suppl. I (1940), 211–45, for comprehensive treatment of the work.

29. Quoted in the translation by H. Frisch (Copenhagen, 1942).

fully. The author argues that Athens' wealth cannot be successfully challenged, because no other state is permitted to construct the ships required to mount such a challenge. Athens' control of naval commerce includes control of the raw materials needed to build ships. He then specifies how Athens contrives to monopolize these materials. First, the producing states cannot dispose of their goods without Athens' permission, and such permission is not granted when it would be inimical to Athens' interests. Second, Athens restricts the activities of other trading states, not permitting them to carry these goods "elsewhere" (than Athens?) under threat of being barred altogether from naval commerce. The Megarian Decree is the living embodiment of these principles. Through it, Athens exercised her power to bar another state, i.e., Megara, from the sea. And what more accurately describes Megara's offense than her having carried the vital raw materials for ship construction "elsewhere," i.e., to Corinth? Furthermore, the decree was equally an example of Athens' policy of restricting the markets of the producers, since it forbade their doing business with or even giving shelter to the ships of Megara. The Old Oligarch has done everything but cite the Megarian Decree by name in this passage as proof of his contention, yet there can be little doubt that the example of the decree was in his mind. We must remember that the pamphlet mentions few specific events, and that the Megarian Decree would have been a contemporary issue, familiar to his readers.

Was the desire to obstruct Corinth's naval expansion Athens' sole motive in enacting the decree? Major diplomatic initiatives seldom have a single cause or purpose. They must be viewed against the always complex background of interstate relations. But, clearly, we have isolated a factor of the greatest significance, and one which ought to be taken into account in dealing with the maneuvers which ultimately led to the Peloponnesian War.

III

Having established a major objective of the Megarian Decree, one may be able to use it to shed some light on the date of the measure, a problem which has attracted as much attention through the years as its purpose.[30] The Corinthian naval build-up began in 435, and we may presume the passage of some weeks or months (possibly until the spring of 434) before it began to attract attention abroad. Athens could scarcely have had the information or the opportunity to react before the middle of 434, when large shipments of Aegean timber must have begun pouring into Corinth. This suggests a *terminus post quem* of summer 434 for the decree, but most historians place it at least a year later, in the summer or fall of 433, after the battle of Sybota.[31] Dating the enactment this late does not seriously weaken the present argument as regards its purpose, but the passage of more than a year between the time Athens first learned of the Corinthians' plans and her reaction to them seems out of character for the decisive (and sometimes precipitous) Periclean democracy. If, for the moment, we consider simply the strategic and political logic of the situation, the Megarian Decree seems most appropriate to the period from late summer 434 to spring 433.

The critical point is to find the earliest

30. See Kagan, *op. cit.*, pp. 254–60, for bibliography on the date of the decree.

31. E.g., F. E. Adcock, *CAH*, V (1927), 477; G. Busolt, *Griech. Gesch.*, III², 811–12; J. B. Bury, *op. cit.*, p. 394; Kagan, *op. cit.*, p. 260, etc.

clear notice of the decree. No one challenges the validity of the reference to it at the first Spartan Congress in the summer of 432 (Thuc. 1. 67. 4), which may therefore be taken as a secure *terminus ante quem*, but are there earlier references? One possible allusion to the decree is still the subject of controversy, i.e., a passage in Thucydides' version of the Corinthian speech delivered at Athens before the alliance with Corcyra was concluded (1. 42. 2—3). Before we turn to this familiar crux, there is a less famous statement in the Corcyraean speech delivered on the same occasion which merits consideration. This passage takes on a new significance in the light of our discussion of the motives behind the Megarian Decree. The Corcyraeans put their case thus: "... When the alliance that is offered is with a maritime and not with a continental power, the alienation of such an ally is not a matter of indifference; on the contrary, you should by all means, if possible, permit no one else to possess ships; but if that is impossible, you should have as your friend him who is strongest therein" (Thuc. 1. 35. 5).

Is this a veiled allusion to the Megarian Decree and the strategy behind it? Are the Corcyraeans politely suggesting that such measures are appropriate but insufficient to counter the threat posed by the Corinthian naval program? I find these very tempting speculations, but we need something more concrete to establish that the decree was an accomplished fact, rather than merely a pending proposal, at the time of the Corinthian-Corcyraean debate.

This brings us to consideration of Thuc. 1. 42. 2–3, on which this earlier dating of the decree has sometimes been based.[32] The Corinthians question the Corcyraean assumption that war between Athens and the Peloponnesian states is inevitable. They insist that, if Athens would do her part in easing tensions, war could be averted: "... The contingency of the war, with which the Corcyraeans would frighten you into wrong-doing, is still uncertain; and it is not worth while for you to be so carried away by it as to acquire an enmity with the Corinthians that will be from that moment on a manifest fact and no longer a contingency. It would be, rather, the prudent course to remove something of the suspicion which has heretofore existed on account of the Megarians; for the favour which comes last, if conferred at the right moment, even though a small one, can cancel a greater offence."

The great stumbling block to interpreting this passage as an oblique reference to the Megarian Decree is the phrase *τῆς δὲ ὑπαρχούσης πρότερον διὰ Μεγαρέας ὑποψίας*, which seems to say that the suspicion engendered by the unnamed offense against the Megarians has ceased to exist. This would appear to rule out the decree, since, if it had been enacted before this debate, it would surely have been in existence at the time of the debate. But this difficult phrase may also be translated (as in the above version) to suggest an earlier and still persisting suspicion. As Gomme has succinctly argued, the key word in the passage is *ὑποψία*, "suspicion": "... The *ὑποψία* must still exist, for Athens is called upon to remove it."[33] It must be allowed that it is difficult to allay suspicion that is no longer held, and yet it is perfectly clear that the Corinthians are suggesting that this suspicion can be removed, if Athens performs a "small favor."[34] Surely the

32. E.g., by E. Schwartz, *Das Geschichtswerk des Thucydides*[2] (Bonn, 1929), p. 123.

33. Gomme, *Comm.*, I, 175–76.

34. If the Corinthians were indeed characterizing the cancellation of the decree as a small favor, their posture on this issue may be sharply contrasted with that of Pericles in 431: "... Let no one think that we shall be going to war for a trifling matter, if we should refuse to rescind the Megarian

Corinthians are not implying that the matter currently before the Athenian *ecclesia*, alliance with Corcyra, was the "small" matter through which Athens could dispel Peloponnesian suspicion; they must be referring instead to the previously mentioned "suspicion on account of the Megarians."

We may therefore conclude that the Corinthians are referring to some Athenian policy involving Megara, which is still a live issue at the time of the debate. Let us now explore this notion of "suspicion" a bit further. At first glance it would seem inappropriate to refer to an act as blatant and severe as the Megarian Decree as merely a cause for suspicion. There could be no shadow of doubt regarding the depths of Athens' hostility toward Megara. But careful examination of the Corinthians' remark suggests that they are not talking about any suspicion of Athens' true feeling toward Megara, but toward themselves and the other Peloponnesians. To put the matter slightly differently, the Peloponnesians are suspicious that some step or steps taken by the Athenians against Megara have exposed their ill will toward the entire Peloponnesian alliance. The Megarian Decree might have been seen in just such terms by the Corinthians and their friends. Though it was specifically directed against the Megarians, and allegedly based on local issues, it was interfering with the flow of shipbuilding materials to Corinth and her allies. They might suspect, but could not prove, that this was precisely Athens' intention. Seen in this way, the speech of the Corinthians at Athens early in the summer of 433 may be the earliest reference to the decree and the first of a series of appeals for its removal prior to the outbreak of the Peloponnesian War.[35]

IV

One objection will inevitably be raised against the theory presented here, i.e., the absence of unequivocal corroboration in our main source, Thucydides. It should be pointed out that much of the evidence used to construct this view of the Megarian Decree is drawn directly from the pages of Thucydides, but it must be conceded that he lends no direct support to it, as he might easily have done. This omission is doubly disturbing, given the very substantial emphasis he accords to naval matters, especially in Book 1. Corinth's belated challenge to the Athenian thalassocracy and the Athenian response, consisting partly of the enactment of the decree, would seem to fit logically into Thucydides' general scheme of things, if it really happened this way. There is no getting around the fact that our most extensive and reliable source has omitted any explicit mention of the motive put forward here.

For those who regard Thucydides as a faithful mirror of events, this fact will probably be sufficient to damn the theory; but few historians any longer hold such an unclouded view of the historian of the Peloponnesian War. If any trend is evident in recent studies of Thucydidean historiography, it is toward ever greater skepticism. A recent article by R. A. McNeal exemplifies the trend.[36] He denigrates the last century's "blind admiration of Thucydides as the prototype of the 'scientific' historian . . . So far from being a record of history 'as it really was,' Thucydides' work is a carefully contrived piece of special pleading

Decree—the thing they especially insist upon, saying that there will be no war if it is rescinded . . . For this trifling thing involves nothing less than the vindication of your political conviction" (Thuc. 1. 140. 4–5).

35. Cf. Thuc. 1. 139. 1–2 and 140. 3–5.

36. R. A. McNeal, "Historical Methods and Thucydides 1. 103. 1," *Historia*, XIX (1970), 306–325. Cf. Kagan, *op. cit.*, esp. pp. 357–74.

which gives us only that part of the past which the historian thought relevant to his theme. The selection of incidents and the logic which connects them have been plotted to awaken in us a particular reaction; and everything which will not further the author's purpose has been ruthlessly suppressed."[37] This statement goes too far: Thucydides' history is filled with too many inconvenient and contradictory facts which fail to fit any single, all-encompassing scheme, and there is an attention to detail for its own sake which is out of keeping with any purely dogmatic or polemical aims. The subject of Thucydides' credibility is certainly one of the more difficult problems the modern historian of Greece has to face, and I do not wish to appear to have dismissed it in a few sentences. But, in the interests of staying as close as possible to the subject at hand, it may not be rash to suggest that Thucydides might have de-emphasized the Megarian Decree for reasons which we would regard as less than compelling.

Thucydides' own conclusion about the fundamental causes of the Peloponnesian War fixes upon the growth of Athenian power and Sparta's mounting fear of Athens (1. 23. 6). As he sees it, the older, land-based power felt threatened by a younger, more dynamic and expansionist naval power, and the older power reacted out of fear of being overwhelmed. To Thucydides' mind, the presence or absence of any particular grievance or grievances was not critical—the war was coming in any event.[38] The Megarian Decree was an extremely inconvenient episode for this theory. Its timing was provocative (even if it came after Sybota), its objectives were inimical to the entire Peloponnesian alliance, and Sparta's insistence on its termination as a condition for continued peace, which Thucydides tried to minimize but could not deny, would seem to place a heavy burden of responsibility for the outbreak of the war on Athens. If we attempt to restore the balance, and give full weight to the decree and the Corinthian naval building program, we may even be tempted to turn Thucydides' thesis on its head: the war may have been not so much the result of Sparta's fear of growing Athenian might as it was the result of Athens' alarm at the growing strength (particularly naval strength) of the Peloponnesians! Have we gone too far? Surely such a conclusion must await an examination of the entire political and strategic situation in Greece during the 430's, taking into account some of the factors emphasized above. But it does not seem to me premature to suggest that neither party in this complex situation monopolized feelings of fear and anxiety.

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37. McNeal, *op. cit.*, p. 309.

38. One cannot fail to note the resemblance of Thucydides' judgment on this critical point to that of Pericles, especially as he expresses it in Thucydides' first book (140. 1–141. 1).