

THE TRUE MEANING OF THE “WOODEN WALL”

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I. THE PROBLEM

The two twelve-line oracles that Herodotus records as addressed to Athens on the eve of Xerxes' invasion have not been rated at their true worth by modern commentators: they are in fact the most important documents of Greek history surviving from such an early period. They give urgent advice about Athens' prospects in the war, and the second oracle was keenly debated by the Athenians when they decided on their course of action. Herodotus himself admires the Athenians more than ever for holding firm in the face of those “alarming oracles”: the oracles are much the longest of any he reports; and he gives them pride of place at the very beginning of his account of the Greek resistance to Xerxes, just after he has described the enormous preparations on the Persian side. It is true that the second oracle is thought by some to have been tampered with after the event, and that according to a recent skeptic, more extreme than any other, both oracles may have been invented a generation later. Either view would give us a remarkable instance of a fictitious or adulterated document prevailing over any authentic memory of events and forming the agreed tradition thereafter.

It is disturbing to see how widely modern writers disagree about the bearing of these oracles, and how generally they depart from Herodotus' express indications. Even those, the majority nowadays, who acknowledge that the oracles were issued before the event often situate them distinctly later than Herodotus does, at a time when Xerxes was already advancing into Greece, perhaps after the withdrawal from the position near Tempe, perhaps even after the collapse of the defense at Thermopylae. It is also commonly suggested that the second oracle was intended to subserve the naval strategy of Themistocles: perhaps Themistocles pulled strings at Delphi; perhaps, too, the second oracle came a good while after the first. Few have hesitated either to reject or to alter beyond recognition Herodotus' picture of the proceedings at Delphi when the Athenian consultants received the two oracles. Indeed it has seemed axiomatic to many that all the verse oracles uttered by the Pythia are a literary convention which Herodotus shares with sophisticated readers. But since it is the precise wording of the Pythia's hexameter response that exercises the Athenians, the literary convention goes beyond the response and must have shaped the whole narrative of Athenian

resistance: Herodotus professes to admire the Athenians because they were not deterred by his own literary convention.

The understanding of Herodotus and of a critical moment of Greek history has been blunted by gratuitous assumptions of several kinds, about how the shrine at Delphi must have operated, about how Athenian plans must have unfolded. It is time to put aside the assumptions and to listen to Herodotus and the oracles. When Athens' assembly considered the second oracle, says Herodotus, "there were many opinions" about its meaning *in addition to* those which he goes on to report: γνῶμαι καὶ ἄλλαι πολλαὶ ἐγίνοντο διζημένων τὸ μαντήιον καὶ αἶδε συνεστηκυῖαι μάλιστα (7. 142. 1). Herodotus reports only the two opinions that were put into effect, namely, that the "wooden wall" commended by the oracle was a palisade on the Acropolis, or that it was the fleet. Modern writers have restricted themselves to the same two opinions, even though the preliminaries in Herodotus' narrative should have led them to expect that the oracle meant something different from any construction that was put on it by the Athenian advocates of resistance. Those "many opinions" included Delphi's opinion respecting the "wooden wall," an opinion implied by the passage of Herodotus leading up to the oracles; to this we now turn.

II. THE CIRCUMSTANCES OF THE ATHENIAN INQUIRY

Herodotus begins the story of the Greek resistance in fine dramatic style, by observing that the Greeks were divided among themselves, many having submitted to Xerxes in advance, and the others correspondingly weak, lacking ships above all (7. 138). Then he expresses the view, which he knows to be unpopular, "that the Athenians were the saviors of Greece" (7. 139). Most of his readers, it is clear, would have given the credit to Sparta, and indeed Sparta's defiance of Persia has just been signaled in the story of the murdered heralds (7. 133–37). To this prevailing view Herodotus objects that the Spartan plan of walling off the isthmus left the Peloponnesus exposed to attack by sea (7. 139. 3–4). We subsequently learn that this wall across the isthmus was indeed built. The full muster of the Peloponnesian League was hard at work on the wall late in the summer of 480 and only ceased with the eclipse of 2 October (8. 40. 2, 71. 1–74. 1; 9. 10. 2–3);¹ the spring of 479 found them toiling once again, and the wall was now virtually complete (9. 7–9); in the final crisis, just before the campaign of Plataea, the same objection to the wall is voiced again by Chileus of Tegea (9. 9. 2). Thus the wall figured from

1. A. A. Mosshammer, "Thales' Eclipse," *TAPA* 111 (1981): 152, should not have doubted that the darkening of the sun mentioned by Herodotus is the actual eclipse of 2 October 480. This eclipse, he says, was inconspicuous in Greece, and the expression ὁ ἥλιος ἁμαυρώθη ἐν τῷ οὐρανῷ "is compatible with other phenomena," which however are not specified. It may be true that a partial eclipse will often go unnoticed; yet the Spartans on this occasion were in the very act of offering sacrifice, and observers would be quick to notice anything amiss in the sky. Moreover, the date of the eclipse fits Herodotus' narrative much better than Mosshammer allows.

the outset in the planning of Sparta and other Peloponnesians, engaged much of their effort in 480, and in 479 was ready for use.

The story therefore opens with a contrast between Sparta's defective strategy and Athens' gallant resolve. Herodotus rounds off the contrast by saying of the Athenians, "Even the alarming oracles that came from Delphi and filled them with fear did not induce them to abandon Greece; they stood firm and prepared to meet the invader of their land" (7. 139. 6). He then passes to the oracles.

The Athenians consulted Delphi and obtained the two oracles as soon as the question of resisting Xerxes arose, that is, sometime in 481.² Herodotus tells us that the oracles reached Athens before the Greek loyalists first met to compose their feuds and send out spies to Sardis and embassies to Argos, Sicily, Corcyra, and Crete: τὰ μὲν δὴ χρηστήρια ταῦτα τοῖσι Ἀθηναίοισι ἐγγόνεε· συλλεγομένων δὲ ἐς τὸ αὐτὸ τῶν Ἑλλήνων κτλ. (7. 145. 1).³ The transaction suits this early juncture and no other. The professed aim of Xerxes' expedition was to punish Athens rather than to subdue Greece at large (7. 138. 1), and the Athenians must decide whether to yield, to emigrate, or somehow to stay and fight; in favor of the last was the considerable fleet that they had lately built for war against Aegina (7. 144. 1). Because the two oracles predict the devastation of Attica, because the second holds up the wooden wall as the sole recourse and also mentions Salamis, and because in the ensuing debate Themistocles looks forward to an engagement at Salamis, many have felt constrained to give the lie to Herodotus and to place the transaction in the spring or summer of 480, when all these things were much more imminent, and when, we are told, the battle of Salamis could be foreseen for the first time.⁴ These critics are misguided. The Athenians in 481 could not realistically decide whether to stay and fight without considering the strategy to be adopted in the fighting, including the "wooden wall" and, as we shall see, the role of Salamis.

Even at this early stage Sparta and the Peloponnesian League must have urged a common strategy of resistance. The strategy they favored—which even later seemed so obvious and so sure—was of course the

2. N. G. L. Hammond, "The Narrative of Herodotus VII and the Decree of Themistocles at Troezen," *JHS* 102 (1982): 75–82, has convincingly explained how Herodotus arranges the events of 481.

3. Although Herodotus' μὲν . . . δέ transitions need not signal any relationship in time, here the pluperfect ἐγγόνεε plainly states the priority of the oracles. This is commonly granted, even by those who nonetheless insist on dating the oracles later. But according to J. A. S. Evans, "The Oracle of the 'Wooden Wall,'" *CJ* 78 (1982): 26, Herodotus merely turns from one topic to the next; "such, at least, is a possible interpretation of the pluperfect." One does not see how.

4. Given the disposition to date the oracles to 480, it is often said that they can be no earlier than 7 Bysius = Anthesterion, when Delphi supposedly opened for business. Thereafter the following junctures have been proposed. On opening day at Delphi, when Themistocles may have been away at Tempe: Evans, "Oracle," pp. 28–29. After the withdrawal from Tempe: J. Labarbe, *La loi navale de Themistocle* (Paris, 1957), pp. 119–21; H. Berve, *Zur Themistokles-Inschrift von Troizen* (*SBW* 1961, 3), pp. 27–28; A. R. Burn, *Persia and the Greeks* (London, 1962), pp. 355–58. Just before Thermopylae: G. Zeilhofer, *Sparta, Delphoi und die Amphiktyonen im 5. Jh. v. Chr.* (Erlangen, 1959), pp. 28–30. After Thermopylae, during the evacuation: R. Crahay, *La littérature oraculaire chez Hérodote* (Paris, 1956), pp. 301–2. The first oracle before Tempe, the second before Thermopylae: P. Amandry, "Thémistocle: Un décret et un portrait," *Bull. de la Fac. des Lettres de Strasbourg* 38 (1961): 424.

isthmus wall. When the Athenians consulted Delphi, the isthmus wall was already in prospect.

III. THE MANNER OF INQUIRY AND RESPONSE

We should consider briefly the manner of inquiry and response: how the two oracles were delivered; what was said and done by the Athenian consultants and by the Pythia and others in charge of the shrine. This may seem an odd topic for discussion when our business is with the meaning of the oracles as we find them in Herodotus; odder still, when Herodotus tells us plainly everything we need to know. His account of this transaction happens to be the fullest account we possess of oracular procedure in the days of Delphi's greatest influence and prosperity. Yet every detail of this account and of the general notion of Delphi that we derive from Herodotus has been doubted or circumvented by modern commentators; and such criticism has consequences for the meaning or the authenticity of the oracles.

It is asserted that Delphi received inquiries and issued oracles on just one day a year, 7 Bysius = Anthesterion; or else on just one day a month, the seventh, and not during the three winter months preceding Bysius. If only on 7 Bysius, surely our transaction must have taken place in early 480, not a whole year before. And whether on 7 Bysius or on the seventh of other months as well, surely time and ceremony did not allow the Pythia to deliver two successive oracles on the same subject.⁵ The premises are as false as the conclusions are unwelcome. From the circumstances of various inquiries recorded by Herodotus and other sources—whether they are real or legendary does not matter, for legendary cases will be true to life—we can see that Delphi might be consulted at need at any time, even in the winter, except on a few days expressly forbidden.⁶ On festal days there were special arrangements that drew crowds of worshippers. But the Athenian inquirers undoubtedly came to Delphi at the very moment when Athens most required an answer, and they proposed to sit fasting at the temple until a satisfactory answer was given (7. 141. 2).

It is also asserted—or rather, it is taken as a piece of ordinary worldly wisdom which only a simpleton could ignore—that our two oracles of twelve hexameters each were not actually chanted by the Pythia in the hearing of the Athenian inquirers. The Pythia, we are told on every side, never uttered a verse oracle; she spoke in prose, whether this utterance was lucid or disjointed and obscure; or not even this, but she merely said or signified yes or no when suitable questions were put to her. It may be that others at the shrine had the task of versifying her responses; it may be

5. The yearly or monthly consultations are a fearful sword in the hands of skeptics: see Crahay, *Littérature*, pp. 297–98; J. Fontenrose, *The Delphic Oracle* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1978), pp. 125, 127; Evans, "Oracle," p. 25.

6. See G. Roux, *Delphi: Orakel und Kultstätten* (Munich, 1971), pp. 71–75. We need not even suppose, as Roux does, that yearly consultations had been the rule in the remote past; the antiquarian notices to this effect are presumably deduced, in the usual etiological way, from the festivities of 7 Bysius.

that any versifying was done by special commission; it may be that verse is the literary dress conferred by each of our authors according to his taste; it may even be that verse oracles were a kind of popular poetry improvised by strolling seers, whose productions were later foisted on Delphi and taken up by authors like Herodotus.⁷ This last theory, which is also the latest, would require us to admit that our two oracles are so remote from their reputed date and setting that it is useless to discuss them, except perhaps as "folklore";⁸ but any notion of secondary versifying would impair their documentary value in some degree. Moreover, all these theories presuppose that Herodotus is very misleading in his circumstantial account of how the oracles were obtained at Delphi and received at Athens.

Herodotus says that the two verse oracles were uttered by the Pythia in just the form he reports. As soon as the Athenian consultants arrive, "the Pythia, whose name was Aristonice, utters these words," *χρᾶ . . . τάδε* (7. 140. 1); the first oracle follows. Afterwards, when the Athenians remonstrate with Apollo, "the prophetess (*πρόμαντις*) utters these second words," *χρᾶ δεύτερα τάδε* (7. 141. 2); the second oracle follows. The Athenians put the second words in writing, *συγγραψάμενοι* (7. 142. 1), and they are soon debated at Athens; the debate is especially concerned with "the last two lines spoken by the Pythia," *τὰ δύο τὰ τελευταῖα ῥηθέντα ὑπὸ τῆς Πυθίης* (7. 142. 2).

These indications agree with the rest of our evidence. Most other verse oracles in Herodotus are expressly attributed to the Pythia; a great many verse oracles in other authors are so attributed; it is always the Pythia, no one else, who speaks for Apollo, and her exact words are binding, whatever their seeming intent (her prophecy to Alexander was inadvertent: "you are invincible, my boy"). This is why official consultants were enjoined, under threat of horrid penalties and inescapable retribution, to give an absolutely faithful report, with nothing added or left out (Theog. 805-10; *Suda* T. 154).⁹

7. So, e.g., Roux, *Delphi*, pp. 144-46; Fontenrose, *Delphic Oracle*, passim; Evans, "Oracle," pp. 24, 29. Roux, whose book is the most balanced and judicious account of many controversial matters, fails us completely when he deals with verse oracles. The Pythia, he says, spoke only in prose (or at most in iambs); these prose responses might be turned into verse by other parties at the instance of the individual inquirer, otherwise by an author like Herodotus who had to contrive the proper literary form; this is the Greek way with "documents" in general. "Thus the form had little importance. Only the substance counted"—a pronouncement belied by how many famous stories! The truth is that oracles form a unique class of documents which the Greeks treated for once as we moderns treat all documents. Their reasons were similar to ours: oracles were precious then because inspired by a god, and documents are precious now because inspired by firsthand knowledge.

8. Some of Fontenrose's reviewers accept this theory as a major advance: J. D. Mikalson, *CW* 74 (1980/81): 179-80; B. C. Dietrich, *AJP* 101 (1980): 238-39; J. Pollard, *JHS* 101 (1981): 182-83. Others do not: F. E. Brenk, *Gnomon* 52 (1980): 702-4; N. Robertson, *Phoenix* 36 (1982): 358-60.

9. An official consultant—"to whom the priestess gives answer with the voice of the god from the inner chamber at Pytho"—must be truer than builder's line or edge, says Theognis; should he add or omit a single thing, he is beyond cure and without escape. A consultant who opens a sealed answer will be punished with loss of sight or hand or tongue, says the *Suda*. Theognis' meaning is spoiled by the interpretation that M. L. West, *Studies in Greek Elegy and Iambus* (Berlin, 1974), p. 159, proposes for lines 809-10.

If then the two oracles were delivered just as Herodotus says, we are entitled to draw some conclusions. The first oracle took the Athenian consultants by surprise, for they had not even put their question. "After they had performed the customary rites round the shrine, just as they had gone into the consulting chamber and were sitting down, the Pythia . . . utters these words": καὶ σφι ποιήσασι περὶ τὸ ἱρὸν τὰ νομιζόμενα, ὥς ἐς τὸ μέγαρον ἐσελθόντες ἴζοντο [imperfect], χρᾶ . . . τάδε (7. 140. 1). By contrast the second oracle is uttered in response to their entreaty: ταῦτα δὲ λέγουσι . . . χρᾶ δεύτερα τάδε (7. 141. 2).

Thus the first oracle had been composed in advance and was intended to forestall the Athenian inquiry. It is indeed an impressive example of Apollo's grand style, to be set beside the best in Herodotus. The second oracle, also impressive, was composed later (whether the interval was of hours or days does not appear), after one of the leading men at Delphi encouraged the consultants to persist. No doubt they had openly divulged their question in the meantime; in any case Zeus is avowedly of the same mind as before.

The authorities at Delphi could not have failed to know beforehand what the Athenian consultants were going to ask. The Athenian assembly must have formulated the question just as they considered the response (7. 142. 1); perhaps the question too had been the subject of prolonged debate. So it is not at all surprising that the Pythia was ready for the Athenian consultants—doubtless she was ready for most of the official inquiries that we hear of in Herodotus.¹⁰ What *is* surprising is that the Pythia spurned the question and delivered the oracle forthwith, an oracle of unmistakable import, and that no pleading could change this import, though the language was softened in the second oracle. Whatever course of action the assembly had envisaged, to this Delphi was unalterably opposed and insisted on another course instead.

Some commentators accuse Delphi of medizing: the aim, they say, was to clear the way for Xerxes by damping resistance of any kind.¹¹ It is hard to believe that the authorities at Delphi could have taken this line even if they had wished to on their own prudential reckoning. Sparta and the Peloponnesian League were determined to resist, and all the members of this powerful alliance had long-standing connections with Delphi. The Thessalians, predominant in the Amphictyony, were ready to join the resistance under the right conditions (7. 172). At the time when the Thessalians and other members of the Amphictyony submitted too readily to the Persian heralds, Delphi was not tainted by the defection, for it was here that the loyalists who vowed reprisal proposed to dedicate a tithe of the spoils (7. 132. 2). No doubt there was much more hedging in every quarter than the later record showed. But whether or not Delphi

10. So M. P. Nilsson, "Das delphische Orakel in der neuesten Literatur," *Historia* 7 (1958): 244.

11. So, e.g., C. Hignett, *Xerxes' Invasion of Greece* (Oxford, 1963), pp. 441–44; cf. W. G. Forrest, "Herodotus and Athens," *Phoenix* 38 (1984): 7: "One absolutely certain fact is that the oracle medised up to the hilt." Those who reject the imputation often do so for reasons that are equally misguided, viz., that the first oracle, like the second, subserves the policy of Themistocles.

had misgivings, she was not overtly disloyal to the resistance. Neither was the course of action that she so fiercely urged on the recalcitrant Athenians.

IV. THE FIRST ORACLE

ὦ μέλει, τί κάθησθε; λιπὼν φεῦγ' ἔσχατα γαίης
 δώματα καὶ πόλιος τροχοειδέος ἄκρα κάρηνα.
 οὔτε γὰρ ἡ κεφαλὴ μένει ἔμπεδον οὔτε τὸ σῶμα,
 οὔτε πόδες νέατοι οὔτ' ὦν χέρες, οὔτε τι μέσσης
 λείπεται, ἀλλ' ἄζηλα πέλει· κατὰ γάρ μιν ἐρείπει
 πῦρ τε καὶ ὄξυς Ἄρης, Συριηγενὲς ἄρμα διώκων.
 πολλὰ δὲ κάλλ' ἀπολεῖ πυργώματα, κοῦ τὸ σὸν οἶον·
 πολλοὺς δ' ἄθανάτων νηοὺς μαλερῶ πυρὶ δώσει,
 οἳ που νῦν ἰδρῶτι ῥεούμενοι ἐστήκασι,
 δείματι παλλόμενοι, κατὰ δ' ἀκροτάτοις ὀρόφοισιν
 αἶμα μέλαν κέχυται, προῖδὸν κακότητος ἀνάγκας.
 ἀλλ' ἔτον ἔξ ἀδύτοιο, κακοῖς δ' ἐπικίδνατε θυμόν.

The meaning of the first oracle is not in doubt, except at one crucial point. Most of the oracle, from the third line to the second last, presents a terrifying vision of utter destruction at the hands of foreign invaders: this will be the fate of all Athens and Attica and of many other places too, where the very gods in their temples now stand sweating and quaking, where red blood streams from the rooftops, portending irresistible savagery. In the light of this vision the Pythia admonishes the Athenians to act. In the first two lines they are told to flee from their homes; in the last line the consultants are told to leave the shrine and take the grim prophecy to heart.

It is the first two lines that deserve a closer look. "Wretches, why do you sit by? Leave your homes and the high peaks of the wheel-shaped town, and flee to the ends of the earth!" Since *ἔσχατα γαίης* (*vel sim.*) is a stock phrase for "the ends of the earth," it is natural to take this phrase with *φεῦγε* and the rest as object of *λιπὼν*. "Flee to the ends of the earth" appears to mean that the Athenians should emigrate. When the *χρησμο-λόγοι* afterwards counseled the assembly "to abandon the territory of Attica and settle in some other" (7. 143. 3), they can hardly have left the first oracle unmentioned, even though it was superseded by the second. The Athenians would not settle at "the ends of the earth" where the Titans are confined (Hes. *Theog.* 731), or whither Oreithyia was abducted by Boreas (Soph. frag. 956 Radt), but perhaps a site like Siris in Italy was close enough to the ends of the earth (cf. 8. 62. 2). This meaning of *φεῦγ' ἔσχατα γαίης* has seemed self-evident to all modern commentators. Yet it is never wise to treat the meaning of a Delphic oracle as self-evident, as many a man has found to his cost.

The Pythia's injunction is ambiguous: the ambiguity turns on the two equally common meanings of *γαῖα*, either (the whole) "earth" or "land," "country." Whereas the context in both Hesiod and Sophocles as cited above plainly shows that the whole earth is in view, the oracle gives no

clue to the precise meaning of γαῖης. Accordingly, if this first oracle had stood as Apollo's final advice to the Athenians, the meaning of φεῦγ' ἔσχατα γαῖης would have been debated just as keenly as the meaning of the "wooden wall" and "divine Salamis" was debated in the event. Some would certainly have plumped for "the ends of the earth" and would have wished to sail in a body to a new home in the west, as the Phocaeans did on a similar occasion. But others would have commended a less sensational meaning and a more pragmatic line of conduct, namely, "flee to the farthest part of the land," i.e., withdraw to the Peloponnesus, the farthest part of peninsular Greece.

Nor should we overlook the remoter possibilities. Others still might have interpreted the "land" as Attica rather than peninsular Greece, and the "farthest part" as Salamis. But to judge from the general tenor of the two oracles, particularly of the second, this meaning was not intended by Delphi. Finally, it is not forbidden—it has been done by respectable modern authorities—to construe ἔσχατα γαῖης with δώματα, so that the Pythia tells the Athenians, "Leave the farthest dwellings of your land," i.e., give up every corner of Attica;¹² φεῦγε then stands by itself, and the Athenians must decide where to go.

Why was this command so peremptory and yet so ambiguous? As we saw before, the very manner of the Pythia's response shows that Delphi sought to enforce a line of conduct that went against Athens' inclination. In composing the first oracle the Delphic authorities thought it useful to frighten the Athenians into compliance; they dwelt at length on the horrors of invasion and spared only a few words for the action that Athens must take to survive. No doubt they expected this action to be understood at once; it could hardly be something that had not been discussed before. The ambiguity of these few words was, they must have thought, only apparent, a necessary feature of Apollo's grandiloquent style; it was no part of Delphi's intention to leave the Athenians in doubt about what to do. But Delphi was not experienced in dealing with such unruly customers as the Athenian assembly. We may infer that the consultants were dismayed not only by the pervasive horrors of the invasion but also by the mysterious brevity of the advice, which could only lead, at Athens, to endless debate. At all events the second oracle undertakes to remove all doubt: "To you again I shall say this word and make it strong as adamant."

V. THE SECOND ORACLE

οὐ δύναται Παλλὰς Δί' Ὀλύμπιον ἐξιλάσασθαι,
 λισσομένη πολλοῖσι λόγοις καὶ μῆτιδι πυκνῇ.
 σοὶ δὲ τόδ' αὖτις ἔπος ἔρέω, ἀδάμαντι πελάσας·

12. Although this rendering seems distinctly odd, it is adopted without comment by H. W. Parke and D. E. W. Wormell, *The Delphic Oracle*, vol. 1 (Oxford, 1956), p. 169; and they have read and pondered more verse oracles than most of us. In any case the question is not so much how odd it is, as whether even one Athenian among thirty thousand could be counted on to rise in the assembly and argue to this effect: the answer is "of course."

τῶν ἄλλων γὰρ ἀλίσκομένων ὅσα Κέκροπος οὔρος
 ἐντὸς ἔχει κευθμῶν τε Κιθαιρῶνος ζαθέιοιο,
 τεῖχος Τριτογενεῖ ξύλινον διδοῖ εὐρύοπα Ζεὺς
 μόνον ἀπόρθητον τελέθειν, τὸ σὲ τέκνα τ' ὀνήσει.
 μηδὲ σὺ γ' ἱποσύνην τε μένειν καὶ πεζὸν ἰόντα
 πολλὸν ἀπ' ἡπείρου στρατὸν ἥσυχος, ἀλλ' ὑποχωρεῖν
 νῶτον ἐπιστρέψας· ἔτι τοί ποτε κάντιος ἔσση.
 ὦ θεῖη Σαλαμῖς, ἀπολεῖς δὲ σὺ τέκνα γυναικῶν
 ἧ που σκιδναμένης Δημήτερος ἧ συνιούσης.

Pallas has no power to soften Olympian Zeus, though she entreat him with lengthy speech and clever argument. But to you again I shall say this word and make it strong as adamant. When all else is falling to the enemy, all that lies within the boundary of Cecrops and the fold of holy Cithaeron, far-seeing Zeus grants to Triton-born that the wooden wall alone shall not be taken, which will preserve you and your children. Do not await the cavalry and the host of foot advancing from abroad, but turn your back and withdraw; a day will come when you shall face the enemy. O divine Salamis, you will destroy the children of women, either when Demeter is scattered or when she comes in!

The first two lines make the essential point, which is sometimes ignored or even contradicted in modern discussion: the outlook set forth in the first oracle remains unchanged. Zeus is firm against Athena's entreaty, and the speeches and argument that she deploys in vain no doubt allude to the disputatious Athenian character, especially as displayed in the assembly. It is not legitimate to render ἐξιλάσασθαι as “soften *wholly*” or the like (“Not wholly can Pallas win the heart of Olympian Zeus”),¹³ as if the prefix ἐξ- had this emphatic connotation, and as if Pallas and Athens had prevailed on Zeus and got much of what they wanted. The compound ἐξιλάσκομαι is used interchangeably with the simple ἰλάσκομαι (cf. LSJ, s.vv.); and such a meaning would be otherwise expressed, e.g., οὐ δύναται Παλλὰς πάντως πεπιθεῖν Κρονίῳνα.

The rest of the oracle gives advice. The advice was already given in the first oracle and is now reiterated, σοὶ δὲ τὸδ' αὖτις ἔπος ἔρέω; the advice is in fact inflexible, ἀδάμαντι πελάσσας.¹⁴ The two oracles give the same advice, but in different proportions of prophecy and admonition. Both foresee the loss of Attica; the first oracle foresaw the loss of “many other strongholds” as well (line 7), i.e., places in central Greece. But whereas the first oracle elaborated the horrors of invasion, the second oracle takes the invasion for granted: “when [Attica] is falling to the enemy.” Both oracles admonish the Athenians to flee: “flee to the farthest part of the land,” says the first oracle; “turn your back and withdraw,” says the second. But whereas the first oracle gave only the briefest of advice, the second is more expansive: trust in the wooden wall; you can fight another day; but an

13. This is the rendering of A. de Sélincourt in the Penguin Herodotus and also of P. Green, *The Year of Salamis, 480–479 B.C.* (London, 1970), p. 95.

14. The parallels that can be cited leave it in doubt whether this phrase means “secure with (bonds of) adamant” (cf. Hes. *Op.* 431, where West's proposal is not convincing; Pind. *Pyth.* 4. 224, 227, whence Ap. Rhod. 3. 1285, 1307; Aesch. *PV* 155) or “endure with (the hardness of) adamant” (cf. *Il.* 5. 766; Pind. *Ol.* 1. 78, with *ibid.* 22).

engagement at Salamis will be costly. These details are simply exegesis of the more cryptic advice contained in the first oracle.

What then did the Pythia mean by the “wooden wall”? Certainly not the fleet. The fleet would be needed for a mass migration to another land as advocated by the χρησολόγοι (7. 143. 3); but Delphi, as we saw, could not be so opposed or so indifferent to the cause of resistance as to urge this course with imperious, unrelenting oracles. On the other hand, the fleet was not to be used to check the Persian advance at some point north of Athens, say at Artemisium; for then the oracle would not insist on withdrawal and the postponement of fighting. For the same reason, and also because the oracle plainly deprecates a stand at Salamis (more of this below), the fleet was not to be the means of evacuating Attica at the last minute, in case of need. Modern commentators are wrong to suggest that Themistocles suborned the authorities at Delphi.¹⁵ Themistocles did not get the oracle he wanted, and his interpretation of this one was very strained.

The “wooden wall” is most naturally taken as a defensive fortification. This is indeed the first opinion recorded by Herodotus, but its exponents chose to fortify the wrong place. “Certain of the older men took the oracle to mean that the Acropolis would escape. For in the old days at Athens the Acropolis had been fortified with a palisade (ῥηχὼ ἐπέφρακτο). So they reckoned this to be the wooden wall” (7. 142. 1–2). Afterwards the defenders of the Acropolis constructed a wooden wall in the strict sense: they “barricaded the Acropolis with planks and timbers,” φραζάμενοι τὴν ἀκρόπολιν θύρησί τε καὶ ξύλοισι. The Persians easily destroyed the barricade by shooting arrows bound with burning tow (8. 51. 2–52. 1). This interpretation of the “wooden wall” seems even more unauthorized than Themistocles’. A wooden barricade was strikingly impractical against a siege party, and a defense of the Acropolis does not agree with the advice to withdraw. No doubt it was resolved on other grounds to defend the Acropolis, and the wooden barricade was added for good measure, in hopes that Apollo might assist. As everyone knows, Herodotus’ account of the defense is contradictory; the contradiction arises because Herodotus fails to distinguish between the real aims of the defenders and the assurance they professed to find in the oracle.¹⁶

15. So Parke and Wormell, *Delphic Oracle*, 1:170–71; Crahay, *Littérature*, pp. 301–2; Zeilhofer, *Sparta*, pp. 29–30; Labarbe, *Loi navale*, pp. 110–22; F. Schachermeyr, “Die Themistokles-Stele und ihre Bedeutung für die Vorgeschichte der Schlacht von Salamis,” *JÖAI* 46 (1963): 167–68.

16. On the one hand, we are told that the Acropolis defense was urged only by “certain of the older men”; that in the event the Persians “find some few people in the shrine, stewards of the shrine and also needy folk” who had not the means to get to Salamis; that their makeshift barricade was quickly destroyed (7. 142. 1–2; 8. 51. 2–52. 1). On the other hand, that the defenders held out “for a long time,” refusing terms of surrender conveyed by the Pisistratids, rolling boulders down the slope and beating off every assault; that Xerxes was completely baffled until his men scaled a sheer precipice that had been left unguarded; that when the fall of the Acropolis became known to the Greek camp on Salamis, there was panic and despair (8. 52. 2–53, 56). The shrine of Aglaurus where the Persians ascended is now seen to lie beneath the steep east face of the Acropolis, so that their exploit was as remarkable as Herodotus says: G. Dontas, “The True Aglaurion,” *Hesperia* 52 (1983): 48–63. The record shows not only that the Acropolis was defended in 480 by a garrison of soldiers, as Bury and others have maintained, but that it

If the "wooden wall" means anything, it can only be the isthmus wall, in the form of a palisade. The Athenians are to withdraw from Attica and take refuge behind the isthmus wall, together with their Peloponnesian allies; the Athenian fleet will help to protect the coast east of the isthmus. Although this interpretation is left unspoken, it is implicit in the context. For Herodotus comes to the two oracles after raising the question of strategy, of whether Greece could be saved by walling off the isthmus. Later in his narrative Sparta's reliance on the wall is repeatedly set beside Athens' determination to stand and fight: in the sequel to Thermopylae (8. 40. 2); in the prelude to Salamis (8. 49. 2, 56–63, 71–72, 74. 1, 79. 2); and again in the prelude to Plataea (9. 7–9). It is no objection that in the event the isthmus wall was solidly built of stone and brick; for as we shall see, the original plan could hardly speak of a permanent line of defense.

The last two lines of the oracle foresee an engagement at Salamis, as was recognized in the ensuing debate in the assembly (7. 142. 2–143. 2).¹⁷ The engagement will bring great loss of life, at whatever time of year—the season is left open. This is definitely not a *vaticinium ex eventu*. No one working with the benefit of hindsight would pose two agonizing questions in two successive lines: who will win? and when? Instead we should have some riddling language about strange combatants, birds or animals it might be, who could be recognized as triumphant Greeks and chastened Persians. For the same reason the line cannot be regarded as a belated encouragement, issued by Delphi as the battle of Salamis drew near. They were indeed the sticking point in the debate: everyone but Themistocles was ready to admit that these two lines are a grim warning, without any hope or comfort.

In the words ὦ θεῖη Σαλαμίς, ἀπολεῖς δέ, the particle δέ—postponed and emphatic δέ—sets off this warning from what precedes.¹⁸ Whereas the wooden wall offers safety, Salamis entails great loss of life. Since Delphi counsels the Athenians to trust the wooden wall and not to risk a sea battle at Salamis, it follows that such a battle had already been envisaged at Athens and had figured in the question the consultants brought to Delphi, to which the Pythia at first would not even listen.

was strongly fortified as well. E. Vanderpool, "The Date of the Pre-Persian City-Wall of Athens," in *ΦΟΡΟΣ: Tribute to B. D. Meritt* (Locust Valley, N.Y., 1974), pp. 156–60, argues that by the middle of the sixth century, when the first broad entrance ramp was constructed at the west, the Acropolis defenses must have been abandoned in favor of a city wall. But the ramp was built because processions now approached from the new Agora at the northwest, rather than from the old Agora at the east, which had been served by a ramp mounting the north slope.

17. J. F. Lazenby, "The Strategy of the Greeks in the Opening Campaign of the Persian War," *Hermes* 92 (1964): 266, regarding the last two lines about Salamis as supposititious, says that "without them the oracle gives no hint as to where the Athenians are to put their 'wooden wall.'" If I understand him rightly, he suggests that, whereas the two lines about Salamis point to the fleet, two other lines that once stood in this place told the Athenians how to contrive a different sort of "wooden wall." Suppose we grant both Lazenby's premise that the oracle was "edited after the event" and his inference that the "wooden wall" mentioned in lines 6–7 was defined in lines 11–12. How then did Herodotus come by his story of the debate in the Athenian assembly?

18. For such postponements, see J. D. Denniston, *The Greek Particles*² (Oxford, 1954), p. 189.

VI. THEMISTOCLES' DECREE

The mention of Salamis is supported by other evidence. Herodotus, as we saw, dates the oracles to mid-481, before the first meeting of the Greek allies. Is it really credible that a battle at Salamis was already envisaged at this early stage? Until recently the usual answer was no, but the putative decree of Themistocles has given pause (*GHI*² 23).¹⁹ For at several points the decree appears to assume that Salamis will serve as headquarters throughout the campaign. It is resolved as part of the evacuation orders "to place the elders and the possessions on Salamis" (lines 9–11).²⁰ After the fleet is mustered, one hundred ships, half the total number, "will lie off Salamis and the rest of Attica and guard the land" (lines 42–44). To further civic unity the ostracized "will go to Salamis and remain there until the people reach a decision about them" (lines 45–47).²¹ These three clauses, like most others in the decree, have been variously interpreted, quite apart from the question of their authenticity. Yet it seems clear from the treatment of the ostracized that the Athenian assembly is expected to meet on Salamis; we know from Herodotus that the council met here in 479 (9. 3. 2–6. 1). Perhaps this is why the elders go to Salamis while the women and children go to Troezen.²² The sailing orders for the hundred ships are much harder to explain;²³ but since Salamis is singled out from "the rest of Attica," the island must have a special role, whether as the main base or as the seat of government.

19. The congruence of Herodotus and Themistocles' decree respecting Salamis is emphasized by C. W. Fornara, "The Value of the Themistocles Decree," *AHR* 73 (1967): 425–33. As Fornara says, we do wrong to smooth out the internal contradictions in Herodotus that are really different voices in his ear, different "traditions" in fifth-century Athens; although Herodotus thought of the battle of Salamis as a fortuitous conjunction, he lets us see that others thought differently. What Fornara does not say, and I would add, is that the epigraphic decree of Themistocles, like Herodotus, need not represent a unitary tradition: there are clear signs that it does not.

20. Though the beginning of line 9 is lost on the stone, "the elders" are supplied with near certainty from the parallel clause in Ael. Arist. *Pro quattuor* 2. 256 Dindorf.

21. The restoration μένειν αὐτοὺς ἐ[κε]||[ἰ ἕως ἂν τι τῷ δήμῳ δοῇ]περί αὐτῶν was proposed by M. H. Jameson, "A Revised Text of the Decree of Themistokles from Troizen," *Hesperia* 31 (1962): 312, 315, and has been generally adopted. H. B. Mattingly, "The Themistokles Decree from Troizen: Transmission and Status," in *Classical Contributions: Studies in Honour of M. F. McGregor* (Locust Valley, N.Y., 1981), p. 83, n. 22, suggests ἐ[ως]||[ἂν τελέως τῷ δήμῳ]. I confess to feeling quite uncertain whether ἀπέναι εἰς Σαλαμῖνα implies that the ostracized are already in Athens.

22. M. H. Jameson, "A Decree of Themistokles from Troizen," *Hesperia* 29 (1960): 213, thought that these elders were the age-classes over fifty who served as a home guard in emergencies. To this G. A. Lehmann, "Bemerkungen zur Themistokles-Inschrift von Troizen," *Historia* 17 (1968): 276, n. 1, objects that the language indicates "the evacuation of defenseless and endangered persons and goods to safety zones." I doubt that the language can be pressed in this way, but we might expect to hear rather of "the eldest and the youngest," as in Thucydides' references to the home guard. As for τὰ κτήματα, "the possessions," it does not appear from other sources (cited by Jameson) whether slaves or inanimate possessions, tools and furniture and the like, are chiefly in view; but in either case they would not be transported farther than necessary, and on Salamis they could be put to use by the assembly and the fleet.

23. Hammond, "The Narrative of Herodotus VII," p. 86, has discovered a perfectly sound reason for stationing one hundred ships off Salamis and the rest of Attica—to meet or deter the very enemy who provoked the building of the fleet, namely, Aegina. The difficulty is to believe that at any given moment, however fleeting, the Athenians were prepared to engage both Xerxes and Aegina on different fronts, and that this precaution against Aegina was preserved and transmitted as part of an inspiring resolve to fight the barbarian and to summon other Greeks to share the danger.

It will be said that the origin and significance of this decree are far too controversial to permit any interim conclusions; that its substantial authenticity is in fact denied by a clear majority of scholars; that even on the most optimistic outlook the undoubted signs of later embellishment make it idle to fasten on a few words in isolation from the rest. Any such objection is off the mark. The decree does not expressly designate Salamis to serve as headquarters; this view of Salamis is incidental to the decree. Whoever among publicists or literati of the fourth century or the third may be thought to have put words in Themistocles' mouth, it was no part of his intention to represent Salamis as headquarters. And however freely he indulged his fancy or imported new preoccupations, there was much traditional material on which to draw. In short, even if every word of this strange decree is mere embroidery, we must still allow that the embroidery is stitched to a given view of Salamis.

Let us consider a minimum hypothesis.²⁴ Salamis appears in three distinct sections of the decree—in the evacuation orders, the sailing orders, and the orders to the ostracized—which need not always have belonged together. A version of the evacuation orders is known to literary sources; this version was not quite the same as what we find on the stone, lacking the prominent mention of resident aliens (lines 7, 13) and also, no doubt, of the ἀρχηγέτης of Troezen (line 9); it did, however, lodge the elders on Salamis, witness Aelius Aristides. A decree recalling the ostracized is also known to literary sources; that the decree directed them to Salamis does not appear, but might be argued from the mysterious circumstances in which Aristides is brought to Salamis by Herodotus, perhaps also from Xanthippus' legendary passage to Salamis as recounted by Aristotle (frag. 399 Rose³) and others. The literary currency of these two decrees shows that they were handed down in a standard work, or in more than one such work, which can only be one or more of the Attic chronicles. An Attic chronicler will have registered the two decrees close together under archon Hypsichides, the attested date for the decree recalling the ostracized. Under the same year he may or may not have registered still other decrees, as for manning the new fleet of two hundred ships, for deploying a smaller squadron here or there, or even for setting up a base on Salamis. His chronicle certainly did not include the extensive recruiting orders of the epigraphic decree (lines 18–35) or the order to sacrifice to a quartet of Panhellenic deities (lines 38–40); and it seems very unlikely that at any given moment in 481/80 half the fleet was ordered to Artemisium, the other half to patrol duty "round Salamis and the rest of Attica." Yet if we made a present of our Attic chronicle to a third-century Troezenian who already possessed some general knowledge and a burning interest in contemporary sea power and the freedom of Greece, he would have ample means and motive for constructing the epigraphic decree.

24. This is adapted in part from N. Robertson, "The Decree of Themistocles in its Contemporary Setting," *Phoenix* 36 (1982): 1–44.

Themistocles' decree has been debated with much learning and ingenuity and also with sternest faith or recusance, and this cursory hypothesis is not presented here as a contribution to the debate. Its purpose is to demonstrate that even if the professed document is nothing of the sort, but rather a third-century compilation of diverse materials, the view of Salamis that it presupposes is likely to be authentic. Anyone who thinks better of the compendious decree, who supposes that the form goes back to at least the fourth century, will hardly need to be persuaded. In sum, a tradition that happens to issue on stone at Troezen agrees in this significant detail with Herodotus' narrative of 481 and with the second oracle as a document of 481.

VII. THE ATHENIAN STRATEGY OF 481

What then was said of Salamis in the Athenian assembly before and after the Delphic consultation? There is reason to think that Themistocles and other Athenians wanted Salamis to serve as a base for the Greek fleet throughout the campaign against Xerxes.²⁵ Such a base was needed, and Salamis was the obvious choice.

When the Athenians in 481 pondered the likely development of the invasion, they could hardly overlook the Ionian revolt of recent and terrible memory. To subdue the revolt the Persians advanced on Ionia, as they would soon advance on Greece, by land and sea together. On land the enemy proved irresistible, but at sea the issue was in doubt until the last. It is true that Herodotus' account of the revolt, both of its aims and of its prosecution, is very unsatisfactory; no doubt there were many twists which we shall never know. Yet for the present purpose it matters less how the revolt was actually planned and carried through than how it was remembered later. Herodotus shows that in retrospect success was thought to depend on sea power—on a strong, united fleet and on a suitable base of operations.²⁶ The unheeded warnings of Hecataeus call for control of the sea (5. 36. 2–3) and a base on the offshore island of Leros (5. 125).

According to Herodotus the Ionians omitted these preparations to their cost. It was only at the eleventh hour, as the enemy drew near Miletus, that the Ionian council chose not to offer battle on land but to muster the fleet at Lade, with a view to fighting a decisive action at sea (6. 7). Even on Lade the men were irresolute till rallied by the Phocaean captain (6. 11). This picture of Ionian fecklessness is exaggerated or even contrived; on general grounds it is quite conceivable that the rebels had always counted

25. It has been said before, especially since the discovery of Themistocles' decree, that Themistocles announced a plan for Salamis—to use it as a base, or to evacuate the Athenians to the island, or to bring about a battle in the strait—whether this plan goes back to 481 or early 480, and whether it was opposed or endorsed by Delphi. Cf. Jameson, "A Decree of Themistokles," p. 205; Burn, *Persia and the Greeks*, p. 357; Schachermeyr, "Die Themistokles-Stele," p. 168; A. R. Hands, "On Strategy and Oracles," *JHS* 85 (1965): 60–61. But these suggestions have not been fully worked out.

26. If they stood together, the Ionians of ca. 500 could muster by far the strongest fleet in the whole Mediterranean: cf. P. Tozzi, *La rivolta ionica* (Pisa, 1978), pp. 200–201.

on the base at Lade and on the prospect of a sea battle nearby. But if so, they were misguided.

Lade gave little room for a fleet of 353 ships (70,600 men if they were all triremes, 17,650 men if they were all penteconters). The men were bivouacked on the island for a considerable period, to judge from the events reported by Herodotus, which if not wholly true must at least correspond to the known interval of time. After seven days of training and maneuvers, says Herodotus, the men grew sick and slack and kept to their tents (6. 11–12). How much longer their confinement lasted we do not know, but it is of interest that the battle of Lade came very late in the season, almost as late as the sowing. For it was said that after the battle Chian fugitives intruded on the Thesmophoria at Ephesus and, being unrecognized, were cut down (6. 9. 1); the Thesmophoria is a festival preliminary to the sowing.²⁷ While based on Lade the fleet either was supplied by sea or drew on stockpiles; yet stockpiles on this little island would soon run out, and seaborne supplies would be threatened by the enemy. To such difficulties we must ascribe the remarkable collapse of morale and discipline that Herodotus reports.

Lade was therefore a lesson to be remembered in 481. In planning the resistance to Xerxes it was important to agree upon a suitable base of operations for the fleet. The Athenians naturally favored Salamis, which is about twice as large as Leros, recommended to Aristagoras by Hecataeus.

It is likely that the Athenians proposed to supply the fleet on Salamis from the harvest of spring 480; for the last line of the oracle makes it a question whether the engagement will take place before or after the harvest, as if the harvest had figured in the planning.²⁸ This last line deserves attention. It should not be doubted that "Demeter" is a metonymy for the corn, and hence that her "scattering," σκιδναμένης, and her "coming in," συνιούσης, refer to seasons of the year. These present participles might be taken as momentary actions, the sowing and the gathering or harvest, actions that belong to October–December and to May–June, respectively. Yet modern commentators, who ascribe this meaning, if any at all, to the oracle, have not explained why the engagement should be expected at one of the two busiest periods in the

27. No doubt the story is an etiological fiction, like other tales of other intruders at the Thesmophoria, e.g., the Megarians at Cape Colias or Eleusis in the time of Solon or Pisistratus. Our inference is legitimate, however: the reason for connecting the famous battle with the customary violence of the Thesmophoria was that both took place at the same season.

28. In the spring of 479 Spartan envoys condole with the Athenians for their loss of "two crops in a row," καρπῶν . . . διζῶν (8. 142. 3), and commentators speak of the cereal crops of spring 480 and spring 479. Hammond, "The Narrative of Herodotus VII," pp. 84–85, explains that the crop of spring 480 was never sown because many had already been evacuated or were "engaged in operational training." But since food is the first necessity, it is nearly certain that the crop of spring 480 was both sown and harvested; at seedtime in 480 Themistocles tells his men to return for the sowing (8. 109. 4). We should remember that καρπός is used of crops or produce of any kind, and that grapes, figs, and especially olives were also staple crops in Attica, of which the loss would be much regretted. The two crops noticed by the Spartan envoys are very likely those of late summer 480 and of spring 479.

farmer's calendar.²⁹ Perhaps Delphi might discount an engagement between the sowing and the harvest, in winter or early spring. But could not Salamis take her toll between the harvest and the sowing, in summer or early autumn? In fact she did, at the very turn of summer and autumn.³⁰

Instead we should understand these present participles as constant or continuing actions. "While Demeter is scattered" or "is spread" denotes the period of five or six months when the seed is in the ground and the corn is growing;³¹ "while she comes in" denotes the period of six or seven months when the corn is harvested and stored away. The question is whether the fighting will take place before or after the harvest, always an important question in ancient warfare. If Xerxes came early in 480, he would destroy the standing corn before it was harvested. The question was doubly important if the crop of 480 was to be used to provision the fleet.

"When the time comes to oppose Xerxes," said the Athenians in 481, "the Greek fleet shall muster at Salamis." This plan was put to the question at Delphi; the Pythia at first refused to listen and then denounced the plan; instead the Athenians must withdraw to the Peloponnesus. Yet Themistocles persisted, and at his urging the assembly persisted, too. The decree that Herodotus records is in effect a summons to other Greeks to muster at Salamis. "In the session that followed the receipt of the oracle they resolved to meet the barbarian as he invaded Greece, embarking everyone on the ships—this in obedience to the god, and in consort with those of the Greeks who wished to join them" (7. 144. 3). Such was the plan, a plan to fight at sea, that Athens laid before the first meeting of the Greek loyalists (7. 145. 1). On the strength of this plan Corcyra was soon induced to join the alliance and commissioned a fleet of sixty ships, the largest in Greece after Athens' (7. 168). But when operations began in 480, the plan was not followed. Circumstances had changed, as even Themistocles acknowledged.

In the spring of 480 the council at the isthmus adopted a different plan altogether: to take up a position on land, the Olympus line between Macedon and Thessaly (7. 172), a position which could not be turned

29. Some speak as if winter alone, or even "midwinter" alone, were excluded: Parke and Wormell, *Delphic Oracle*, 1:171, citing Oenomaus; Green, *Year of Salamis*, p. 95. Burn, *Persia and the Greeks*, pp. 357–58, thinks that "midsummer" (it is really the whole summer and more) is excluded because the oracle was issued then, after the withdrawal from Tempe. Crahay, *Littérature*, p. 302, n. 1, gives a very strained interpretation: because these oracles were issued under irregular auspices in the autumn of 480, the last line declares that a prediction at this season counts for just as much as a regular prediction in the spring, in the month Bysius.

30. The battle of Salamis was probably fought on 28 or 29 September: K. S. Sacks, "Herodotus and the Dating of the Battle of Thermopylae," *CQ* 26 (1976): 232–33, 243–46. This is a couple of weeks earlier than the very beginning of the sowing of the corn, which "in Attica today extends from the middle of October to the end of December, depending on the rains": A. Chandor Brumfield, *The Attic Festivals of Demeter and their Relation to the Agricultural Year* (New York, 1981), p. 20.

31. Cf., e.g., *Il.* 2. 850 Ἀξίου, οὗ κάλλιπτον ὕδωρ ἐπικίδναται αἶαν, "the Axios, whose water is the fairest that is scattered over the earth."

from the sea, so that the Greek fleet was not needed.³² Ships were used only to transport the soldiers, with Themistocles commanding the Athenian contingent, from their muster-ground at the isthmus to a port in southern Thessaly (7. 173). The change of plan was prompted by a message from Thessaly. Whereas the Thessalians at an earlier juncture had readily submitted to Xerxes' heralds, so that the loyalists included them in the threat of reprisals (7. 132), they now recanted and offered to join the resistance. Although Thessaly's original submission was very likely subsequent to the debate at Athens and to the first meeting of the allied council (for it was the allies as a body who threatened reprisals), no one in mid-481 could have contemplated a defense at the Olympus line; only the forthright message of spring 480 made this defense attractive. Themistocles himself no longer called for a muster of the fleet.

To abandon the Olympus line after so much effort—ten thousand hoplites mustered and transported to a distant theater—must have been disheartening. At Thermopylae and Artemisium the defenders were dubious and half inclined to decamp (7. 183. 1, 207; 8. 4); the Peloponnesians kept looking to the isthmus. Ships that missed the engagement at Artemisium were ordered to Pogon, the eastern harbor of Troezen (8. 42. 1). It is understandable that when the fleet finally came together at Salamis, Herodotus imagined a scene of utter perplexity and disorder.

VIII. THE SPARTAN STRATEGY OF 481

The strategy that the Spartans advocated in 481 is not in doubt. It is the strategy on which they would have preferred to fall back at any time during the Persian invasion. Herodotus begins by mocking Sparta's reliance on the isthmus wall (7. 139. 3–4). Thereafter the Peloponnesians under Leonidas are barely restrained by their allies in central Greece from giving up Thermopylae and retreating to the isthmus (7. 207); the Peloponnesians under Eurybiades have no thought but to quit Salamis and sail away to the isthmus (8. 49, 56–63, 70–81); at the time of Thermopylae and Salamis the Peloponnesians are bending every effort to construct the isthmus wall (8. 40. 2, 71–72; 9. 10. 2); the next year they finish it and in the meantime allow Mardonius to occupy Attica for a second time (9. 7–9). There is an element of dramatic exaggeration in all this, but Sparta's general disposition cannot be doubted. When she took a stand at Olympus, at Thermopylae and Artemisium, at Salamis, and at Plataea, it was because allies north of the isthmus left her no choice.

In one respect Herodotus is quite misleading. He implies that in building the isthmus wall the Spartans were oblivious to the danger of a seaborne attack on the Peloponnesus, until it was finally pointed out to

32. The strength of the Greek position was not understood by Herodotus: cf. N. Robertson, "The Thessalian Expedition of 480 B.C.," *JHS* 96 (1976): 100–121; Hammond, "The Narrative of Herodotus VII," p. 91.

them by Chileus of Tegea (7. 139. 3–4; 9. 9. 2). Even the most blinkered Spartan could see this, and the campaign of 480 shows that Sparta well knew the importance of naval operations and the value of Athens' fleet. When Sparta dallied in 479, it was probably because, despite Chileus, the immediate danger was past. In 481 the very first step toward realizing the isthmus wall was to make sure of a naval arm that could protect the coast east of the isthmus. This meant inducing Athens to throw in her lot with Sparta and the Peloponnesian League. Hence those "alarming oracles," which warned the Athenians to withdraw to the Peloponnesus and to trust in the "wooden wall."

The "wooden wall": it is true that the isthmus wall constructed in the next two years was much more solid and durable than a mere palisade. "Stones, bricks, timbers, and baskets full of sand" were used (8. 71. 2), and at the last the wall was topped with "battlements," ἐπάλξις (9. 7. 1, acc. pl.). In the light of these details, and of what else we know about such walls, the mind's eye can see a socle of stone, upper courses of mud brick with timber cross-ties and with baskets of sand as interior filling where bricks ran short, and at the top a parapet of brick within a timber frame.³³ Among the isthmus walls that can still be traced on the ground, there is a considerable stretch of mixed ashlar and polygonal masonry, with square protruding towers, on a ridge northwest of Cenchreae, which may well go back to this occasion.³⁴ In the event time and resources availed for the construction of a quite substantial wall, and indeed something of the sort was required if Greece north of the isthmus should come to be occupied permanently by the enemy. Yet we must not assume that this ambitious undertaking was urged as a common strategy in 481; for the prospect of a permanent defense line at the isthmus would be likely to discourage the Athenians and other potential allies to the north.

Much later events prove that a palisade was judged feasible as a temporary measure. When Epaminondas was about to invade the Peloponnesus for a second time in 369, Sparta and her allies sought to hold a line running through Corinth just south of the isthmus, and a palisade was part of the defense.³⁵ Diodorus, drawing on Ephorus, gives the following account of the fieldworks of 369 (15. 68. 3–5), which are not mentioned by Xenophon (*Hell.* 7. 1. 15–16): "They resolved to fortify the passages and prevent the Boeotians from entering the Peloponnesus.

33. See F. E. Winter, *Greek Fortifications* (Toronto and Buffalo, 1971), p. 74, citing Herodotus apropos of "stone walls with battlements and tower-chambers of brick and wood."

34. See J. R. Wiseman, "A Trans-Isthmian Fortification Wall," *Hesperia* 32 (1963): 255–56, 270–71; id., *The Land of the Ancient Corinthians* (Göteborg, 1978), pp. 59–62. A few sherds as well as the masonry encouraged Wiseman to think of Herodotus. But according to O. Broneer, "Isthmus of Corinth," in *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Classical Sites* (Princeton, 1976), p. 418, the wall of 481–479 "has left no sure traces." A. W. Lawrence, *Greek Aims in Fortification* (Oxford, 1979), p. 169 (cf. p. 377), describes the remains as a "mysterious—to modern eyes superfluous—work" of the early fifth century.

35. For more details of the topography and of the maneuvers, see J. Buckler, *The Theban Hegemony, 371–362 B.C.* (Cambridge, Mass., 1980), pp. 94–98, 296. Without going into the contradictions of the sources, he combines, as it is reasonable to do, Xenophon's version of the fighting with Diodorus' account of the fieldworks.

From Cenchreae to Lechaeum they proceeded to secure the ground with stakes (σταυρώμασι) and with deep trenches. Since the work went forward quickly by reason of the number and the zeal of the men, they got ahead of the Boeotians and fortified all the ground." When Epaminondas came up to the line, none of the defenders "ventured to advance from the wall (ἐκτὸς τοῦ τειχίσματος), but they all engaged from the palisade (ἀπὸ τοῦ χαρακώματος)." After hard fighting all along the line, Epaminondas broke through a Spartan position. Frontinus also speaks of a "palisade (*vallum*) drawn across the isthmus," and explains, as Diodorus does not, that after harassing the Spartans all night, Epaminondas stormed the fortification when the defenders retired to rest (2. 5. 26).

Diodorus exaggerates the length of the palisade, and Frontinus misconceives the line of defense, which is not quite the isthmus. Inasmuch as Corinth and Acrocorinth were strongly fortified and were linked by long walls to Lechaeum, fieldworks were needed only to the east of Corinth, along the line of Mount Oneium. The parallel account in Polyaeus shows that Ephorus was not at fault (2. 3. 9). Here the fighting develops as in Diodorus and Frontinus, though without mention of fieldworks, but the setting is correctly given as Oneium. There remains an outright contradiction between Ephorus and Xenophon. Xenophon describes a surprise attack at first light that is not preceded by any exhausting alarms along the line; and since he clearly had detailed knowledge of the engagement, his version is to be preferred. Yet the palisade is not discredited; indeed, these elaborate fieldworks probably gave rise to the picturesque story of Epaminondas' "stratagem," of a general diversion followed by a sudden thrust. The events of 369 demonstrate the practicability of a palisade and dispel any theoretical objections: for example, that the requisite quantity of wood was hard to come by.³⁶

When Sparta and the Peloponnesian League went on to construct not a palisade but a massive wall of stone and brick and timber, Athenians might well reflect that trusting in this wall would not even satisfy the Pythia's indications. All the more reason to look for a different fulfillment of the oracle and to provide the Acropolis garrison with a token "wooden wall."

IX. CONCLUSION

To sum up briefly, in 481 Sparta proposed to wall off the isthmus and defend the Peloponnesus. As Herodotus observes in disparagement of the plan, a fleet was needed to protect the coast; this the Athenians could supply if they joined the Peloponnesians behind the isthmus wall. The strategy of the Greek resistance was therefore at stake when Athens

36. One might ask whether the Peloponnesians of 481 thought of erecting their palisade on the Oneium line rather than on the line taken by the several isthmus walls. Probably not; for although the high ground along Oneium is more defensible than the broken terrain along the walls, the Persian advantage in numbers told against a longer defense line.

applied to the Delphic oracle. It is not surprising that the oracle insistently commended the Spartan plan and insistently rejected the Athenian counterplan; for Sparta's wishes carried more weight at Delphi. This reconstruction vindicates both Herodotus and the Delphic oracle; it also vindicates what Herodotus impugns, namely, the strategy of Sparta and the Peloponnesian League.

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