

## THE ERRORS IN PLUTARCH, *NIKIAS* 6

TWICE in this chapter, according to the commentators,<sup>1</sup> Plutarch has confused a pair of military engagements, Spartolos with Poteidaia and Nikias' campaign in the Megarid during 427 with that of Demosthenes in 424. In both instances this view seems to me to be of doubtful validity. In one case I would propose that instead of confusing two campaigns Plutarch simply misunderstood a very difficult passage in Thucydides, while in the second there is only flimsy evidence for rejecting Plutarch's version.

His statement that the Athenians under the command of Kalliades and Xenophon were defeated in Thrace by the Chalkidians refers to the battle of Spartolos (Thuc. 2. 79),<sup>2</sup> but it has become a critical dogma that Plutarch 'gives Kalliades as the commander, clearly by confusion with Kallias son of Kalliades',<sup>3</sup> who led the Athenian forces at the battle of Poteidaia (Thuc. 1. 62-3). The only apparent reason for this view is the coincidence of the names Kallias and Kalliades,<sup>4</sup> but the frequent occurrence of these names makes this coincidence of no significance.<sup>5</sup> On the other hand, to hold that Plutarch has confused the two battles means that he has turned Kallias the victor at Poteidaia into Kalliades the loser at Spartolos. There can be no simple explanation for this compound error except to say that Plutarch was completely confused on this point.

Yet it is clear that Plutarch is following Thucydides very closely throughout the *Nikias* and that he must have reread Thucydides in preparation for composing this biography.<sup>6</sup> In view of this we ought to demand stronger evidence than the similarity of names to convince us that Plutarch has so badly garbled his source. In fact, only a process of elimination will definitely exclude the possibility that Kalliades commanded at the battle of Spartolos.

The modern reader will probably take Thucydides' description of Xenophon at Spartolos as *τρίτος αὐτός*<sup>7</sup> as a back reference to 2. 70. 1, where the generals Xenophon, Hestiodoros, and Phanomachos receive the surrender of Poteidaia, and conclude that by this method Thucydides is identifying all three commanders at Spartolos. But is this what Thucydides intended to do by writing *τρίτος αὐτός*? There is nothing in the nature of the ordinal-plus-*αὐτός* formula to suggest it;<sup>8</sup> the expression merely signifies two things: (1) the number of

<sup>1</sup> Bernadotte Perrin, *Plutarch's Nikias and Alcibiades*, pp. 190-3; H. A. Holden, *Plutarch's Life of Nikias*, pp. xlii-xliii.

<sup>2</sup> It does not seem possible to interpret Plutarch's words to indicate two separate engagements. Even if such an interpretation is acceptable, it would still require us to assume that Plutarch blundered badly.

<sup>3</sup> A. W. Gomme, *A Historical Commentary on Thucydides*, ii. 203.

<sup>4</sup> This is the only point mentioned by Perrin, 190, Holden, 70, and Gomme, 203. The usually conservative Busolt gives no reason at all for calling Plutarch wrong; cf. his *Griechische Geschichte*, iii. 970, n. 4.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Johannes Kirchner, *Prosopographia*

*Attica*, nos. 7772-7803 and 7805-7898.

<sup>6</sup> In addition to the evidence cited by Holden, xlii-xlvii, there are other indications that Plutarch paid close attention to Thucydides' narrative. In the first place he has excerpted a wealth of information from Thucydides about the morale of the Athenian army in Sicily. Or consider his treatment of Nikias' Corinthian campaign (6), where he has taken a minor detail from Thuc. 4. 44. 6 and transformed it into an important example of Nikias' devotion to duty.

<sup>7</sup> 2. 79. 1.

<sup>8</sup> On this formula cf. K. J. Dover, '*ΔΕΚΑΤΟΣ ΑΥΤΟΣ*', *J.H.S.* lxxx (1960), 61-77.

generals in command and (2) the leading personality among them. On the other hand, by its very nature this formula precludes a complete identification of the officials involved. Additionally, in eight other cases, the formula seven times refers to officials mentioned for the first time,<sup>1</sup> while in the eighth instance it is not certain whether back reference is intended or even possible.<sup>2</sup> Therefore, it would be strange indeed for Thucydides to name all the commanders at Spartolos through the expression at 2. 79 when seven or eight other times he avoids a complete naming by the use of this formula. Thus, it seems likely to me that when he writes *τρίτος αὐτός* he simply does not care to tell us who Xenophon's colleagues were.<sup>3</sup>

If this conclusion is valid, there remains only the evidence of Diodoros (12. 47. 3) that Xenophon and Phanomachos commanded at Spartolos. Perhaps the third general was indeed Hestiodoros, but his replacement for reasons of incompetence (Thuc. 2. 70. 4) or disability or his assignment to defend Poteidaia is not to be excluded.<sup>4</sup> This still leaves the third position for Kalliades. Diodoros' account is markedly different from Thucydides' description of the Spartolos campaign, and there may have been other versions. It is perfectly possible, then, that Plutarch came across a version which stressed the activities of Kalliades and Xenophon at Spartolos. At any rate, although we cannot be certain that a Kalliades was in command of this expedition, still we should not reject Plutarch's account out of hand.

In the second case Plutarch is definitely in error when he ascribes the capture of the Megarian port of Nisaia to Nikias: 'after he shut the Megarians up in the city, he immediately seized the island of Minoa and a little later got control of Nisaia.' According to Perrin,<sup>5</sup> 'in this sentence Plutarch blends incidents of two entirely different expeditions, one under command of Nikias, in 427', against Minoa (Thuc. 3. 51) 'and one under command of Demosthenes and Hippocrates, in 424, the eighth year of the war, which narrowly failed in an attempt to capture Megara, but did succeed in taking Nisaea' (Thuc. 4. 66-9).

Instead of accounting for Plutarch's error in this way, which once again seems improbable in view of his close dependence on Thucydides, I suggest that it is the result of his misconstruing Thuc. 3. 51. Such a misunderstanding would not be surprising since that chapter contains a half-dozen ambivalent elements which have led to several different interpretations by modern scholars,<sup>6</sup>

<sup>1</sup> 1. 46. 2; 1. 116. 1; 3. 3. 2; 3. 19. 1; 4. 42. 1; 5. 4. 1; 8. 35. 1. The use of *δέκατος αὐτός* at 2. 13. 1 is different from the others since there Thucydides is not talking about the command of a military force. Dover couples this instance with 1. 116. 1 as examples of *δέκατος αὐτός* meaning 'only one of ten'.

<sup>2</sup> The five generals of 1. 61. 1 may or may not include the three (?) mentioned in 1. 57. 6.

<sup>3</sup> Both Gomme, 203, and Busolt, 961, n. 2, think that Thucydides does not tell us the names of Xenophon's colleagues.

<sup>4</sup> Busolt, 961, n. 2, argues that the Spartolos army had only recently been dispatched

from Athens. If this is correct, we would expect a new general to accompany it.

<sup>5</sup> 193.

<sup>6</sup> Confusion arises from the use of *αὐτόθεν* to refer to two different places, from the number of towers, and from such indications of direction as *ἀπὸ τῆς Νισαίας*, *ἐκ θαλάσσης*, and *ἐς τὸ μεταξύ*. The most important studies are H. G. Lolling, 'Nisäa und Minoa', *Ath. Mitt.* v (1880), 1-19; Felix Böhle and Georg Weicker, 'Nisaia und Minoa', *Ath. Mitt.* xxix (1904), 79-100; Gomme, *A Historical Commentary on Thucydides*, ii. 333-6; and A. J. Beattie, 'Nisaea and Minoa', *Rhein. Mus.* ciii (1960), 21-43.

while most commentators consider the passage corrupt.<sup>1</sup> Omitting the involved account of Nikias' motives for the campaign, Thucydides' version is as follows:

Ἀθηναῖοι Νικίου τοῦ Νικηράτου στρατηγοῦντος ἐστράτευσαν ἐπὶ Μινῶαν τὴν νήσον, ἣ κείται πρὸ Μεγάρων· ἐχρώντο δὲ αὐτῇ πύργον ἐνοικοδομήσαντες οἱ Μεγαρῆς φρουρίῳ . . . ἔλὼν οὖν ἀπὸ τῆς Νισαίας πρῶτον δύο πύργῳ προὔχοντε μηχαναῖς ἐκ θαλάσσης καὶ τὸν ἔσπλουν ἐς τὸ μεταξὺ τῆς νήσου ἐλευθερώσας ἀπετείχιζε καὶ τὸ ἐκ τῆς ἡπείρου, ἥ κατὰ γέφυραν διὰ τενάγους ἐπιβολῆθαι ἦν τῇ νήσῳ οὐ πολὺ διεχούση τῆς ἡπείρου.

According to Gomme,<sup>2</sup> 'What else should ἐλὼν ἀπὸ τῆς Ν. mean but "captured by attack from N."?' If Plutarch took it this way, we have the explanation for his error: in order to attack the towers from Nisaia, he must have captured Nisaia first. Although such a conclusion would be mistaken, still it would be a perfectly reasonable interpretation of the text of Thucydides, and once the reader has decided on this meaning for ἀπὸ τῆς Νισαίας he could interpret the remainder of the doubtful elements in Thucydides to fit it. Although most modern reconstructions of the battle area place all the fighting on the island, the fact that Thucydides speaks of only one tower there could easily lead to the assumption that the two towers which Nikias captured were on the mainland.<sup>3</sup> Thus it would be easy to understand from Thucydides' account that the Athenians attacked (and presumably captured)<sup>4</sup> Minoa and then (οὖν) turned their attention to the mainland, where they seized Nisaia and the towers and built a wall to deny the Megarians access to the island. Combining this interpretation with the usual view of τὸν ἔσπλουν ἐς τὸ μεταξὺ τῆς νήσου as the channel between the island and the mainland, the reader would be in a position to understand how Nikias 'freed' the channel: first he captured the island and then he cleared the towers on the mainland opposite.

By no means would I claim that this is Plutarch's own interpretation in every particular, but it does show how a natural construction of Thucydides' words could lead to the conclusion that Nikias captured Nisaia.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Among those proposing corrections of the text I have noted the following: Classen, Gomme, Hude, Hünnekes, Krüger, Meineke, Stahl, Steup, and Ullrich.

<sup>2</sup> 334.

<sup>3</sup> Beattie, 25, has actually adopted this interpretation of Thucydides.

<sup>4</sup> Since Thucydides does not explicitly mention the capture of the island, it must be inferred, as, for example, by Beattie, 25, who translates, 'Then he built a wall to protect his position on the mainland (sc. as well as capturing the island) at a point where the

island, which is not far from the mainland, could be counter-attacked *via* a bridge over a marsh.'

<sup>5</sup> Plutarch clearly derives his idea of the speed of Nikias' operations from Thuc. 3. 51. One difficulty remains: Thucydides says nothing about shutting the Megarians up in the city. I suggest that this is Plutarch's inference from their failure to oppose Nikias. Plutarch seems to think that this was a campaign by land, while Thucydides seems to indicate that Nikias went by sea.