PYLOS 425 B.C.: THE SPARTAN PLAN
TO BLOCK THE ENTRANCES

THE whole of the Pylos campaign is intimately connected with the local topography. Pritchett[1] has shown beyond reasonable doubt that the land in this area has sunk (rather than risen, as commentators have assumed) since classical times, and hence there is much about the campaign that needs re-examination. We confine ourselves here to a consideration of the Spartan plan to block the entrances, as given in Thucydides.[2] Some points relevant to this turn on a more detailed examination of the site itself, which we were able to conduct in the summers of 1967 and 1968.

I. SOME DIFFICULTIES

1. (a) Gomme[3] takes βύζην to mean 'by taking the bungs out of their ships' (and hence sinking them), noting that βύσμα means 'a plug or bung'. However, (i) the verb βύω means simply to 'stuff up' or 'stop up', and neither the verb nor the noun has any particular connection with the bungs of ships; (ii) βύζην could quite straightforwardly mean 'in a stuffing-up or stopping-up way', perhaps adding force to κλήσειν 'close the entrances by stuffing them up tight'. (The phrase is not a tautology: βύζην tells the reader that they intended to close the entrances in a certain *manner*.) (iii) It is hard to see how the adverb can strictly construe on Gomme's interpretation: it must surely mean 'in a bung-like or stopping-up kind of *way*', rather than '*by removing* the bungs'. None of these points is conclusive: but the weight of probability is against Gomme.

(b) ἀντιπρώροις. Gomme[4] takes this as implying that the triremes were to be broadside on to the open sea. He makes this interpretation seem more plausible by talking only of the *two* triremes (sc. in the Sikia channel) which 'were to face each other': ἀντίπρωρος, he says, 'really means "stem facing stem" '. This will work for two triremes, but Thucydides is talking of the whole blockship plan, which involves many more than two. It is barely conceivable that the plan was (or was thought by Thucydides to be) to have a line of triremes anchored in pairs, one member of each pair being anchored stem-to-stem with its partner: but unlikely. ἀντίπρωρος naturally (and commonly elsewhere)[5] means simply 'with the prow turned towards . . .' or 'with the prow facing . . .'. If, as appears from the point just made, the prows are not to face each other, there is nothing for them to face except the open sea or the enemy: either of which would mean that they were not broadside on. At the very least, it would be highly misleading of Thucydides to use ἀντίπρωρος to *mean* 'broadside on': he would more naturally have used πλάγιος, as elsewhere.[6]

Further, if Gomme is wrong about βύζην, broadside-on ships could be rammed and sunk, and hence provide no effective barrier at all. The example

[1] W. K. Pritchett, *Studies in Greek Topography*, 6–16.
[2] Thucydides 4. 8. 4–8.
[3] A. W. Gomme, *A Historical Commentary on Thucydides*, iii. 444.
[4] Ibid. 443.
[5] See references in Gomme, ibid.
[6] Ibid.

of Syracuse[1] does not tell against this: for there the ships were firmly anchored and very vigorously defended, in a restricted and enclosed area. The Spartans, by contrast, wished to avoid a sea-fight (4. 8. 5 ἄνευ ναυμαχίας).

From this it follows that Thucydides tells us of a Spartan plan to block up something with lines of parallel ships. Whatever the width of either ἔσπλους, it is to some extent uncertain just how many ships would be required: but on any plausible view of trireme-dimensions, it is hard to see how the Spartans would need less than one ship for every 20 or 30 feet of space. This obvious point should have worried commentators more than it has, as appears below.

2. In marrying what Thucydides says with historical fact, commentators seem to have exercised less than their usual care both on the text and on the topography. Two assumptions are characteristically made:

(a) that, from the numbers of ships Thucydides gives in 4. 8. 6 ('two 'and 'eight or nine'), we can infer similar numbers as required for blocking the entrances. This assumption is tacit, and has only to be compared with the text to be seen to be unwarranted. Thucydides says[2] that the location of Sphacteria makes the entrances narrow, allowing on the one side a διάπλους of two ships, and on the other a διάπλους of eight or nine. Whatever he means here, there is no reason at all to suppose that his criterion for διάπλους ship-numbers is conceptually the same as, or contingently correlates with, any criterion for numbers of blockships. In fact, διάπλους must mean 'a sailing-through' (sc. of the ἔσπλους): Thucydides is giving the numbers of triremes (two for the Sikia) that could sail comfortably abreast through the channel, and giving them in sufficient detail to be taken seriously. From what we know of trireme-dimensions, we may assume a figure of about 45 feet per trireme for a διάπλους (hull, outriggers, oars, and an adequate space between the triremes), and about 16 ft. 6 in. for a blockship.[3]

(b) that there is no problem about the northern (Sikia) channel. It is assumed, not only, as in (a) above, that Thucydides is *saying* that two ships could have blocked it, but also that two ships could *in fact* have blocked it. The Sikia channel is assumed to be about 150 yards wide not only by Gomme[4] but, curiously, by Pritchett,[5] who is himself out to demonstrate that the land has sunk. But if so, it would allow a through-passage for ten triremes, not two, and require about twenty-eight triremes to block it.

3. The question of the south channel is similarly bedevilled. Thus Gomme:[6] '... not only some 1,400 yards wide, but, what is more important, about 200 feet deep and could not have been blocked even by the whole Peloponnesian fleet. It is quite out of the question ...' Apart from the fact that Gomme's own map[7] shows the channel to be 1,300 yards wide (and, incidentally, the

[1] Thucydides 7. 59 *et seq.*
[2] Thucydides 4. 8. 6.
[3] Breadth with outriggers about 16 ft. 6 in., and oars projecting perhaps 10 ft. on either side, make up 36 ft. 6 in.: and we may allow 4 ft. 3 in. on either side for a safety margin to make up a round figure of 45 ft. Of course all of this is approximate and some of it guesswork: but the distance is unlikely

to have been much less than 40 ft., or much more than 50 ft. The argument would not be affected by any reasonable variations. See J. S. Morrison and R. Williams, *Greek Oared Ships* (C.U.P.), ad loc.
[4] Ibid.
[5] Ibid.
[6] Ibid.
[7] Ibid., facing p. 486.

Sikia channel to be 100 rather than 150 yards), this curt dismissal depends logically on Gomme's implausible view on the meaning of βύζην: the depth is relevant only if the Spartans were planning to sink their ships.
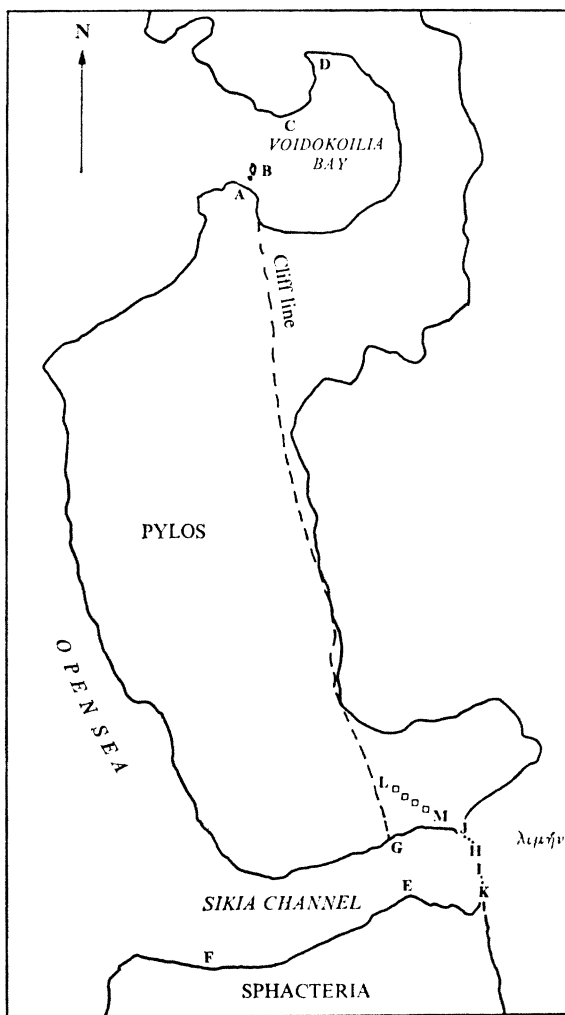

Fig. 1

Those commentators who believe in the plan have in effect argued: 'If a channel of 150 yards can be blocked by two triremes, then a channel of 1,400 yards can be blocked by 18'. Here too we meet the assumptions criticized in § 2 above: briefly,

(a) Thucydides does not say that a 150-yard channel can be blocked by two triremes;

(b) nor in fact can it.

Despite the superficial reasoning on both sides, those commentators are nevertheless right who say that the south channel could not have been blocked.

For taking ἀντιπρῴροις in its more plausible sense, and allowing the generous figure of 18 ft. per trireme, we reach a figure of over 200 triremes: and even if we take ἀντιπρῴροις as 'broadside-on', thus giving the somewhat more plausible figure of 30–40 triremes, we still have the difficulty that such triremes could have been rammed and sunk, even if they could have survived bad weather.

4. Although Thucydides does not specify numbers of triremes required as blockships, he does have (or convey) a false picture at least of the south entrance. Nor can this be righted by assuming errors in numeral transmission. Not only is this arbitrary from a palaeographic point of view (in a way in which Burrows's suggestion of εἴκοσι for δέκα in regard to the length of Sphacteria is not palaeographically arbitrary):[1] but, more important, the south entrance is not στένος, though Thucydides says that it is. The whole Athenian fleet could have sailed through it in line abreast. The fact that Thucydides was mistaken about the southern entrance, however, does not entail that he was mistaken about there being a Spartan plan to block something. We have the following possibilities:

(i) There was a plan to block the south and north entrances.

(ii) There was no plan to block anything.

(iii) There was a plan to block the north entrance and perhaps some other ἔσπλους.

(i) I hope already to have shown to be absurd, unless we assume that the Spartans responsible for the plan had never actually seen the south entrance: for if they had, its impracticability would have been immediately obvious to them.

(ii) is extremely unlikely. Thucydides is both definite and circumstantial: he mentions the plan three times (4. 8. 5, 8. 7, and 13. 4), and gives the details about ship-numbers in conjunction with the first two mentions. We would have to assume a very complex and improbable false source (see § 9 below). But Thucydides may well have reached his false notion of the south channel from other sources: and it is cavalier to postulate a complex false source simply in order to disembarrass Thucydides of the whole idea of the Spartans intending to block something. We are left with (iii).

5. Since Grundy's suggestion for a second ἔσπλους to the south-east of Pylos has been shown by Pritchett to be baseless,[2] we may either pick the entrance to Voidokoilia Bay as the second ἔσπλους, or assume that the plan was to block one only and somehow Thucydides turned it into two. The latter assumption seems absurd: see (ii) above (also Thucydides speaks constantly of τοὺς ἔσπλους in the plural). We may accept as a tentative suggestion, then, that the plan was to block the ἔσπλους of the Sikia channel and the entrance to Voidokoilia: and we have to face the questions: Do these ἔσπλοι fit Thucydides' figures? Was it practicable for the Spartans to block them? How many triremes would be required? What would the Spartans hope to gain by it? Why did they not carry out the plan? And finally, where and why is Thucydides mistaken?

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[1] ΔΠ or ιε′ (15) for ΔΔΠ or κε′ (25).

[2] Pritchett, loc. cit. The Osmin Aga lagoon was then, as now, dry land.

II. Suggested Solutions

The considerations mentioned above would lead us to predict that the dimensions and topography of the Sikia channel and the entrance to Voido-koilia would fit the Thucydidean figures; and also that this interpretation of the plan would make more sense of various points in the text. We shall try to show that both of these are the case.

6. *Do these ἔσπλοι fit Thucydides' figures?*

Topographical investigations of the area had to be carried out in person, since all the maps are in some respects unreliable or inadequate. The data that follow are from our own measurements, checked by independent observers. They are offered with some reservations because,

(*a*) the area is, of course, seismic, and it is possible (though not at all likely) that there have been major changes due to seismic activity;

(*b*) although there is adequate proof of the rise in sea-level, it would be difficult (even for a hydrographic team) to achieve certainty about the 'soft' (silt, gravel, sand, and alluvium) areas. This latter point relates to the Sikia channel, which has always been subject to strong swirls and cross-currents. However, the facts seem to us to present a sufficiently strong case.

(i) The Voidokoilia entrance is approximately 116 yards wide from B to C (see Fig. 1). The water is deep over all the entrance, even close to the points B and C, and navigability for triremes of 4 to 5 foot draught would not be affected by a rise in land-level of 2·50 m. (the figure mentioned by Pritchett) or indeed, by twice that rise. The interior of the bay is sandy, and the depth varies (e.g. over a fairly large area of it the sea-bed rose some 5 to 6 ft. in the course of a year). The entrance, however, remains over 20 ft. deep at all points, and there is no difficulty at all in landing on the sandy shores, even when strong winds cause surf; particularly close to the cliff (D on the sketch), which is a well-protected point in all weathers.

(ii) The Sikia channel (like the Voidokoilia entrance) is deep throughout, wherever Sphacteria directly faces Pylos (E–F on the sketch). At its narrowest point (E–G) it is approximately 112 yards wide. The shore at E and G is not as sheer as at Voidokoilia, and we should perhaps allow some 10 yards over which a land-rise of 2–3 metres would have made navigation impossible. This leaves 102 yards of navigable water in classical times. Further east, however, the depth diminishes rapidly: that this is not a very recent phenomenon is testified by a number of old nautical charts and maps, which mark depths similar to those marked by Grundy. Briefly, measure-ments of depths and widths (allowing always for a 2–3 metre land-rise) give us a navigable channel of about 35 yards between points H and I. In classical times it would be either dry or fordable over the line H–J and I–K. These measurements fit Thucydides' figures almost exactly. Eight triremes for the Voidokoilia entrance require a distance of 8 × 45 feet, i.e. 120 yards: the entrance itself is 116 yards. A ninth trireme, if sufficiently venturesome, could have sailed between point A on Pylos and the rocks (B). Thucydides'

ὀκτὼ ἢ ἐννέα is exactly right. For the Sikia, we require 2×45 feet for two triremes, i.e. 30 yards: another very exact correspondence. Even if we grant reservations about the dimensions of the triremes or about shifts in the sea-bed caused by currents, and resist the temptation to extract more accuracy from Thucydides than any author could be expected to bear, the correspondence is striking: and it is, therefore, worth pursuing a theory on this hypothesis.

Commentators have usually failed to consider exactly where the points we have marked as H and I—that is, the end of the proposed Spartan blockade-lines for the Sikia—should be placed. Because of this failure, they have also not appreciated the difficulties for the common view (exemplified by Gomme), which implicitly or explicitly puts H on Athenian-held territory.

The prima facie difficulties of laying ships sideways on so as to reach enemy territory, and then defending them against fire, or other forms of Athenian destruction, are obvious: but there is in any case the knock-down argument that if this had been possible, the Spartans would certainly have done it (in preference to the dangerous Thrasymelidas landing on the south-west rocks) as a way of reaching Athenian-held territory. There is not much doubt, though I cannot give the full reasons here, that the Athenians enclosed the (comparatively) flat south-east corner within their fortifications, which afterwards served as a base, though an inadequate one. I have marked the possible wall-line here L–M, simply to make the point that the Spartan blockade-end must have been east of this or any similar wall, if it was to be on Spartan-held territory; this virtually forces us to adopt H for this point, and hence profoundly reinforces the significance of the correspondence of Thucydides' figures with the measurements.

7. *What did the Spartans hope to gain?*
The crucial passage here is the first sentence of 4. 8. 8 :

οὕτω γὰρ τοῖς Ἀθηναίοις τήν τε νῆσον πολεμίαν ἔσεσθαι τήν τε ἤπειρον, ἀπόβασιν οὐκ ἔχουσαν (τὰ γὰρ αὐτῆς τῆς Πύλου ἔξω τοῦ ἔσπλου πρὸς τὸ πέλαγος ἀλίμενα ὄντα οὐχ ἕξειν ὅθεν ὁρμώμενοι ὠφελήσουσι τοὺς αὑτῶν), σφεῖς δὲ ἄνευ τε ναυμαχίας καὶ κινδύνου ἐκπολιορκήσειν τὸ χωρίον κατὰ τὸ εἰκός, σίτου τε οὐκ ἐνόντος κτλ.

Editors take this passage to refer solely to the Spartans' intention to deny the Athenians a *base of operations*. The words ὅθεν ὁρμώμενοι certainly refer to a base: but they are connected syntactically with the τὰ γὰρ . . . ὄντα clause, and not with the earlier part of the sentence, as the brackets normally inserted by editors indicate. Disregard of the syntax could produce some such translation as: 'They thought that thus the Athenians would find both the island to be enemy-occupied and the mainland, affording them no chance of landing: so that, since the coast of Pylos itself outside the entrance, towards the open sea, is harbourless, they would have no base of operations to help their troops': or possibly, taking ἤπειρον as the subject of ἕξειν, '. . . the mainland, affording them no chance of landing (since the coast of Pylos . . .), would give them no base of operations . . .'. However, it is plain that the subject of ἕξειν must be τὰ . . . ἀλίμενα ὄντα; and this puts the meaning of the sentence in a new light.

The correct translation is: 'They thought that thus the Athenians would find both the island to be enemy-occupied, and the mainland, which gave them no chance of landing[1] (for the coast of Pylos itself, outside the entrance and towards the open sea, is harbourless and would give them no base of operations to help their troops) : . . .' The order of thought is : both the island and mainland would be enemy-occupied, and prevent a landing—*all* the mainland (in case the reader was wondering), since there was no place at Pylos for a base. This leaves open the possibility that when Thucydides talks of ἀπόβασις, he is not thinking of a possible *base* for the Athenians, but of a landing for some other purpose. This is perfectly in accord with Thucydides' use of ἀπόβασις elsewhere in 8–13.

Indeed, the Spartans can hardly have thought that the Athenians would have tried to use anywhere on the ἤπειρος as a *base*, i.e. a defensible and semi-permanent camp. For there already were Peloponnesian forces at Pylos (ready to attack the Athenian wall) which could very quickly have been deployed to attack any attempted Athenian base in the vicinity (e.g. on the coast behind Sphacteria). The Athenians might have tried to use Sphacteria, which partly explains the Spartans sending troops there: but it does not explain why they stationed troops παρὰ τὴν ἤπειρον (in 4. 8. 7, immediately preceding this sentence). Stationing troops παρὰ τὴν ἤπειρον would not have prevented the Athenians using Pylos as a base, had it been possible: nor would it have prevented them from sailing into the λιμήν, destroying the Spartan fleet, and thus opening up the south-east corner of Pylos as a base (as in fact they did).

Nevertheless we are told that the denial of places for an ἀπόβασις would help the Spartans ἐκπολιορκήσειν. For reasons just given, the reference cannot be to an ἀπόβασις *qua* base: nor can it be to an ἀπόβασις *qua* any point at which supplies might be landed, despite the temptation of σίτου τε οὐκ ἐνόντος. For, in calm weather and with a friendly shore, supplies may be landed at many points on Pylos—it is not necessary to have an anchorage, or even a proper landing-place, to get supplies ashore. Sense can only be made of ἀπόβασις and ἐκπολιορκήσειν if we take the Spartans to have been afraid of a quick landing by the Athenian ships, designed to take the Spartan troops besieging Pylos in the rear, or by some other similar tactical move make the Spartan assault more difficult. Thucydides is thinking simply of a possible landing-place. If such an ἀπόβασις were possible on Pylos, it would of course *be* a base (because permanently defensible) : and that is why Thucydides talks of a base in the bracketed part of the text. That Thucydides has the possibility of such quick tactical landings in mind is itself shown by ὅθεν ὁρμώμενοι ὠφελήσουσι τοὺς αὐτῶν : literally, 'setting out from where they would bring relief to their troops'. Since this putative base is on Pylos itself, where would they go *to* after setting out ? The kind of ὠφελία Thucydides has in mind is plainly not in the nature of any general relief, supplies, etc., for Pylos itself: for the ships would be there already. It must be in the nature of the tactical landings already mentioned.

We now have an obvious motive for the Spartans blocking the entrance to Voidokoilia :[2] for the bay offers an ideal place for such a landing. The landing

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[1] Not 'landing-place' : there were *places* to land, but no *chance* of landing (because of the Spartan troops).

[2] Some may be misled here by Leake's description of Voidokoilia (quoted by Gomme, p. 484) as a bay with 'a narrow entrance ; it is nevertheless bad, exposed to a continual surf, and capable only of admitting boats'. But

(1) the entrance is wider than the Sikia channel (see map) ;

(2) it is usually calm, and its beach is

is easy, and very close indeed to the Peloponnesian troops who would be besieging Pylos, and whom any such landing would take immediately in the rear. The same point applies to blocking the Sikia channel. It may of course be argued that the stationing of hoplites παρὰ τὴν ἤπειρον would of itself be sufficient protection against Athenian landings: but the Spartans may have wanted to make doubly certain, or may have wished to relieve the hoplites of this guard-duty in order to use them for the assault on Pylos. We might indeed conjecture that one reason why they failed to execute their blocking plan was because enough hoplites arrived to do the job. (See 4. 14. 5 ἤδη βεβοηθηκότες.)

We have still to cope with ἄνευ ναυμαχίας. If it be supposed that Thucydides is here thinking in terms of blocking the Sikia and the (impossibly wide) channel south of Sphacteria, then Thucydides is simply reading non-existent Spartan intentions into his own topographical error. On this view, the Spartans (as Thucydides believed) argued as follows: 'We do not want a ναυμαχία. We can avoid a ναυμαχία if and only if the Athenian fleet is kept out of the λιμήν. Therefore we must block the entrances to the λιμήν'. If this is the way Thucydides thought the Spartans argued, then he is in error: the same error, in effect, as his topographical one. But it should by now be clear that the Spartans need not have argued along those lines at all. A ναυμαχία would not *only* be necessary to prevent the Athenian fleet from entering the λιμήν. It would be necessary to prevent tactical landings, unless the prevention of such landings could be achieved by some other way. And this is what the Spartans attempted. They argued: 'If the Athenian fleet (which will in any case be able to enter the λιμήν, the south entrance of which we cannot block) is going to be able to make tactical landings anywhere it chooses, our siege of Pylos will be more difficult. Therefore we will ensure that it cannot land anywhere on Sphacteria or on the mainland: and we shall block up the Sikia and Voidokoilia entrances, and place hoplites on Sphacteria and the mainland. If we don't do this, we shall have to stop them by a ναυμαχία, which is dangerous to us.'

It remains true that the Athenian fleet could (and did) land on the south-east corner of Pylos, after having defeated the Spartan fleet: and that they were thus enabled to blockade the Spartans on Sphacteria. The argument above suggests *one* reason why a ναυμαχία would be necessary, if the Spartans did not take certain precautions: but we may still ask whether the Spartans did not see that it would in any case be necessary for these *other* reasons. In other words, how did they hope to prevent the Athenian fleet from sailing in, landing on Pylos, and blockading Sphacteria without a ναυμαχία, even if they hoped to prevent other difficulties without a ναυμαχία? To this there are two possible answers:

(a) Thucydides does not say that the Spartans believed that they would certainly be able to avoid a ναυμαχία. The crucial sentence leaves the main verb to be understood; and the phrase κατὰ τὸ εἰκός, which we may take as applying in force as much to the ἄνευ τε ναυμαχίας as to the rest of the clause, suggests that we may reasonably translate: 'They hoped that . . .' or 'They thought that they would probably . . .'. Nor was this hope unreasonable. The Athenian fleet would have to enter (by one entrance

exposed to surf only in strong northerly or westerly winds (certainly not to 'continual' surf);

(3) whatever Leake means by 'boats', the

entrance is quite deep enough for triremes.

See § 6 above in the text.

only, if the Spartans had blocked the Sikia channel) a λιμήν the shores of
which were (apart from the small area at Pylos) manned by Spartan
hoplites, in face of a fleet half as large again as their own. It would not be
clear to the Athenians that they would have anywhere to anchor their
ships, or whether they would gain anything at all by entering the λιμήν.

(b)   The Spartans may well have believed this hope to have been realized
when the Athenians (13. 3), after inspecting the area from the open sea,
went away in the direction from which they had come: in fact to Prote,
though the Spartans may not have been immediately aware of this. The
behaviour of the Athenian fleet in 13. 2 and 3 might be taken as a ruse.
Why did not the fleet sail straight into the λιμήν? It is possible that they
needed time, and an anchorage, to prepare for a ναυμαχία (13. 3 τῇ δ'
ὑστεραίᾳ παρασκευασάμενοι ὡς ἐπὶ ναυμαχίαν), but unlikely: possible too,
and more likely, that they arrived towards the evening, and left themselves
too little time to make a proper job of the ναυμαχία: but possible also that
they found the Spartan fleet alert, and hoped, by seeming to disappear
altogether, to be able to return and catch them off their guard. Whether or
not that was the Athenian intention, the Spartans may well have thought
that they had gone for good (see above, (a)) : visibility as far as Prote is by
no means always adequate from Sphacteria and Pylos.

Some such suggestion is strongly reinforced by the lack of alertness in the
Spartan fleet in 14. 1. When the Athenians return, they wait for a little to see if
the Spartans will sail out into the εὐρυχωρία. ἡσυχάζοντες δ' ἐν τῇ γῇ τάς τε ναῦς
ἐπλήρουν καὶ παρεσκευάζοντο: 'they stayed quietly ashore[1] and *were in the process
of* manning their ships and preparing . . .'. As the imperfects show, they had
not completed this process. This is why some ships were damaged while still
being manned, and before leaving the shore (14. 1 ἔτι πρὶν ἀνάγεσθαι ἐκόπ-
τοντο) : and others, which must have been on the shore, taken in tow after their
crews had been put to flight. Since the Spartans had already gained a little
time for preparation while the Athenians were waiting out at sea, all this
indicates a state of extreme unreadiness: explicable only if the disappearance of
the day before had been taken by the Spartans as permanent.

This would, we think, in itself sufficiently answer the ἄνευ τε ναυμαχίας
problem. But there is a further and more important consideration. For the
value to the Spartans of blocking the Sikia channel on the line H–I, *between the
south-east corner and the λιμήν*, is plain enough. Most obviously, it has value as
a bridge by which the hoplites on Sphacteria could reach the mainland: but it
also makes the Athenian position much more difficult. The Athenians required
—what after the ναυμαχία (because the Sikia blockade was not executed) they
actually gained—a combination of an anchorage (i.e. a sheltered area) and
a place to land. The former was the λιμήν: the latter, the south-east corner of
Pylos. 26. 3 gives the picture in brief: the Athenian fleet maintain touch with
Pylos by anchoring in the north-west part of the λιμήν, next to the defended
south-east landing-place. Had the direct communication between these two
been severed so that the Athenian ships would have had to circumnavigate
Sphacteria in order to stay in touch with the south-east landing-place, it is
doubtful whether there would have been a viable base at all; in the event,

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[1] Not, with Gomme, 'stopping their at-
tacks by land': possible Greek (though un-
likely because of the ἐν), but the sense is
irrelevant to the context.

indeed, it proved precarious enough. The blockade would justify Thucydides'
statement of the Spartan intention (otherwise absurd) to blockade the entrances
ὅπως μὴ ᾖ τοῖς Ἀθηναίοις ἐφορμίσασθαι ἐς αὐτόν (8. 5). This plan was wholly
practicable. If we allow (taking βύζην very seriously) a niggardly 15 ft. for
a trireme acting as a blockship, this would require 6 triremes for the Sikia
channel of 30 yards, and some 23 or 24 for the Voidokoilia entrance of 116
yards.

8. *Why did the Spartans not carry out the plan?*
   Despite the obvious merits and practicability of the plan, it would have been
   surprising if the Spartans had executed it. We need not here rely
   (*a*) on well-worn remarks about Spartan lack of enterprise: nor
   (*b*) on their inexperience in nautical matters: nor, more plausibly,
   (*c*) on the possibility that the arrival of Peloponnesian reinforcements to be
       stationed παρὰ τὴν ἤπειρον made the plan unnecessary.

   More relevant are:
   (*d*) They needed to use the Sikia channel (if they were not to go a long way
       round by the southern Sphacteria channel) in order to conduct the
       assault by sea; and they did not have much time to form their blocks
       between the end of that assault and the arrival of Athenian fleet (13. 1
       and 2). Exactly how long they had is unclear from this passage, because
       the ἐν τούτῳ in 13. 2 is uncertain in its reference. The Athenian fleet
       may have come back whilst the sea assault was just ending, or in that
       part of the day after it had finished, or on the next day. Nor do we
       know just how long it would take the Spartans to form the blocks.
   (*e*) The Spartan plan to use siege-engines on the south-east corner of
       Pylos would certainly also have needed a free Sikia channel: and this
       seems to have been the plan with the highest priority in 13. 1.

   It has to be remembered throughout that the blocking-plan was to operate
   only ἢν ἄρα μὴ πρότερον ἕλωσι (8. 5). In brief, the Spartans simply did not
   have the time.

9. *Where and why is Thucydides mistaken?*
   In favour of the view here put forward, it must be noticed that Thucydides
   is thereby saddled with only one basic mistake: that is, the *position* of the
   ἔσπλοι. He is correct in referring to two narrow entrances: correct in
   giving their rough διάπλους dimensions: correct in saying that the Spartans
   intended to block them. Further, his reportage in 8. 8 and elsewhere enables
   us to infer their motives. It is simply that he thinks that the ἔσπλοι are at
   either end of Sphacteria, and that the Spartans intended to block *these*
   entrances (sc. of the λιμήν).
       On our view, it is in the highest degree unlikely that Thucydides was told
   that the entrances on either side of Sphacteria were of the dimensions he
   gives. He was told of two entrances, told how wide they were, and told that
   the Spartans intended to block them. This relates importantly to his state-
   ment about the Spartan intention. He could not have argued: 'The en-
   trances by Sphacteria are narrow: the Spartans intended to block them:
   therefore their intention must have been to keep the Athenians out of the

λιμήν': for he was told nothing about the entrances *by Sphacteria*. How did Thucydides get from his knowledge (1) that there were narrow entrances, and (2) that the Spartans intended to block them, to (3) that these entrances were by Sphacteria? He argued: 'The Spartans were going to block these narrow entrances I've been told about—to keep the Athenians out of the λιμήν, of course.' (So far, so good.) 'Naturally they are the Sphacteria entrances, since Sphacteria stretches alongside the λιμήν.'

It is worth observing what we should have to believe if we accepted the orthodox view. We should either have to believe in a Spartan informant who said, e.g., 'Yes, we lost the ναυμαχία and our hoplites on Sphacteria: but, you see, we had intended to block the Sphacteria entrances (they're both very narrow), and that would have fixed those Athenian so-and-sos': but this naturally prompts the question, 'Then why on earth didn't you?'—a question Thucydides does not answer. Or we should have to believe in an Athenian informant who, whether from the force of Demosthenes, Eurymedon, or Cleon, having himself passed by the southern Sphacteria entrance, would know it to be unblockable, and yet would say otherwise. Yet he would have no obvious motive for lying.

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