ON HERODOTUS 7.183: THREE SOUND SHIPS FOR SALAMIS

τῶν δὲ δέκα νεῶν τῶν βαρβάρων τρεῖς ἐπήλασαν περὶ τὸ ἕρμα τὸ μεταξὺ ἐὸν Σκιάθου τε καὶ
Μαγνησίης, καλεόμενον δὲ Μύρμηκα. ἐνθαῦτα οἱ βάρβαροι ἐπειδὴ στήλην λίθου ἐπέθηκαν
κομίσαντες ἐπὶ τὸ ἕρμα, ὁρμηθέντες αὐτοὶ ἐκ Θέρμης, ὡς σφι τὸ ἐμποδὼν ἐγεγόνεε καθαρόν,
ἐπέπλεον πάσῃσι τῇσι νηυσί, ἕνδεκα ἡμέρας παρέντες μετὰ τὴν βασιλέος ἐξέλασιν
ἐκ Θέρμης. τὸ δὲ ἕρμα σφι κατηγήσατο ἐὸν ἐν πόρῳ μάλιστα Πάμμων Σκύριος.

ἐπήλασαν a : ἐπάλησαν D : δοκῶ ἐστάλησαν R : ἐπεστάλησαν SV

Of the ten ships of the barbarians three ἐπήλασαν περὶ the reef that is between Sciathus and
Magnesia and is called the Ant. When the barbarians had brought to the reef and set up there
a pillar of stone, they themselves set out from Therma, as the way ahead had now been made
clear for them, and sailed on with all their ships, having let eleven days pass since the king's
departure from Therma. The reef, which was right in their course, had been pointed out to
them by Pammon, a Scyrian.

All the editions read ἐπήλασαν (earlier ἐπέλασαν), and ἐπήλασαν περὶ is usually
taken to mean 'ran aground on': 'τρεῖς [νῆες] ἐπήλασαν περὶ τὸ ἕρμα *drove upon
the rock*, Hdt. 7.183', *LSJ* s.v. ἐπελαύνω II 2; '(3. of ships, *run aground*: περὶ
τὸ ἕρμα 7.183[2.])', J.E. Powell in his *Lexicon to Herodotus*. Powell's brackets
indicate the existence of a variant, but the variants here receive no separate
treatment from him.

   First of all, apart from the wider question of the sense of the passage, there is
a formidable grammatical objection to ἐπήλασαν: elsewhere horses and ships are
found as the objects, never the subjects, of active forms of ἐλαύνω and its com-
pounds.[1] Here we might, following Schweighäuser,[2] take τρεῖς (sc. νέας) as
object of ἐπήλασαν understanding οἱ βάρβαροι as its subject, but τρεῖς naturally
presents itself as the subject and the prominent expression of οἱ βάρβαροι in the
very next sentence is against understanding οἱ βάρβαροι as the subject of this one;
besides, if Herodotus had wanted to say 'Of the [clearly their own] ten ships the
barbarians drove three aground on the reef . . .', he would have said that and not
'Of the ten ships of the barbarians they [sc. the barbarians] drove three aground
on the reef . . .', i.e. he would have written οἱ βάρβαροι, not τῶν βαρβάρων.

   The second, and fatal, blow to the grammatically dubious ἐπήλασαν comes
from considering the sense of the passage as a whole. The word has owed its
existence in the text of Herodotus to a belief that the sense 'ran aground' is
appropriate in the context. That belief is quite mistaken.

   Xerxes' naval force was at Therma and ten fast ships had been sent ahead from
there.[3] One of the tasks assigned to these ships must have been the erection of a
marker on the Ant reef which lay dangerously in the path of the barbarian fleet.
That the Persians already knew about the reef at this stage is certain: they owed
their knowledge about it to Pammon and not to running aground on it, which
would have rendered Pammon's services ludicrously superfluous; and we may

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[1] The only exception, or seeming excep-
tion, known to me is in Achilles Tatius
1.12.2 ἐπὶ τὸν ἵππον τὸν σὸν ἐκάθισεν, ὦ
Κλεινία, ὃς τὰ πρῶτα μὲν ἤλαυνεν ἠρέμα,
δύο δὲ περιελθὼν ἢ τρεῖς δρόμους τὴν
ἱππασίαν ἐπέσχε καὶ τὸν ἵππον ἱδροῦντα

κατέψα, but here the subject should be the
rider (the subject of ἐπέσχε and κατέψα)
and we should read . . .ὃν . . . ἤλαυνεν. . . .
   [2] J. Schweighäuser, *Lexicon Herodoteum*
(Strasbourg, 1824), s.v. ἐπελαύνω.
   [3] Hdt. 7.179.

assume that they did not carry stone pillars around with them for no definite purpose.

Did three of the ships, then, suffer the unlikely mishap of 'driving onto' the reef that they had come to mark? Hardly; and the whole tone and structure of the passage are against it too. There can be no doubting that the main subject-matter of this passage is the setting up of a marker on a dangerous reef about which the Persians already had information, in order to make the way safe for their advancing fleet, and even if a few of their ships had run aground in the course of this venture, Herodotus would certainly not have begun his account unnaturally with an unduly prominent statement of this, at the same time relegating to a footnote the fact that they had already known about the reef and making no comment on how the accident occurred in spite of that knowledge. Besides, after setting up the marker the barbarians sailed on 'with all their ships', a phrase we would expect to find qualified in some way if we had been told in the immediately preceding sentence that three of their ships had just come to grief.

What in fact happened is that three of the ten ships 'were dispatched to the vicinity of the reef' to erect the pillar. The ships themselves would not, presumably, have gone very close to the rocks (hence περί rather than, say, ἐπί) and the στήλη must have been taken on the last stage of its journey by boat: that is what κομίσαντες ἐπὶ τὸ ἕρμα refers to.

ἐπάλησαν (D) means 'were disabled', 'were wrecked',[4] which is at least as unsuitable in the context as 'ran aground'. ἐπιστέλλω (ἐπεστάλησαν SV) in the sense 'send' is used only of sending letters (ἐπιστολή), messages, and the like. ἐστάλησαν would give just the required sense and it is also supported by what seems to me to be a plausible way of explaining how the rather special set of variants arose. The manuscripts on which the text is based are related as follows:

Lost archetype

a (lost)   d (lost)

A   B   D

R   S   V
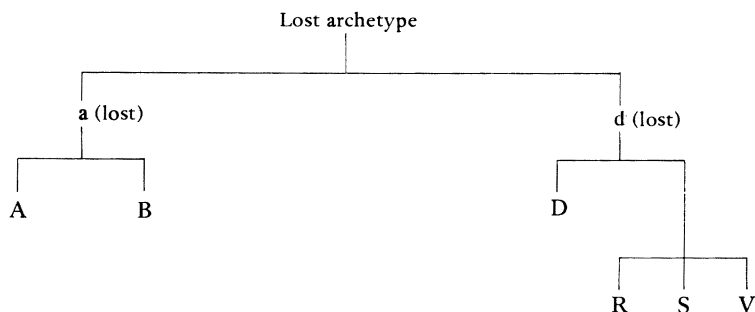
I would reconstruct the tradition in this way:[5] the archetype and hyparchetype d had ἐπάλησαν (preserved in D), a word that might well strike a scribe as a *vox nihili* readily admitting of correction in this context: in hyparchetype a (or a

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[4] For the very rare παλέω see LSJ and LSJ Suppl. s.v..

[5] Cf. C. Hude's analysis (in the preface to his Oxford text of Hdt., p. ix n.1): 'Documento et rationis quae codicibus huius (Romanae) stirpis inter se intercedit et bonitatis cuiusque sit locus q.e. VII 183, 2, ubi vera scriptura ἐπήλασαν (ABCP) in archetypo alterius stirpis in ἐπάλησαν (D)

abierat, unde in R δοκῶ ἐστάλησαν, quae quidem scriptura correctorem prodit, in SV vero ἐπεστάλησαν factum est.' My own reconstruction is, of course, tentative, but due attention should be given to the fact that the text was certainly tampered with repeatedly and to the intrinsic merit of ἐστάλησαν.

forebear) ἐπάλησαν was changed to ἐπήλασαν because of the frequent nautical use of ἐλαύνω; SV offer ἐπ⟨εστ⟩άλησαν; and the person to whom the reading in R is owed has given us his considered opinion (δοκῶ) that ἐπάλησαν should be ἐστάλησαν, and that is what should be put in the text: it is the simplest correction of ἐπάλησαν, the reading from which the other variants could all have come most easily, and gives, as I have said, just the right sense, 'were dispatched to the vicinity of the reef'.

The *falsa lectio* ἐπάλησαν is itself quite unlikely to be the result of a mere accident: παλέω is a very rare word which fits exactly in sense with the common misunderstanding of the passage. Is it not most likely to have come from an original ἐcτάλησαν, prompted by the mention in one sentence of ships and a reef? As for the motivations of other scribes in my scheme, a's ἐπήλασαν is due to an understandable ignorance of παλέω (the scribe was still a good way from 8.21, where παλήσειε could not be 'emended' so readily) and R's ἐστάλησαν comes from a proper understanding of the passage.

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