

THUCYDIDES 1.42.2 AND THE MEGARIAN DECREE

καὶ τὸ μέλλον τοῦ πολέμου ὧ φοβούμεντες ὑμᾶς Κερκυραῖοι κελένουσιν ἀδικεῖν ἐν ἀφανεῖ ἔτι κεῖται, καὶ οὐκ ἄξιον ἐπαρθέντας αὐτῶ φανεράν ἔχθραν ἤδη καὶ οὐ μέλλουσιν πρὸς Κορινθίους κτήσασθαι, τῆς δὲ ὑπαρχούσης πρότερον διὰ Μεγαρέας ὑποψίας σῶφρον ὑφελεῖν μᾶλλον (ἢ γὰρ τελευταία χάρις καιρὸν ἔχουσα, κἂν ἐλάσσων ἦ, δύναται μείζον ἐγκλημα λῦσαι) . . .

Is there or is there not a reference here to the Megarian Decree?¹ Opinions have differed and no doubt will continue to do so. However, considerable authority has recently been thrown behind the proposition that the matter can be decided on purely linguistic grounds, that merely as a matter of use of Greek the passage cannot contain a reference to the Megarian Decree.² This seems, on investigation, to be false, and since confusion appears to persist in the books about the interpretation of Thucydides' text a short discussion may perhaps be of value.

Problems have centred on the word *πρότερον*. The Corinthians are calling on the Athenians to do something to diminish a state of suspicion existing between the two states. Yet the suspicion is said to be *ὑπάρχουσα πρότερον*, and many scholars have felt that this *ought* to mean that the suspicion existed before but no longer did so.³ Some have not tried to solve this problem at all. Gomme, for example, merely asserted that *πρότερον* is difficult on any view as to the nature and cause of the suspicion and left it at that,⁴ while Kagan unashamedly translates the phrase ' . . . try to remove the suspicion that existed because of the Megarians'.⁵ Others have evaded the difficulty with paraphrase translations⁶ or no translation at all.⁷ But there have been attempts at a solution. Von Fritz, a supporter of the proposition that there is a reference to the Megarian Decree, claimed that the view that *πρότερον* shows some past state of affairs to be in question had no weight because a general principle is being expressed,⁸ an argument that, in the absence of further explanation,

¹ There were, of course, several Megarian Decrees, not to mention the other οὐκ ὀλίγα διάφορα (Thuc. 1.67.4). Throughout I use 'Megarian Decree' as a shorthand for some action of Athens towards Megara in the fairly immediate past in 433.

² G. E. M. de Ste. Croix, *The Origins of the Peloponnesian War* (London, 1972), p. 230.

³ e.g. A. W. Gomme, *Historical Commentary on Thucydides* i (Oxford, 1945), ad loc. P. A. Brunt, *AJP* 72 (1951), 271 n. 9; F. A. Lepper, *JHS* 82 (1962), 54; D. Kagan, *The Outbreak of the Peloponnesian War* (Cornell University Press 1969), p. 256; R. Meiggs, *The Athenian Empire* (Oxford, 1972), p. 430; De Ste. Croix, loc. cit.; R. Legon, *CP* 68 (1973), 169.

⁴ Loc. cit.

⁵ Op. cit., p. 233.

⁶ e.g. Crawley: 'the unfavourable impression which your conduct to Megara has created' (repeated without change in H. R. Harding, *The Speeches of Thucydides* (Lawrence, Kansas, 1973)).

⁷ e.g. R. Sealey, *CP* 70 (1975), 103 n. 26.

⁸ K. von Fritz, *Die griechische Geschichtsschreibung* i (Anmerkungen) (Berlin, 1967), 286–7 n. 37: ' . . . weil hier, auch in Anwendung auf einen speziellen Fall, ein allgemeines Prinzip ausgesprochen wird: eine später erwiesene freundliche Handlung lässt einen früheren Affront bzw. das gegen die Macht die ihn begangen hat daraus entstandene Misstrauen verschwinden oder wenigstens verblasen.'

remains of uncertain effectiveness. Legon, while finding the phrase τῆς δὲ ὑπαρχούσης πρότερον . . . ὑποψίας 'difficult' and feeling that on the face of it the suspicion had ceased to exist, suggests that a translation can be made 'to suggest an earlier and still persisting suspicion'. But he does not unequivocally produce such a translation (' . . . the suspicion which has heretofore existed on account of the Megarians').⁹ Other much earlier scholars have been less timid, and rightly so, as we shall see, but have been largely ignored.¹⁰

A quite different way out of the difficulty has now come from De Ste. Croix.¹¹ His translation/interpretation of the key phrase is 'suspicions which now exist on our part owing to what happened about Megara some time ago'.¹² The sentence is elliptical, and πρότερον properly belongs not with ὑπάρχουσα but with a verb, to be understood, expressing the creation of the ὑποψία. It is as though Thucydides actually wrote: ἡ ὑποψία ἣ νῦν ὑπάρχουσα διὰ τὰ πρότερον περὶ τοὺς Μεγαρέας γεγόμενα. Having offered this explanation of the Greek, De Ste. Croix holds that the reference *must* be to the events of the First Peloponnesian War,¹³ when Megara and Athens became allies, much to the anger of Corinth.¹⁴ Perhaps that is what Thucydides' Corinthians had in mind,¹⁵ but the language of the passage does not require it to be so. De Ste. Croix's interpretation proceeds on three, apparently widely shared, assumptions about πρότερον: (a) that it is problematical; (b) that it cannot mean 'already'; (c) that it implies some not inconsiderable passage of time. I suggest that all of these assumptions are incorrect.

First, as to (c), all that πρότερον fundamentally implies is 'previous to some fixed fixed point in time'. It does not require any great length of time to have elapsed between the previous moment and the fixed point. In the case of Thuc. 1.42.2, even if the passage be expanded in the manner that De Ste. Croix suggests, all that πρότερον need be conveying is that the present suspicion derives from some events concerning Megara which occurred some quite undefined length of time previously. It is consistent with the events being as long ago as the 460s, but it does not require them to be. Therefore, even accepting De Ste. Croix's linguistic interpretation of ὑπάρχουσα πρότερον as an extreme ellipse, we are not compelled to accept his historical interpretation of the phrase as a reference to the First Peloponnesian War.

In fact, his linguistic interpretation seems to me very doubtful. That brings us to the next assumption, (b), that πρότερον cannot bear the sense of ἤδη, that is, that the phrase cannot be simply translated 'the already existing suspicion'. This assumption should be accorded much less regard than has often been the case. Consider, for example, the following passages:

⁹ Loc. cit. The same translation in R. J. Bonner, *CP* 16 (1921), 239.

¹⁰ e.g. B. Jowett, *Thucydides* i (Oxford, 1881), ad loc.; G. Busolt, *Griechische Geschichte* iii.2 (Gotha, 1904), 811 f. n. 1 (following Classen–Steup⁴ ad loc.)

¹¹ Loc. cit. The disagreements here expressed with De Ste. Croix's treatment of Thuc. 1.42.2 do not, of course, connote any lack of respect whatsoever for this brilliantly stimulating work of scholarship.

¹² Similar interpretations seem to lie

behind the translations of Meiggs, loc. cit. ('suspicions that you once aroused because of Megara') and J. de Romilly, Budé Thucydides (Paris, 1953), ad loc. ('la suspicion antérieurement créée par le cas de Megara'), both of whom also take the reference to be to events of c. 460.

¹³ He writes that πρότερον is a 'fatal difficulty' for the view that the reference is to the Megarian Decree.

¹⁴ Thuc. 1.103.4.

¹⁵ See further below, pp. 305 f.

(i) Thuc. 1.72.1: τῶν δὲ Ἀθηναίων ἔτυχε γὰρ πρεσβεία πρότερον ἐν τῇ Λακεδαίμονι . . . παρούσα . . . The presence of the Athenian ambassadors in Sparta is certainly not a past state of affairs (they proceed to appear before the Spartan assembly and speak on the subject of Corinthian complaints). If the phrase were expanded in the manner of De Ste. Croix's treatment of 1.42.2 (e.g. ἔτυχε γὰρ πρεσβεία πρότερον μὲν ἐς Λακεδαίμονα ἀφικομένη, ἔτι δὲ ἐν ἐκείνῳ τῷ χρόνῳ παρούσα . . .), this would at least confirm the point made above that πρότερον need connote no great length of time. But the natural reaction is surely simply to translate: 'there happened to be an Athenian embassy already present in Sparta'.¹⁶

(ii) Thuc. 2.65.12: † τρία μὲν ἔτη ἀντείχον τοῖς τε πρότερον ὑπάρχουσι πολεμίοις καὶ τοῖς ἀπὸ Σικελίας μετ' αὐτῶν . . . Again, these are not 'former enemies', but 'enemies they had formerly *and still had*', or 'the enemies they already had'.

(iii) Thuc. 7.28.3: . . . ὥστε ἔτει ἐπτακαίδεκάτῳ μετὰ τὴν πρώτην ἐσβολὴν ἦλθον ἐς Σικελίαν ἥδη τῷ πολέμῳ κατὰ πάντα τετρυχωμένοι καὶ πόλεμον οὐδὲν ἐλάσσῳ προσανείλοντο τοῦ πρότερον ὑπάρχοντος ἐκ Πελοποννήσου. Given Thucydides' view of the essential unity of all the events from 431 to 404 in one *polemos*, this must mean 'the war that already existed from the Peloponnese'.

(iv) Thuc. 8.54.4: τὰς τε ξυνωμοσίας, αἵπερ ἐτύγχανον πρότερον ἐν τῇ πόλει οὔσαι ἐπὶ δίκαις καὶ ἀρχαῖς, ἀπάσας ἐπελθὼν . . . ' . . . went the round of all the clubs already existing in the city' (Crawley); ' . . . made contact with all the clubs that already existed in Athens' (Warner).

It appears therefore that πρότερον can bear the sense of ἤδη, and that there is no reason in principle why τῆς δὲ ὑπαρχούσης πρότερον διὰ Μεγαρέας ὑποψίας should not be rendered '(of) the suspicion that already exists because of the Megarians'. In fact, the articulation of the references to present and future events in 1.42.2 is slightly curious, and deserves some further discussion, if only because it may have played a part in hampering proper understanding of the phrase under discussion.

The curiosity concerns the temporal relations between πόλεμος, ἔχθρα, and ὑποψία. First, the πόλεμος. That is still in the mists of future uncertainty (τὸ μέλλον τοῦ πολέμου . . . ἐν ἀφανεί ἔτι κείται . . .). That is fair enough. Next, the speaker contrasts this uncertain future with something that he describes as φανερά . . . ἤδη καὶ οὐ μέλλουσα (that is, unequivocally in the certain present), namely Corinthian ἔχθρα. That is less fair. Corinthian ἔχθρα is something that would result from the Athenians acceding to Corcyra's request for help, and such an accession still lies in the future; not, admittedly, so far in the future as the πόλεμος (and that, in effect, is the Corinthian point), but still not present. For rhetorical effect, therefore, and to ram home the point that Corinthian ἔχθρα is a more immediate danger than the πόλεμος, the speaker has insistently called present a state of affairs that can only be future. This would be unremarkable enough if it were only a question of contrast between the πόλεμος and the ἔχθρα. But then the Corinthian goes on to another contrast between

¹⁶ It is a melancholy fact that the relevance (after J. Steup, *Thukydideische Studien* ii of 1.72.1 to the interpretation of 1.52.2 was (Freiburg/Tübingen, 1886), 22). long ago noted in Classen–Steup⁴ ad 1.42.2

the *φανερὰ ἔχθρα ἤδη καὶ οὐ μέλλουσα* and the (mere) *ὑποψία* which would, if the Athenians take the wrong decision, be replaced by *ἔχθρα*. In strict logic the *ὑποψία* exists at the time of speaking, the (potential) *ἔχθρα* in the future. But how is the speaker to express this? He has already pre-empted *ἤδη* and (in effect) *νῦν* (i.e. *οὐ μέλλουσα*) in reference to the (future) *ἔχθρα*. He can therefore only describe the *ὑποψία* as existing before the moment at which it turns into *ἔχθρα*, i.e. *ὑπάρχουσα πρότερον*. But since, as we have seen, the fact that something is described as existing *πρότερον* a given event/state of affairs does not preclude its existing also at the time of that event/state of affairs, nothing is (or should be) lost, and the speaker can still be seen to be expressing the simple idea that the *ὑποψία* already existed.

The length of this discussion may seem to guarantee the truth of at least assumption (a) above, that *πρότερον* is problematical. But the above examination of the construction of the relevant part of 1.42.2 perhaps justifies one in saying that, if there is a problem, it is not with *πρότερον* but with the rest of the context.

Where does all this leave the Megarian Decree? Since all that 1.42.2 guarantees is that *ἡ . . . διὰ Μεγαρέας ὑποψία* existed already at the time of the debate in 433, it gives us little information, since an already existing situation may in principle have existed for a long or a short time. It might be thought that some light could be shed on the nature of the *ὑποψία* by consideration of what the Athenians are invited to do about it. However, this turns out not to be so. There are two possible interpretations of what it is that the Corinthians are asking Athens to do. (a) Not only not to accede to Corcyra's request, but also to reverse the actions pertaining to Megara that had caused the suspicion; (b) to refuse the Corcyran request, thereby failing to confirm the suspicion, caused by events concerning Megara, that Athens is hostile to Corinth. If (a) were correct, then a reference to the Decree would be likely, for whereas Athens could reverse the action taken in passing the Decree, it is less easy to see what they could do to reverse the events of the First Peloponnesian War period—not least because they had already been reversed by the Thirty Years' Peace. But if (b) is correct, we are no further forward. Unfortunately, (b) seems the easier interpretation, for two reasons:

(i) *τῆς . . . ὑποψίας . . . ὑφελεῖν* presumably means 'remove *something of* the suspicion'.¹⁷ But on interpretation (a), the Athenian action ought to remove all the grounds for suspicion (at least all the ones that are here treated as relevant by the Corinthians). True, one could say that even such Athenian action might not immediately convince all Corinthians of Athens' lasting good faith, but to explain *τῆς . . . ὑποψίας . . . ὑφελεῖν* thus would, I think, be special pleading.

(ii) *ἡ γὰρ τελευταία χάρις καιρὸν ἔχουσα κἂν ἐλάσσων ἢ δύναται μείζον ἔγκλημα λύσαι* evidently refers to the proposed Athenian action (the *χάρις*) and the Corinthian reaction that would follow (acceptance that the *ἔγκλημα* had been dispelled), and it stresses the point that what Corinth is asking Athens to do is little enough in comparison with the gratitude she will feel if Athens

¹⁷ i.e. *τι* is to be supplied. LSJ⁹ s.v. *ὕφαιρέω* ii.2 translates 'gradually to take

away part of'. Stephanus, *Thesaurus Graecae Linguae* s.v. *ὕφαιρέω* suggests 'minuere'.

agrees. In fact this point is in effect made twice in the last seven words of the sentence; the *χάρις* is *ἐλάσσων* than the *ἔγκλημα* (that is, would not normally be great enough to dispel it), and the *ἔγκλημα* is *μείζων* than the *χάρις* (that is, would normally require a greater *χάρις* to secure its removal). Since *ἔγκλημα* presumably refers to the *ὕποψία* (a belief, based on events concerning Megara, that Athens is hostile to Corinth), the tautological stress on the disproportion between *χάρις* and *ἔγκλημα* must indicate that Corinth is not expecting or asking Athens to go to the heart of the *ἔγκλημα* and reverse the action relating to Megara, but to do much less, viz: take the essentially negative action of not upsetting the *status quo* by assisting Corcyra. To put it another way: the Corinthian speaker claims that Athens has two options (i) coming into open enmity with Corinth, and (ii) diminishing the *ὕποψία*. He then asserts that by not following (i) Athens can at the same time achieve (ii); the force of *γάρ* is something like ‘and now you actually have the opportunity of achieving the wise course because a small but timely *χάρις* can be disproportionately effective.’ Once again, therefore, it seems that (b) is the better interpretation.

Therefore, what the Corinthians are asking Athens to do is only to show good faith by not helping Corcyra, and in itself this tells us nothing about the nature or age of the suspicion *ὑπάρχουσα . . . διὰ Μεγαρέας*. The only linguistic feature of 1.42.2 that might tip the balance one way or the other is the word *τελευταία*. It *might* be held that this better fits a situation in which the *ὕποψία* has been long in existence, but since what should or should not count as a long time is not independently established, it is hard to feel very confident. On the whole, the prudent view is that the question of what the Corinthian speaker is referring to cannot be decided by purely linguistic consideration of Thuc. 1.42.2.

A more fruitful approach might be to start from Thucydides’ view on the political background to the Peloponnesian War. Notoriously, Thucydides’ judgement of the Megarian Decree is, by the standards of those who wanted to make it the *fons et origo* of the conflict, very low key. What should be noted is that it is also low key by the standards of those who would at least wish to see it as an element in the worsening relations between Athens and Corinth in the latter 430s. Leaving 1.42.2 out of account, Thucydides never makes any such point. In 1.67.4 the Megarians appear as one of the groups responding to a Spartan appeal for complaints against Athens to be brought into the open (that is, they are not among those, such as Corinth and Aegina, whose complaints stimulate Sparta to take action in the first place). Nowhere in the subsequent debate or later do the Corinthians make any reference to the Decree, let alone a reference to it as touching them particularly closely). In fact, the Decree is only thereafter mentioned in the context of Spartan demands to Athens after the vote that the Peace has been broken.¹⁸ True, special stress was laid on the Megarian grievance,¹⁹ but since this may as well be because it was the most trifling issue and Sparta wished to create discord in Athens by making it seem that Pericles was prepared to go to war for a mere nothing²⁰ as for any other reason, not much can be made of this—and in any case, the Corinthians have,

¹⁸ Thuc. 1.139.1–2; 140.3–4; 144.2.

¹⁹ Loc. cit.

²⁰ Cf. 1.140.4.

by that stage in Thucydides' narrative, faded into the background.²¹ If Thucydides thought the Decree so important as to justify the sort of reference that has sometimes been supposed to appear in 1.42.2, why, one might ask, is he so silent elsewhere? What is said in 1.42.2 is, in itself too unclear for Thucydides to have been able to expect his readers to understand a reference to the Decree without some back-up explanation elsewhere. What Thucydides is *not* silent about elsewhere is, of course, the effect on Corinth/Athens relations of the events of *c.* 460: *καὶ Κορινθίους μὲν οὐχ ἥκιστα ἀπὸ τοῦδε τὸ σφοδρὸν μῖσος ἤρξατο πρῶτον ἐς Ἀθηναίους γενέσθαι*.²² Nobody has ever understood this as anything but a comment intended to forge a link between the events of the First Peloponnesian War and, precisely, those of the immediate lead-up to the War of 431–404. In short, it appears to provide the gloss on 1.42.2 that is so painfully absent if that passage is supposed to refer to the Megarian Decree.²³ Of course, it might be argued that Book 1 is in an incomplete state and that, therefore, the sort of argument presented here is not cogent. But as things stand at the moment, there would seem to be some force in it. More difficult to deal with would be the contention that the fact that the Corinthians make nothing of the Decree in their speeches in 432 does not prove that they might not have been supposed to have done so in 433, when the Corcyra affair had still not quite come to the boil, and Potidaea lay in the future. There is, it must be admitted, no obvious way of establishing or disproving such a contention.

A further point may, however, be made. What the Corinthians wanted in 433 was to stop the Athenians affording aid to a state actively at war with her. But that was exactly what had happened in *c.* 460: *προσεχώρησαν δὲ καὶ Μεγαρῆς Ἀθηναίους ἐς ξυμμαχίαν Λακεδαιμονίων ἀποστάντες, ὅτι αὐτοὺς Κορίνθιοι περὶ γῆς ὅρων πολέμῳ κατεῖχον*.²⁴ If the reference in 1.42.2 were to the events of *c.* 460, there would be a neat parallelism between the two cases. Some proponents of the view that 1.42.2 refers to the Decree may, of course, hold that the Corinthians rightly or wrongly thought that the purpose of the Decree was to put pressure on Megara so as to nurture internal revolt and external realignment and that they might therefore have seen a parallel between the Decree and the possibility of assistance to Corcyra. But such a parallel would certainly be less close; for the moment, Megara was loyally helping Corinth²⁵ and she was to hold out despite the Decree for many years.

To conclude: I suggest with some confidence that De Sté. Croix's linguistic interpretation of 1.42.2 is mistaken and that merely linguistic arguments probably cannot answer the question of what the Corinthians were referring to. I suggest somewhat more tentatively that different arguments may none the less lead to the conclusion espoused by De Sté. Croix and others that the reference is to what occurred in *c.* 460. It should be noted, however, that if these arguments are acceptable, we can derive no information at all from 1.42.2 as to the date

²¹ They are not mentioned at all after 1.124.3.

²² 1.103.4.

²³ That what in 1.42.2 is merely *ὑποψία* in 1.103.4 is *σφοδρὸν μῖσος* is simply Thucydides' tacit comment on the tactful way the Corinthians expressed themselves in 433. It should be noted that the pro-

Athenian action of the Corinthians in 440 in the matter of Samos (Thuc. 1.40.5; 41.2) is not inconsistent with the subsistence of this *μῖσος*, at least if the rationale for that action was what the Corinthians in 433 claimed it to have been.

²⁴ 1.103.4.

²⁵ 1.27.2.

of the Megarian Decree, since the reasons for supposing that there is not a reference there to that decree are not such as to allow 1.42.2 to be even a *terminus post quem*.²⁶

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²⁶ Thanks are due to Robin Seager for reading an earlier draft of this note.