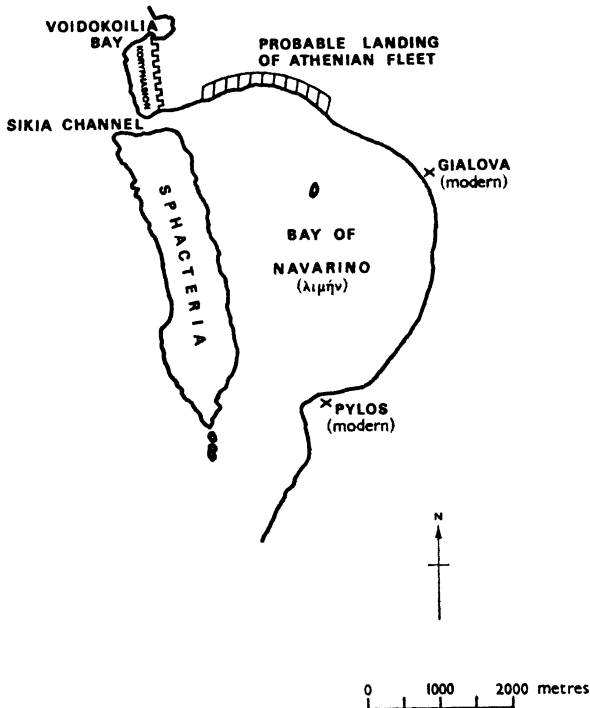


BAD WEATHER AND THE BLOCKADE AT PYLOS

JOHN WILSON AND TIM BEARDSWORTH

SINCE PRITCHETT's important study,¹ it has become clear that there are many features of the Pylos campaign which need re-examination. A proper understanding of the campaign involves an intimate knowledge of the topography as well as detailed analysis of Thucydides. Some fruits of such study appear elsewhere;² here we confine ourselves to some points in connection with the λιμήν and the Athenian blockade.

It should be noted that maps of the area, and also nearly all nautical or topographical guides, are either inaccurate or insufficiently detailed. The sketch printed here is based on Pritchett's aerial photograph,³ but



¹W. K. Pritchett, *Studies in Ancient Greek Topography* 1 (University of California Publications: Classical Studies 1, 1965).

²J. Wilson and T. Beardsworth, "Pylos 425 B.C.: The Spartan plan to block the Entrances," *Classical Quarterly* 20 (1970).

³Pritchett, *Studies* 143.

with some alterations based partly on observations of our own in the summers of 1967 and 1968, connected with Pritchett's demonstration that the land in this area has sunk (rather than risen, as has hitherto been supposed) by approximately 2.5 metres.⁴

I. THE ORIGINAL ATHENIAN LANDING

ὥς ἐγένοντο πλείοντες κατὰ τὴν Λακωνικὴν . . . , ὁ μὲν Ἐυρυμέδων καὶ Σοφοκλῆς ἠπείλουντο ἐς τὴν Κέρκυραν, ὁ δὲ Δημοσθένης ἐκέλευε . . . ἀντιλεγόντων δὲ κατὰ τύχην χειμῶν . . . κατήνεγκε τὰς ναῦς ἐς τὴν Πύλον. [Thucydides 4.3.1]

At what point round the Peloponnese did this storm occur? Not, surely, at some point off "Laconian territory" in a narrow sense of the phrase, i.e., excluding Messenia. For the end of this territory is at least fifty sea-miles from Pylos (more if the Athenians hugged the coast instead of sailing straight across the Messenian Gulf), and they would have taken shelter well before that. (Certainly they would not have tried to weather Cape Akritas. There are places tolerably sheltered from north-westerly gales along the comparatively deserted Messenian coast up to and including Methone.) So Thucydides here uses *Λακωνική* to include Messenia.⁵

We are dealing here with an area where summer storms nearly always come from the north-west, varying occasionally to WNW or NNW. If, as is highly probable, the gale was a north-westerly one, the ships must have been to the north or north-west of Pylos at this point: for it is not plausible that triremes caught by a storm could have continued into it; they would rather have run before it, if at all possible. This view also allows us to take *κατήνεγκε* as "carried the ships to" Pylos, rather than (more loosely) as "forced the ships to put in at" Pylos. This is the better and more natural meaning (*cf.* Thucydides 1.137, where Themistocles is carried by a storm to Naxos). From this it follows that the ships were somewhere between Pylos and the Messenian or "Laconian" frontier.

A *prima facie* objection to this is that the discussion of whether to put in at Pylos before going on to Corcyra *ought* to have taken place before the ships passed Pylos. But Thucydides does not say that it did: and it would have been quite in order for Demosthenes to continue arguing the point so long as the ships were somewhere in the Pylos area. Moreover, while Demosthenes was arguing the point, the generals were

⁴Pritchett, *Studies* 6-18.

⁵Nor only here: *ποτέ* has real force when he describes Pylos as ἐν τῇ Μεσσηνίᾳ ποτὲ οὖσῃ γῇ (4.3.2 and 41.2): and hence when after the campaign the Messenians at Pylos ἐλῆζοντο τὴν Λακωνικὴν (4.41.2) we must understand that Messenia as well as Laconia proper may be meant.

in fact pressing on (i.e., having passed Pylos) to Corcyra: *ἡπείγοντο ἐς τὴν Κέρκυραν*. Editors often take this imperfect in the sense of "were in favour of pressing on"; this is required, however, only by the pre-determined view that Pylos had not already been passed; and it is in itself plausible only if we take the parallel imperfect, *ἐκέλευε*, in the sense of "was in favour of ordering"—that is, not "was telling the generals," as it is usually (and rightly) translated, but "was in favour of orders being given to the troops." All this seems unnecessary and improbable. It is perfectly legitimate, both from the textual and topographic viewpoints, to assume that Pylos had already been passed and that the north-westerly gale drove them back to it.

Where did the Athenians actually land? Almost certainly on what is now the sand-bar at the north end of the bay near to Koryphasion itself: this is one of the few places where there is both shelter and a shallow beach (see p. 115, below). This fits well with the initial Athenian fortification (4.4.1). On hostile (even if uninhabited) territory, the Athenians would have been unlikely to stray far from their ships: and the soldiers would hardly have felt inclined on their own initiative to fortify Koryphasion if, for instance, the ships were lying five or so miles away at the southern end of the bay (*αὐτοῖς τοῖς στρατιώταις . . . ὁρμὴ ἐνέπεσε . . . ἐκτειχίσαι τὸ χωρίον*, 4.4.1).⁶

II. THE *λιμὴν* DURING THE BLOCKADE

Commentators' views on the shelter afforded by the Bay of Navarino (Thucydides' *λιμὴν*) differ dramatically. (a) Gomme describes the *λιμὴν* as "an 'arm of the sea,' and not a very sheltered one at that, for triremes";⁷ and other editors express themselves still more strongly, e.g., Mills: "It is far too exposed to have been a refuge for the Athenian fleet in a storm."⁸ (b) On the other hand the more topographically experienced Pritchett says that "today, boats of the size of ancient ships anchor and tie up at Gialova in all seasons," and that he has "seen ships anchored for long periods in various parts of the harbour."⁹

Each view has obvious objections. Against (a), we have the fact that the Athenian fleet originally put in to Pylos to escape a storm, and remained somewhere in the Bay after its return from Zacynthos for the whole campaign: against (b), we have Thucydides' remarks on the

⁶This particular part of the story, where the fortification appears to depend on the unauthorised *ὁρμὴ*, seems to us incredible. But the argument here is not affected. For if, as we believe, the fortification was the result of recent agreement amongst the generals, there would still have been good reason to beach the ships near Koryphasion.

⁷A. W. Gomme, *Historical Commentary on Thucydides*, 3 (Oxford 1956) 483.

⁸T. R. Mills, edition of Thucydides Book 4 (Oxford 1930) 157.

⁹Pritchett, *Studies* 17.

difficulties to the Athenian fleet of a χειμῶν (ἔδεδοίκεσαν μὴ σφῶν χειμῶν τὴν φυλακὴν ἐπιλάβοι κτλ, 4.27.1).

The text of 4.27.1 requires further comment: but the answer is essentially simple. The north-westerly storms can be extremely violent, and since the sea extends uninterrupted for many miles to the north-west, waves of considerable height are easily built up. Shelter from such storms is therefore best at the north end of the bay, i.e., on what is now the sand-bar (and would then have been ordinary land); though vessels beached at the south-east corner of Pylos, or sheltering immediately in the lee of Sphacteria, would also be well placed. View (a) is wrong, therefore, in maintaining that the λιμὴν as a whole gives *no* adequate shelter. On the other hand, view (b) is unconvincing in implying that *other* parts of the λιμὴν (e.g., Gialova) are adequately sheltered. Pritchett's "ships" and "boats of the size of ancient ships" are not good enough. It is not the size but the unseaworthiness of triremes that is in question. Modern ships have a deeper draught, more freeboard, and better ballast.

It seems that editors have failed to distinguish between the two essentially different conditions of the λιμὴν. (i) When the Athenians first put in to escape the storm, it offered them the northern sand-bar as a landing-ground. (ii) When most of the shore was in Spartan hands, this was no longer true; Spartan troops occupied the whole shore (and Sphacteria), except for a small area on the south-east corner of Pylos. Hence the Athenian difficulties during the blockade. Triremes beached at the south-east corner of Pylos would survive, and others might also survive by anchoring in the comparatively shallow water close to and behind Sphacteria. But a glance at the sketch will show the difficulties of finding, for seventy-plus triremes,¹⁰ a place which is (a) shallow enough to anchor, (b) not in Spartan-held territory, and (c) sheltered from the waves which pour through the Sikia in a storm from the west. As Thucydides says, there was not room for all the fleet to beach on Pylos (4.26.3): and there is really nowhere else. Moreover, it would have been impossible to conduct an effective *blockade* in stormy weather, even if the Athenian fleet had been able to find anywhere to anchor. The blockade normally entailed anchoring round Sphacteria at night, and at least two triremes constantly sailing round the island by day (On this see below, pp. 116 ff.).

The text supports this conclusion: and since there is some possibility, either that the climatic or hydrographic conditions of 425 were different from what they are today, or that the summer of 425 was unusually tranquil, Thucydides' help is not to be despised. Analysis of the text

¹⁰At the stage described in 4.32.2 there were more than 70 triremes. Numbers of ships at earlier stages are disputable: but at least 40 in 4.13.2.

strongly suggests that (a) there had not yet been a storm; and (b) if there had been the Athenians would not have been able to cope.

(a) Thucydides nowhere says there was a storm. He says (4.23.2) that the Athenians could not anchor on the seaward side of Sphacteria *ὁπότε ἄνεμος εἴη*; that the loyal helots waited for an *ἄνεμος* and a *πνεῦμα ἐκ πόντου*; and that if it was calm they were caught (*ὅσοι δε γαλήνη κινδυνεύσειαν ἡλίσκοντο*). But in these passages there is no mention of a storm. The argument *ex silentio* is strong.

(b) In 4.27.1 the Athenians at home *ἐδεδοίκεσαν μὴ σφῶν χειμῶν τὴν φυλακὴν ἐπιλάβοι, ὁρῶντες τῶν τε ἐπιτηδείων τὴν περὶ τὴν Πελοπόννησον κομιδὴν ἀδύνατον ἐσόμενῃ, ἅμα ἐν χωρίῳ ἐρήμῳ καὶ οὐδ' ἐν θέρει οἱοι τ' ὄντες ἱκανὰ περιπέμπειν, τὸν τε ἔφορμον χωρίων ἀλιμένων ὄντων οὐκ ἐσόμενον κτλ.*

Why did the Athenians think that *ἔφορμον . . . οὐκ ἐσόμενον*? Not, surely, because of the supply difficulty. The Athenians are pictured as *ὁρῶντες* two things: one about supplies, and another about some other difficulty in blockading, which would result in its failure one way or another. These two things are represented by the two distinct clauses *τῶν τε . . .* and *τὸν τε . . .*. The *ἔφορμον* clause is part of the second, not of the first. We are given two distinct reasons: (1) stormy weather would make it impossible to supply the blockading forces, (2) stormy weather would make the blockade impossible because there was no proper harbour. This second reason must stand on its own feet, i.e., it is the combination of a storm and of the lack of a harbour which would by itself make the blockade impossible, quite apart from any supply difficulty.

But why should it have been impossible for *this* reason? The Athenian fleet was used to *πνεῦμα ἐκ πόντου* and *ἄνεμος*, and had continued the blockade nevertheless. The answer must be that the fleet could survive the weather-conditions of *ἄνεμος* and *πνεῦμα*, *but not a proper storm*. And this in turn argues strongly that there had not yet been a storm, and that the fleet was thought not to be able to survive storms, in the *λιμὴν* at the time of the blockade, i.e., when most of the bay was in Spartan hands.

III. ATHENIAN AND SPARTAN TACTICS

The Athenians had to blockade about six miles of coastline. For this they used, during the daytime, *δυοῖν νεοῖν ἐναντίαιν* (4.23.2). The nearest lines of escape for the Spartans were (1) from the north-east corner of Sphacteria to the sand-bar (perhaps 200–300 metres),¹¹ and (2) from the south-east corner to the mainland (1200 metres). To prevent escape along these lines, two ships so placed would not have sufficed. For, as

¹¹ Much of this would have been fordable (see J. Wilson and T. Beardsworth, *op. cit.* above, n. 2); but this would not have greatly helped the Spartans.

some brief mathematical thought will show, there would inevitably be times when *neither* ship was *nearer* than $1\frac{1}{2}$ miles from any single point, assuming that the ships remained at a constant distance of 3 miles round the coast from each other; and if, as is likely, they did not keep perfect station, then the minimum distance would be more than $1\frac{1}{2}$ miles.

Since the Athenian fleet probably anchored, for the most part, in the north-west corner of the bay (by the south-east corner of Pylos), this may have been enough to deter the Spartans from using the first and shortest escape route. But the second would still be viable. If we call the point referred to in the above paragraph *P*—that is, the nearest point at which the Athenians would be *certain* of having a ship at all times—then the distance from *P* to the mid-point of the escape-route is about double the distance of the escape-route itself. Given that we know nothing about what sort of boats might have been available to the Spartans, it still seems very likely that they could have covered the distance before the trireme could have intercepted them. This would certainly be true if there was a wind from the west: for the circulating triremes would not have their sails rigged.

Why did the Spartans not try this? They had boats, which the helots had carried the supplies in; and in fact the operation would have been even easier than suggested above. The attention of the relevant trireme could have been distracted by a *fausse sortie* from some other point, for instance. The answer must be that the Athenians stationed at least one ship—probably more—at the south of the bay, to command this particular route: and it is quite possible that other ships not mentioned by Thucydides performed similar duties elsewhere—though all other escape-routes involve much greater distances, and may well have been sufficiently commanded by the circulating triremes.

Relevant to this is the question of why the Spartans did not take advantage of other difficulties (i.e., besides the inadequacy of the circulating triremes), in particular (a) darkness, and (b) bad weather. (a) is easily dealt with: the Athenians *ἅπασαι περιώρμουν* (4.23.2), and it would be far too dangerous to make the attempt. The fact that they could not anchor on the seaward side in a westerly wind is irrelevant, since it was not towards the sea that the Spartans needed to escape. They might perhaps have attempted to leave from the seaward side and come to land. But first, under windy conditions small boats would have been dangerous (we are not told how many helots drowned); secondly, if they then went south, they could not have re-entered through the channel (which the Athenians would certainly be guarding), and would have been forced to land on an extremely precipitous piece of coastline somewhere

¹²Gomme, *Hist. Comm.* 3.468.

between the modern towns of Pylos and Methone; if they went north, they would have to get past Koryphasion itself, and the Athenian ships near the Sikia, before reaching Voidokoilia Bay. About (b), Gomme says in his note on 4.27.1 (where the Athenian fear is expressed that the Spartans will sail off in the helot boats *χειμῶνα τηρήσαντας*): "one wonders why the Spartans had not already made some such attempt, *ὅποτε ἄνεμος εἴη*. Courage at sea seems to have been expected only of helots."¹² But an *ἄνεμος* is not a *χειμῶν*. As has been argued above, a proper *χειμῶν* would obviate the Athenian fleet in a way that an *ἄνεμος* would (and did) not. So far there had been nothing in the nature of a *χειμῶν*; nor, fortunately for the Athenians, was there to be during the campaign.

A further reason is also important. Even if the boats evaded capture, they would almost certainly have been noticed. Hence, if the Spartans sent a few of their men off at a time, the Athenians would realise that their numbers had lessened, and attack the depleted force with a good chance of success. On the other hand, if they tried to take off their whole force at once, this would have been a considerable operation: even if only the 420 hoplites went, and left the attendant helots behind. Moreover, if they *were* caught, the disaster would have been total. It was not worth the risk; and I do not think we can blame the Spartans for excessive *ἡσυχία*.

To return briefly to the situation in calm weather and daylight, we might suppose that the reasons just mentioned would be sufficient to prevent the Spartans making the attempt then, even if no more than two circulating triremes were on the watch; and this would obviate the need for other triremes stationed by the southern escape-route. But we do not think this is likely. There had been plenty of time (Gomme allows over two months)¹³ for the Spartans to have collected enough boats from the helots to take off the bulk of their force. Well-planned diversions with boats—manned by expendable helots—leaving the north end of the island would have put about three miles distance between the escape-route and the nearest trireme; and even landlubberly Spartans should have been able to cover 1200 metres before the trireme reached them. We prefer to believe that the Athenians took precautions, of the kind already described, against this, and that here too we cannot blame excessive Spartan *ἡσυχία*.

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¹³Gomme, *Hist. Comm.* 3.478.