

THUCYDIDES ON THE PURPOSE OF THE DELIAN LEAGUE¹

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IN BOOK ONE, chapter 96 of his history Thucydides describes the formation of the Delian League. It is the only description in the historian's own words of the inception of the League, though, as we shall see, on three occasions he allows speakers in his history to recount the same events. Thucydides' own account in 1.96 is factual and straightforward. This simplicity has not, however, prevented scholars dealing with the passage from misreading the Greek. In particular, the sentence in which Thucydides expresses his own view of the original programme of the League has been consistently misinterpreted and misrepresented. *πρόσχημα γὰρ ἦν ἀμύνεσθαι ὧν ἔπαθον δηοῦντας τὴν βασιλέως χώραν*. The syntax is simplicity itself. It is the meaning of *πρόσχημα* which has caused the trouble. Before examining the passage we should take a brief look at this word, which appears rarely in the fifth-century literature left to us.

In Herodotus and Thucydides, the word *πρόσχημα* is, with one exception,² used uniformly. As its etymology (*προέχειν*) suggests, it means (LSJ) "that which is held before," hence, "that which is held before to cover, screen, cloak." It is thus a common way of designating "pretense, pretext."³ In this latter sense it is sometimes clarified by the objective genitive *τοῦ λόγου*.⁴ Since *πρόσχημα* refers to a "professed purpose" or "publicly made claim" it is always contrasted with words or phrases which designate "real intentions," "true aims," "private reasons." The historian usually makes the contrast explicitly in the syntactic and semantic construction of the sentence. Herodotus 7.157.1 is quite clear: (*sc.* Πέρσης ἀνὴρ) . . . *πρόσχημα μὲν ποιούμενος ὡς ἐπ' Ἀθήνας ἐλαύνει, ἐν νόῳ δὲ ἔχων πᾶσαν τὴν Ἑλλάδα ὑπ' ἐωυτῷ ποιήσασθαι*. 6.44.1 is almost identical. In 9.87.2 the contrasting word is *ἀληθῆς*. In 4.167.3 the contrast is em-

¹I should like to thank Professor W. Robert Connor and the referees of *Phoenix* for reading an earlier draft of this paper and for offering helpful criticism on its arguments. They should not, of course, be assumed to agree with its conclusions.

²Herod. 5.28. The variation is due to the other meaning of *πρό*, "above, ahead." See LSJ s.v., para. II, where the translation "ornament" is suggested for this sense of *πρόσχημα*.

³Cf. Soph. *El.* 525. As Jebb points out in his commentary on this passage, "*πρόσχημα* here = *σκήψις, πρόσφασις*." In the same play, line 682 has *πρόσχημα* in its other sense (see note 2), as Jebb explains. *Πρόσχημα* does not appear in extant Greek literature before Sophocles and Herodotus.

⁴Herod. 4.167.3 and 6.133.1. Cf. Thuc. 8.89.3: *ἦν δὲ τοῦτο μὲν σχῆμα πολιτικὸν τοῦ λόγου*. Here *σχῆμα* is used as a synonym for the compound word.

phasized by the phrase *ὡς ἐμοὶ δοκέειν*: *αὕτη μὲν νυν αἰτίη πρόσχημα τοῦ λόγου ἐγένετο, ἐπέμπετο δὲ ἡ στρατιή, ὡς ἐμοὶ δοκέειν, ἐπὶ Λιβύων καταστροφῇ*. In the other Herodotean occurrence (6.133.1), the contrast is made by *ἀτάρ*. Note that in all but one of these passages (9.87.2), Herodotus uses *πρόσχημα* to designate the publicly professed purpose of an aggressor whose real intention is conquest (*καταστροφή*).

There are three examples of *πρόσχημα* in Thucydides, of which the clearest is 3.82.4: *τὸ δὲ σῶφρον τοῦ ἀνάνδρου πρόσχημα*. “Prudence (was considered) a cloak for cowardice.” In 5.30.2 Thucydides spells out the Corinthians’ real and professed complaints and concerns:

Corinth in her answer, delivered before those of her allies who had like her refused to accept the treaty, and whom she had previously invited to attend, refrained from openly stating the injuries she complained of, such as the non-recovery of Solium or Anactorium from the Athenians, or any other point in which she thought she had been prejudiced, but took shelter under the pretext (*πρόσχημα δὲ ποιούμενοι*) that she could not give up her Thracian allies, . . .

(transl. Crawley)

One may compare 8.89.3 (see note 4) where *σχῆμα* is used in precisely the same way: *ἦν δὲ τοῦτο μὲν σχῆμα πολιτικὸν τοῦ λόγου αὐτοῖς, κατ’ ἰδίαν δὲ φιλοτιμίας οἱ πολλοὶ αὐτῶν τῷ τοιούτῳ προσέκειντο*. . . . In all these cases the contrast to *πρόσχημα* or *σχῆμα* is explicit and clear.

In Thucydides 1.96.1 the contrast is neither explicit nor clear:

Παραλαβόντες δὲ οἱ Ἀθηναῖοι τὴν ἡγεμονίαν τούτῳ τῷ τρόπῳ ἐκόντων τῶν ξυμμάχων διὰ τὸ Πανσανίου μῖσος, ἔταξαν ἅς τε ἔδει παρέχειν τῶν πόλεων χρήματα πρὸς τὸν βάρβαρον καὶ ἅς ναῦς· πρόσχημα γὰρ ἦν ἀμύνεσθαι ὧν ἔπαθον δρῶντας τὴν βασιλέως χώραν.

The Athenians having thus succeeded to the supremacy by the voluntary act of the allies through their hatred of Pausanias, fixed which cities were to contribute money against the barbarian, which ships; their professed object being to retaliate for their sufferings by ravaging the king’s country.

Thus Crawley, who, like most translators, correctly reproduces the meaning of *πρόσχημα*. Thucydides does not immediately state the “real object.” This has led to two kinds of misinterpretation, both serious, and to a general failure to appreciate the full importance of Thucydides’ choice of words. The passage is crucial for (1) the original purpose of the Delian League and (2) Thucydides’ judgment of the original purpose of the Delian League. We shall here be concerned with only the second question, but it is important initially to show how those who have been concerned with only the first have obscured the second.

The authors of *ATL* paraphrase the sentence beginning with *πρόσχημα* in two ways: vol. 3, p. 226, “the programme was to obtain satisfaction for their losses by spoiling the King’s land”; and vol. 3, p. 230, “for it was their intention to avenge their losses.” Another historian translates the sentence “for the purpose was to exact vengeance for their sufferings

by ravaging the king's land," and refers to it as "Thucydides' statement of the purpose of the Delian League."⁵ With such translations the force of *πρόσχημα* is entirely lost, as is Thucydides' judgment, and, worst of all, so is the fact that Thucydides does render a judgment here rather than simply state a fact.

A second kind of problem arises from a misidentification of the antithesis of *πρόσχημα*. In an article on "The Hellenic League against Persia,"⁶ P. A. Brunt recognized (150) the force of the word: "The professed purpose (*πρόσχημα*) of the Delian League is given by Thucydides, i, 96, 1; the members were to seek reparation for the damage they had sustained by ravaging the king's territory." Brunt pointed out that "This statement is not complete," but he then went on to find the completion of it two books later: "elsewhere (in the Mytilenaeen speech) we are told that the league was formed 'to free the Greeks from Persia.' (iii, 10, 1)." It is difficult to believe that Thucydides waited until Book 3 to complete a statement made in Book 1. Furthermore, it makes no sense to have Thucydides say "The professed purpose was to ravage the King's territory; the real purpose was to free the Greeks from Persia." If the real purpose, according to Thucydides, had been to free the Greeks from Persia, there would have been no reason for him to say that the Athenians covered it up. Quite the contrary. In addition, it is very bad practice indeed to find the completion of a Thucydidean statement in a speech. Brunt also refers to "the relation between the professed purpose of the league and the obligations of the members," and (151) makes a similar distinction between the "professed purpose" of the second Athenian confederacy and its "formal character." This is apparently his interpretation of the function of *πρόσχημα* in Thuc. 1.96.1: it distinguishes "professed purpose" from "formal character," or actual "obligations." But from what we have seen of *πρόσχημα* elsewhere, this kind of distinction is not likely. A *πρόσχημα* is always a screen for real intentions which must be concealed for one reason or another.

Philologists have generally appreciated the denotation of *πρόσχημα* in 1.96, if not its connotation. The scholiast glosses it with *πρόφασις*, a clear indication that he understood its force. Krüger endorses this note and compares several of the other passages containing this word in Thucydides and Herodotus which we have reviewed. Classen-Steup translates, "der ausgesprochene Grund des Bundes war die Absicht, sich zu rächen usw." and Gomme, "The 'announced intention' was aggression against Persia, a continuation of the war, not only preservation of the newly won freedom." What these scholars have *not* done, however, is to ask why Thucydides used so strongly colored a term to describe the announced

⁵R. Sealey in *Ancient Society and Institutions, Studies presented to Victor Ehrenberg on his 75th birthday* (Oxford 1966) 237.

⁶*Historia* 2 (1953-54) 135-163.

purpose of the Delian League. As we have shown in a comprehensive study of the terms *πρόφασις* and *πρόσχημα*,⁷ the latter is considerably more negative in tone than the former. Both words denote a "reason" or "claim" which one offers to explain or excuse his conduct. But while *πρόφασις* can designate a true as well as a false claim, a *πρόσχημα* is always false. It describes a "falsely alleged claim," a "specious pretext" used to cloak real motives. It always indicates that a true or real motive is being concealed. As we have seen, every passage in Herodotus and Thucydides containing *πρόσχημα*, with the single exception of Thuc. 1.96, explicitly mentions the contrast to *πρόσχημα* in the form of a statement of the "true motive" or "real intention." There can be little doubt that in 1.96 as well Thucydides meant, at the very least, to imply a contrast to *πρόσχημα*, the "alleged purpose" of the Delian League. What that contrast was, at least in Thucydides' judgment, we now inquire. In so doing, we should keep three things in mind: the contrast to *πρόσχημα* should come soon after the statement of the *πρόσχημα*; in all cases, the historians use *πρόσχημα* to designate a false pretext which covers real intentions; in all cases, the real intention is private interest or conquest (*καταστροφή*).

With these thoughts in mind we turn to the passage following our sentence. After saying that the League's professed purpose was to ravage the land of the King, Thucydides speaks of the Hellenotamiai, the tribute, the treasury, and the synodoi. Chapter 97, a digression and possibly a later insertion into the narrative by Thucydides,⁸ is a preface to the Pentakontaetia. It is not until chapter 98 that Thucydides returns to his narrative. Now we are able to compare the "professed purpose" of the League with the Athenians' actual conduct as leaders of the allies. The account is direct and straightforward:

First they (*sc.* the Athenians, as is clear from the subject of 97.1 and the end of 97.2 as well) took by siege Eion, a city on the Strymon which the Medes were holding, and they sold its inhabitants into slavery. Kimon the son of Miltiades was commander. Then they sold into slavery the people of Skyros, an island in the Aegean which the Dolopians were inhabiting, and they colonized it themselves. Then, without the rest of the Euboeans, they conducted a war against the Karystians, and in time they made them surrender on conditions. And after this they warred against the Naxians who had revolted and they reduced them by siege, and this was the first allied city to be subjugated against the agreement which had been made, and later the same happened to the others who revolted, one by one. There were other causes of the revolts but the principal ones were failure to provide money and ships and sometimes desertion. For the Athenians were very severe and harsh to men who were unprepared by habit and unwilling to undergo hardship, and they used force against them.

⁷*A Semantic Study of prophasis to 400 B.C.*, *Hermes Einzelschriften*, Heft 33 (Wiesbaden 1975), especially 33-34.

⁸See most recently O. Lendle, "Die Auseinandersetzung des Thukydides mit Hellenikos," *Hermes* 92 (1964) 129-143 = *Thukydides. Wege der Forschung* 661-682, especially 678 and note 44.

Already, only five or six sentences into the Pentakontaetia, we feel the historian's tone. The Athenians have conducted four operations as hegemon of the League, one against Persians, one against Dolopians, two against Greeks. Thucydides' emphasis is upon Athenian aggrandizement. The position of αὐτοί in 98.2 (they colonized it *themselves*) helps to make that clear: it was the Athenians who benefitted from the expedition to Skyros, not the League as a whole. So does the insertion of the phrase ἀνευ τῶν ἄλλων Εὐβοέων after αὐτοῖς in the next sentence: Thucydides tells us not that the other allies assisted the Athenians (as they almost certainly did), but that the Euboeans did *not*. By his selection of facts Thucydides emphasizes Athenian responsibility for this war against a Greek state rather than League participation. In the following sentence (98.4) there is once more no mention of allied support: the suppression of Naxos, without question an action of the League as a whole, appears to be a purely Athenian operation. Furthermore, the words πρώτη τε αὕτη πόλις ξυμμαχίς παρὰ τὸ καθεστηκὸς ἐδουλώθη convey an extremely negative tone.⁹ As Gomme points out in his *Commentary* on this passage, ἐδουλώθη is a "rhetorical word," whose effect on a Greek reader would have been strong. What Thucydides clearly means to stress is that *from the very first*, the Athenians used the Delian League for their own hegemonial ends.

After only a few sentences of the Pentakontaetia we are in a position to contrast the alleged purpose of the Delian League with its actual operations. What has happened to the announced programme of "ravaging Persian territory?" There is not a sign of it. Furthermore, as Thucydides' account of the 50 years between the wars continues we hear nothing of any such action on the part of the League. The word δηρὸν occurs only once (114.2) in the Pentakontaetia and the "ravagers" are not the Athenians but the Spartans! Τέμνειν never appears.¹⁰ Not once are the Athenians or their allies said to ravage *anything*. This in spite of the vast booty we know they did collect (cf. Plut. *Kimon*) during the course of their campaigns against the Persians. Thucydides is utterly silent about the ravaging of Persian land and the collection of booty therefrom. In other words, he suppresses what we know, and he must have known, to have been the results of the Delian League's programme of taking vengeance from the Persians for what the Greeks had suffered. On the other hand, he gives a great deal of attention to Athenian campaigns against

⁹One is reminded of Tacitus' famous remark on the opening "event" of the reign of Tiberius: *Primum facinus novi principatus fuit Postumi Agrippae caedes . . .* (*Annals* 1.6.1).

¹⁰See the lists in A. H. Jackson, "The Original Purpose of the Delian League", *Historia* 18 (1969) 12–16, on pp. 15–16. In this article Jackson shows that by δηρὸν Thucydides (or the Athenians and allies in 478) meant the ravaging of territory, not necessarily the acquisition of booty.

other Greek states, both those inside and those outside their empire. To take just one pair of examples. Thucydides confines the battles of the Eurymedon, great and glorious League victories, which must have resulted in the acquisition of considerable booty, to a single sentence (100.1), while devoting a long paragraph (100.2–101.3) to the revolt of Thasos and its consequences in Greece. The contrast with Plutarch's handling of these same two events (*Kimōn* 12–14) is instructive: there Eurymedon receives two chapters, Thasos one sentence. Plutarch's emphasis is no less clear than Thucydides'. One stresses League achievements against Persians, the other Athenian aggression against Greeks. Thucydides' very selection of material in the Pentakontaetia exposes his historiographical point of view: he goes out of his way to draw attention to Athenian hegemonial ambition and aggressiveness, and consistently underplays League actions against the Persians. He takes pains, in other words, to stress the contrast between the League's announced programme and its actual conduct under Athenian hegemony.

Now it is perfectly true that the Delian League did evolve gradually from an original alliance under Athenian leadership to an Empire under Athenian domination. Moreover, it is quite clear that Thucydides saw it as evolving in this way. He says as much in 1.99, where he attributes at least some of the responsibility for this process to the allies themselves, and he lets the Athenians make this same point in their own account of the inception and development of the League in 1.75–76. In this respect Thucydides has been followed by almost all modern historians, who have supported and added a great deal to his picture of a gradual development of the League from alliance to Empire.¹¹ But while these scholars are in essential agreement with Thucydides about the nature of the process itself, they differ sharply, and, one might add, unwittingly, from him on the intentions of the Athenians at the beginning of this process. For while they accept, for the most part, the League's own announced programme as the genuine purpose of both the allies *and the Athenians* at the League's inception in 478, it seems clear that he did not. When Thucydides described the public avowal of the League in 478 as a *πρόσχημα*, and when he contrasted that initial avowal with subsequent Athenian leadership of the "allies" in his Pentakontaetia, he meant thereby to suggest rather ironically that, to the Athenians at least, the Delian League was not simply a crusade but also an hegemony, an opportunity to create and employ power for their own purposes.

We mentioned at the beginning of this paper that, in addition to his own statement, Thucydides on three occasions in his history allows

¹¹The most recent and complete treatment of the subject, R. Meiggs' *Athenian Empire* (Oxford 1972), emphasizes this aspect of the League's history throughout the text.

speakers to describe the inception of the League. We have examined two of those passages already. The Mytilenaeans in 3.10.1 quite naturally and tendentiously claimed that the League was formed to “free the Greeks from Persia.” The Athenians in 1.75–76 stressed, just as naturally and as tendentiously, the allies’ role in requesting Athenian hegemony in 478. The third such instance comes in Hermokrates’ appeal to the Kamari-naeans in Book 6. Again the speaker is pleading a case, this time a vehemently anti-Athenian one.¹² But Hermokrates’ description of Athenian intentions in 478 bears a striking resemblance to the historian’s own. After first depicting Athenian claims in Sicily as “pretexts” (*προφάσει* in 6.76.2; Thucydides makes the same point himself in 6.6.1 and gives it to Nikias in 6.8.4) Hermokrates repeats (6.76.3) almost verbatim Thucydides’ words in 1.96 and 99:

ἡγεμόνες γὰρ γενόμενοι ἐκόντων τῶν τε Ἰώνων καὶ ὅσοι ἀπὸ σφῶν ἦσαν ξύμμαχοι ὥς ἐπὶ τοῦ Μήδου τιμωρία, τοὺς μὲν λιποστρατίαν, τοὺς δὲ ἐπ’ ἀλλήλους στρατεύειν, τοῖς δ’ ὥς ἐκάστοις τινὰ εἶχον αἰτίαν εὐπρεπῇ ἐπενεγκόντες κατεστρέψαντο.

For after they became hegemon with the consent of the Ionians and of all their own descendants who were allied with them, avowedly for vengeance against the Mede, by charging some with desertion, others with making war on one another, and others with any specious charge they had, they conquered them all (*κατεστρέψαντο*).

Note how *ὥς* here performs the same function which *πρόσχημα* did in 1.96.1: it brands the claim as a pretext.¹³ In addition, the adjective *εὐπρεπῇ* strengthens the point that the Athenians’ openly expressed motives are at variance with their real intentions. At the very least, we may conclude that Hermokrates here comes much closer to expressing Thucydides’ view of Athenian motives in 478 than do the other speakers in the history who treat this issue.

To many historians of the fifth century this judgment will seem unduly harsh and cynical, especially for the inception of the League and the first years of its existence. It will appear to be the product of hindsight and an all too typically Thucydidean inclination to attribute what we now call Machiavellian motives to politicians, especially Athenian politicians. But before we thus condemn Thucydides’ account, it is useful to recall that Herodotus held an even more sceptical view of Athenian claims at that period. The historian of the Persian Wars cast considerable doubt on the “medism” of Pausanias (5.32) and went so far as to assert that the Athenians used it (or the rumor of it) as a pretext (*πρόφασιν*) to take the

¹²Note especially the words which introduce the speech in 6.75.4.

¹³For this use of *ὥς* with an *ἐπὶ* phrase cf. 8.108.4: “This Arsaces was the one who had pretended a secret quarrel and invited the leading men of Delos to join his army; after thus bringing them out on the pretense of friendship and alliance (*ἐξαγαγὼν ὥς ἐπὶ φιλίᾳ καὶ ξυμμαχίᾳ*), he kept watch on them while they dined, surrounded them with his own men, and shot them down.”

hegemony away from the Spartans (8.3.2). Strasburger has emphasized, clearly and correctly, the strong criticism of Athens in this latter passage.¹⁴ Thucydides (1.95.5 and 128-134) accepted the story of Pausanias' medism and its consequence, that the Ionians voluntarily asked the Athenians to take over the hegemony. Herodotus doubted the medism and rejected what Thucydides (and others) considered to be its effects. In so doing, he dated the beginning of Athenian imperialism and the propaganda used to mask it even earlier than his "more cynical" successor was to do a generation later.

It is thus clear that Thucydides was not alone in thinking that the desire to control large forces and dominate considerable areas was a major unexpressed motive behind the Athenian decision to assume leadership of those Greeks eager to wreak vengeance upon the Persians in 478. Whether scholars will want to accept this picture or not is another question. But they should at least recognize that it *was* Thucydides' (and Herodotus') interpretation, and admit that, to a Greek at any rate, hegemony was not normally a selfless concept.

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¹⁴*Historia* 4 (1955) 20 with note 4.