

THE OPENING OF THE PYLOS CAMPAIGN*

THIS essay presents a new interpretation of what happened in the opening of the Pylos campaign; one that rests mainly on an attempt to discover, in Thucydides' text, Demosthenes' original plan for the campaign and the Spartan reaction to it. Thucydides says little about plans for Pylos; indeed, he seems to describe this part of the campaign as unusually haphazard and fortuitous. Unfortunately, his account of it (iv 2–16), which is our only real source, is so compressed, obscure, and elliptical that no interpretation of these events can now approach proof or certainty. All scenarios and explanations are therefore speculative. They can be evaluated only by their degree of consistency with all the data, unsatisfactory as these may be, and by their relative plausibility—a subjective and fallible measure at best since human affairs so often turn out less plausibly than we expect. Despite these limitations and caveats, rigorous analysis is possible, and can reveal enlightening and previously unnoticed connections both between events within the Pylos campaign, and between these difficult chapters and other, clearer parts of Thucydides' text.

1. *The dispute*

The dispute that arose between Demosthenes and the generals dominates the first three chapters of the narrative. Thucydides' description of it, although incomplete, reveals significant elements of Demosthenes' plan that are not directly mentioned in his narrative and have not been considered by scholars.

One element that is clear from the text is that Demosthenes went to extreme lengths in order to keep his Pylos plans secret. This is understandable since the factors of secrecy and surprise, which had played crucial roles both for and against him in his earlier campaigns,¹ were obviously vital at Pylos where his plan could be so easily thwarted by a forewarned Sparta. The timely arrival, for example, of only several hundred hoplites would have been sufficient to prevent the Athenian fleet from fortifying the place. Indeed, we may conclude from the fact that there were no Spartan troops on hand (or poised nearby) when the Athenians landed at Pylos, that Demosthenes' efforts to maintain secrecy had been successful.

Considerations of security, therefore, probably account both for the extraordinarily vague language of the Athenians' public charge to the generals

(to permit Demosthenes) at his own request, to make what use he liked of this fleet of theirs on its way round the Peloponnesus (iv 2),²

and for Demosthenes' decision not to tell the generals what he intended until the fleet had actually landed at Pylos (iv 3).

Apparently, Demosthenes preferred to keep the generals in ignorance rather than to risk the security leaks that might result from their informed cooperation. This may reflect an underlying judgement that if secrecy were maintained, no enemy forces were likely to prevent or deter the generals from agreeing to fortify Pylos when the Athenian fleet passed there—as it would have to—on its way to Corcyra and Sicily. Most of the Spartan army would be deployed in Attica that spring and the remaining troops at home would have to move with uncharacteristic speed in order to prevent the fort's completion (indeed, as we shall show below, Demosthenes' plan may

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¹ In 427 Demosthenes had suffered defeat (iii 94–8) primarily because the Aetolians had learned of his plans

in time to concentrate strong forces unexpectedly against him, and in 426 (iii 96) he gained victories in Amphilochoia by his own skillful exploitation of surprise (iii 105–113).

² All Thucydidean passages quoted in this essay are from the translation by Rex Warner (Harmondsworth 1972).

well have included measures to prevent a rapid Spartan response by land). The Peloponnesian navy would pose no threat to his scheme, as it had avoided large Athenian forces for the past three years and could not intervene directly without risking an engagement with the 40 triremes of the Athenian fleet.

These assessments proved basically correct at the outset of the campaign, but Demosthenes seems to have overlooked the possibility that the generals, in their ignorance, might respond to distant enemy maneuvers with moves of their own that could conflict with his plan. That, at least, is what seems to have happened on this occasion, for when the generals heard, while cruising off Laconia (iv 3), that the Peloponnesian fleet had sortied to Corcyra, they decided to take their own fleet rapidly and directly to that island.³

Accordingly, they refused to stop the fleet at Pylos, as requested by Demosthenes, 'to carry out his plan' (iv 3). They perceived a far more urgent threat and opportunity at Corcyra than anything that Demosthenes—who still refused to reveal what his plan was about—might be able to create at Pylos. By pressing on, they could hope to surprise and engage the enemy fleet (as Eurymedon had almost succeeded in doing there in 427) or, failing that, at least to carry out their orders to relieve the pro-Athenian Corcyreans from hostile pressure—now intensified by the presence of the enemy fleet (iv 2). Thus, even after a storm came up and forced the Athenians to take shelter at Pylos, and Demosthenes finally disclosed that his plan was to fortify the place (iv 3), the generals insisted that the fleet's immediate priority would remain Corcyra.

Thucydides does not tell us whether the generals were willing to return to Pylos after completing the Corcyra mission, but a strong case can be made that they offered to do so. First of all, to have done less would have been to ignore their definite (if vaguely worded) orders to accommodate Demosthenes, and this might have proved difficult to explain later since they could not claim that the change in mission sequence by itself would have forced a cancellation of his project. The campaign season was still young and the fleet could hope to reach Corcyra, defeat or drive away the enemy ships, and return to Pylos in less than two weeks. Moreover, the generals do not at this time seem anxious to reach Sicily quickly: they subsequently remain at Pylos for thirteen weeks—three before and ten after the harbor battle (iv 39)—and then stay at Corcyra long enough to annihilate the oligarchical faction there (iv 46–8), before sailing west.

Although their derisive comment about putting the state to expense (iv 3) reveals a failure at that time to appreciate Demosthenes' plan or Pylos' unique suitability for it, their statement that he 'could find plenty of other desolate headlands around the Peloponnesus to occupy (fortify), apart from this one,' may, if it can be pressed, indicate a willingness to return later to fortify Pylos or some other location. (Indeed, their mention of *other* headlands is most significant because it suggests that Demosthenes was protesting that the fleet's diversion to Corcyra would *cost* them the opportunity to fortify Pylos⁴—more on this below).

The generals' refusal to permit work on the fort to begin while the storm kept the fleet at Pylos (iv 4) is usually seen as an indication of their opposition to Demosthenes' plan, but it should also be seen as consistent with an intention on their part to return and fortify Pylos later. They knew that the Spartans would recognize Demosthenes' intention as soon as construction began and might attack the structure before it was complete and defensible (iv 4). It was clear,

³ The Athenians apparently knew (iv 2) that the Peloponnesian fleet might sail to Corcyra before their own ships left Piraeus, but Demosthenes seems not to have been sufficiently alarmed by this to inform the generals of his plan.

⁴ If the generals' statement reflects a genuine offer (albeit indirectly expressed here) to take Demosthenes to some other Peloponnesian headland and to fortify it for him, we can only assume, since they were making this 'offer' in the context of their refusal to fortify Pylos now, that it was an offer to be carried out 'in the future'.

But if they had been willing to make such an offer, they would surely have been willing (and would have offered first) to fortify Pylos for him in the future as well. Indeed, they might only have suggested the fortification of *other* headlands as an alternative after (and because) their prior offer to return to Pylos had been rejected by Demosthenes as unacceptable or unfeasible. Finally, such a refusal by Demosthenes to accept postponement for the fortification of Pylos may indicate that *timing* was a critical element of his plan.

therefore, that once work on the fort commenced, it should be completed as rapidly as possible. This obvious requirement, however, conflicted directly with their own determination to sail to Corcyra as soon as weather permitted. If work on the fort were interrupted by the fleet's departure for Corcyra, Demosthenes' plan would be irremediably ruined because the now alerted Spartans would never permit the Athenians to return to complete and occupy the works unopposed. Indeed, the only way to reconcile the Corcyrean priority with a future possibility of fortifying Pylos was for the Athenians to postpone construction until it could be completed without interruption, and to avoid all other actions that might prematurely disclose the project to the enemy.

This is sound military logic; what is curious is that Demosthenes found the prospect of a two-week delay so unacceptable. His decision to discuss the plan with the troops and the taxiarchs (iv 4) seems not only inappropriate but destructive, for it disclosed his plan to the entire Athenian force and thereby completely breached the secrecy that he had heretofore so successfully protected. It also undermined what might have been the generals' policy by deliberately jeopardizing any possibility of returning to build the fort there in the future. Since Demosthenes clearly knew how vital and difficult it was to maintain security, his behavior was either irrational—which is difficult to believe—or the product of a conviction on his part that the plan would surely fail (or be otherwise betrayed) if the fort's construction were long delayed.

Perhaps one can discern a reason for Demosthenes' conduct in the design of the Delium campaign of 424, a complex scheme of separate, simultaneous military actions, which failed due to security leaks and a breakdown in mission timing. If Demosthenes was not the sole designer of that plan, he at least co-authored it with the otherwise undistinguished Hippocrates; and since it occurred one year after the extraordinarily successful Pylos campaign, it could well have been patterned after Pylos or at least have included some appropriate military elements that had proved effective in the earlier success. In fact, the Delium campaign plan does resemble the Pylos campaign in several crucial respects, and Thucydides' detailed account of it (iv 76–7, 89–101) offers an explicit rationale for separate and simultaneous operations. He writes that the seizure and fortification of Delium and the betrayal by pro-Athenian factions of Siphiae and Chaeronea were all to take place

at the same time on a fixed day, so that the Boeotians, instead of being able to march out against the Athenians in full force at Delium, would have to deal with local troubles, each in their own area. If everything went well and Delium could be fortified, it was expected that, even though there might not be an immediate revolution in the cities of Boeotia, nevertheless the existing state of affairs could not last long once these places were occupied, and the whole land exposed to raiding parties, and an easy refuge open to all who were against the [Theban] government. (iv 76).

The intended function of the fortified posts in Boeotia as bases for refugees and raiders is exactly the same as that served by Pylos in Messenia. If the parallel had extended to diversionary operations as well, then the Messenian helots at Pylos could have played (probably with more zeal and security) the fifth-column role of the pro-Athenian faction of Boeotia. Certainly the Naupactos Messenians, who seem to have enjoyed a special relationship with Demosthenes, who probably helped him to design the Pylos plan⁵ and who might have viewed it as a first step in the liberation of their homeland (iv 41), would have been ideally suited to enlist such support. They could have organized and directed groups of their disaffected countrymen to raid isolated posts, block communications, disseminate rumors, etc.—all at the proper time—in order to confuse and paralyze the Spartan defense while the Athenians fortified Pylos, in much the same way as simultaneous strikes were to distract the Boeotians from the fortification of Delium.

No evidence exists for such ancillary operations in Messenia or Laconia, but one event at Pylos clearly reveals the existence of a larger plan with coordinated operations—although Thucydides neither recognizes nor identifies it as such. I refer to the opportune arrival of two

⁵ A. W. Gomme, *HCT* (Oxford 1956) i 488.

ships from Naupactos (iv 9) carrying Messenian hoplites essential to Demosthenes' purpose and appropriate weapons for the Athenian sailors who were to form part of the fort's initial garrison. The timely appearance of these vessels cannot have been fortuitous;⁶ on the contrary, it is evidence that some Messenians at Naupactos knew quite early on—well before the Athenian generals, for instance—of the project's outline and timing.

If Demosthenes' Pylos plan had called for such simultaneous diversionary operations, then the generals' sudden and unexpected diversion of the fleet to Corcyra would ruin the plan's timetable. Demosthenes would not have been able to delay distant operations to maintain synchronization with the suddenly postponed construction of the fort. Indeed, he might fear that the now-premature raids would end badly for the participants since no Pylos construction would preoccupy the enemy or provide refuge for the raiders. Finally, and worst of all, the Spartans would certainly respond to helot disturbances by recalling their army from Attica; once the army arrived home, it would be able to strike quickly and in strength at any later attempt by the Athenians to fortify Pylos.

Perhaps it was some grim prospect such as this that accounts for Demosthenes' obstinate opposition to the generals, and for his conclusion that he had nothing to lose if his plan's secrecy were compromised in a final effort to persuade them to maintain its original timing.

2. *The decision to build the fort*

This dispute is not resolved. It ends abruptly and strangely. Immediately after Demosthenes has failed to persuade the generals, soldiers, and taxiarchs, and has resigned himself to doing nothing, Thucydides describes how

the soldiers themselves, who were tired of having nothing to do, suddenly had the idea of forming themselves into gangs and building fortifications for the place. (iv 4)

This statement, which might possibly describe how the troops felt when they set to work, cannot be accepted as a credible explanation or description of how the decision to build the fort occurred. The generals had refused Demosthenes for important political and military considerations. They could hardly now, a short while later, allow a whim or impulse of common soldiers to overrule their decision. And if the soldiers acted here in defiance of the generals' authority (with or without the instigation of Demosthenes), it is difficult to explain how such a mutinous act, unprecedented in Athenian military history, could produce no further repercussions in Thucydides or other ancient accounts. Indeed, the evident cooperation between the generals and Demosthenes later on in the campaign, when the fleet left a garrison at the fort (iv 5) and then returned to Pylos (iv 8), would hardly seem possible if the fort had somehow been built against the generals' will.

Moreover, although rank and file troops have been known to attack or retreat without orders, usually in the presence of the enemy, there are no instances in which they have spontaneously set to work on a large construction project. Since Sparta lay only two or three days' march distant, organized and disciplined labor under pressure was required to complete the fort as soon as possible, and the lower ranks could hardly sustain such an effort for six days on enthusiasm alone. In fact, leadership and compulsion seem so essential to the successful design and completion of the Pylos fort that it simply could not have been accomplished without the full participation and approval of the expedition's officers and generals.

Perhaps scholars have been misled on this point by Thucydides' remark that the Athenians failed to bring construction tools with them (iv 4). The lack of proper tools has been viewed as proof that no plan to fortify Pylos (or anywhere else) could have been devised or approved in

⁶ Virginia J. Hunter, *Thucydides the artful reporter* (Toronto 1973) 69 n. 8, lists a number of scholars of this opinion. See also Donald Kagan, *The Archidamian war* (Ithaca, N.Y. 1974) 228.

Athens before the fleet sailed.⁷ Therefore, it is argued, Demosthenes must have improvised his plan at sea and owes its success less to skill and foresight than to opportunism and good fortune—which in turn supports the text's description of an unplanned, spontaneous construction effort. This entire line of inference, however, is incorrect, because the expedition did *not* lack appropriate tools.

The missing implements mentioned by Thucydides were masonry tools (λιθουργά) which would have been employed to face stone blocks and create tight joints in proper stone walls. They would have been useless at Pylos, however, because the Athenians there, as Demosthenes would have foreseen, would not have had sufficient time to build a permanent wall properly. The fleet carpenters with their excellent woodworking tools,⁸ on the other hand, could have easily shaped palisade poles, foundation footings, structural members, walkways, etc., from the wood that Demosthenes said was abundant at Pylos when he listed the advantages of the site (iv 3); and since wood could be worked more rapidly than stone, it was clearly a more desirable material for hurried wall construction. In short, Demosthenes would never have planned to build a finished stone wall at Pylos. What he needed was a crude rampart of timber and randomly fitted stones⁹ that could be completed before the enemy arrived, and that would yet prove adequate to withstand his assaults.

In the same passage, Thucydides also describes troops carrying mortar on their backs with their arms clasped behind to keep it from falling off (iv 4). This vivid image reinforces the impression that the troops had to improvise remedies for a lack of proper tools, but it too is certainly overdrawn. Forty triremes and cargo ships would not have lacked buckets or containers capable of transporting mortar. Hods could easily be built from spare ship supplies and, if there had been much mortar to move—which I doubt—then cauldrons, blankets, sails, shields, etc., could have been employed to carry the stuff. Perhaps a few soldiers moved mortar on their backs in this unusual manner, and Thucydides thought it remarkable enough to note down, but this could only have been a colorful detail, not a *modus operandi*.

I conclude, therefore, that the generals *did* change their minds and order work on the fort to begin, but not because of any action or argument of Demosthenes. We may never know what in fact led to this reversal on their part, but one possibility stands out as both more simple and supportable than any other: if the Athenians at Pylos had learned that the Peloponnesian fleet had left Corcyra, this information would have removed the threat and/or opportunity that had motivated the generals' decision to sail directly there, and would have left them with no reason to delay further the fort's construction.

Thucydides says little about the timing of the Peloponnesian fleet's withdrawal from Corcyra, but what he does say allows it to have taken place much earlier in the campaign than current interpretations imply. He writes in iv 8 that the Spartans had already sent a message recalling the fleet from Corcyra when Agis and his army arrived from Attica. This may seem to be part of the marshalling of forces against the fort, but the pluperfect sense of the verb, noticed by Gomme,¹⁰ indicates the priority of the summons, and perhaps of the fleet's departure. Of course, if the fleet left Corcyra in time for news of its departure to travel to Pylos and trigger a decision to build a fort there, then the Spartans must have recalled it in response to some other, much earlier occurrence. The only earlier event (in the text) that could possibly have caused the Spartans to recall their fleet is the departure itself of the Athenian expedition to Sicily from Piraeus. As we shall see, this is not only a plausible explanation, it is one that can be supported from Thucydides' accounts of the naval campaigns of 429–425.

⁷ See Gomme (n. 5), iii 438–9, J. B. Wilson, *Pylos 425 BC: A historical and topographical study of Thucydides' account of the campaign* (Warminster, Wilts. 1979) 62, and F. M. Cornford, *Thucydides mythistoricus* (London 1907) 88.

⁸ J. S. Morrison and J. F. Coates, *The Athenian trireme*

(Cambridge 1986) III, 130. Each trireme carried a carpenter and tools.

⁹ See Thucydides' description of the rapid fortification of Delium (iv 90), and of the hasty wall construction near the Olympeium at Syracuse (vi 66).

¹⁰ Gomme (n. 5), 442.

Thucydides scornfully describes the Spartan commissioners' naive conclusion that cowardice, not incompetence, was the cause of their more numerous fleet's first defeat by Phormio in 429 (ii 83–5), but he nowhere mentions that the Spartans dropped this ingenuous explanation after their second defeat (ii 90–2). Yet his own account of the next Peloponnesian naval campaigns—the raid on Piraeus (ii 93–4), the foray into the Aegean on behalf of Mytilene (iii 26, 29–33), and the intervention in 427 at Corcyra (iii 69–81)—reveal clearly that the Spartans had thereafter adopted a new and intelligent naval strategy that was appropriate to their navy's combat inferiority. A key element of that new strategy was that the Peloponnesian fleet should avoid open-water battles of maneuver with Athenian triremes.

This strategy would explain why the Peloponnesian fleet in these years attacked, harassed, and threatened Athenian allies or positions only when and where the Athenian fleet was absent. As soon as Athenian ships turned up in force, or threatened to do so, it fled to safety. Only once in this period, at Corcyra in 427, did it accept battle with Athenian units, and on that occasion the odds were overwhelmingly favorable. Nonetheless, it conducted the action with great caution: 32 Peloponnesian triremes—after losing one of their number—formed a defensive hedgehog against only 12 Athenian ships (iii 78). Perhaps the Spartans had even concluded—not without reason—that superior Athenian naval skill could then neutralize any numerical advantage that could be concentrated against them.

This Spartan policy was hardly unique; it was indeed quite similar to the one imposed by Pericles upon the Athenian army *vis-à-vis* its superior Spartan opponent. It may have seemed an inglorious and sometimes humiliating policy to some Spartans (as that of Pericles did to some Athenians), but it successfully preserved the Peloponnesian fleet and forced Athens to allocate resources to guard against it. There is no reason to believe that this policy had changed as the campaign season opened in 425. Even the Peloponnesian fleet's sortie to Corcyra would be completely compatible with it if, as was clearly the case two years earlier, the Spartans planned to arrive before reinforcements from Athens could be sent (iii 69), and to produce a decisive outcome or to withdraw before significant Athenian forces could arrive.

The Corcyrean naval encounter of 427 is also significant to this argument because the Spartans on that occasion failed to provide their fleet with timely warning of the approach of Eurymedon's ships 'from the direction of Leucas' (iii 80). When the fire beacons finally alerted them, the Athenians must already have interposed themselves between the Peloponnesians and their nearest home base. No wonder that they

set off by night, at once and in a hurry, for home, sailing close in to the shore (iii 81).

This near-disaster clearly demonstrated Athenian willingness and capability to react quickly to threats against Corcyra, so it is unlikely that Sparta would send its fleet back to that island two years later unless certain this time that it would receive reliable and timely warning of the approach of hostile forces. The earliest warning that could be sent, and the most reliable (because Spartan agents could hardly miss the departure of so large a force), would be that the Athenian fleet destined for Sicily had left Piraeus and was on its way toward Corcyra.

The distance from Athens to Corcyra via Corinth and Patras is approximately 300 miles. Triremes and relays of runners (or horsemen) could probably cover 100 miles in 12 hours of daylight and more if they also travelled at night. Fire beacons, like those which brought word of the Athenian ships to Corcyra in 427, could probably transmit simple, pre-arranged messages at 50 miles per hour. Thus news of the Athenian fleet's departure would certainly reach Corcyra in two or at most three days—in time (but without much to spare) to permit the fleet's safe withdrawal to Cyllene, the nearest Peloponnesian port.¹¹

¹¹ In three days, the Athenian expedition would travel 210 miles (see 14 below) and be near Pylos, but it would still require one more day to reach Zakynthos and another to prepare for combat there before moving

north of Cyllene. The Peloponnesian fleet would travel the 145 miles from Corcyra to Cyllene, even by way of the isthmus of Leucas, in two days or less.

Once the Spartans on Corcyra knew that the Athenian fleet was approaching, the most conservative move they could make, and the most characteristic one, would have been to set sails for home as soon as possible. Their departure would be quickly followed by that of a second message boat (the first having announced the arrival of the Peloponnesian ships (iv 3)) dispatched by Athenian agents on Corcyra to carry the news to Zakynthos and on to the approaching Athenian fleet. More information about the enemy fleet's movements might come from pro-Athenian coast watchers at the mouth of the Gulf of Patras who might observe the Peloponnesian fleet as it sailed south from Leucas and dispatch a boat to bring word of the sighting to Zakynthos and on to Pylos.

Of course, the Athenian fleet was pinned at Pylos by storm winds while much of this occurred, and since these winds blew steadily for several days, they probably formed part of a large weather system that would have affected the entire region between Corcyra and Pylos. It is necessary to assume, therefore, for this hypothesis, that these winds blew from the north or northwest, which would have prevented the Athenian vessels from heading in that direction while permitting southward-moving ships (the message boats and the Peloponnesian fleet) to cruise downwind under sail.

In this way, news of the Peloponnesian fleet's departure from Corcyra might come to Pylos, but we cannot yet say whether it could have arrived in time to initiate a decision to build the fort. To determine whether such timing was possible, I have made an attempt to model the situation chronologically, although it seemed at first a futile exercise because the crucial cruising speeds, routes, stopping places, and stopping times of individual fleets and ship captains can never be known, and because our limited experience with oared ships prevents us from estimating the average speeds of message boats, fleets of triremes, and fleets of triremes convoying merchant vessels, with sufficient precision to make the effort worthwhile.¹²

Fortunately, it became clear after only a few trials (and was subsequently confirmed by many trials) that a wide range of values in this situation produces surprisingly similar and plausible results. That is to say, once one assumes that the Peloponnesian ships will leave Corcyra early in order to avoid the Athenian fleet, the relative timing between key events turns out to be quite insensitive to changes in the variables. This is demonstrated in the analysis below, where extreme ship speed values are used to calculate maximum intervals between critical events in order to indicate how the hypothesis works over a range of intermediate values.

I. The Athenian fleet's departure on Day 1 starts the sequence. If news of its departure travels to Corcyra at an average speed between 100 and 150 miles per day, it arrives there some two or three days later, on Day 3 or Day 4.

II. The Peloponnesian fleet leaves some hours after receiving this news, late on Day 3 at the earliest, or Day 4 at the latest.

III. The Corcyrean message boat leaves several hours after the Peloponnesian fleet, also on Day 3 at the earliest or Day 4 at the latest. If it sails 60 to 120 miles per day (even message boats would move more slowly than usual under short sail in a storm),¹³ it would cover the 210 miles from Corcyra to Pylos (with a stop of several hours at Zakynthos), in two days at the least, or in a little more than three days at the most, arriving at Pylos sometime between the second day (Day 5) after its earliest, and the fourth day (Day 8) after its latest, departure.

IV. The Athenian fleet leaves Piraeus on Day 1 and sails between 60 and 90 miles per day,¹⁴ reaching Pylos (235 miles) at the earliest on Day 3 and at the latest on Day 4.

These, then, are the extreme possibilities: the Athenian fleet could arrive at Pylos as late as Day 4 and the Corcyrean message boat as early as Day 5 (the second day of the Athenian fleet's

¹² Morrison and Coates (n. 8), 103–6 do discuss trireme speeds at oar or sail, stops for meals and sleep, effects of weather, convoys, message boats, etc., but ancient sources and examples are few.

¹³ See note 12.

¹⁴ Morrison and Coates (n. 8), 105, think five knots would be the speed of a fleet of triremes with merchantmen. This gives an average range for a fourteen-hour sailing day of about 75 miles.

stay at Pylos), or the Athenians could arrive as early as Day 3 and the message boat as late as Day 8 (the sixth day of the Athenian fleet's stay at Pylos).

Thucydides does not tell us how long the Athenians waited at Pylos before beginning work on the fort—only that it was long enough to fatigue the soldiers with inactivity (iv 4)—but any set of variables that brings the news to Pylos on the third, fourth, or fifth day of the Athenian fleet's stay at Pylos (Day 6 at the earliest to Day 9 at the latest), produces a plausible result. The extremes of two and six days calculated above may seem unlikely (though not impossible), but they set outer limits to the model; any combination of more moderate ship speeds will bring the news of the Peloponnesian fleet's departure to Pylos within those limits.

A sample chronology employing moderate values is presented below. It begins with the departure of the Athenian fleet from Piraeus and counts forward to Day 31, when the truce is agreed. Here I offer only Days 1 through 7, the period covering the events which led up to the decision to build the fort. The balance appears at the end of this essay.

Day 1: The Athenian fleet with accompanying merchant ships leaves Piraeus and travels 75 miles per day toward Pylos. Spartan agents leave Athens to carry the news to Corcyra.

Day 3: The Athenian fleet meets the first message boat off Laconia and learns that the enemy fleet is at Corcyra. The Peloponnesian fleet receives word of the Athenian fleet's departure from Piraeus.

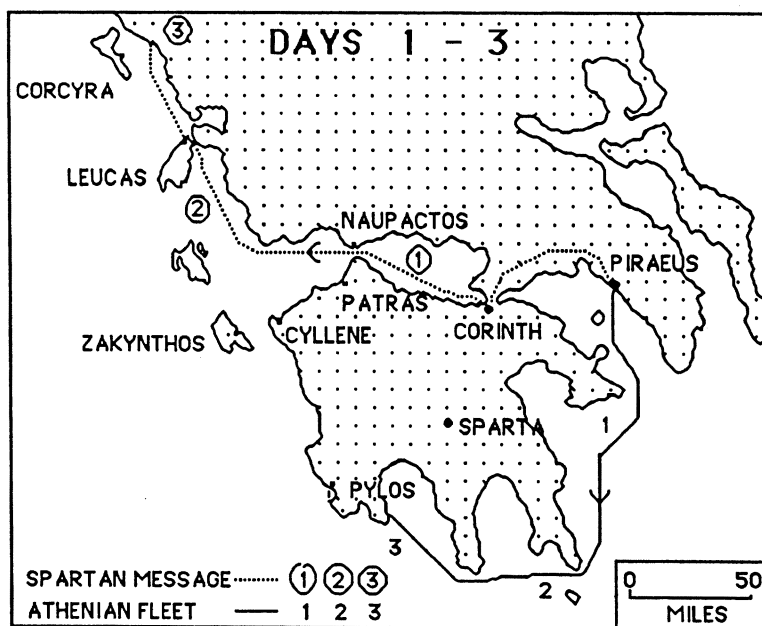


FIGURE 1: DAYS 1-3

Day 4: The Athenian fleet rounds Cape Akritas but is forced by a storm to put into Pylos. The Peloponnesian fleet departs from Corcyra for Leucas (70 miles). The second message boat leaves Corcyra for Zakyntos (140 miles) and Pylos (70 miles further). Both travel southward 75 miles per day under short sail in heavy seas.

Day 5: Winds keep the Athenian fleet a second day at Pylos. The Peloponnesian fleet reaches Leucas and crosses the isthmus.

Day 6: Winds keep the Athenian fleet a third day at Pylos. The second message boat from Corcyra arrives at Zakyntos and continues toward Pylos. The Peloponnesian fleet leaves Leucas at dawn and reaches Cyllene (75 miles) that evening. It is sighted at midday by observers at the mouth of the Gulf of Patras who dispatch a message boat to carry the news to Zakyntos and on to Pylos.

Day 7: Winds keep the Athenian fleet a fourth day at Pylos. The second message boat from Corcyra arrives at Pylos in the morning. The third message boat from the Gulf of Patras (100 miles) reaches Pylos in the afternoon. The Athenians generally order construction of the fort to begin.

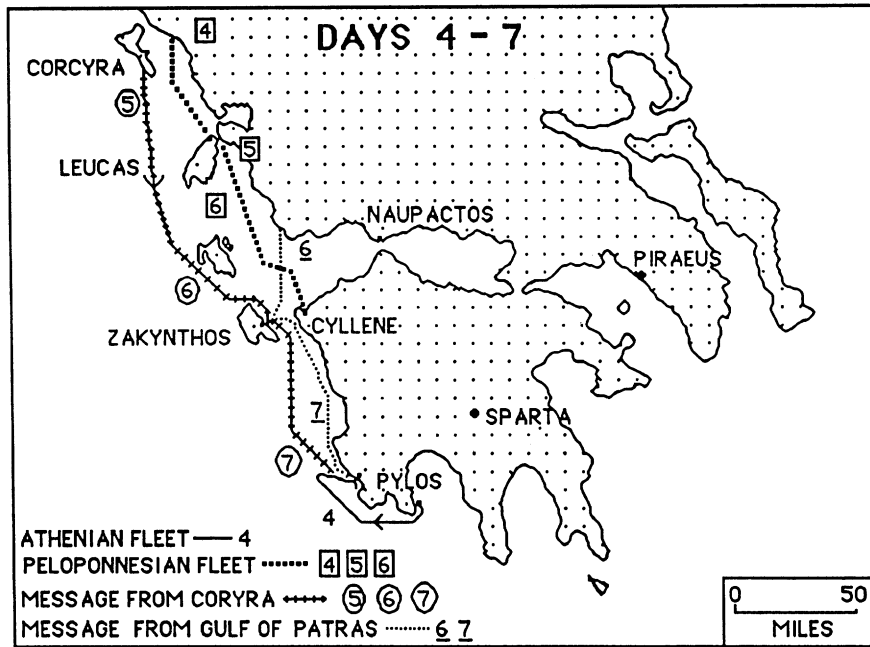


FIGURE 2: DAYS 4-7

3. *The Spartan reaction to the fort*

The hypothesis of the Peloponnesian fleet's early departure from Corcyra begs two important questions whose resolution hinges on the nature of the Spartan reaction to the fort at Pylos.

1. If the Peloponnesian ships left Corcyra early in conformity with their policy of avoiding battle, why did they not remain safely in port until, as they knew would happen sooner or later, the Athenian fleet left for Sicily? Was it not a violation of that policy to incur the risk of sailing past the Athenian fleet at Zakynthos in order to take up positions at Pylos where they could be attacked, and indeed where they invited attack?

2. When Thucydides writes that the Peloponnesians dragged their ships over the isthmus of Leucas, escaped the notice of the Athenian fleet at Zakynthos, and arrived safely at Pylos (iv 8), he has been understood as describing one single uninterrupted voyage. But if the Peloponnesian fleet left Corcyra before the fort was built, this could not have been so, for we can calculate directly from the text that it arrived at Pylos more than two weeks later (about Day 20).¹⁵ Where was it for two weeks?

Both these questions can be answered quite simply if one assumes that the Spartans reacted sharply to the fort at Pylos, perceiving it as a dire threat that must be destroyed quickly, regardless of cost or risk. If that were the case, then the Peloponnesian fleet could indeed have made two separate voyages in response to different situations and corresponding policies: the first voyage, the fleet's early withdrawal from Corcyra to perhaps Cyllene, would have been undertaken to avoid the Athenian fleet in accordance with the policy in effect before the fort's construction was known; the second, from Cyllene to Pylos, would have been carried out some two weeks later pursuant to a new policy adopted in that interval as a response to the Athenian initiative at Pylos.

¹⁵ If construction began on Day 7, it was completed six days later (iv. 5) on Day 13. Allow nine days for news of the fort's construction to reach Agis and for him to return to Sparta (Day 16) and three days more for the

first troops from Sparta to reach Pylos (Day 19). We know that the fleet arrived after the army (iv 8), so the earliest it could have arrived would be Day 20.

The acute Spartan reaction to the fort must be inferred from Thucydides' text, but the inference can be sustained through an examination of (1) the contradictory responses of King Agis and the home government to the fort, (2) the Spartan failure to launch an attack against the fort during its construction, and (3) the later Spartan fears of and responses to both the helots and the fort.

Thucydides implies in iv 5 that the news of the fort was not taken seriously at Sparta. Festival celebrations provided a traditional excuse for delay and the government minimized the affair by saying that the Athenians would withdraw or be easily expelled later (which might actually reflect their initial reaction to the Athenian presence at Pylos before construction of the fort began). Thucydides does add, however, that their decision to hold back was influenced by the absence of the king and the army.

When the king received word of the fort, however, he viewed it as such a grave threat to vital Spartan interests that he and his army immediately marched home (iv 6). Cold weather and a shortage of provisions mentioned in the text may indeed have contributed to his decision, but these may also have been disinformation broadcast to explain the army's early return without revealing the true cause of Spartan anxiety.

Since Spartan hoplites were notoriously ineffective at assaulting walled sites, the Spartans undoubtedly knew that their best strategy for destroying the Athenian fort would be to launch an immediate attack (even with a small force) while the works remained unfinished and indefensible. Conversely (and in contradiction to what they are reported to have said in iv 5), they must have known that an assault by even a large hoplite force would probably fail once the fort was complete. Certainly the Athenians, who

did everything they could to hurry on with the work and to finish the more vulnerable parts before the Spartans could come up to attack it (iv 4),

feared a rapid response. It is significant, therefore, that the Spartans made no attempt to intervene at Pylos during the fort's construction. Their first troops, in fact, did not leave Sparta until Agis arrived and could not have reached Pylos until six days after the fort's completion¹⁶—to the undoubted astonishment and relief of the Athenians.

Since a sufficient number of troops had surely been left at Sparta to man an adequate assault against Pylos,¹⁷ and an immediate riposte was so obviously advantageous to them, we must assume that something other than normal Spartan lethargy—for which Thucydides does not criticize them here—deterred them from a rapid response. No reason for this delay appears in the immediate text, but I think we may find a clue in Thucydides' later statement that

Spartan policy with regard to the helots had always been based on the idea of security (iv 88).

Thucydides mentions several times (iv 41, 55, 80) how the occupation of Pylos (and later Cythera) heightened Spartan fears of helot revolution in 424 and led to brutal and drastic counter-measures. It is likely, however, that Spartan alarm first intensified in the spring of 425 when the Pylos fort was just being built, its impact was as yet unknown, and the Spartan army was far away. In such circumstances, fear of an imminent helot revolt might explain why Spartan generals would refuse to divide their limited reliable forces at home in order to send a small body of troops through Messenia to Pylos. They would not have forgotten that a force of 300 Spartan hoplites had been annihilated in Messenia during the last helot rebellion.¹⁸

¹⁶ For the timing, see n. 15 above, and Wilson (n. 7), 70. Kagan (n. 6), 223 noticed the slow Spartan response to the fort and the contrasting reactions of Agis and the home government but drew no conclusions. Hunter (n. 6), 63–4 correctly saw that the absence of the king and the army was the real reason for Spartan delay, but she is certainly wrong when she says Thucydides here artfully supplies more motives for Spartan behavior than is required.

¹⁷ The annual expeditions to Attica seem to have comprised only two-thirds of available forces, Thuc. ii 47, iii 15, so we may assume that a minimum force of 1,500 to 2,500 Spartan hoplites, would have been present at Sparta.

¹⁸ Hdt. ix 64.2.

Their reluctance to act would have been stronger still if coordinated Messenian acts of sabotage had alarmed and distracted them (and impelled Demosthenes to fight for the original timetable), but even if no such actions took place, they might well have suspected that the fort being constructed at Pylos would be just the first step in a larger plan to incite revolt. When the previous helot uprising had occurred some forty years earlier, the current Spartan commanders were young men. They would remember that the Athenians who came to help under Cimon were sent home with ill will because it was feared that they were potential 'sponsors of some revolutionary policy' (i 101–2). Sparta had needed many years to put down that revolt at a time when she was at peace with the rest of Greece. Now she was at war with a powerful adversary who could fortify Pylos secure in the knowledge that most of the Spartan army would be away, spoiling Attica as it had done every spring but one since the war began. Perhaps marauding Spartan forces there had already taken in Athenian slaves, as they would from Decelea after 413 (vii 27). For the Athenians to retaliate by inciting a helot rebellion might seem, to Spartans, a historically predictable, morally understandable, and—with the army away—extremely dangerous counterattack.

Since apprehensions about helot revolt could not be publicly acknowledged, the Spartans could not even summon their allies for help until after Agis returned (iv 8). While they waited for him, and the Athenians completed the fort, they behaved as if nothing significant were happening, conducted business as usual (religious ceremonies), and publicly minimized the threat. All this, however, would have been nothing more than a false front designed to gain time and to conceal their alarm from their enemies, their allies, and perhaps their own citizens.¹⁹

If this picture is correct, then when the leaders of Sparta sat down to develop a plan to expel the Athenians from Pylos, they did so in an atmosphere of political crisis and military emergency. Their dilemma was that the army which could protect them from helots could not capture the fortress by assault. Thus they would have to besiege Pylos and somehow prevent Athenian naval resupply. Since the direct means to accomplish that—to defeat the Athenian fleet and drive it away—was beyond their power, some other, more indirect course had to be found.

The plan that they devised, described by Thucydides in iv 8, ingeniously exploited both the geography of the site and the shore-base requirements of triremes, while compensating for the combat inferiority of the Peloponnesian fleet. As I have suggested elsewhere,²⁰ the plan was based upon a harbor with blockable entrances in the cove at the southeast corner of Pylos where the Spartans could and apparently did set up blocklines with initial success. Unfortunately, Thucydides' description of what happened in the harbor battle is so elliptical and obscure that we cannot be sure why the Spartan plan failed.

We can be confident, however, that experienced sailors were among its designers since it required a sophisticated knowledge of triremes, blocklines, and the local geography of the Pylos area and its harbor. Although there might have been enough sailors at Sparta to develop the plan, it is much more likely that personnel from the fleet provided the necessary expertise. Thus the nautical emphasis of the Spartan plan and the time required to design and organize it may support the hypothesis of an early return of the Peloponnesian fleet, as it would have been difficult for naval personnel to prepare the plan if the fleet had remained late at Corcyra and sailed directly to Pylos. On the other hand, the two-week interval between the fleet's hypothesized arrival at Cyllene and its departure for Pylos (Days 5 to 19 in the chronology) would have been sufficient for key personnel to travel to Pylos and Sparta, conduct reconnaissance, participate in discussions with Agis, and return to Cyllene in time to sail with their ships.

¹⁹ Cf. Xen. *Hell.* vi 4.16; the announcement of the battle of Leuctra at Sparta provides a similar example of Sparta's stiff upper lip when publicly handling bad news.

²⁰ R. B. Strassler, 'The Harbor at Pylos: 425 BC', *JHS* cviii (1988), 198–203 discusses further the Spartan plan and the harbor battle.

Although the Spartans put their fleet at risk at Pylos, its static, defensive role in their plan suited its capabilities and was consistent with its past strategy and tactics. The Peloponnesian ships were to block access to the only harbor which, as it was enclosed by the walls of the Athenian fort, could not be occupied by Spartan hoplites. The triremes' blocking positions would thus force the Athenian ships either to launch a disadvantageous assault (their naval skills would be neutralized in a frontal attack in narrow waters against anchored lines) or to withdraw from the area for lack of a local shore base. If the Athenian ships refused this challenge or failed to break the blocklines and withdrew, the Spartans would gain the victory, as they had planned, without having risked a battle at sea (iv 8). As a compromise between a successful if inglorious naval policy and what must have been immense political pressure to employ the fleet to drive the Athenians out of Pylos, the Spartan plan was little short of brilliant.

4. *The second Athenian fleet*

One question remains: how did Demosthenes originally intend to defend Pylos against a siege after the Athenian fleet had left for Sicily? He could hardly have predicted what actually happened—that the Athenians would defeat and capture all the enemy's triremes in one battle—and since coastal forts were vulnerable to land-sea sieges (Pylos surrendered to one in 409–8),²¹ he must initially have envisioned some permanent means to counter this threat. Here again we must seek to reconstruct something which certainly existed, but which the text never mentions.

The movements of the Athenian fleet, which have puzzled scholars up till now, are actually quite informative in this context. Thucydides writes that when the fort was complete, the Athenian ships left Pylos 'on their way to Corcyra and Sicily' (iv 5). Yet one week later,²² they were found by Demosthenes' triremes at Zakynthos, only 70 miles away. Gomme spoke for many when he wondered why the fleet would have left Pylos at all if it were going no further than Zakynthos, and whether it had remained there that whole week.²³ Apparently, he overlooked or did not seriously consider Thucydides' key statement in iv 8 that the fort had few supplies and could not hold out for long against a siege. If this Spartan assessment had been accurate (which it probably was since it was both crucial to their strategy and verifiable by direct observation of both Pylos and the Athenian fleet from nearby heights), the Athenian fleet would have had to leave Pylos as soon as its manpower was no longer needed to work on the fort if only to conserve provisions there. Pylos, after all, was a desolate promontory in a deserted region (iv 3) whereas Zakynthos was a friendly city, presumably equipped with markets, shipyards, and other amenities.

The lack of supplies at Pylos also reveals that Demosthenes' plan could not have required the Athenian fleet to Sicily to carry sufficient supplies for the fort's long-term support, just as it did not call for it to bring triremes and a garrison for its long-term defense. Indeed, it would have been imprudent to have done so not only because the assembly of such extra resources at Athens (even wicker arms for a temporary garrison) might have compromised secrecy, but also because no one could predict at the outset of the campaign whether the attempt to fortify Pylos would succeed. By delaying the dispatch of substantial provisions and other defensive requirements until the fort had been completed, the Athenians would lose perhaps two weeks time,²⁴ but they would avoid the considerable expense, risk, and political embarrassment—if they failed at

²¹ Diod. xiii. 64.5; in 409–408, (or maybe 410, see D. M. Lewis, *Sparta and Persia* [Leiden, 1977] 126, n. 112).

²² The Athenian fleet would arrive at Zakynthos one day after the fort's completion (Day 14). If Demosthenes' triremes left Pylos on Day 20 when the Peloponnesian ships arrived (see 14 above), they would have reached Zakynthos on Day 21 about one week after the fleet. See Wilson (n. 7), 67.

²³ Gomme (n. 5), 442.

²⁴ Allowing three days for news of the fort's establishment on Day 13 to reach Athens (Day 16), seven days to fit out vessels, gather crews and load supplies (Day 23), and four more for the triremes and cargo ships to reach Pylos (Day 27), the interval between the fort's completion and the arrival of the second Pylos fleet would be about two weeks.

Pylos—of having sent triremes and cargo ships on a useless voyage there and back. Finally, the lack of supplies at Pylos also leads to the perhaps startling conclusion that Demosthenes must originally have planned (at least I can think of no other way that he could have gone about it) to have a second Athenian fleet bring the elements of permanent defense to Pylos after the fort had been successfully built and established by the first.

Thucydides says nothing about a second fleet, but he does mention 20 additional Athenian triremes that were on hand 'to help in the blockade' of Sphacteria when the truce ended (iv 23). This seems an odd number to have been sent for that purpose as it is difficult to understand what military help 20 triremes could render to the 50 already there, who, with no naval opposition to face, were blockading a small island with few landing places. We know that the Athenians suffered from insufficient food, water, and mooring space (iv 26), and 20 more triremes would only have aggravated those problems without providing commensurate military assistance.²⁵

It is possible, however, that these triremes could have formed part of a second Athenian fleet. Although the organization of that force would not have commenced until word reached Athens that the fort had been established, its assembly might not have taken more than a week, and its departure from Piraeus could well have occurred before news of the harbor battle arrived there (see the chronology below).²⁶ In that case, Thucydides' statement that these triremes were on hand to help in the blockade would be true only in the sense that that is what they ended up doing. It would not describe their original mission, which would have been (1) to protect the merchant vessels from pirates and/or Spartan warships stationed on the coast of Laconia (iv 16), and (2) to remain at Pylos (perhaps not all of them) as a permanent naval squadron like the one which seems to have operated from Naupactos from 429 to 424, and possibly to 413.²⁷

The Naupactos squadron, although continually outnumbered, successfully deterred the Peloponnesians from ever attempting a naval assault or siege against its base. We have no evidence that Demosthenes chose to provide for Pylos' long-term defense in this way, but I think it a strong possibility since the military situation of the two bases would have seemed practically identical to him in 425 and, having commanded the Naupactos squadron, he would have known and appreciated its defensive effectiveness. Moreover, his plan to deploy Messenians as raiders from Pylos would have required the presence of at least some locally based Athenian naval units to transport them to and from the vicinity of their objectives.

We may now conclude (and answer Gomme's second question in the affirmative) that the Athenian fleet to Sicily did indeed remain that whole week at Zakynthos—by agreement with Demosthenes and in accordance with his plan—in order to protect the Pylos fort until the second fleet arrived. Zakynthos would thus have been more than a necessary logistical base in Demosthenes' plan, it would also have been a port close enough to Pylos, and to the direct route to Pylos from the north, to permit him to assume that the mere presence of the Athenian fleet there would deter the Peloponnesian navy from attacking the fort.²⁸ The Athenian generals clearly consented to this arrangement, as they would not otherwise have left five triremes, their crews, and perhaps a large number of fleet hoplites²⁹ at Pylos as an initial, temporary garrison.

²⁵ These twenty triremes may have remained at Pylos, despite the added strain, because the Athenians believed for some time that the surrender of the Spartans on Sphacteria was imminent (iv 26), and that some triremes would prove useful there after the Athenian fleet left, even though the fort would face no immediate hostile naval threat. Later, when it became clear that Sphacteria would not surrender, the squadrons's manpower would have seemed too valuable in an assault to send away.

²⁶ See note 24.

²⁷ John Wilson, *Corcyra and Athens* (Bristol 1987), 135, feels the data will not support the conclusion that the Athenians maintained a permanent fleet at Naupac-

tos. The subject is too complex to take up here, but I read the same record as strong evidence for the organized existence of such a force. See Thuc. ii 69, 80-1, 90, 103; iii 7, 69, 75, 91, 98, 102, 105, 107, 114; iv 49, vii 17, 31, 34.

²⁸ Wilson (n. 27), 106, points out that the Peloponnesian fleet may have remained in port throughout much of 426 in order to avoid Demosthenes' squadron that was operating at Leucas and off the coast of Acarnania that year.

²⁹ A substantial number of Athenian fleet hoplites might have been left at Pylos to build up the garrison because the generals at that time would not have expected to have to fight at sea.

This arrangement would also explain why Demosthenes had felt confident that he would never have to confront superior hostile naval forces even though the Athenian fleet had left Pylos (iv 9), and why he knew, when he sent off the two triremes, that they would find the Athenian fleet at Zakynthos (iv 8).

Some scholars have suggested that the Athenians at Zakynthos were actively trying to intercept what they thought would be an onrushing Peloponnesian fleet³⁰ but it is more likely that they relaxed there, confident (with Demosthenes) that the enemy ships would stay away. They probably viewed Zakynthos as just a stop 'on their way to Corcyra and Sicily' and never imagined that a Spartan naval operation was about to unfold that would force them to return to Pylos and would threaten the entire project. Only such a relaxed and overconfident attitude can account for their otherwise inexplicable negligence in failing to observe and pursue, much less to intercept, the Peloponnesian ships as they passed (undoubtedly at night) between Cyllene and Zakynthos.³¹

Such a relaxed posture might also explain why three days (Day 21 to Day 23 in the chronology) were required for Demosthenes' triremes and the Athenian fleet to make the 140-mile round trip between Pylos and Zakynthos, when a trireme in a hurry might be expected to row that distance in less than half the time. Weather could not have delayed them because the Spartan assaults against the rocky coast of Pylos, which could only have been attempted in calm seas, took place on two of those three days. Perhaps the Athenian fleet required a full day or more to round up crews, halt repair and refitting work, gather and load supplies, and put to sea, but it is also possible that they moved deliberately because they did not believe the enemy ships would remain at Pylos long enough for the Athenians to overtake them. Since they knew that the second Athenian fleet was not expected in the area for at least a week, that the troops at Pylos would not suffer from the effects of a siege in the first few days, and that the fort (as Demosthenes proved with only 60 hoplites and a few archers) was invulnerable to amphibious assault, they would have had little reason to hurry.

The Spartans, on the other hand, must have been extremely vigilant at this time. They probably knew, as Thucydides implies (iv 8), that the Athenian fleet was at Zakynthos, not only because the Athenian plan was to make its presence there known, but because accurate information about the location and posture of enemy forces was vital to their own strategy. Their navy, after all, would have to evade the Athenians at Zakynthos and arrive at a Pylos harbor empty of enemy forces at least several hours ahead of pursuit in order to be able to organize blocklines.³²

When the Peloponnesian fleet set out at dusk from Cyllene and rowed for Pylos, some 85 miles distant, it seized the initiative and, for the second time in the campaign, acted in a manner that Demosthenes had not anticipated. It is likely, therefore, that the Athenian ships were surprised, upon arriving, to discover that the Peloponnesian fleet blocked them from the fort. Since they had not prepared for this situation, and they had no other place to beach their ships, they retired to the inadequate shelter of Prote for the night. There the Athenians, aware of the limited staying power of both their fleet and the fort, decided to attack the lines the next day rather than leave Pylos without a fight.

The chronological scenario concludes as follows:

³⁰ Wilson (n. 7), 67. H. Awdry, 'Pylos and Sphacteria' *JHS* xx (1900) 14-19, even suggests the fort was a decoy to draw the Peloponnesian fleet out and destroy it, but he does not explain why the Athenians could assume this Spartan reaction, or its opportune timing.

³¹ Even at night, the Peloponnesian fleet's passage unobserved through the Zakynthos and Cyllene channel strongly suggests that the Athenians were not looking for them. In 429 a Peloponnesian fleet tried to

elude Phormio by slipping its moorings at night, but because Phormio had set a watch for them, they were observed, pursued, and attacked before dawn (Thuc. ii 83).

³² The Spartans may even have been aware of the approach of the second Athenian fleet, and of the need to implement their plan before it could arrive on the scene.

Day 9: News of the construction of the Pylos fort reaches Sparta.

Day 11: News of the construction of the Pylos fort reached Agis in Attica; the Spartan army begins to march home.

Day 13: The Athenians complete the fort; their fleet leaves for Zakynthos.

Day 16: Agis and the army arrive at Sparta. News of the fort's completion reaches Athens. The organization of the second fleet begins.

Day 17: The first Spartan troops leave Sparta for Pylos. Fleet personnel leave for Cyllene.

Day 19: The first Spartan hoplites reach Pylos. The Peloponnesian fleet leaves for Pylos at dusk.

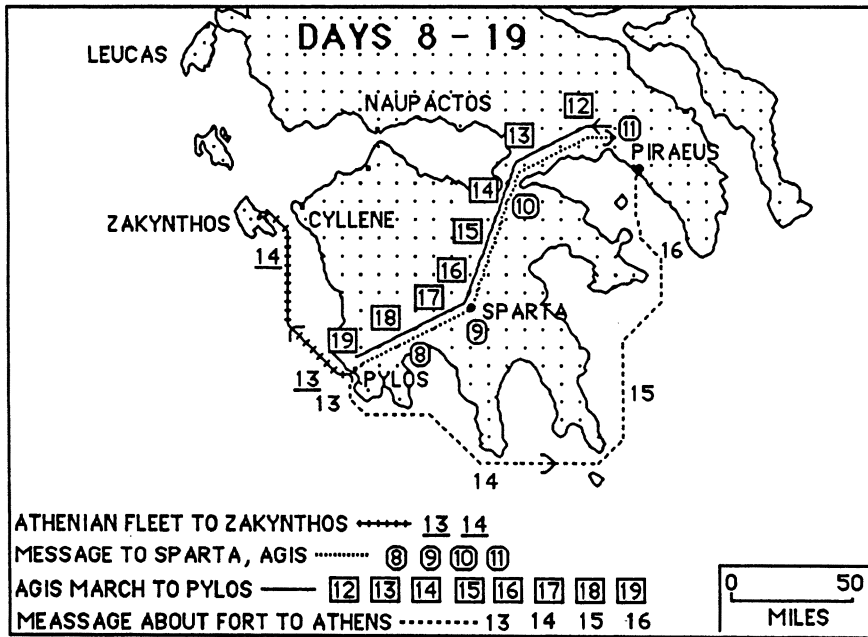


FIGURE 3: DAYS 8-19

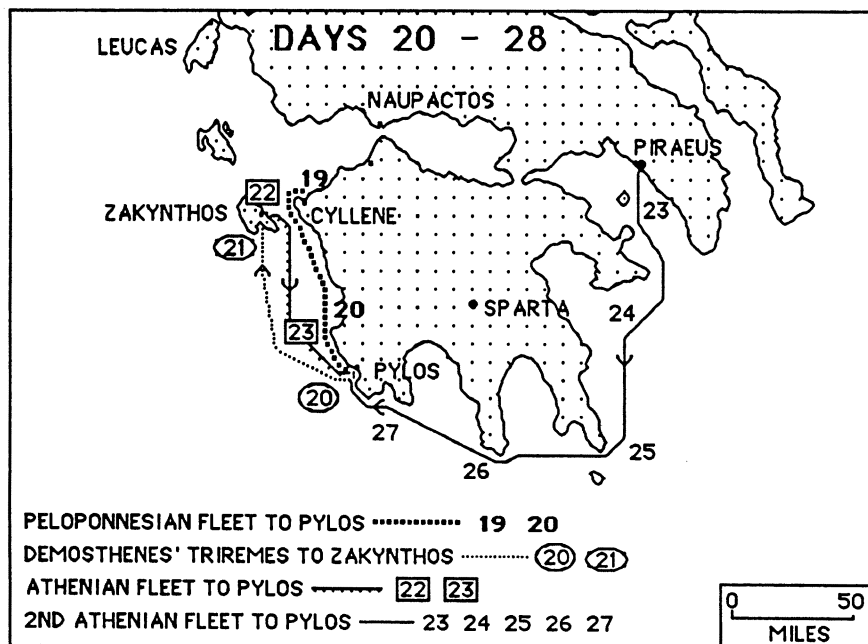


FIGURE 4: DAYS 20-28

- Day 20: The Peloponnesian fleet arrives at Pylos. Demosthenes sends two triremes to Zakynthos.
Day 21: The first day of Spartan amphibious attacks. The two Athenian triremes arrive at Zakynthos.
Day 22: The second day of Spartan amphibious attacks.
Day 23: The Spartans send to Asine for timber. The Athenian fleet reaches Pylos in mid-afternoon, retires to Prote. The second Pylos fleet leaves Piracus.
Day 24: The Peloponnesian fleet is routed in the harbor battle.
Day 27: News of the harbor battle reaches Athens.
Day 28: The second Pylos fleet arrives at Pylos.
Day 31: The truce is agreed.

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