

# ATHENIAN AMBITIONS AND THE DELIAN ALLIANCE

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IN A PAPER PUBLISHED IN *Phoenix* 31 (1977) 1-8, H. R. Rawlings examined the implications of Thucydides' choice of words in 1.96.1,

πρόσχημα γὰρ ἦν ἀμύνεσθαι ὧν ἔπαθον δηοῦντας τὴν βασιλέως χώραν

The overt purpose (*proschema*) was to take reprisals for what they had suffered by ravaging the territory of the King

and suggested that by his choice of the word *πρόσχημα* Thucydides made an implicit judgement, namely that the ostensible purpose of the league was merely a pretext, or a cover, for the Athenians' real intentions: these intentions were "to create and employ power for their own purposes," (6); for "a *πρόσχημα* is always a screen for real intentions which have to be concealed for one reason or another" (3); and "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 [4]. . . . While they [modern historians] 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 [Thucydides] did not" (6). In Rawlings's view (a) Thucydides intended to imply that from the beginning the Athenians regarded the Delian alliance as a screen to cover their imperial designs; and (b) Thucydides conveyed his meaning by his choice of the word *proschema*.

Herodotus uses the word six times, Thucydides three times, which is not an impressive statistical sample on which to base a historical interpretation. In one of Herodotus' examples, ἡ Μίλητος . . . τῆς Ἰωνίης ἦν *πρόσχημα*, "Miletus was . . . the pride of Ionia" (5.28), the word does not mean "a screen for real intentions," and has no implied antithesis. This use of the word is not unique, cf. Sophocles *Electra* 682.

In Sophocles, Herodotus, and Thucydides, the first generation of extant writers to use the word, *proschema* seems to mean "the external aspect," or "that feature of a thing likely to impress." Not surprisingly therefore it *generally* implies an antithesis, i.e., the less obvious or concealed aspect; but such an antithesis is not invariable, as we see from the examples in Herodotus and Sophocles. Consequently we are hardly justified in assuming that Thucydides necessarily implies an antithesis in 1.96 either.<sup>1</sup> If he

<sup>1</sup>For economy of space I have condensed Rawlings's argument. He explains the apparent

did so, it is regrettable that he did not make his point more clearly, for it has taken a long time to sink in.

To support his interpretation Rawlings cites chapter 98, where Thucydides describes the activities of the alliance, beginning with the siege of Eion and ending with the subjugation of Naxos. "Already, only five or six sentences into the *Pentekontaetia*, 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 on Athenian aggrandizement . . . . What Thucydides clearly means to stress is that *from the very first*, the Athenians used the Delian League for their own hegemonial ends . . . . What has happened to the announced programme of 'ravaging Persian territory?' There is not a sign of it" (5).

In Rawlings's view Thucydides puts the antithesis to the feigned purpose in the form, not of the "true purpose," but of the actual effects. Thucydides' intention is revealed by the fact that he "suppresses what we know, and he must have known, to have been the results of the Delian League's programme . . . . On the other hand, he gives a great deal of attention to Athenian campaigns against other Greek states" (5-6).

According to this interpretation, we should expect to find in chapter 98 a statement of the "true purpose" of the alliance (as Thucydides believed that the Athenians saw it). Instead of a "true purpose" we find a short list of four operations. The "true purpose" (in Rawlings's view) is implied by Thucydides' choice of these particular four from all the operations conducted by the allies in the first (ten?) years of the alliance, for they are not concerned with "ravaging Persian territory" but mainly with Athenian expansion at the expense of other Greek states.

To test the validity of Rawlings's argument one must ask if Thucydides' choice of the four operations can readily be explained in any other way. The question itself draws attention to the historian's aim and method in the *Pentekontaetia*. As the announced programme of the alliance was to hit at the King's territory, why did not Thucydides go on immediately to recount major allied operations of that nature, rather than such apparently minor actions as those at Skyros, Karystos, and Naxos? The answer involves an appreciation of Thucydides' purpose in his inclusion of the essay in his war history.

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exceptions to his view on the grounds that *proschema* has two meanings, derived from two senses of the prefix *pro-*: and that *proschema* derived from the use of *pro-* = in front of, always in Herodotus and Thucydides means "a pretence or pretext" as opposed to "real intentions." But the fact that the word was currently used in two senses must have made it ambiguous to Thucydides' contemporaries. Consequently it is not reasonable to insist that Thucydides must be using it here in the sense postulated by Rawlings, and that Thucydides' audience would find no ambiguity.

Although the Pentekontaetia is often treated as a brief history of Athens in the period 479–435, because it is our only reliable historiographical source, it was not composed or presented by Thucydides as a mini-history. The purpose of the essay, as he clearly states, is to explain his verdict that the Spartan decision for war in 432 was induced not so much by the arguments presented at the assembly as by fear of further Athenian aggrandizement (Thuc. 1.88). The verdict echoes the previous judgement (1.23.6) that the basic cause of the war was psychological: by her actions Athens had brought about a climate of fear in Greece, and it was this, rather than the clashes involving Corcyra and Potidaea, that brought about war. Thucydides implies that if the climate of fear had not been present, the clashes might not have produced the general conflagration. Thucydides substantiates his view of the “truest cause” of the war by examining Athenian actions before, but mainly after, the formation of the Delian alliance. Her conduct as hegemon is crucial: the misuse which she made of her leadership in operations outside the initial guidelines of the programme is of much more importance to the purpose of the essay than the operations which she conducted within its guidelines. During the years covered in the Pentekontaetia the allied fleet cruised the Aegean each year; had Thucydides selected this period for historiography, it would have filled many books. But from the mass of operations he chose a very small sample directly relevant to his purpose. In chapter 97 he briefly explains his method of selection. He suggests three categories of allied operations which in fact indicate three stages in the progress of Athenian imperialism. The three categories are operations against the barbarians, operations against the Athenians’ own allies, and operations against such Peloponnesians as crossed Athens’ path. The operations overlap in time, but the categories follow each other in a logical development. The essay, by its strict choice of examples, is intended to show how Athenian expansion of power led, step by step, towards the atmosphere of fear which produced general war.

The historical model set up in the essay is necessarily simplified, but is illustrated adequately for Thucydides’ purpose. To illustrate each of his categories of operations he gives, in the early period, only one or two examples. In chapter 98 he cites the capture of Eion as a straight example of a Persian-occupied area captured by the allied fleet: we can assume with certainty that there were many others. Skyros is included perhaps because it was the first “liberated area” colonised by the Athenians themselves, a step not included in the official guidelines of the alliance. Karystos, a Greek state which had collaborated with the Persian invader and consequently laid itself open to reprisals, was coerced into the alliance: it is the coercion which merits its inclusion in the essay. We have

now reached the second category of operations, and Thucydides cites the case of Naxos, which was the first allied state to defect, to be captured, and "enslaved." To remind the reader of his selective method, Thucydides here mentions that there were other similar instances; but, again, he does not find it necessary to retail them. Although the subjugation of Naxos occurs, as Rawlings says, only five or six sentences into the Pentekontaetia, it occurred before the accession of King Artaxerxes, but apparently not long before, judging from Thucydides 1.137.2 (Themistocles' flight to Asia); scholars date the operation at Naxos variously between 470 and 465, with perhaps some preference for 467 and 466.<sup>2</sup> So we cannot assume that Thucydides intended to stress that from the very beginning the Athenians used the Delian alliance to further imperialistic ends. The brevity of narration and the strict rationing of samples to illustrate a point, are the fulfillment of what the historian promises in 1.97. He does not at the beginning devote much space to allied operations against Persian-occupied territory because they are of only limited importance to his announced purpose. Later in the essay he does discuss the more spectacular operations against Persian-occupied territory in the south east, in Pamphylia (1.100), in Cyprus (1.104), and in Egypt (1.104, 109–110, 112–113). The operations reveal the growth of Athenian power, the daring of Athens, and her setbacks; the results have side-effects on the Greek scene, and hence become relevant to the purpose of the essay. The Pentekontaetia validates Thucydides' judgement of the "truest cause" because the alliance became a weapon turned against the Greeks who had concluded it, and a cause of increasing apprehension in Greece.

In the Pentekontaetia Thucydides was concerned to show *how* Athens came to exert such frightening pressure on the Greek states as to produce a climate of fear: he reveals the mechanics of imperial expansion rather than the motives. Elsewhere (1.75) he gives a careful analysis of Athenian motivation: the analysis is cast in the form of a speech, which need not necessarily represent the views of the historian. The analysis is consistent and not unconvincing. The Athenians argue that the empire was not acquired by force; the allies' request to Athens to assume the leadership was spontaneous<sup>3</sup> but once in a position of authority, the Athenians found

<sup>2</sup>When Pausanias was arrested on suspicion of treason, evidence obtained during the interrogation implicated Themistocles, then in exile at Argos. He fled from the Athenian officers sent to arrest him, and was driven by storm to Naxos, which was being besieged by an Athenian task force (Thuc. 1.137.2). He escaped to Asia and sent letters to Artaxerxes, who had recently become King (elsewhere dated to 465–464): for a discussion of the dating see M. E. White, *JHS* 84 (1964) 140–149.

<sup>3</sup>The Athenians claim (1.75.2) that they took over leadership of the Hellenic alliance at the request of the allies: Thucydides himself confirms (1.96.1) that the allies' acquiescence in Athenian leadership was spontaneous.

themselves the prisoners of circumstances, and it became increasingly impossible to surrender the power they had attained, because they feared the consequences to themselves of such surrender. The motives by which they were driven had changed as their fortunes changed. In the first instance the motive was fear; then the desire for prestige; later on came the spur of self-interest. Once Athens had won distrust and suspicion by her imperial methods, it was dangerous to let go. She had reached her present position (in 432) not by design or out of wicked ambition, but because the momentum of power had carried her along.

Their plea on this occasion is in accordance with views expressed elsewhere, that once a nation finds itself in the position of a ruler, it is too late to go back; in effect it is more dangerous to try to dismount from the tiger than to continue to ride it.<sup>4</sup> Put in general terms, power, *dynamis*, is dynamic, and must go on expanding; it can never remain static. Like the Greek tyrants, Athens used power primarily to acquire more power: imperialism, once launched on its way, is a self-sustaining process.

The mechanics of imperial expansion, as set out in the Pentekontaetia, and the motivation of the Athenians, as described in 1.75, combine into a consistent picture. Imperial ambitions develop only by degrees, and in response to changing conditions. The transition to imperialism is neither planned nor controlled, but an almost mechanical and involuntary process. It is a view in direct contradiction to the one which sees the Delian alliance as planned from the start with imperial ambitions in mind.

We may ask which of the two interpretations—a gradual response to a changing situation, or a long-term plan of imperialism—is more consistent with Thucydides' narrative elsewhere, and indeed with his general treatment of human affairs. In particular, how much weight can we attach to the Athenian speech at the Peloponnesian assembly as reported in 1.73–78? Is it mere reportage, the account of a contribution to a debate, with no special significance outside that debate? Or is it inserted by the historian as his view of what the Athenians believed their motives had been? There is no simple answer, and the whole problem of Thucydides' use of the speeches is involved. But some points call for comment. It is a puzzle that an Athenian speaker should be contributing to a Peloponnesian debate at all. The speech lies outside the context of the argument, and does not take up the charges made against Athens. As the speech had evidently no effect on the decisions taken, the main justification for its inclusion seems as an account of how Thucydides believed the Athenians regarded the situation, i.e., it has more historiographical im-

<sup>4</sup>See Pericles' words in 430 to an Athenian audience about their imperial position. "It is no longer possible for you to extricate yourselves from it . . . you possess it as a tyrant possesses his power; it seems wrong to have taken it, but too dangerous to let it go now." (Thuc. 2.63.2).

portance as information to the reader than as a contribution to an actual debate. The sentiments which appear in the speech are consistent with those that appear elsewhere in Thucydides' narrative. On the whole there is a good case for believing that, in Thucydides' view, this *was* how the Athenians saw the situation.<sup>5</sup>

With regard to the point raised by Rawlings in his paper, does the text of Thucydides give adequate reason to suppose that he viewed the progress of Athenian imperialism as the fulfillment of a goal seen by Athenian leaders in 477 B.C.? Was the official aim of the alliance a mere blind to cover a more sinister aim? The grounds adduced in support of this view seem unconvincing, because the evidence from Thucydides' text can in fact be explained without the need for the theory. But the issue remains important. At what point did Athenian policy makers see and use the Delian alliance as an instrument of imperialism? Was the intention present at the inception of the alliance? Or was the development primarily a response to a changing and unforeseeable set of circumstances?

It is hard to find evidence in Thucydides clearly pointing to the theory of the original intention in this instance; or indeed, to the view that history generally consists of the fulfillment of original intentions. On the contrary, the selection of evidence by the historian seems rather to imply the opposite. There is a great stress on the intervention of chance in human affairs, and a repeated inclination to refer to the paradoxical nature of developments. To take one point in the *Pentekontaetia*: the really dangerous stage only opened with the third of Thucydides' categories of operations, those against the Peloponnese. But the sequence of events which led to Athens' changing her policy in this way flowed from a sheer accident, the great earthquake, and from an unforeseeable set of consequences: the Spartan inability to cope with the helot revolt, the appeal to Athens, the Athenian expedition, and its amazing consequences. It was a hinge of history as unexpected as, e.g., the Pylos expedition with its extraordinary train of consequences, or the plague at Athens during the Archidamian war.

The point raised by Rawlings is relevant to one's view of Thucydides' whole attitude to history. Can one believe that men make history, in the sense that what emerges is the fruition of plans, ambitions, tactics? Is the history of a people in some way analogous to the life of an individual, in the sense that, when he has reached point X, it is legitimate to trace back his actions to an early ambition, of which his success is the final attainment? To what extent is history primarily the attainment, and the failure of attainment, of national goals, the incarnation of ideas conceived

<sup>5</sup>For an analysis of Thucydides' intention in 1.73–8, see the discussion by J. de Romilly, *Thucydides and Athenian Imperialism* (tr. P. Thody, Oxford 1963) 242–254: I follow her views.

in the minds of men? Or conversely, is the history of a people rather to be regarded as a chaotic jumble of false steps, missed chances, changes of goal, and confusions of purpose, in other words, an inconsistent set of improvisations in response to an intricate tapestry of unexpected occurrences? If one's view is closer to the latter theory, then it is futile to seek to trace a final outcome to any one original design (for there were many, and they were always changing), and to any consistent long-term policy. Which of these two extreme views of history seems closer to that of Thucydides? Critics may differ on the question, but Thucydides' book provides plenty of evidence that he was no stranger to the theory that chance is a stronger principle in history than is human design, and that the genius of men who make history is expressed most clearly in their ability to improvise in the face of the inevitable unexpected.

One may assume that a historian who rates so highly the role of chance in human history would hardly be likely to attribute final results to firm intentions, when they are to be attributed in the last resort to a mass of volatile voters. About Athenian motives in 478 Thucydides was quite non-committal: his text, in 1.96, does not help us very much when we speculate, if we do, about the real Athenian intentions. It does not, however, prevent our feeling a certain scepticism about the altruism of their motives in taking over the leadership of the alliance, and it is a scepticism apparently shared by Herodotus (8.3.2), as Rawlings points out (7-8). It is not difficult to believe that in the hard days of the immediate post-war period the Athenians were bound to take advantage of the confused situation in any way they could. Athens had lost two harvests, and her economy was in poor shape; there was a temporary dislocation of supply lines and a general need for relief supplies; the Ionian states which had carried on much of the carrying trade of the Aegean had, through the effects of the revolt and the war, lost much of their capacity. The situation put a premium on naval power and the control of the sea lanes; Athens' greatest asset was her modern war fleet and its back-up of supply vessels, probably much augmented by captured prizes. Taking advantage of the situation meant making maximum use of the fleet for the good of Athens. Desirable objectives were to protect and divert supplies, to commandeer money and treasure, and to seize land for colonists. The leadership of the alliance was of immediate value because it apparently enabled the Athenians practically to decide where and how the allied fleet would be deployed, and how the spoils were to be divided.<sup>6</sup> Athens' losses in the war had been severe, but her post-war economic recovery was startling: it was her use of the allied fleet which enabled her to recoup what she had lost. Thus, under the pressure of immediate problems, Athens took the

<sup>6</sup>For the depredations of Themistocles in the Aegean see Hdt. 8.110-112, 121; for Cimon's division of the spoils see Plutarch *Cimon* 9.

first steps leading towards imperialism: with the passing of time she found no inclination to surrender the advantages and the power she had gained, and it became increasingly dangerous to do so. This is more or less the interpretation offered by the unknown Athenian apologist in Thucydides 1.75, and it is at least plausible, agreeing as it does with the evidence available to us and with the probabilities of the total situation.

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