

THE CORCYRAEAN CIVIL WAR OF 427 B.C.

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IN A STIMULATING ARTICLE ON "Megara and Mytilene" in this journal (22 [1968] 200-225) Dr R. P. Legon investigated the domestic political tensions which accompanied the attempts of these cities to defect from the Peloponnesian League and the Athenian Empire respectively, and concluded that the pressures which the hegemonic states brought to bear upon the internal political organization of their lesser allies dictated the courses of action open to the active politicians, democratic and oligarchic alike, in these allied states. He further drew attention to the role of the *demos*, as a force which could, and sometimes did, act independently of its democratic leaders, or of the men whose aim was to establish a democracy. Studies of this kind are important, because they are essentially addressed to the difficult question of the relationships between Athens and democrats, and Sparta and oligarchs, and why these more powerful states were so often implicated in the *stasis* of a smaller state. And it is on his answer to this question that the historian must base his broad view of the character of the Peloponnesian War and the character of Athenian imperialism. Corcyra presents an unusual case since she belonged to neither the Athenian Empire nor the Peloponnesian League. She thus had no hegemon to exert political pressures, but she experienced a violent civil war over an issue of foreign policy, and one in which the Athenians, the Corinthians, and the Spartans were all involved.

Thucydides begins his account of the Corcyraean *stasis* (3.70-81) with the return to Corcyra of some two hundred and fifty prisoners (cf. 1.55.1) who had been captured by the Corinthians in the battle of Sybota and were ostensibly released for a substantial ransom¹ guaranteed by the *proxenoi* of Corcyra in Corinth,² but in fact had been persuaded to win Corcyra over to the Corinthian cause. They then approached their fellow citizens individually (*ἐκαστον τῶν πολιτῶν*) urging the termination of their defensive alliance with Athens. Subsequently representatives arrived from both Athens and Corinth, and the Corcyraeans, in their democratic assembly apparently, heard both sides and voted for neutrality—to preserve the defensive alliance with Athens but also to

¹But surely not 800 talents, as in our text of Thucydides; see A. W. Gomme, *A Historical Commentary on Thucydides* 2 (Oxford 1956) on 3.70.1.

²Rather than by the *proxenoi* of Corinth in Corcyra (cf., e.g., G. Grote, *A History of Greece* [London 1888 edition] 5.185); Corinthian citizens would be better guarantors whether the deal was genuine or only a credible deception.

be friends to the Peloponnesians as before. It was perhaps a naive and unrealistic decision, but it was clearly the decision of the majority, in effect, of the *demos*. As George Grote observed,³ the mere presence of Corinthian envoys indicated a change in the political feeling of Corcyra. Neutrality, furthermore, had earlier been the policy of Corcyra, and when the alliance with Athens was sought during the dispute over Epidamnus the Corcyraeans felt called upon to excuse themselves for their former ἀπραγμοσύνη, which had seemed prudent before but now appeared to have been a source of weakness.⁴ But as circumstances changed it could be made to appear prudent again.

Now, what are we to make of the returned prisoners? They represented all the free Corcyraean prisoners taken at Sybota, the remaining eight hundred or so being slaves whom the Corinthians had sold. They are described by Thucydides as being in the majority among the foremost men of Corcyra, but in the circumstances of their capture they must have been a sample of the hoplites or *epibatai* on the Corcyraean ships. A. W. Gomme thought them probably patriotic men.⁵ Even if the Corcyraean *epibatai* were all recruited from the hoplite class, rather than from the thetic class as at Athens, there is no reason to suppose that they were supporters of oligarchy, still less that they were pro-Corinthian. The prisoners of war certainly did not make up Grote's "selfish oligarchical party, playing the game of a foreign enemy,"⁶ although they obviously did make some sort of deal for their own release. In making the deal it is probable that a small number of the prisoners conducted the negotiations with the Corinthians, but Thucydides leaves no doubt that the Corinthians were the ones to take the initiative.⁷ A modern pro-Athenian might say that the prisoners had been brain-

³*Ibid.* 5.186. No doubt small groups of activists had arranged for the missions from Athens and Corinth.

⁴Cf. Thuc. 1.32.4-5 and V. Ehrenberg, *JHS* 67 (1947) 52. The Corcyraean vote to remain neutral I described as *perhaps* unrealistic because as events were to turn out Corcyra did not in fact play much part in the subsequent course of the war, and neutrality could later have been a realistic position. We may observe that Corcyra had only once been actively involved in the war before 427, when in 431 she sent fifty ships to assist an Athenian attack on parts of the Peloponnese (Thuc. 2.25.1).

⁵In the usual sense of the word, not in the *ubi bene ibi patria* sense expounded by A. H. Chroust, "Treason and Patriotism in Ancient Greece," *Journ. Hist. Ideas* 15 (1954) 280-288. Arguments that Corcyra was a democracy, or an oligarchy, at the time of the Epidamnian affair are speculative and inconclusive; nor are they relevant to the present study because domestic politics were clearly not a factor in the dispute over Epidamnus. The Corinthians, at any rate, supported the Epidamnian *demos*. For a Corcyraean the issues were first the pride, and ultimately the independence, of his *polis*.

⁶*Op. cit.* (above, n. 2) 5.199.

⁷Thuc. 1.55.1. The account of Diodorus is virtually worthless, and among his errors he makes the Corcyraean prisoners take the initiative (12.57.1-2). On the timing of their release by the Corinthians, see Gomme on 3.70.1.

washed, but between their capture and their release the Peloponnesian War had begun, and, whatever view of the situation had been presented by the Corinthians, patriotic Corcyraeans could reasonably have reached the conclusion that it was in the best interests of their city to avoid active participation in the war.

There was at Corcyra a group which advocated close co-operation with the Athenians. Its most prominent figure was one Peithias, a member of the Corcyraean council, a voluntary *proxenos* of the Athenians,⁸ and a notable political leader of the Corcyraean *demos*. It is important to remember that the *prostates tou demou* was not the leader of a political party in the modern sense, although he depended for his continued influence upon the support of the *demos*, and the procedures of direct democracy imposed upon him a constant and severe strain.⁹ The vote in favour of neutrality which the Corcyraeans passed may be taken as a political defeat for Peithias, whose position in Corcyra would have been immeasurably strengthened by a full alliance with Athens. In these circumstances some of the repatriated prisoners prosecuted Peithias on a charge of enslaving Corcyra to Athens. The issue was one of foreign policy, and so-called enslavement to Athens would have been a real issue, especially if the fate of Mytilene was known, and then especially to all landowners. There is as yet no evidence that the opponents of Peithias were ambitious oligarchs trying to overthrow the democracy. Peithias, however, was acquitted—the jurors either thus endorsing his policies, or considering the charge unfounded, particularly in view of the recent resolution of neutrality—and then brought a counter-action against five of the richest of his opponents, charging them with cutting vine-props on sacred ground.¹⁰ They were condemned and fined, and an appeal about the method of payment was dismissed. The convicted men then turned to violence, but not before learning that Peithias intended to persuade the people to conclude an offensive and defensive alliance with Athens—a drastic change of foreign policy which could have forced Corcyra into the war as a major combatant and which some Corcyraeans could reasonably have thought to be a disastrous course. So, presumably accompanied by supporters, these five invaded the council and stabbed to death Peithias and about sixty others, both

⁸ἐθελοπρόξενος must surely mean not appointed by the Athenians, despite the scholiast who suggests that it means not appointed by the Corcyraeans: ἀφ' ἑαυτοῦ γενόμενος καὶ μὴ κελευσθεὶς ἐκ τῆς πόλεως. οἱ γὰρ πρόξενοι κελευόμενοι ἐκ τῆς ἑαυτῶν πόλεως ἐγένοντο.

⁹On the *prostates tou demou* and on so-called political parties in ancient Greece see the admirable paper by O. Reverdin, "Remarques sur la vie politique d'Athènes au Ve siècle," *MusHelv* 2 (1945) 201–212. On the tension to which democratic political leaders were subject, see M. I. Finley, "Athenian Demagogues," *Past & Present* 21 (1962) 3–24.

¹⁰See Gomme on 3.70.4–5.

councillors and private citizens, in the belief, no doubt, that their own view of patriotism justified the deed. A few of Peithias' supporters escaped the massacre and took refuge on the Athenian trireme which had brought envoys to Corcyra before the assembly passed its resolution of neutrality and which happened still to be in port. One may suspect that the Athenian envoys had been holding further private discussions with Peithias and his group; the Corinthian envoys had apparently left earlier. The Athenian ship may have been the nearest place of safety, or the pro-Athenians may have determined at once to go to Athens themselves to seek assistance, but one must also wonder whether uncertainty about the reaction of the *demos* led them to take this course. The assassins then called an assembly, explained their action as a means of avoiding enslavement by Athens, and proposed, and forced through, a resolution to receive Athenians or Peloponnesians if they came in one ship, but to regard more than this as a sign of hostility. The words *ἐπικυρώσαι ἡνάγκασαν τὴν γνώμην* imply that a surprised *demos*, deprived of its usual spokesmen, was intimidated by a prepared and probably armed faction. Yet the resolution was a remarkably moderate one. The assassins then sent envoys to Athens to explain their actions—a curious course to adopt if their purposes were strongly pro-Peloponnesian—only to have the envoys arrested by the Athenians as revolutionaries.¹¹ The revolution was the abrogation of the limited Corcyraean alliance with Athens.

It was after the arrival of another Corinthian ship at Corcyra, this time with envoys from Sparta on board, that the next serious outburst of violence occurred. "Those in charge of affairs attacked the *demos* and defeated it in a fight." The assassins of Peithias were "in charge of affairs" because they had been able to organize an armed and determined faction, not necessarily very numerous, but strong enough to ensure that the normal processes of law did not operate. The *demos*, which had been divided and uncertain in the debate on foreign policy, without the leadership of a *prostates*, was in no state to take any action at all. Over sixty of the pro-Athenian group had been removed from the scene, so that those who had effected the coup may have feared little opposition at home. But now they attack the *demos* which had twice recently approved resolutions of neutrality. An attack on the *demos* probably means that the *demos* was assembled for some purpose,¹² perhaps to hear new proposals from the Spartan envoys. If this was the

¹¹Gomme, on 3.72.1, wrote: "It may be that Athens held them on behalf of the rightful government in Kerkyra." But "rightful" depends on one's point of view, and there was strictly no "government." The men may have been arrested as murderers of an Athenian *proxenos*, although he was not officially recognised, but more probably as representatives of a group which the Athenians regarded as hostile.

¹²Cf. R. P. Legon, *Demos and Stasis* (Cornell U. dissertation 1966) 23.

case, the political institutions of democracy had not as yet been abolished. Perhaps the *demos* displayed an unexpected independence of mind, but whatever the turn of events the attack on the *demos* at this time was almost certainly prompted by the presence of the Spartans and Corinthians. They were not present in sufficient strength to ensure the success of the attack, so it seems more probable that they urged it than that their presence merely encouraged it. And the object of the attack must have been the overthrow of democracy. I am not at all sure that an oligarchic revolution had been the intention from the beginning;¹³ there had first been an attempt to change the foreign policy of Corcyra through the democratic institutions, and the attempt had been in some measure successful; when a group of pro-Athenians had continued their efforts to secure a closer alliance with Athens, these men had been murdered, but the popular assembly had not been abolished; the revolutionaries had advocated neutrality, but the Peloponnesians could now argue that since the Athenians would undoubtedly strike back at them their only hope lay in closer co-operation with the enemies of Athens, which could best be achieved by an oligarchic government. The *demos* might vote for neutrality, but could hardly be expected to support an alliance with Corinth—indeed, such a proposal may have been rejected by the *demos* at this time.

The *demos*, however, was not to be put down easily. The next day was spent in rallying support, both sides appealing to the slaves in the fields with promises of freedom. Most of the slaves joined the *demos*, while the other party hired eight hundred mercenaries from the mainland. When the fighting resumed, the *demos* was victorious because of its superior numbers and its command of the stronger positions in the city. The Corinthian ship and the mercenaries then made their departures.

Greek political terminology was on the whole imprecise and encourages vagueness in translation; sometimes we have no choice but to be vague, because it is so difficult to ascertain what a Greek term really meant. Thucydides speaks of the *demos* in his narrative of the fighting, but later uses "the Corcyraeans" of the same people massacring their opponents who were alleged to be enemies of democracy. By *demos* we must understand the majority of the citizen body, and the poorer majority, essentially the thetic class, but not necessarily exclusive of people above the thetic class. When the Corcyraeans (Thucydides' term) approved two resolutions of neutrality, a significant proportion of the *demos* must have supported the motions, but so too, no doubt, did many of the richer minority. The *prostatai tou demou* or *prostatai tou demou* are men who have taken an active role in politics, speaking regularly in the assembly, advocating certain policies or courses of action, and have attained their

¹³As argued by Legon, *ibid.* 24–25.

influential position by achieving over a period of time a record of continued support from the *demos*, support, however, which might be withheld at any time and on any issue. Unless such men happened to belong to a distinguished noble family, or were very wealthy, their ability to influence or direct public affairs was dependent upon the preservation of democracy, and in time of civil strife they usually appear as the democratic leaders, especially when any secret negotiations with the Athenians took place. For these were the men in whom the Athenians placed their confidence, and to whom they often entrusted *proxenia*. In an oligarchic state a proponent of democracy could attain prominence, if not political power, by taking a stand as a *prostates tou demou*, and such men too were cultivated by the Athenians with grants of *proxenia* and perhaps with other favours. It is hardly surprising that in times of trouble such democratic leaders should have looked to Athens for aid, and when I spoke of pro-Athenians at Corcyra, I meant not the democrats in the sense of the *demos*, but a relatively small group, in fact Peithias *καὶ οἱ μετ' αὐτοῦ*. All this is not too difficult, but we are on much less secure ground when we begin to speak of the oligarchs. Thucydides uses *οἱ ὀλίγοι* once in his account of the fighting, when the "few" set fire to the houses and buildings around the agora to prevent the *demos* from reaching the arsenal. All that is implied, surely, is those who were fighting against the *demos*, but if we regard them all as oligarchic revolutionaries the later part of Thucydides' narrative presents problems, to which we shall have to turn in due course.

The day after the victory of the *demos* the Athenian general Nicostratus arrived at Corcyra with twelve ships and five hundred Messenian hoplites. His aim was to restore order by persuading both sides to come to terms, which included the prosecution of the ten men most responsible for the *stasis* (who had already gone into hiding), and to arrange an offensive and defensive alliance between Corcyra and Athens. Gomme¹⁴ calls this "a most humane compromise" with the only security asked "the strengthening of the alliance with Athens." There is no question that Nicostratus conducted himself admirably at Corcyra, but Gomme takes the Athenian point of view. Nicostratus was clearly there to act in the interest of Athens, and the alliance which he sought was such as to contravene the earlier Corcyraean policy of non-alignment. It was exactly what the murderers of Peithias had feared and their fears were thus shown to have been well founded. The settlement concluded, Nicostratus was about to leave, but was persuaded by the *prostatai tou demou*—new ones who had emerged as leaders in the fighting perhaps—to leave five ships as a precautionary measure, and to accept an offer of five Corcyraean ships to replace them. The *prostatai*, however, had their

¹⁴On 3.75.1.

opponents conscripted for service on the ships, and thus for removal from the scene, and they, naturally, refused to serve, fearing that they would be taken to Athens as prisoners. So they took up a suppliant position in the temple of the Dioscuri. The *demos* then rearmed, but was restrained by Nicostratus, and "the rest" (of the oligarchs) became suppliants at the temple of Hera, the number of suppliants being at least four hundred. The *demos*, fearing some action by these, transported them to the island opposite¹⁵ and had provisions taken across to them.

On the figure of four hundred suppliants Gomme comments¹⁶ that it "seems to describe *all* the oligarchs who were nervous of democratic promises, which means most oligarchs." But Thucydides (80.1) mentions τοῖς ἄλλοις, as distinguished from the suppliants, and Gomme calls these "yet other 'oligarchs' who were not revolutionaries." His use of inverted commas, of course, suggests awareness of the fact that if they were not revolutionaries there is no ground to call them oligarchs. Further we learn from Thucydides (85.2) that after a frightful massacre of oligarchs there were still some five hundred Corcyraeans who survived and became exiles, and it is natural to regard these as the remnants of the oligarchs. They harassed the city for another two years until they were captured with Athenian help and executed by the Corcyraeans.

Four or five days after the suppliants had been taken to the island fifty-three Peloponnesian ships arrived from Cyllene, under the command of Alcidas, but with Brasidas as adviser, and the Corcyraeans in alarm sent out sixty ships against "the enemy." Two deserted at once, and on others the Corcyraean crews fought among themselves. Thirteen Corcyraean ships were captured in the ensuing sea-battle, in which the twelve Athenian ships under Nicostratus participated, but the next day the Peloponnesian fleet sailed away on learning that an Athenian fleet of sixty ships under Eurymedon was approaching. The mission of these ships was obviously to ensure that Corcyra did not fall into the hands of the Peloponnesians. In the meantime the Corcyraeans had brought back the men from the island to the Heraeum, fearing that the Peloponnesians might gain mastery of the sea. Some of the suppliants and "others" agreed to serve, in order to save their city, on thirty ships which the *demos* manned in expectation of another Peloponnesian attack before the approach of the new Athenian fleet was known in Corcyra. But when the news came "the Corcyraeans" began a massacre of their opponents, including those who had agreed to man the ships with them. About fifty of the suppliants were willing to stand trial, and were condemned to death; others committed suicide; and during the seven-day stay of Eurymedon and his fleet the massacres continued on the pretext

¹⁵Vido: see Gomme on 3.81.5.

¹⁶On 3.75.5.

that the victims had conspired to overthrow the democracy. *πᾶσά τε ἰδέα κατέστη θανάτου.*

Thucydides at a later date appended to his narrative of the Corcyraean *stasis* a remarkable analysis of the phenomenon of which Corcyra had provided the first example.¹⁷ The Corcyraean *stasis* was savage, but it had seemed the more so when it occurred because it was the first. Later such civil violence became widespread in the Greek world because the state of war between the Athenians and the Peloponnesians gave to revolutionary leaders everywhere an opportunity to seek the aid of one side or the other. This would not have happened in peace-time, but in the war an alliance with one of the major combatants was always at hand. Thus every kind of villainy befell the Greek states, and the cause of it all, in Thucydides' judgment, was love of power manifested in greed and personal ambition. The rivalries which developed everywhere induced the *prostatai tou demou* to ask for help from Athens, and the *oligoí* from Sparta.

In the domestic politics of any state a change from oligarchy to democracy, or from democracy to oligarchy, could in normal circumstances only be accomplished by violence. Nor would it be easy to accomplish. In an oligarchy, the *demos* would usually be unarmed and the necessary organization of it difficult to achieve. If the *demos* did rise against an oligarchy it would do so less on ideological grounds than because the men who ruled had aroused popular hatred by their actions in specific situations. In a democracy, where the *demos* could more easily be mobilized, potential oligarchic revolutionaries would be numerically inferior and not likely to succeed unaided. At Corcyra, as we noted, the minority group in the civil war was quick to hire mercenaries. When it was to the advantage of powerful foreign states to assist a revolution in a smaller state, they often did so, and the obvious occasion when there would be an advantage to them would be in time of war. In the Athenian Empire, and in the Peloponnesian League, there were pressures of varying intensity on member states to conform to the political system of the hegemon, and the overthrow of the system supported by the hegemon was virtually impossible without assistance from the rival hegemon. There was, of course, another aspect of the situation: defection from one alliance had no chance of success without a permanent association with the other alliance, and the new hegemon might insist on an internal political change as a part of the bargain. All this suggests, I think, that the responsibility which the larger states must bear for outbreaks of *stasis* in the smaller was probably greater than the remarks of Thucydides at this point might indicate.

Corcyra, however, was a member of neither organization, although

¹⁷Thuc. 3.82-83. Probably written in its final form after 413 B.C. See Gomme on 3.82.1.

she had concluded a defensive alliance with Athens some years before. The larger states did not have the usual reasons to demand certain policies, foreign or domestic, of the Corcyraeans. But in the war Corcyra was, or could be, of strategic importance to both sides, and especially to the Athenians, and it was of great concern to the Peloponnesians, and in particular the Corinthians, to deny Athens the advantages which Corcyra could provide. So the Corcyraeans found that even they could not decide freely to be neutral. Peithias and his friends perhaps realised this and opted for close ties with Athens (they obviously had a personal interest in doing so too); the *demos*, to judge by its first vote for neutrality, evidently did not realise it.¹⁸ And I doubt whether the "oligarchs" realised it either. They thought that by eliminating the leaders who urged the taking of sides they could eliminate their policy, for leaders in a Greek democracy made policy—there was not the continuity, such as it is, of party policy. But in murdering the pro-Athenians they were inevitably starting a civil war, and one in the outcome of which both Athenians and Peloponnesians were vitally interested; both were prepared to intervene, invited or uninvited, it made no difference, the Athenians, as it happened, the more successfully.

Of necessity we have spoken of the "oligarchs," a term which usually implies supporters of oligarchic government. But who were they? The population of a Greek state could be divided into property classes, and the *oligoí* were the minority of the citizen body in the wealthier property classes. An oligarchic government might be narrow, controlled by a small number of the wealthiest families, or might be more broadly based, with political rights given to all of, say, hoplite census, which might be any proportion up to almost half of the citizen body. A few of the wealthiest men might want to govern their *polis* absolutely, but the hoplites as a body would have no great reason to support them. The hoplites might prefer a moderate oligarchy, such as existed in Boeotia at this period, but politically ambitious wealthy men might find such a system no more congenial than democracy, and no more receptive to their leadership. What I conclude from this is that *oligoí* is a useful term for the wealthier minority, but is vague as a political term, and if we understand it to mean those who wish to establish an oligarchy we cannot define the group which we wish to designate by it. There may have been at Corcyra a small faction of oligarchic conspirators, although I feel that the real issue was foreign policy. What I am more convinced of, however, is that in the civil war the fighting was not between "democrats" and "oligarchs," as supporters of different political systems. Passions had been aroused in a tense and complex situation, and violence had erupted. One cannot be neutral in a civil war—the moderate man

¹⁸Cf. again Legon, *op. cit.* (above, n. 12) 24–25.

is treated as an enemy by both sides. So sides were chosen as a result of all sorts of pressures: social or political associations, place of residence, community of interest, personal friendships or hatreds, and so on. As Thucydides observed, debtors took the opportunity to kill their creditors. In short, chaos must have reigned.

To conclude, I believe the whole Corcyraean episode was not so much an exemplar of party feud as an illustration of the evils generated for smaller states by the Peloponnesian War, the *κίνησις* of all Hellas. And it was this aspect of the war that Thucydides in this whole passage was concerned to demonstrate.¹⁹

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¹⁹In this conclusion I come close to acceptance of Gomme's view, with which few have agreed, that Thucydides was expressing his conviction that violence within a state is a natural consequence of war between states. See Gomme's essay "The Greatest War in Greek History" in his *Essays in Greek History and Literature* (Oxford 1937) 116-124.