2 THUCYDIDES THE HISTORIAN

You discovered when reading about the Sicilian Expedition a few hints of the distinctive shaping role played by Thucydides' own viewpoint, even in an apparently straightforward description. Before you go on to read more extensively from his work, I would like you to consider the evidence we have about Thucydides' aims and methods in undertaking his history of the Peloponnesian War.

2.1 THUCYDIDES' AIMS AND METHODS

Please read *Thucydides*, I, 1 and 21–3. As you read make brief notes on the following questions:

(a) Why do you think Thucydides attaches such importance to his history of the war?

(b) Thucydides mentions two main components of historical writing. What are these and how does he say that he tackles them?

Discussion

(a) You might have suggested that the war was *personally* important to Thucydides and of course it did, in a sense, govern his whole life. (We do not know exactly when he was born but since he was strategos in 424 he must by then have attained the minimum age, thirty, for that office.) It was in this year that he was exiled for military failure. He died soon after the final Athenian defeat in 404. But personal considerations are not the basis of Thucydides' claims about the importance of the war. Although war was endemic among the Greek states, it was the length and scope of the Peloponnesian War which distinguished it for Thucydides. No polis could escape being drawn into it (notice how in I, 23 he associates war with the outbreak of internal struggles as well) and the sufferings associated with it were extreme and protracted. But as well as justifying his account on the grounds of the importance of its subject, Thucydides also claims that it will be *useful*. The precise meaning of the sentences in which he makes this claim (the last two sentences in I, 22) has been much disputed by scholars. Look at the passage again now. It seems to me that Thucydides is making two claims. The first is that his work will help people to *understand* what happened — surely an impeccable aim for the historian. His second claim is less straightforward. He says that this understanding will be useful in the future when similar situations arise. The important point is, what does Thucydides mean by this? Does he intend us to believe that history will repeat itself, perhaps in a cyclic form? In my view the key words in interpreting this passage are 'human nature being what it is'. Thucydides does not mean that history repeats itself exactly but rather that similar problems about political decisions and actions and about the taking and exercise of power would occur again in the future. It is worth remembering that Thucydides was writing for an educated and informed Greek audience — men who would be likely to have a part in the decision-making process of their own polis. The 'understanding' which he wishes to promote would then undoubtedly have a practical application.

(b) The two components of historical writing distinguished by Thucydides (in I, 22) are 'set speeches' and 'factual reporting of the events'. His discussion of 'factual reporting' is the more straightforward. His stress is on accuracy, based mainly on the comparison and evaluation of eye-witness accounts with special attention to the possibility of bias or error on the part of his informants. Elsewhere (V, 26) he comments on the fact that his exile gave him a more balanced view of the evidence from both sides than if he had remained in Athens.

2.2 THUCYDIDES: THE FACTUAL REPORTER

There are many substantial sections of historical narrative in Thucydides. Some of these are combined with description and you have already encountered an example when you read the section about the departure of the Sicilian Expedition. Now I would like you to read a particularly famous passage in which Thucydides interrupts his narrative of the events of the second year of the war (430) in order to describe in detail the epidemic which broke out at Athens. Please read *Thucydides*, II, 47–55. As you read keep in mind the following questions (making notes if you wish):

(i) To what extent do you think Thucydides' account represents a medical excursus.

(ii) To what extent does it inform our understanding of the progress of the war?

(To make up your mind about this you will have to consider *both* the placing of the account of the plague in the narrative and the way the account itself is handled by Thucydides.)

Discussion

The first important point to note is the way in which Thucydides relates the account to the immediate narrative context. He describes the Peloponnesian invasion of the Attic countryside, which in turn accounts for the concentration of population within Athens itself (II, 52). This over-population increased the sufferings of the people and indeed the insanitary and crowded conditions may well have contributed to the intensity of the epidemic (which was probably typhus).

Notice too that although Thucydides describes in detail the symptoms of the victims he is equally interested in the effects on society.

Did you notice that Thucydides moves directly from Pericles' Funeral Speech (431/430) into the account of the plague (430)? Think back to your study of the Funeral Speech in Unit One and compare the triumphant affirmation of Athenian achievement and social cohesion conveyed by the speech with the suffering and social fragmentation described in the account of the plague. Indeed, it is in this culminating part of the account (II, 51–54) that the contrast with the self-confident society portrayed in the Funeral Speech is at its most pointed.

On balance, therefore, I would say that although Thucydides' inclusion of medical details goes beyond what is strictly required by the narrative, the account as a whole greatly adds to our understanding not merely of the events of 430 but more particularly of the social effects of misery, uncertainty and deprivation. If you turn to III, 87 you will find a specific comment on the plague's recurrence and its effects on the fighting strength of the Athenians. Surprisingly the effect on manpower is not mentioned in this part of the account (but cf. II, 56–8), probably because Thucydides is mainly concerned with the social and political effects, including recourse to oracles (note his ironic comment in Section 54).

I headed this section 'Thucydides: the factual reporter', and clearly his account is based solidly on empirical evidence. But the point of the account lies in Thucydides' interpretation of what happened. Even in this account, although his method has sometimes been described as 'scientific', it is clear that it consists not merely of the accurate recording of data but also of illuminating his central theme, the progress of the war, by juxtaposition and interpretation of the evidence.

2.3 THUCYDIDES: THE REPORTER OF SPEECHES

The method used by the historian in the set speeches is one of the major problems to be encountered in any study of Thucydides. Formal speeches and debates are an essential part of any ancient historian's work — an element which as a convention had to be included. What is significant here is Thucydides' discussion of the way he tackles them. (And note he uses the past tense throughout. I think we can take this as a late passage — a statement of achievement not merely of intention.) He acknowledges the impossibility of precise

accuracy in reporting. His method was instead: 'while keeping as closely as possible to the general sense of the words that were actually used, to make the speakers say what, in my opinion, was called for by each situation'. Again, in trying to interpret this sentence we are entering a scholarly minefield. Notice that Thucydides makes no distinction between his treatment of the speeches he himself heard and those reported at second hand. What he is claiming is that his treatment of each speech conveys what was necessary in the circumstances — what was called for by each situation; in other words his treatment is the result of *his own judgement* about what were the real issues and principles involved, while at the same time conveying the main outline of what the speaker said. The speeches, then, are not dramatic *inventions*, but they are (as well as being historical recreations) in a sense Thucydides' own commentary on the underlying reasons for actions and events which he tried to report factually. Consideration of the relationship between speeches and narrative will be a central issue in our study of the Sicilian Expedition.

You are now going to read II, 59–65, which is the last speech of Pericles together with Thucydides' own comments. I have chosen this speech for special attention because it coheres naturally with your earlier reading of the Funeral Speech and with the plague sequence. It also introduces some issues which will be important for your study of the Sicilian Expedition. Please read the section carefully and write short notes on these topics.

(a) How far do you think Pericles' position was prejudiced by what had happened to the Athenians in the first two years of the war?

(b) What, according to Thucydides, is Pericles' attitude to the Empire?

(c) Look closely at Section 65. What is Thucydides' attitude to Pericles?

Discussion

(Remember to regard your notes as only a *starting point* for the discussion.)

(a) Pericles' position. The first thing to remember is that Pericles was an elected leader of the democracy (one of the ten strategoi, see Unit One, Section 2.2.2). He was therefore accountable and, although his position as in effect the *leading* strategos rested on his own authority and reputation and was not an official post, it did mean that he would have been judged by both political and military criteria. It is perhaps significant that Thucydides suggests that this policy speech of Pericles was delivered at a time when not only had the Athenians been devastated by plague and their countryside subjected to a second Spartan invasion, but also the expeditionary force which Pericles had organized against the Peloponnese (II, 56) had been only partially successful and the attempt of another strategos, Hagnon, to capture Potidaea had failed (II, 58). Thucydides states (II, 59) that the Athenians 'began to blame Pericles for having persuaded them to go to war' and in an earlier passage (II, 13–14), which you studied for cassette Band 2, he attributes to Pericles the policy of:

(i) The evacuation of the population of the countryside into the city in the face of invasion by Spartan landforces;

(ii) Consolidation of naval strength rather than engaging in battle by land; and

(iii) Reliance on the huge financial reserves and military fortification which the Athenians possessed. The combination of the loss of crops and property in Attica with the outbreak of plague in the crowded city had, as you have seen, a profound effect on Athenian morale and Thucydides gives this (II, 59) as the reason for Pericles wishing to address the Assembly (which incidentally had technically to be summoned by the prytaneis, see Unit One, Section 2.2.2, although doubtless Pericles' prestige was such that they would not have refused his request).

Notice that Thucydides carefully explains this context for the speech before telling us what Pericles said. This is characteristic of the way in which Thucydides 'places' major speeches in the text. It is also characteristic of his method that he devotes a section (II, 65) to telling us of the effect of the speech — that the Athenians accepted Pericles' arguments but public opinion was only placated by fining him. We cannot be certain of the charge against him, but possibly it concerned some financial impropriety. This was a standard Athenian

method of expressing disapproval of a leading politician's policy or of his military failure. Such a fine automatically entailed dismissal from office, although Thucydides indicates that Pericles was soon re-elected (and note the historian's sarcasm at the fickleness of public opinion).

The way in which Pericles' position was threatened at this time, and the reasons why he became unpopular, give us valuable information on a number of topics. First, we learn something about the relationship between the democracy and its leaders, who were subject to the policy decisions of the Assembly (although compare Thucydides' remarks in II, 65 about the nature of Pericles' leadership, discussed in Unit One, Section 4.3). Secondly, we can see the stresses and strains placed on Athenian policy, partly because of the unforeseeable misfortune of the plague, but also because of the distress caused by the invasion and devastation of their farms. Thirdly, Thucydides' own judgements invite us to consider a larger perspective than that of the mere reporting of events and speeches. His specific comments are made with some advantages of hindsight. He also makes Pericles introduce more profound questions, such as those concerning the nature of the taking and holding of power — perhaps these indicate problems which Thucydides himself considered fundamental to the conduct of the war?

(b) Pericles' attitude to the Empire and to the war, according to Thucydides, are two closely connected aspects of the speech. Broadly, Pericles' attitude is that the Athenians must face up to the implications of both. So far as the war is concerned, it would be both dishonourable and disastrous to try to negotiate peace merely because they were suffering and depressed. Note the stress on reputation (II, 61) and honour (II, 63); but it is not only to such values that Pericles appeals. He also tries to convince the Athenians that it is positively in their *interest* to continue. (The argument closely follows that of the Athenian spokesman at Sparta at the outbreak of the war, I, 76.) If they give in now they will lose not only the war but their Empire. Their freedom *and* their prosperity are at stake. Pericles tries to restore the Athenians' confidence by emphasizing that the Empire rests not only on the support of the allies but on the Athenians' naval supremacy (for discussion of the importance of sea power compare I, 143 and II, 13, also the Old Oligarch 2(5), *Anthology* A6). The passage in which he compares the power accruing from the navy with the affluence represented by houses and land is especially significant, perhaps implying that those who were arguing for peace represented the interests of those who had suffered most from successive invasions by Sparta.

Thucydides makes Pericles apply very similar arguments in the section on Empire (II, 63). Holding on to the Empire is a matter both of honour and of self-interest. It would be dangerous to let it go. The analogy with tyranny has been much discussed. Some historians see it as a critical *moral* comment by Thucydides but I think the force of the analogy is derived from the realistic implication that it is when tyrants cease to be tyrannical that they are deposed — in failing to exercise superior power they lose authority. Thucydides is saying that the same holds true of imperial power.

We shall return in the next section to problems concerned with the exercise of power, but here it is significant that Pericles associates the setting up and survival of the Empire with certain qualities of the citizens — courage, intelligence and the capacity for decisive action. Politically apathetic or inactive people (identified here with those who want peace, but not pacifists in the sense that we would use the word) are, he says, in effect parasites upon the rest. It would be worth comparing the sentiments expressed in II, 63 with your notes on the qualities celebrated in the Funeral Speech (Unit One, Section 5.2).

(c) With regard to Thucydides' attitude to Pericles, the whole section appears to be a vindication of Pericles. In the postscript to the speech, Thucydides defends Pericles' policy, his integrity and his judgement, significantly comparing Pericles' qualities with those of his successors, whose policies were, he says, both more ambitious and more dangerous and in addition were often the result of factional rivalry. Notice especially the contrast between the alleged capacity of Pericles to guide the democracy without offending it, and Thucydides' assertion that the subsequent leaders' speeches so inflamed the Assembly that they lost control of policy to it. In II, 60 Pericles set out his (and Thucydides'?) criteria for leadership — knowledge (i.e. sound judgement) and the ability to express it (i.e. to convince the Assembly), combined with integrity and patriotism. In making Pericles deliver such a speech Thucydides is not only giving us his own judgement of Pericles' policies and attitudes, he is also telling us what he, as a historian, thinks the Athenians were like at this time — what they doubted and feared, what they valued and found convincing, how they

reacted in times of stress. To me the speech strikes a note of immediacy and realism which is lacking in the idealized subject matter of the Funeral Speech. But precisely because of the vigour and urgency of the Last Speech we might be in danger of being carried away by some of the judgements contained in it. When Thucydides describes Pericles' difficulties and conveys to us what he himself regards as the real situation and the real alternatives open to the Athenians, he does not tell us the whole story. He conveys little of Pericles as a man, logically enough, since his concern is with policy and the conduct of the war. (Other sources indicate that even before the war Pericles may have been under very severe attack, which included the prosecution of some of his friends, see Units 7–8, Section 5.4 and Cassette Side 1 Band 3.)

We also need to consider the extent to which Thucydides' attitude to Pericles is coloured by his view of the working of the democracy — how much did the mere fact of Pericles' supremacy (which Thucydides praised) contribute to the public resentment which Thucydides describes? Was 'government by the first citizen' praised by Thucydides because he had high regard for Pericles' judgement or because he distrusted the reactions of the Assembly, or both? It is significant that Thucydides, in recounting that the Assembly was convinced by Pericles' *arguments* and agreed to retain his policy, adds that he was fined and deposed anyway. To what extent is his comment on the Assembly's later change of mind ('as is the way with crowds') counterbalanced by the evidence elsewhere in the section that it was the general and continuing misery of the population which caused it to react against the rational approach of Pericles and attack him personally? The latter point assumes a comment on the working of society as a whole rather than merely on the characteristics of a political system.

Now turn to your Cassette Notes. You should listen to Band 3 before you read Section 3 of this unit.

3 SPEECHES AND DEBATE IN THUCYDIDES

So far you have looked in some detail at two of the speeches in Thucydides. Both were attributed to Pericles but you saw how in spite of some personal touches the important differences in content and tone were a result of the historian's use of the speeches as a commentary on the narrative action. You saw, too, that the historian's conception of speech reporting involved giving a shaping role to his judgement about 'what the situation required' as well as including the essentials of what was said.

If you were reading the whole of Thucydides' work you would encounter many different kinds of speech, ranging from the Funeral Speech through debates in the Assembly, or between ambassadors to generals' encouragement to their troops before battle.[1] In the next section I shall raise specific questions about the relationship between speeches and narrative in Thucydides' account of the Sicilian Expedition. In this section I am going to ask you to focus on one rather special example of Thucydides' use of speakers in formal debate, the Melian Dialogue (V, 85–113). The dialogue has provoked an enormous range of critical comment, the most important examples of which are listed under your further reading. I have chosen to consider it here for two reasons. Thematically it will help to inform your understanding of the Sicilian Expedition, since it both develops the concept of imperial power set out in Pericles' last speech (II, 65) and foreshadows some of the issues and attitudes which underly the debates about Sicily which you will encounter in Books VI and VII. Secondly, the dialogue raises difficult but important questions about the attitude of Thucydides himself to the holding and exercising of power. The dialogue itself is, as you will discover, far from typical of Thucydides' treatment of deliberation and debate. Diplomatic and political niceties are stripped away. The historical context itself, which is harrowing but not untypical, is not explored.

3.1 THE MELIANS AND THE ATHENIANS

First, a word about the context. The island of Melos in the southern Aegean (see Map 10 in the Course Guide) had consistently refused to pay tribute to the Athenians (in fact, she inclined towards Sparta and may have given her support). In 425 Melos was assessed at the high rate for tribute of fifteen talents but she did not pay. Eventually, in 416, Athens put pressure on her. Melos still refused, was besieged and eventually surrendered. All the men of military age were killed, the rest of the population enslaved, and the island colonized by the Athenians. In itself the event was not unique – Scione had been similarly treated (V, 32), Mytilene almost so (III, 50). What is unique is the way Thucydides has used the occasion to construct a dialogue between the Athenians and the Melians, taking place before the island was blockaded.

3.2 THE MELIAN DIALOGUE

Please read *Thucydides*, V, 84–116 and Appendix 3 of the Penguin edition (pp.614–16) which says something about the untypical lack of clarity in Thucydides' treatment of the context. I propose to discuss only two of the many problems the dialogue raises so it will help if you keep these two questions in mind as you read:

(i) What is the Athenians' basic justification for their action in threatening Melos?

(ii) What difficulties do we meet in trying to discover Thucydides' own attitude to what is said?

[1] For a list of typology of some 141 speeches in Thucydides, see West III, W.C. (1973) 'The Speeches in Thucydides, a description and listing' in Stadter, P.A. (ed.) *The Speeches in Thucydides*, The University of North Carolina Press.

Discussion

(i) The Athenians state that they are not going to justify their action by the usual emotive appeals to their historical status as the leaders of the Greeks against the Persians (V, 89) nor are they concerned with what is fair or just or consistent with religious beliefs. Their view is that their own interests must be paramount and since they consider it in their interest to control Melos they will exercise their superior power and do so — 'it is a general and necessary law of nature to rule wherever one can' (V, 105).

The philosophical implications of this may interest you. You will be able to explore them in Units Ten and Eleven, *Plato: Gorgias*. You may have remembered, too, from your reading of the Mytilene debate (III, 36–50), that there was an underlying assumption in the speeches of both Cleon and Diodotus that the Athenians should always act in their own interest. The debate was not about morality; it was about their disagreement over what action towards Mytilene was in the Athenians' best interests. As Diodotus puts it: 'I call upon you to accept my proposal as the better one. Do not be swayed too much by pity or by ordinary decent feelings. I, no more than Cleon, wish you to be influenced by such emotions . . . In following this course you will be acting wisely for the future and will be doing something which will make your enemies fear you now' (III, 48).

(ii) Events prove the Athenian judgement correct. She is stronger than Melos and conquers her, but Thucydides mentions this almost as an afterthought (V, 116). I think Thucydides' treatment of the episode indicates that he wants us to concentrate on the abstract parts of the argument and not on the details of the Athenian position at the time. He could have made the Athenians argue that they could not risk Melos joining Sparta, that they needed an example to encourage other reluctant allies, that they had the support of Melian democrats (if such existed). But he does none of these things; he makes the Athenians say the equivalent of 'Hard luck, we are acting in our own interest and if you are sensible you will realize you have no hope against us because we are stronger than you. So you ought to stop bleating about freedom and justice and give in gracefully while you've still got the chance'. Thucydides is, I think, telling us that this is what power is really about.

A further and more difficult question remains. Does Thucydides approve or disapprove of the view stated by the Athenians? A number of historians have engaged in controversy about this. On the one hand he has been identified with those who believe 'might is right' (this is one of the views you will be exploring in the *Gorgias*). On the other hand, some believe that he is drawing our attention to the 'unacceptable face of imperialism', that he is acting as a moralist fostering our sense of revulsion. This indeed may be the *effect* of the passage, but is it the *intention*? Can we ever know?

My own view is that we cannot be certain about Thucydides' attitude here but that in any case it is unlikely that he set out to promote either of the two viewpoints identified in the previous paragraph. What *is* clear is that the abstract manner in which he treats the episode indicates that he is using it to 'signpost' issues and assumptions that he considers of fundamental importance to the conduct of the Empire and of the war. He is *using* particular events to illustrate general issues. In throwing the statements of the Athenians into relief, divorced from his usual exploration of the strategic and diplomatic context, he is making a bleak comment on the harsh realities of life. Might may not be morally right but it is nevertheless decisive. Unlike other speeches, the debate is not a commentary on a particular section of narrative, although it may be a commentary on the whole work. In giving us 'what the situation required', Thucydides can hardly be referring to the requirements of diplomacy! The 'requirements' here are those associated with the exercise of power. The dialogue builds on the asssumption, already introduced in the Mytilene debate, that states act according to their own interests as they perceive them and adds to it the further claim that the parameters of 'interest' are defined by power. This conjunction of interest and power is important for our understanding of the psychology behind the Athenian venture in Sicily, to which we shall turn in the next section.

Figure 7 Coins of Melos c. 420–416. Both coins come from a hoard of nearly 100 coins discovered on Melos in 1907, which is the source of all known specimens of these types. The hoard may have been buried during the Athenian siege of 416 since it contains Melian issues of the immediately preceding years which had not yet been circulated.

(a) Reverse Stater (obverse not shown): Ram's head MAΛΙΟΝ

(b) Obverse Stater (reverse not shown): Apple. The design is a pun on the island's name (melon *means apple). (Hirmer Fotoarchiv.)*

4 THE SICILIAN EXPEDITION

This is the most substantial section of the unit and you will be doing most of your detailed reading of Thucydides here. We shall be approaching the material from two critical perspectives. First, in your use and interpretation of Thucydides as the main source you will need to draw on the preliminary studies of his method and ideas made in earlier sections of this unit. The cassette exercises in Band 3 will help to reinforce this aspect of your work. Secondly, in focusing on the slide from greatness into disaster in Athenian affairs, you will build on the knowledge you have already gained from Unit One and from Sections 1–3 of this unit about how the Athenians made policy decisions, how their chain of command worked and how they set about trying to break out of the stalemate into which the war with Sparta had fallen.

Thucydides gives a detailed account of the Sicilian Expedition in Books VI and VII. You will not be expected to study these in their entirety, although I hope that many of you will want to read through the whole account. Our method of study will consist of a guided reading of key passages (Sections 4.2–4.6) followed by a detailed analysis of one central question 'Why did the Athenians fail in Sicily?' (Section 4.7). Keep this question in mind as you work through the sections which lead up to it.

4.1 THE IMPORTANCE OF SICILY

Please look at Map 10 in the Course Guide. You can see that the Sicilian cities are identified as allies of Athens or of Sparta. Actually, the position was rather more complex and changeable. The reasons for this are to be found in the origins of the cities themselves. In Radio Programme 1, Greek Colonization, A.J. Graham explained how pressures of

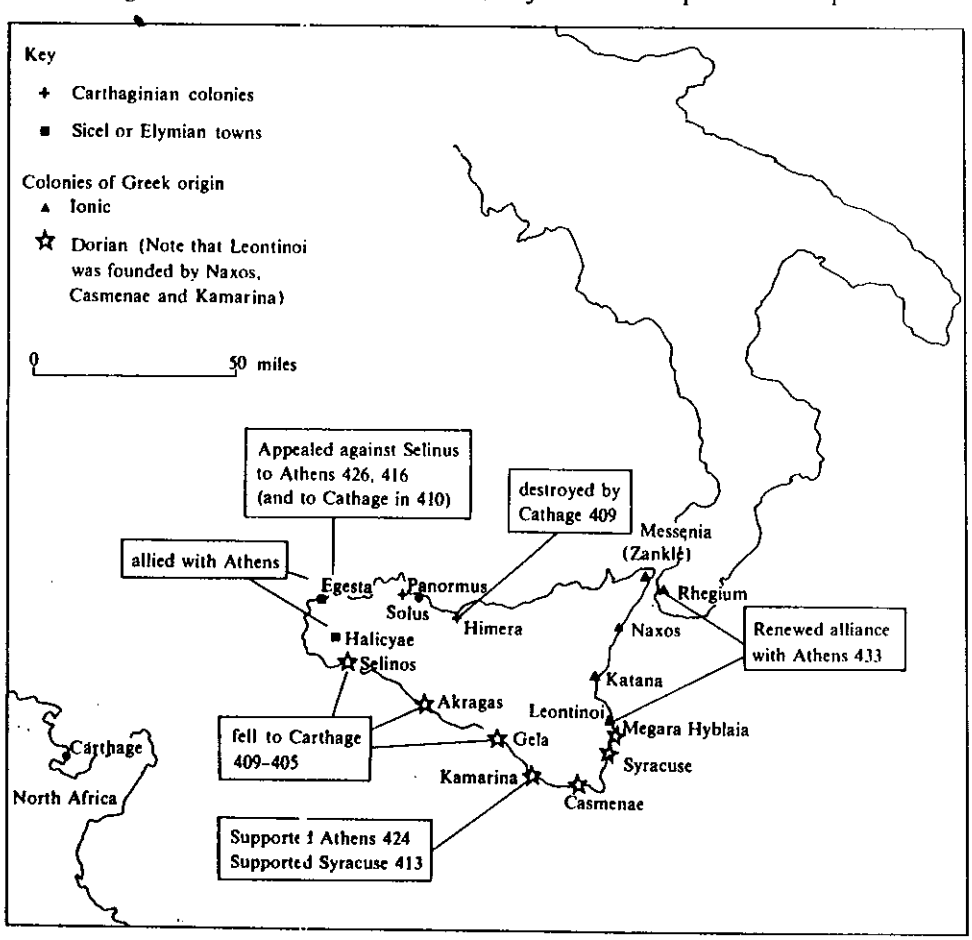


Figure 8 Sketch map of Sicily showing ori ins of colonies and fifth-century alliances

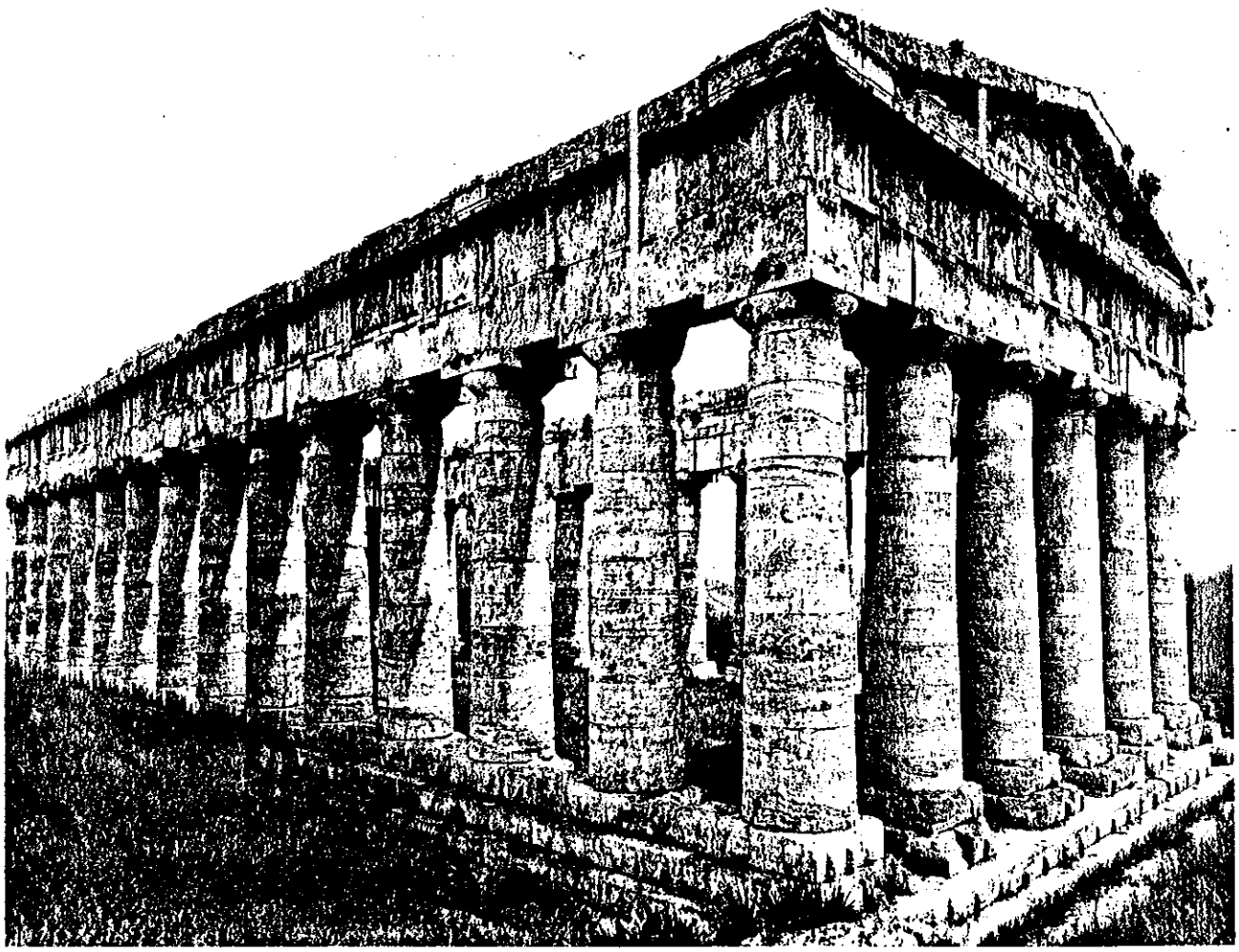


Figure 9 Temple of (S)Egesta. Egesta's origins were not Greek, but Hellenic influence is evident in the unfinished Doric temple of the late fifth-century. (Alinari.)

population in the period from the eighth century to the sixth century led to the Greek cities founding colonies along the Mediterranean coast, including the agriculturally promising areas of southern Italy and Sicily. There are important ecological differences between present day Sicily and the land which was so attractive to colonization. Ancient Sicily was well forested and had a good supply of water from rivers and springs. The rainfall was much higher than nowadays so the soil was fertile. In addition, the south coast offered good beaches. (It was initially the Greek practice to beach their ships. The Great Harbour at Syracuse was developed later.) The colonies adapted their development to local conditions but retained their Greek institutions and culture and although most were fully independent they retained strong links with their founding cities and were usually allied with them in war. In addition, some colonies founded further cities for themselves. Thus during the Peloponnesian War the Sicilian cities tended to have the same allegiance as their mother cities. Now look at Figure 8 opposite in which the main cities in Sicily are identified according to the origins of their founders. Notice, too, the Carthaginian influence in the west. At its nearest point North Africa is only 160km. from Sicily.

The Sicilian cities with which Athens had had the closest relationship were those originally founded from Ionia. (Of which Athens considered herself the mother city and from where the Athenian Empire drew great strength. (Look at the eastern part of Map 10 and see Unit One, Section 3.4). She also allied herself with western cities of non-Greek origin such as Halicyae and Egesta. Cities of Dorian foundation usually supported Sparta. Remember, too, that both Ionians and Dorians had had to come to terms with the pre-existing population. Generally speaking, the Ionians had a reputation for co-operation and gradual absorption, the Dorians for domination. (*Thucydides*, VI, 1–6 contains a chronologically suspect excursus on the history of Sicily. Cassette Side 1 Band 3 explores

Figure 10 Tetradrachm of Leontini, c. 450. Reverse: Lion's head and barley grains LEONTINON. The four grains are normally found on the reverses of Leontini coinage and refer to the fertile plain to the north of its site. The lion's head is a pun on the city's name. The lion is also associated with Apollo whose head is shown on the obverse. The coinage ended when Leontini became dependent on Syracuse in 422.

The function of Sicilian coinage was political, artistic and psychological rather than commercial (few examples have been found outside Sicily). It is a useful source of evidence for study of the pattern of cultural and political influences between the Sicilian cities. (Hirmer Fotoarchiv.)
All coins enlarged × 2

further the question of Thucydides' reliability when he acts, in effect, as a secondary source for the more remote history of the Greeks.)

We know from inscriptions that the Athenians had entered into alliances with Egesta and Halicyae (in western Sicily) in the 450s and 440s and with Rhegion (in southern Italy) and Leontini in the 440s and again in 433–2. Six years later (in 427) both cities appealed to Athens to help Leontini preserve her independence from the powerful city of Syracuse to the south, which was closely allied to the Athenians' enemy Corinth. Although it no longer enjoyed the same power it had had in the 470s, Syracuse was still the leading city in the western Mediterranean and we know from Diodorus Siculus (XII, 30, 1) that by 439–8 the Syracusans had built 100 triremes, doubled the number of their cavalry, increased their infantry and exacted heavy tribute from the indigenous population. Diodorus attributes these activities to a desire to dominate the whole of Sicily.

It was clearly in the Athenians' interest to prevent Sicily, with its valuable corn exports, being drawn into the Peloponnesian camp, so an expeditionary force of twenty ships was sent. Thucydides says the Athenians did this 'ostensibly because of their kinship with the Leontinians, though their real aims were to prevent corn being brought in to the Peloponnese from the west and to make a preliminary survey to see whether it would be possible for them to gain control of Sicily' (III, 86). Thucydides emphasizes his belief that Athens had long aspired to dominate Sicily when he attributes the alliance with Corcyra (433) not only to the wish to gain the help of the Corcyraean navy but also to the 'fact that Corcyra lay very conveniently on the coastal route to Italy and Sicily' (I, 44).

Messina agreed to join Athens and Athens thus received the major advantage of control of the Straits of Messina (southern Italy was almost two miles away). The old alliance with Egesta was renewed but otherwise the venture had little success.

Eventually a congress of the Sicilian states held at Gela in 424 agreed on a peace plan according to which the Sicilians were to arrange their own affairs and the Athenians withdrew (IV, 58–65). Nothing effective was done by the Athenians to help the democrats of Leontini when they were driven out by the oligarchs who were in collusion with Syracuse. For a while the Athenians' interest in Sicily appeared to lie dormant, but after the failure of Athenian attempts to break the stalemate north of the Gulf of Corinth and in the Peloponnese, their thoughts returned to the area when their intervention was requested by Egesta in 416. Apparently, the Athenians had forgotten that they had got their fingers burnt in 424.

4.2 ATHENIAN POLICY IN SICILY IN 415

The arguments used by the Egestaeans to persuade the Athenians to intervene on their behalf in their quarrel with the Selinuntines are summarized by Thucydides in Book VI, 6. Briefly, these arguments were strategic and financial. The strategic argument was that if Athens permitted the Selinuntines to invoke the aid of Syracuse, the Syracusans would soon dominate the whole of Sicily and would have a strong base for assisting the Spartans in their war with Athens (we have no independent evidence to help us decide whether the suggested threat from Syracuse was a real one). The financial argument was that the Egestaeans themselves could supply sufficient money to finance the war. The Athenian Assembly therefore decided to send representatives to Egesta to verify the claims of the Egestaeans.

The report of the Athenian delegation, the decision of the Athenians and the subsequent debate in the Assembly are recounted by Thucydides in Book VI, 8–29. Please read this now and as you read make short notes in answer to the following questions.

(a) What was the Athenians' initial decision? (Section 8)

(b) Why did Nicias want the matter re-opened? What were his main arguments against the expedition? (Sections 9–14)

(c) What were Alcibiades' arguments in favour of the expedition? (Sections 15–18)

(d) According to Nicias, what were the logistic problems involved? (Section 19–26)

(e) In what respects does Thucydides suggest the mutilation of the Herms affected the launching of the expedition? (Sections 27–9)

Discussion

(a) The Athenians decided (on false evidence as Thucydides points out) to send out sixty ships to Sicily and appoint as commanders Alcibiades, Nicias and Lamachus. Note that the cost of running a ship for one month was one talent (rowers were paid by the day) and that the question of equipment and supplies was to be considered separately.

(b) Nicias was unwilling to move on to consider logistic matters since he was unhappy about the *principle* of Athenian intervention in Sicily. He opposed intervention for the following reasons:

(i) Athenians would be dividing their forces and would have the dual disadvantage of leaving behind their enemies in the Peloponnese and Aegaean (who might renew hostilities at any time and would be more likely to do so if they saw Athens acting aggressively) and making new enemies in Sicily.

(ii) Athens' allies in Greece were not totally loyal and might revolt when the Athenians' backs were turned.

(iii) The argument that the Syracusans might bring a united Sicily to the aid of Sparta was spurious since the Sicilian cities would revolt against Syracusan leadership.

(iv) The Athenians' real enemy was Sparta (and note Nicias' emphasis on the value the Spartans attached to military glory).

(v) The Athenians were only just recovering from the effects of the plague and of the ten years of war from 431–421. They were still short of men and money.

(vi) The expedition was planned by one faction for its own aggrandizement and profit. Note the emphasis on Alcibiades' immaturity, although he is not specifically named, and also on the social and political tensions in Athens.

(vii) The Sicilians did not come within the Athenians' sphere of interest (for both the political reasons stated earlier and for geographical reasons).

Did you notice the rhetorical flourish at the beginning of the speech (Section 9) when Nicias says it would be useless to advise the Athenians to safeguard what they already have and not to risk it for the sake of doubtful future gains? He then goes on to make precisely that attempt. The general policy he advocates is not original. It should have reminded you of the policy Pericles set out in his Last Speech (see Section 2.3 above).

(c) Thucydides prefaces Alcibiades' speech with a hostile introduction, attributing Alcibiades' support of the expedition to personal motives. Remember that in Athenian terms the desire for personal success, wealth and above all honour was commendable. What was not commendable was lack of respect for public institutions (whether religious or political), and it is this which is the main focus of Thucydides' accusations. You can hear more about Alcibiades' private life in Radio Programme 4. What is important here is the policy he puts forward and the arguments he uses to justify it. Notice especially the way in which Thucydides makes Alcibiades emphasize the honour brought to his polis, as well as to himself, by his successes in the Olympic Games and his performance of various liturgies, subtly associating his magnificence with youthful vigour and the capacity for dynamic action. After this personal justification he goes on to justify his policy on the following grounds.

(i) The Sicilian cities were weak because they were divided *within* themselves, both ethnically and politically.

(ii) The Sicilians were short of hoplite strength.

(iii) The ancestors of the Athenians had managed to defeat the Persians and deal with disloyal 'allies' at the same time.

(iv) The Athenians had sworn to help their allies and this should apply as much to Sicily as to the Empire (again notice the stress on vigorous action, Section 18).

(v) A show of strength would depress the Spartans.

(vi) The power of the city could not remain static. It had either to grow or to diminish.

In general, Alcibiades' speech is very little concerned with logistics. It is primarily a celebration of the restless energy which he claims has created the Empire. Compare Pericles in Book II, 63.

Figure 11 Tetradrachm of Egesta, c. 410.

Obverse: River-god and hound. Reverse: Nymph Segesta sacrificing over a wreathed altar. The left hand holds a laurel branch; on the right Nike (winged victory) flies to crown her.

The mint at Egesta is important because, unlike most of the others, it did not adopt the galloping quadriga type associated with Syracuse. (Hirmer Fotoarchiv.)

Figure 12 Tetradrachm of Selinus, c. 410.

Obverse: Quadriga, with horses galloping with female driver. Ear of barley and SELINONTION.

Selinus (the most western of the Greek cities in Sicily) was destroyed in 409. This is its last coin, probably taking its design from a Syracusan model. (Hirmer Fotoarchiv.)

(d) When Nicias has lost the argument on principle, he still makes an indirect attempt to change Athenian policy on logistic grounds. In Section 20 Thucydides makes him emphasize the number and strength of the Sicilian cities, the efficiency of their ships, and their superior resources in horses and corn. Therefore the Athenians would have to ensure the participation of their allies' forces of archers and slingers, since the transport of cavalry would be difficult. Their force would be too large to be supplied on the march, so they must carry their own provisions, and to ensure superiority at sea they would require at least 100 triremes (not sixty as originally envisaged). In describing the Athenians' reaction to Nicias' speech, Thucydides suggests that the Athenians saw the expedition as providing an opportunity to enhance their prosperity, rather than as part of the war strategy against Sparta. Ironically, Nicias' large demands for men and ships, which were intended to dissuade the Athenians from going at all, in fact had the effect of making the undertaking more ambitious.

(e) A Herm was a stone pillar with carved head and erect phallus and was supposed to ward off evil. Accusations were quickly extended to include Profanation of the Mysteries (i.e. the Eleusinian mysteries, which involved secret and very sacred rites). Popularly the events would have been interpreted as a bad omen. Politically they were a sign of rivalry and tension and nearly prevented Alcibiades' assumption of the command. We shall be looking in Units 7–8 at the religious and social background to these events. At present it is the military consequences which you should bear in mind.

Now please re-read *Thucydides* VI, 30–2. Now that you have studied the debates and events leading to the Sicilian Expedition, have you changed any of your earlier responses to Thucydides' description of its launching?

At the very beginning of this unit I asked you to respond imaginatively to Thucydides' description. Your reaction may well have been heightened by your experience of the atmosphere in Britain at the time of the departure of the Royal Navy Task Force to the South Atlantic in the Spring of 1982. (That crisis arose after these units had been prepared!) But now that you have studied the events preceding the launching of the Sicilian Expedition you will have discovered that the differences between the ancient and modern occasion are more illuminating than the similarities, giving valuable insight into the way Athenian society differed from our own. Think especially about the pretexts for the expedition, about the decision-making process leading up to the launching, about the method of equipping and paying for the ships, the recruitment of the necessary manpower and the role of religious sanction at the launching. When you turn to the activities of the Athenian force (discussed later in the unit), bear in mind especially the problems of long-distance supply and communication, and the relationship between military commanders and the political decision-makers in a *direct* democracy.

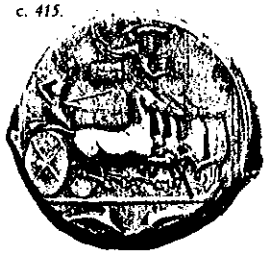
4.3 REACTIONS IN SICILY

When news of the Athenian expedition was received in Syracuse, an Assembly was called. Thucydides says there was divergence of opinion over how serious the threat was and what action to take. He records the main speeches in a debate (VI, 33–41, optional reading) which parallels that which took place earlier in the Athenian Assembly. The speeches are constructed round the same themes — unity and rivalry among the Dorians, Ionians and non-Greeks in Sicily, whether the Athenians' underlying aim was really to conquer all Sicily, the resources of the Sicilians and the problems of the supply of horses and food which the Athenians would encounter. The difference is that these themes are considered from the point of view of people faced with invasion, and it is this difference which underlies the emergence of two factors which cast doubt on the wisdom of the Athenians' assumptions about Sicily. First, the decision of the Sicilians to co-operate against the Athenians casts doubt on one aspect of Alcibiades' claim that because of its varied ethnic origins 'such a crowd as this is scarcely likely either to pay attention to one consistent policy or to join together in concerted action' (VI, 17). He had either forgotten the Athenian experience of 424, or chose to ignore it. Secondly, the Athenians' assumption, that because of the discord

between competing political factions within the Sicilian cities there will be no co-operation between them, is not borne out. The Syracusan democrats do play down the likelihood of Athenian ambition but nevertheless preliminary steps are taken to prepare an army and to deny the Athenians supplies. Of course, there were still ethnic and political tensions *within* the Sicilian cities and *between* them. The important point is whether the Athenians had overestimated these problems.

Please now read *Thucydides* VI, 42–52 in which Thucydides describes the early difficulties encountered by the Athenians. The passage is an example of descriptive writing which shows the historian's understanding of the importance of detail in military campaigns. It also presents in concrete form the practical effects of the debate at Syracuse which precedes it. In addition, the conflict of opinion between Nicias and Alcibiades (already presented in their respective speeches at Athens) now becomes crucial, and when Nicias' cautious policy is outvoted by Lamachus and Alcibiades, the imperialist character of the expedition is confirmed.

Figure 13 Tetradrachm of Syracuse, c. 415.



Obverse: Quadriga with horses galloping. The far horse has a broken rein. Above: Nike flies to crown a bearded driver and carries a tablet inscribed with the artist's name, EYAINETO (Euainetos); below: two dolphins.

Reverse: Arethusa with dolphins SYRAKOSION. (Hirmer Fotoarchiv.)

4.4 THE ROLE OF ALCIBIADES

Please read *Thucydides*, VI, 60–1 and 88–93 (starting mid-way down page 465). As you read try to decide:

(a) What was the real reason for the Athenians' mistrust of Alcibiades?

(b) What are the main arguments used by Alcibiades to ingratiate himself with the Spartans? (Watch out for both direct and indirect examples.)

(c) Consider carefully the way in which Alcibiades defends his betrayal of his polis. What information does this part of his speech give us about Greek values?

Discussion

(a) Thucydides' treatment of the recall of Alcibiades emphasizes the underlying rather than the immediate causes. The immediate cause was the accusation that Alcibiades had profaned the sanctity of the Mysteries. The real reason for the Athenians' mistrust of him was rather more complex. The profanation of the Mysteries (together with the associated scandal of the mutilation of the Herms) represented in the public consciousness a blow struck at the established values of Athenian society. And at this time the political framework for these values was the democracy. Thucydides says the Athenians were both angry and suspicious. He even implies that scapegoats were necessary. 'In all this it was impossible to say whether those who suffered deserved their punishment or not, but it was quite clear that the rest of the city, as things were, benefited greatly' (VI, 60). It was commonly believed that if the gods were offended by the action of one member of the community they might punish the whole community if it failed to find out who was the guilty man.

Clearly, too, the democracy at Athens was felt to be under stress at that moment and an aristocrat such as Alcibiades was especially vulnerable to an anti-oligarchic backlash. Reaction against him was complicated by the mischance that the Spartans advanced to the Isthmus of Corinth at about this time and Alcibiades was known to have strong family ties with Sparta. There was also the suggestion that a plot against the democracy in Argos was fostered by associates of Alcibiades. Notice especially how Thucydides' treatment of the incident draws both on his awareness of the irrational effects of popular anxiety and prejudice and on his sense of the importance of the relationship between the aristocracies of different poleis (who might be supposed to share oligarchic sympathies even if their own polis was at that moment democratic, cf. 'The Old Oligarch', *Anthology* A6, I, 14).

In reading this passage I get a strong sense of the fagility of the apparently stable democracy. You might contrast Professor Forrests' suggestion in Radio programme 03 that the democracy was basically strong but endured a few 'hiccups'. Certainly there is evidence in *this* passage that the democrats felt they were under pressure from aristocratic intrigues. Thucydides' stress on the links (real or imagined) between political factions in different poleis is an important theme for the rest of this study, and of course the practical effects of Alcibiades' exile were considerable.

(b) Alcibiades' arguments are, I think, of two kinds. First, there are his direct arguments, which are largely personal. He appeals to the traditional relationship of his family with the Spartans. His family had acted as *proxenoi* for the Spartans in Athens — in other words, they had represented the Spartans' interests. He excuses his campaigns against the Spartans on the (dubious) grounds that Sparta had tied his hands by negotiating with his political enemies in Athens. Most important of all, he disowns the Athenian democracy as an absurdity. Notice especially, however, that he excuses his participation in it on the grounds that it is the prevailing political system. This alerts us to the fact that Alcibiades assumes (correctly) that his listeners share his regard for success and participation in politics (whatever the actual system in force). It would have been unthinkable for an ambitious aristocrat to 'opt out'.

Secondly, there are Alcibiades' indirect arguments, which demonstrate to the Spartans how valuable his advice will be to them. He confirms (and extends?) their worst fears about Athenian ambitions in Sicily and the west; he emphasizes that Sicily is the key to success in the Peloponnese; he gives his analysis of the Sicilians' weakness. All this familiar to you. But the point is that these assertions are now marshalled to prompt *Spartan* intervention in the west, whereas previously Alcibiades' analysis had been used to persuade the *Athenians* to act.

Alcibiades then goes one step further and advises Sparta to act on two fronts, intensifying pressure on Athens in Attica itself (which will both damage Athenian resources and encourage the Syracusans) and sending a strong naval and military force to Sicily. Thucydides remarks (perhaps with some irony) that this was the advice the Spartans wanted to hear (Section 93). Alcibiades secured his own safety (for the time being) and took what he claimed to see as the first step towards securing the kind of Athens to which he could return.

(c) This is a complicated and difficult matter and at this stage I would only expect you to have a few preliminary thoughts on the subject, which raises wide questions about what were the dominant values of Greek society and the extent to which individual conduct matched up to public ideals. The first and obvious thing to say is that we shouldn't make the mistake of interpreting Greek values in the light of the value systems of modern western society, with its stress on an ideal of 'my country right or wrong'. If we were to take certain aspects of Alcibiades' statements in Sparta as a genuine and typical example we would have to conclude that it was acceptable in Greek society to hold personal success as the highest value. It is this which is Alcibiades' basic justification for his participation in a democratic form of government in which he does not necessarily believe, for his failure to return to face trial in Athens and for his desertion to the Athenians' enemy. However, his speech also tells us that such personal justification, although important, would not be considered adequate. He has also to emphasize that he has been unjustly driven out by his enemies (this was probably true as you saw earlier). There is also the rhetorical flourish of his assertion that he really has the interests of Athens at heart (i.e. that he wants to see established there a regime more favourable to him?).

Remember, too, that it was an accepted norm of Greek behaviour to help one's friends and harm one's enemies so there would be nothing exceptionable about Alcibiades' campaigning against those Athenians who had attacked him. (He was not unique in this respect. After the Persian Wars the exiled Athenian leader Themistocles had taken refuge with the Great King.[1] It is perhaps significant that later a tradition grew up and was recorded by Isocrates and Plutarch that Alcibiades did not go directly to enemy territory but first attempted to find refuge in Argos.) Also crucial is the fact that Alcibiades was eventually recalled by the Athenians — compare the impossibility of General Montgomery going over to advise the German army in North Africa and then being given a new command by the British Government.

Perhaps Alcibiades' brilliance made his conduct more acceptable. (You will be able to hear more about this in Radio Programme 4.) Clearly, however, he could not be regarded as typical. My impression is that he pressed the bounds of what might be tolerated to their limits and that his career epitomizes the inevitable tensions between a political system which valued both the direct democracy and the success and prestige of outstanding individuals. In Units 7–8, Section 5.4 you will encounter the very different view of the relationship between the individual and the polis represented by Socrates (see also *Anthology* F11).

[1]'Great King' always refers to the king of Persia.

Figure 14 Ostraka referring to Alcibiades son of Cleinias. In 418–417 Nicias and Alcibiades were both candidates for ostracism but their supporters combined to force out the radical democrat Hyperbolus. (American School of Classical Studies at Athens: Agora Excavations.)

4.5 INDICATIONS OF THE ATHENIANS VULNERABILITY

After Alcibiades had been recalled, the Athenian forces were divided into two by lot and the two remaining generals each commanded one section. They then sailed for Selinus and Egesta to find out what was happening and obtain more money (VI, 62). They gained a victory over the Syracusans from their base outside the city (VI, 63–71). However, the Athenians lacked the necessary cavalry, money and corn to take the city itself so they sailed back to their winter quarters at Naxos and Catana. This gave the Syracusans the opportunity to improve their fortifications and to destroy the Athenian camp at Catana when the garrison was absent seeking support from Messina. This support was not forthcoming since Alcibiades had betrayed the intentions of the pro-Athenian faction and they had been killed (VI, 74).

Athens then turned to Camarina, with which she had a defensive alliance, for support and Thucydides records a debate there between Euphemus the representative of Athens and Hermocrates the representative of Syracuse (VI, 75–88: optional reading). Hermocrates' speech emphasizes themes which by now are familiar to you — the imperial ambition of Athens, the Syracusan version of the 'domino theory' (i.e. that Athens intended to conquer Sicily city by city), and the need for a unified policy among the Sicilian cities. The Athenian envoy Euphemus is thus put in the position of having to defend the Athenian Empire. His speech is often compared by historians with that made by the Athenian envoys in Sparta at the outbreak of the war (I, 72ff.) in that it covers similar themes — Athenian prestige derived from the naval leadership given by Athens during the Persian Wars, the Athenians' fear of Sparta's military power and the need for Athens to maintain an empire for her *own* security. But, in contrast to the speech of the envoys, the tone of Euphemus' speech is aggressive rather than apologetic. After justifying the Athenians' position, he passes swiftly over the question of the Athenians right to power ('We are not making any dramatic statements such as that we have a right to rule because single-handed we overthrew the foreign invader' VI, 83) and concentrates on the identity of interest which Athenians and Camarinaeans share. 'When a man or a city exercises absolute power the logical course is the course of self-interest, and ties of blood exist only when they can be relied upon; one must choose one's friends and enemies according to the circumstances on each particular occasion' (VI, 85). Compare the actions and attitudes of Alcibiades at Sparta.

You should read Euphemus' speech if you have time (VI, 82–7). It is instructive to compare it with the arguments put by the Athenians in the Melian dialogue (see Section 3).

There are obvious affinities, but the contrasts highlight the changed political and military status of the Athenians in Sicily. Significantly, in this case, the Camarinaeans chose (and were permitted) not to take sides openly. They feared Syracuse as much as they feared Athens (VI, 88). The way in which Thucydides here juxtaposes an aggressive speech with an *unsuccessful* diplomatic manoeuvre suggests that he is drawing to our attention two points. First, successful diplomacy requires more sophisticated techniques then mere aggressive rhetoric. Secondly, the fact that even the Athenians recognize that something more than an aggressive speech is required tells us something about the limitations of Athenian power in *this* theatre of war.

4.6 DEFEAT OF THE ATHENIANS

Book VII opens with the arrival in Sicily of ships from Sparta and her ally Corinth in 414. This book is somewhat different in structure from Book VI. Most of it is best read straight through as a military narrative. You will not find the carefully staged debates which were so important in Book VI. There are some speeches in which the generals encourage their troops but the conflicts are no longer about policy. What we see here is the working out in action of the events for which Thucydides has already created the conceptual framework. It is as if the speeches you have already studied in Book VI and the events reported in Book VII provide an ironic commentary on each other.

The impact of the Spartan commander Gylippus' action to raise land and naval forces and material support intensified the difficulties of the Athenians, and Nicias was forced to send to Athens for reinforcements. Thucydides explains why Nicias did not trust to messengers but wrote a letter (VII, 8), the supposed text of which is reproduced by the historian. Please read this section, VII, 8–18, then look back at your notes on the confident claims of Alcibiades (VI, 17–18).

In spite of the arrival with more ships of two additional Athenian generals, Demosthenes and Eurymedon, the rest of the Athenian experience in Sicily was disastrous. Before the arrival of reinforcements they were defeated in a battle in the Great Harbour at Syracuse in 413 (VII, 31–41 the Camarinaeans joined the Syracusans), but even afterwards they fared no better. Demosthenes realized that the Athenians' dangerous position was to some extent due to Nicias' failure to make and take opportunities (VII, 42) and adopted a more energetic policy but the Athenians were defeated in the dark at Epipolae (see the map 'Syracuse' at the back of the Penguin *Thucydides*). Demosthenes then wanted to retreat from Sicily but Nicias was unwilling to openly admit failure (VII, 49). The hesitation was fatal. The Syracusans then planned to attack the remaining Athenian forces both by sea and by land. They won a further victory at sea (VII, 70–2). The final stages of the rout of the retreating Athenians are described in Book VII, 73–87. Please read this now and then read Book VIII, 1 to find out about the reaction in Athens.

Figure 15 Tetradrachm of Syracuse, c. 412–400.

Reverse: Head of Athena, signed by Eucleidas around four dolphins: SYRAKOSION. The obverse (not shown) depicts the usual Syracusan quadriga. (Hirmer Fotoarchiv.)

4.7 WHY DID THE ATHENIANS FAIL IN SICILY?

So far our work in this section has focused on a guided reading of one source. (The cassette exercises should have helped you to understand why he is our major source.) Although our detailed study of passages has been selective I hope you have also felt something of the unified structure of the episode and especially that you have sensed the subtle relationship between the speeches and the narrative. I am now going to ask you to step back and consider the episode as a whole under the general question why did the Athenians fail in Sicily? By asking you to consider a specific question I am trying to help you to develop a number of skills which will help you when you come to answer essay questions, for example:

(i) Selecting relevant evidence and evaluating its contribution to answering a question.

(ii) Balancing the use of detail with the contribution of generalization in arriving at a conclusion.

(iii) Very important here: considering whether the way in which Thucydides presents the evidence determines our judgements.

You will therefore need to work quite slowly and carefully.

Would you now please consider the question 'Why did the Athenians fail in Sicily?' Ask yourself what were the immediately obvious reasons for their defeat. Were there also underlying causes? Were these reasons and causes of different kinds, for example, military, logistic, political, economic, chance, bad luck, poor commanders? Bear in mind all the time: what does Thucydides think? Can we know what he thinks? If so, how? How does his treatment of the whole episode influence us? Are we to believe him? You will need to spend some time on this exercise, going back over your set reading and the earlier parts of this section, and referring to the exercises on Cassette Side 1 Band 3. *Burn*, pages 290–6 is also helpful. You will get more benefit if you make fairly detailed notes (perhaps even a skeleton plan of how you would answer the question if you were writing an essay) before turning to my discussion.

Figure 16 Tetradrachm of Syracuse, 413.

Obverse: Quadriga driven by winged naked youth. Above: Nike carrying in the left hand an aphlaston, *the broken off stern ornament of a warship, which was the symbol of naval victory. This may allude to the Syracusan victory in the Great Harbour. Below: Scylla and abbreviated signature EVTH . . . (an artist known only from this die, although he may have engraved a comparable chariot design at Selinus c. 410, see Figure 12). (Reproduced by permission of the Trustees of the British Museum.)*

Discussion

Remember that when trying to answer this kind of question it is not necessary to 'tell the story' of the Sicilian Expedition. Indeed, to attempt to do so would be irrelevant to the main aim of the question, which requires you to *analyse* what happened in order to give your own *reasons* for the disaster. Therefore, your references to particular events or details should be introduced to explain and support your own judgements and not as substitutes for them. When thinking about this question myself I found I had first of all to distinguish between several different kinds of causes of the Athenian failure. First there were the immediate military causes — defeat by land and sea involving lack of cavalry, insufficient money and so on. But of course it is necessary to look beyond these immediate causes and to consider why this state of affairs should have been permitted by a wealthy and successful imperial power. This brings us to the second main category of causes, the underlying ones, for example, the mistaken assumptions made by the Athenians in authorizing the expedition. There is also, I think, a third category of reasons which cuts across the previous two and includes such factors as the choice of commanders and the relation between Athenian policy in Sicily and towards the war as a whole.

At this point, I would like you to look back at your notes and satisfy yourself that you have considered more than one type of reason for the Athenians' failure. Your analysis does not have to be structured like mine but it should look at factors outside Sicily as well as the actual events.

Further discussion

Immediate causes of the Athenians' defeat

First, the Athenians lacked the necessary range of military resources to fight successfully on land. In particular they lacked cavalry. The reasons for the shortage of cavalry were that it was impossible to transport horses long distances by sea and that they failed to obtain horses locally. In short, they failed to take sufficient account of the particular problems of waging warfare in a hostile environment. They were insufficiently flexible and mobile and this was made worse by their lack of cavalry. At Syracuse what began as a seige waged by the Athenians ended with they themselves under siege. Secondly, even the Athenians' traditional skills in naval warfare were eventually found wanting. There were a number of reasons for this, the most important being sheer lack of ships. Also important was the lack of co-ordination between their land and sea strategy (in contrast to the Syracusans). Notice the great care with which Thucydides recounts the complicated strategic manoeuvre (VI, 36–43). He is a military as well as political historian.

Thirdly, the Athenians' resources were under great strain. Money and corn were essential and neither were forthcoming in Sicily to the extent needed. Therefore the great length of their supply lines became a serious disadvantage.

Fourthly, the Athenians suffered from inadequate generalship. There were disagreements in policy, strategy and tactics among the original commanders. Lamachus was killed, Alcibiades exiled, Nicias indecisive and ill, and Demosthenes late on the scene.

Underlying reasons for the Athenians' defeat

Some aspects of these emerge directly from analysis of the immediate causes of defeat. First, when they decided to send the expedition the Athenians misjudged the geographical significance of Sicily as a theatre of war. On the one hand they did not think enough about the sheer distance involved and the difficulties of taking adequate supplies, but on the other hand they also erred in regarding war in the west as 'self-contained' or detachable from the main conflict with Sparta. They did not recognize that they would be stretched to cope with conflict on two fronts.

Secondly, the Athenians seriously underestimated both the will and the capacity of the Sicilians to resist. Either their intelligence was deficient or their desire for conquest so great that they ignored it. Certainly, they were correct to recognize the ethnic and political differences within and between the Sicilian cities. What they did not bargain for was the fact that the Sicilian cities were not merely pale shadows of their mother cities but had identities and a power structure of their own, with even the weaker ones tending to fear Syracuse more than they feared Athens. (Consider evidence provided by the coins illustrated in this unit for the existence of common motifs and political symbols.)

One effect of these two misjudgements was to intensify the effects of a third misjudgement — the Athenians' overestimation of their own imperial power. In short, Sicily was not like Melos. Fourthly, there was ambiguity in the Athenians' own reasons for undertaking the expedition. The tension between the strategic aspects (forestalling possible Sicilian aid to Sparta) and the desire for conquest meant that it was difficult for the commanders to achieve a coherent policy which was attuned both to the realities of the situation in the field and to the expectations of the Athenians at home. The rhetoric which was necessary to persuade the Assembly to authorize the expedition in itself raised false expectations.

Inadequacy in the Athenian command

This category draws together aspects of the previous two areas which we have analysed. I have already mentioned the disagreement among the Athenian generals when they first arrived in Sicily. Thucydides suggests (VI, 48) that Lamachus' policy was in fact the best of the three, being practical but avoiding the defensiveness of Nicias and the adventurism of Alcibiades. We might well question the wisdom of appointing to the command two men whose disagreement on policy was so sharply drawn as that of Alcibiades and Nicias, and in fact an inscription dealing with the equipping of the expedition, but unfortunately surviving only in fragmentary form, does indicate that there may have been disagreements before it was decided how many generals were to be sent (IG, i, 2, 98–9).

I have called Alcibiades' policy 'adventurist'. Perhaps 'expansionist' would be a more accurate term. In studying Thucydides' account of the expedition it is hard to disentangle one's judgements about the blame, if any, attaching to Alcibiades, from the hostility of Thucydides' treatment of him (see especially Book VI, 15). The trouble is that we can only speculate about whether the expedition would have succeeded if it had been under the uninterrupted command of Alcibiades. In adopting his policy and then recalling him the Athenians in fact got the worst of both worlds, since Nicias was totally unsuited to pursuing Alcibiades' policy and the Spartans then got the advantage of Alcibiades' advice.

This brings me to the reasons behind the recall, condemnation and exile of Alcibiades. Whatever our interpretation of the complex web of social and political causes behind the charges of sacrilege, it is at any rate clear that there was dissent between rival political factions at Athens and that the democrats thought they were being threatened by the oligarchs. It is ironic that the Athenians appear to have overestimated the persistence of factional rivalry in Sicily and underestimated it in their own polis.

In fact, the final stages of the débâcle are full of ironic twists. For example, when the indecisive Nicias was at last raised to a sense of urgency, it was the normally dynamic Athenian Assembly which acted cautiously, failing to replace him as general and prevaricating over the dispatch of reinforcements. Again, when Demosthenes wanted to cut his losses and run (and something might yet have been salvaged) it was Nicias, who had been the strongest resister of commitment to Sicily, who persuaded him to carry on, perhaps because of his fear of the reactions of the Athenian Assembly to failed generals. The generals were in the unenviable position of not being masters of their own policy but yet

being held responsible for it. The Athenian generals of 424 had been punished for taking their troops home from Sicily. A more drastic example of the reaction of the Assembly to commanders is recounted by Xenephon (*Hellenica*, VII, 1ff.). On this occasion the victorious generals at the naval battle of Arginusae (406) were condemned to death for failing to organize the rescue of survivors from the sea before a storm blew up. The prosecution was at least in part fostered by political rivalry between the senior and junior commanders. The success ethic of the Athenians meant that their leading citizens had to compete for the command on the strength of their reputations and speeches (Nicias was supposed to be 'lucky', Alcibiades dynamic), and in the opening speeches in Book VI Thucydides shows that the rhetoric of persuasion sometimes itself determined policy. Once in the command there was no turning back. Nicias was, in fact, denied mention in the official casualty lists because he had surrendered rather than been captured.

Thucydides' views

When introducing this exercise, I asked you to consider the manner of Thucydides' treatment of the episode and its effect on our reactions and judgements. Here I think there are three aspects of his treatment to keep in mind.

The first is the direct introduction of his own views and analysis. Examples are his comments on the Athenian commanders Nicias and Alcibiades and on the workings of the democracy. This aspect of his writing is the most obvious but perhaps least pervasive influence on our interpretation.

Secondly, there is the way in which Thucydides' selection and juxtaposition of issues in his history as a whole, throws certain ideas into relief. For example, before encountering his treatment of the Sicilian Expedition you had already read Pericles' Last Speech in Book II, together with Thucydides' comment (II, 65) on the contrast between Pericles and his successors. The effect of this is two-fold. It prepares the way for the detailed exposition in Book VI of the Athenian process of policy making and especially its relationship to the competitive rhetoric needed to convince the Assembly. It also implicitly invites us to compare objectively the policy set out by Pericles with that adopted in Sicily. Now, one immediate reaction may be to compare Alcibiades' expansionism unfavourably with Pericles' defensive strategy. However, it is clear from Thucydides' setting of the speeches made in the Athenian Assembly that Pericles' policy had in fact produced stalemate. It was sufficiently active to avoid defeat, but insufficiently aggressive to ensure victory. The plague and its aftermath and the Melian Dialogue showed that Athens could not risk slow but certain exhaustion through the non-replenishment of her resources, or allow her Empire to slip away by showing weakness towards her allies and neutral poleis. Pericles admitted that once the Empire was taken it had to be energetically maintained. The same was true of the war, so given the analogy perhaps Alcibiades, and not Nicias, was the intellectual heir of Pericles? This would mean that Nicias' error lay in trying to apply an outmoded policy in an inappropriate situation. Thucydides does not specifically suggest this (in fact both Nicias and Alcibiades are subjected to greater personality analysis than Pericles) and it seems to me that this kind of issue reveals a tension between his expressed opinions and his overall structuring of the episode.

Third (and most important of all in my view) is the question of the relationship between speeches and narrative in Books VI–VII. We saw in Sections One and Three that it is mistaken to think that there is a direct correlation between a speech and Thucydides' own judgements. An individual speech does not give us Thucydides' voice, but a group of speeches gives us the historian's judgement about what the issues were and the form in which they had to be presented given the particular occasion and given the historian's first or second-hand knowledge of the characteristics of the speaker and the audience. If you compare in detail the speeches of Book VI with the events described in Book VII (and the analysis of the reasons for the Athenians defeat helps to draw out the most important points of comparison) you will discover how the events recorded in Book VII in fact elucidate the speeches and vice versa. It is as though the hypotheses set out in the speeches are tested in action. Thus we cannot make an artificial division between speeches and narrative. To identify the voice of Thucydides we need to understand the structure of the whole episode. In one sense, the Sicilian episode represents a microcosm of the whole war. We see Athens moving from a position of confidence laced with fear to a sense of uncertainty about her own power (the debate at Camarina) and then to disaster. A study of the reasons for the failure in Sicily suggests some of the reasons why she lost the whole war.

Figure 17 Tetradrachm, c. 412/11.

Obverse: Head of Tissaphernes, wearing tiara.

Reverse: Lyre BAS = basileos ('of the king'), a reference to the Great King (of Persia).

Tissaphernes was satrap of the coastal provinces of Asia Minor. Satraps occasionally had coins bearing their own portraits struck for use in military operations. (Hirmer Fotoarchiv.)

5 EFFECTS OF THE ATHENIAN DEFEAT IN SICILY

In spite of the magnitude of the defeat suffered by the Athenians, the war did not immediately come to an end. You have already read Thucydides' description of the alarm felt at Athens when news of the defeat was received (VIII, 1). What is more surprising, perhaps, is that the emergency measures taken proved reasonably effective, and, in the absence of immediate enemy attack, Athens was able to reconstitute a fleet and even to achieve some successes before her eventual defeat in 404. Nevertheless, after the Sicilian disaster nothing was ever quite the same again for the Athenians. The defeat marked, if not the end of the war, at least the turning point. At home, Athens' political stability and financial resources were shaken. Abroad, her prestige had received a fatal blow. Not only had the limitations of her own navy been exposed, but in addition her enemies had been forced to develop their naval resources. The basis of the Athenians' imperial power was now threatened. Please now read what Thucydides has to say about the reactions of the other Greek poleis in Book VIII, 2.

5.1 ATTITUDES OF OTHER POLEIS TOWARDS ATHENS

5.1.1 Neutrals

Not surprisingly, the myth of Athenian supremacy was shattered. Yet the *background* to the expedition was perhaps as influential as its result. Athens was increasingly seen, after the breakdown of the Peace of Nicias, as the imperial aggressor. The Sicilian adventure had marked a continuation of the philosophy behind the reduction of Melos. It was increasingly clear to neutral states that they dare not remain aloof. The Athenians might attack all who were not for her. Very well, since Athens had been shown to be so vulnerable, neutral poleis might as well join Sparta and even stand to benefit from the likely Athenian defeat. Notice how Thucydides' account of the reactions of other poleis draws on the political principles he considered in the Melian Dialogue. We have no independent check on how these states reasoned, but we can draw inferences from what they did — see *Thucydides*, VIII, *passim*.

Figure 18 Tetradrachm of Samos, 454/3.

Obverse: Lion's scalp.

Reverse: Forepart of an ox with ornamental collar, to left: olive branch. SA.

Samos revolted from Athens in 441 and her coinage was suppressed until the end of the fifth century when she became a vital ally and was given the privilege of minting her own silver coinage. (Hirmer Fotoarchiv.)

5.1.2 Athenian allies

Clearly the Athenians' relationship with their allies came under severe stress. Important allies, such as Euboea, Lesbos, Chios and Salmos, wondered whether they dared revolt (Thucydides goes on to give examples in Book VIII, 5). Even the more willing allies were affected by Athenian financial need and by political changes in Athens (see Section 5.2 below). Where allies did defect, the revolts were usually led by oligarchs. The democracies tended to remain loyal. For example, after the violent suppression of the oligarchs in Samos in 412 the democratic regime remained a staunch ally of the Athenian democracy (see *Anthology* B25 and *Thucydides* VIII, 21).

5.1.3 Spartan allies

Their confidence was boosted. Most important of all was the prospect of the arrival of the Sicilian naval forces. Thucydides does not tell us anything of their reaction to the increased financial demands made by Sparta.

5.1.4 Sparta

Two lessons had been learnt by the Spartans (who now had the benefit of Alcibiades' advice). The first was that they had to *defeat* Athens. The imperial ambition underlying the Sicilian Expedition showed that they could not hope merely to contain her. The second lesson was that to defeat Athens they must control the seas. Thucydides goes on to tell us (VIII, 3) that the Spartan king Agis 'raised money from the allies for the building of a fleet'.

He extended the area from which the Spartan league drew tribute and 'sent in their requisitions to the cities for the building of 100 ships'. He also fostered revolt among the Athenians' allies (VIII, 5). Remember, however, that Spartan policy was not primarily attuned to naval strategy.

At this stage Sparta already held a strong postion by land, since early in 413 Agis had marched into Attica and seized and fortified Decelea, a mere fifteen miles north of Athens itself. Agriculture was brought to a standstill and many slaves (Thucydides says as many as 20,000) ran off to the Spartans. The economic consequences of these events were serious for the Athenians. The silver mines at Laureion lost most of their slave workers and the import of supplies to Attica became more expensive. Since the route from Euboea through Oropes and Deceleia could no longer be used, transport had to be by ship round Cape Sunion (see Maps 7, 14 and VII, 28).

The Spartans also realized that a policy of naval expansion combined with the fostering of revolt against Athens required Persian assistance (and naturally Persia was eager to reassert her influence in Asia Minor), and although it took some years for the new policy to become fully effective (and in particular for the grain supply to Athens via the Hellespont to be shut off), its beginnings are evident in the reaction to the Athenian defeat in Sicily. It was now Sparta's turn to raise money to finance a fleet and to find skilled naval commanders.

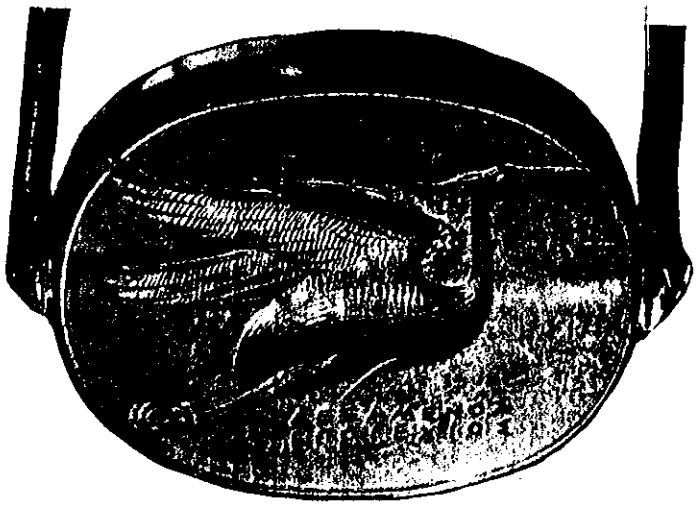


Figure 19 Flying heron signed by Dexamenos of Chios (width 2cm). Dexamenos was the leading engraver of Ionian stones and gems. This heron is one of four extant pieces which bear his signature. (Photo: M-L Vollenweider.)

5.2 THE ATHENIANS' RESPONSE TO DEFEAT IN SICILY

5.2.1 Economic

Immediately after the defeat there was a great deficit in manpower, ships and money (*Thucydides* VIII, 1). They gave priority to shipbuilding (VIII, 4), safeguarding their supply routes, and became justifiably suspicious of their allies. There was a limit to the extent to which they could cut their expenses, so when Chios revolted the Athenians had to draw on the 1000 talents in their reserve fund (which had been set aside in 431 — *Thucydides* II, 2 and VIII 15). This financial resource was in addition to the money accruing from the change made in the system of tribute payment in 413, by which the fixed assessment was replaced by a five per cent tax on goods carried to or from the harbours of the Empire (VII, 28). It is uncertain whether this system could be effectively policed and there is some evidence to suggest that the tribute system was restored in 410.[1]

The long term effect of the closing of the silver mines at Laureion in 413 became evident when the traditional silver coinage was replaced by gold in 407 (the gold was obtained from melting down dedicatory offerings, some from the Acropolis), while in 406 copper began to be used, thinly plated with silver. Compare this situation with the splendour of the departure for Sicily.

Figure 20 Tetradrachm of Athens, c. 440–430.

Obverse: Athena wearing Attic helmet ornamented with olive leaves.

Reverse: Owl (left: crescent and sprig of olive). (Hirmer Fotoarchiv.)

[1]The problem of dating the fragmentary inscriptions relating to the last assessment of tribute from the allies is discussed in Meiggs, R. (1972) *The Athenian Empire*, note 23, pp.438–9.