

Warring with Words: Themistoclean Generalship in Herodotus  
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The strategies of Themistocles in the pages of Herodotus are nearly always enacted and effected by means of words—whether in their interpretation, in persuasion or dissuasion, in manipulation of individuals and events, or in outright deception. It is this use of words which make him a unique general and an “Odyssean” figure rather like the historian himself (cf. Marincola, “Odysseus and the Historians,” *SyllClass* 18 ((2007)).

The first appearance of Themistocles in *Histories* involves interpreting the oracle of the “wooden wall” (Hdt. 7.143). The *khrēsmologoi* have the Pythia’s utterance wrong, he says, teasing out the philological semantics of “holy” Salamis; it is not in the acropolis, but in the fleet which the Athenians must trust. Like Herodotus himself (who responds to, among others, the bad judgments of Hecataeus; cf. Marincola, Dewald (1987), Thomas (2000)), Themistocles corrects the mistakes of others.

There are numerous other examples of words playing an important role in Themistocles’ strategic successes and failures. After the Greek retreat at Artemisium, Themistocles hits upon a contrivance involving words (8.22): “cutting letters into the rocks,” (*entamnōn en toisi lithoisi grammata*), he bade the Ionians to fight badly or desert their Persian overlords. When the Peloponnesian contingent wishes to abandon the Athenian people at Salamis and instead make their stand at the Isthmus, a war of words breaks out between the generals, who at first fling them like javelins (8.64, *houtō men hoi peri Salamina epei akrobolisamenoi*), and then shove like hoplites (8.78, *tōn de en Salamina stratēgōn egineto ōthismos logōn pollos*). Searching for a *mēkhanē* (8.57) by which to persuade the Spartans to stay, Themistocles embarks upon an impassioned speech (*pollos ēn ho Themistokleēs en toisi logoisi*, 8.59) in which he elaborates in great detail the strategic and ideological reasons for staying. This fails when Adeimantus the Corinthian simply tells Themistocles to “shut up” (8.61), effectively disarming him.

Salamis is the defining point for the career of Themistocles, and it is the Athenian stand here which earns them Herodotus’ highest praise as the “saviors of Greece” (7.139). Themistocles’ foresight in moving the Athenians towards this end has elsewhere been noted (*inter alia*, by Holladay (1987)), and his decision to take the windfall from Laurion and put it into the fleet is said by Herodotus to be the “best decision for the occasion” (*gnōmē...es kairon ēristeuse*, 7.144.1); again, this strategic action was enacted via Themistocles’ persuasive abilities with the people (*anegnōse Athēnaious*), and the actual stand at Salamis is forced by Themistocles’ betrayal of the Greek plan to depart; though defeated in council (*hessouto*), he sends a secret message informing on the Corinthians and Spartans and urging the Great King to intervene (8.75), making the stand at Salamis unavoidable.

Herodotus reserves his highest praise for Themistocles until he has persuaded the Greeks to let the Persians escape back to Asia. Though by the other Greeks he “was previously thought wise, now he showed himself truly wise and a man of good counsel” (*proteron dedogmenos einai sophos ephanē eōn alētheōs sophos te kai euboulos*, 8.110.1). Within the speech itself, Themistocles explicitly plays Herodotean, beginning, “I myself have been present... and have heard” (*kai autos ēdē polloisi paregenomēn kai pollō pleō akēkoa*, 8.109.2); this use of autopsy to generate his authority with his listeners is exactly analogous to the historian’s *apodeixis*. As both general and speaker, Herodotus arms Themistocles for war with words.