The Democratic Implications of Men, Ships, and Walls

Alcaeus first coined an idea – that "fighting men are a city's walls" (fr. 112) in his poetry about 6th century Lesbos. Herodotus in the *Histories* has Themistocles claim before the battle of Salamis that he has a city as long as he has ships filled with men (8.61), Sophocles in the *Oedipus Tyrannos* has the priest appealing to Oedipus at the beginning of the play claim "neither walled town nor ship is anything, if it is empty and no men dwell within" (56-7), and after the disastrous defeat in Syracuse, Thucydides has Nicias encourage his men with the same idea ("the city is men and not walls and ships empty of men," 7.77.7). We do not know if Alcaeus included the idea of ships in his line, but our later sources make emphatic use of ships in their allusions to Alcaeus' idea. Themistocles' shifting of the image from men to ships filled with men makes sense in the context of the looming naval battle and the development of Athenian naval power – where he himself famously interprets the "wooden wall" oracle to mean ships (7.143). The mention of ships is rather strange in Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannos*, since Theban naval power is not at issue in the play. His point is also different from that of Themistocles, who equates ships with power. It is, however, particularly Athenian to think this way. As Raaflaub (1998) has argued, the rise of Athenian naval power and the development of its radical democracy are deeply intertwined. The identification of a city with its people rather than its geographic location is a common feature in the formation of a civic or ethnic identity, and the persistence and shift in this image reveal how closely the Athenians tie their civic identity with their naval strength.

Later in Thucydides, we see how this identity manifests itself in a different way. When the democracy in Athens is overthrown by the rule of the 400, the Athenian fleet at Samos forms a democratic government and declares itself the real Athens. Forsdyke (2009) interprets this as, in essence, the formation of a government in exile. The fleet's language mirrors two elements.

One, its arguments against the government back home resemble Alcibiades' argument about Athens after his own exile in Book 6 (and that the fleet will then recall Alcibiades underlines this connection). Second, its actions make the cliché of the city and her men and ships real. Price (2001) argues that the fleet's actions should be read in the context of Themistocles' argument before Salamis, but goes on to claim that Thucydides uses this episode to further his argument that Athens is moving towards *stasis*, and the language the fleet uses does also echo Thucydides' description of *stasis* in book 3. Taylor (2010) argues that the defection of the fleet is the logical extension of Pericles' vision of Athens and the distinct Athenian ability to redefine themselves in the face of difficult circumstances. For Taylor, this serves as part of the proof of the argument that Thucydides does not fully approve of Periclean politics. Canfora (1995) sees the fleet's defection as the next step in the development of a personal concept of the state, and to some degree this is true, but Thucydides takes steps to present the fleet's defection without significant leaders – men are named, but the decisions come from the body politic. Later, it will take Alcibiades to convince the fleet not to sail on Athens itself, which also reveals that the fleet still values the geographic space that is the city.

I will argue, however, that the Athenian fleet's defection from a now oligarchic Athens represents an issue heavily contested in Thucydides' work and in the late fifth century; the idea that a city is its men (and ships!) is a nice adage for encouraging men in warfare, but the reality of separating the physical aspect of the city from its inhabitants and their government is painful and fraught with difficulties. Also, although it is very strongly represented in Athens and Athenian ideology, the debate between the physical city and the personal state appears in several places throughout the *History*, which I will discuss in my paper. I will conclude by briefly exploring the relevance of these ideas in modern definitions of democracy and political identity.

Works Cited

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