

## Thucydides and the “Luck” of Pylos

The Pylian campaign and the resultant battle of Sphacteria of 425 BCE proved to be a decisive moment in the first phase of the Peloponnesian War. During the campaign, a group of Peloponnesians, including Spartans and, presumably, their helot attendants, became blockaded on the island of Sphacteria opposite the Athenian garrison at Pylos. After the Athenian assault on the island, two hundred and ninety-two of the original four hundred and twenty hoplites who occupied the island were captured; around a hundred and twenty of them were Spartiates. This loss caused the Spartans to begin suing for peace, which eventually led to the short-lived Peace of Nicias. Thucydides, our only substantive source, recognized the significance of this event and devoted a good deal of attention to the campaign (4.2–6, 8–23, 26–41). Despite the campaign’s importance and the attention Thucydides gives to it, his account is woefully inadequate, in part, because of the historian’s attribution of several key moments of the campaign to chance (τύχη). This reliance on chance leaves several narrative gaps in the account and creates the impression that Thucydides has omitted information.

This feature of the narrative has long been noted by scholars with several theories put forth to explain the historian’s reason for emphasizing chance. Francis Cornford has argued that Thucydides saw a mythical/poetical formulation of Fortune at work, which could aid or desert individuals, giving Thucydides’ history a tragic hue (1965 [orig. 1907]: 97–98, 108). A. W. Gomme, on the other hand, has downplayed Cornford’s thesis by pointing out that the verb τυγχάνειν simply refers to events happening simultaneously (1956: 488–489). Neither approach entirely convinces, for they fail to explain why it is suddenly only in book 4 that there is such an emphasis on chance, nor do they fully explain the narrative gaps.

The contention of this paper is that Thucydides emphasized the role of chance and omitted several important details in the Pylos narrative to invalidate the campaign's success because it did not accord with Periclean strategy for the war and to deny credit to those responsible for its success, Demosthenes and Cleon. There is little doubt that Thucydides was a proponent of Periclean strategy for the war and that he blamed Athens' deviation from it for the city's eventual defeat, given his words at 2.65.7. Thucydides has Pericles lay out his strategy as part of a speech at 1.143.3–144.1. It has been said, based on this description, that "Pericles favoured limited war" (Marshall 1984: 20). It has also been persuasively argued that the Pylos campaign did not accord with the Periclean approach to the war (Holladay 1978: 414–416). Despite its deviation from Periclean policy, the Pylos campaign proved to be a stunning success. Thucydides had to reconcile with this uncomfortable truth, and his history provided him with the setting to do this. Thucydides, thus, constructed a narrative that did not attribute the success at Pylos and capture of one hundred and twenty Spartiates to good planning, but to luck. To do otherwise would be to acknowledge that a non-Periclean strategy changed the course of the war in Athens' favor and helped lead to the Peace of Nicias. In the course of his narrative, Thucydides had to attribute certain instances to chance and omit key elements.

#### Bibliography

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