

# REVISITING THE PYLOS EPISODE AND THUCYDIDES' 'BIAS' AGAINST CLEON

*By Anastasios Nikolaidis*

**Summary:** The Pylos episode, ending with the capture of almost 300 Spartans who had been cut off on the Sphacteria island, was the first major setback suffered by Sparta during the Peloponnesian war and, at the same time, the first major – and more importantly – unexpected success of Athens, in Peloponnesian territory at that. Without overlooking the military side involved, this paper will primarily focus on the political aspects of this enterprise in an attempt (a) to assess and evaluate Thucydides' attitude to the protagonists of this episode, Cleon, Nicias and Demosthenes, (b) to better understand the historian's political stance and judgement through the vocabulary that he employs, and (c) to show that his notoriously presumed bias against Cleon is poorly substantiated and, insofar as it may occasionally occur, it does not interfere with his respect for historical truth.

Thucydidean scholarship is unanimous, I think, on the importance of the Pylos affair. The Sicilian expedition aside, no other single episode of the war takes up almost one third of a book, and to no other single episode does Thucydides return time and again, however briefly, in three more books.<sup>1</sup> Apart from its very interesting military aspects, this affair provides insights into the character, abilities, and the whole personality of such significant protagonists as Nicias, Cleon and Demosthenes, thus allowing us (a) to assess and evaluate Thucydides' attitude to these men, and (b) to explore the historian's political judgement through some de-

1 From the 135 chapters of book 4, almost all of the first 46 concern the Pylos affair. But see also 5.14.3, 24.2, 34.2, 56.3, 110.2; 6.105.2; 7.18.3, 26.2, 71.7, 86.3.

tails that he stresses or omits as well as through the diction that he employs. But first, let us briefly be reminded of the circumstances that led to the Pylos episode.

After the Athenian commander Demosthenes had somehow fortified Pylos in the spring of 425, the Spartans decided, *inter alia*, to put more than 400 soldiers on Sphacteria, the oblong island that closes the bay and the big harbour opposite the mainland, and block the entrances to it, so that the Athenians would not be able to support the men of their makeshift fort there. The Athenian fleet, however, entered the bay, defeated the Spartans in a decisive sea-battle, and blockaded their soldiers on Sphacteria (4.14). Confronted with this calamity and greatly concerned for the safety of their marooned men, the Spartans sent an embassy to Athens with a general peace offer culminating in a proposal for a formal alliance between the two cities.<sup>2</sup>

Thucydides bluntly recognizes that his compatriots, now having the upper hand, believed that they could obtain the peace of their choice any time they wished, and so they were greedy for more, as the Spartan envoys had feared they would and had tried to admonish them and talk them out of their avidity;<sup>3</sup> toward which, he adds, they were mainly incited by Cleon, a popular leader of that time with exceptional influence upon the multitude (4.21.3: μάλιστα δ' αὐτοὺς ἐνήγε Κλέων ὁ Κλεινέτου, ἀνὴρ δημαγωγὸς κατ' ἐκείνον τὸν χρόνον ὧν καὶ τῷ πλήθει πιθανώτατος).<sup>4</sup> The Athenian counter-proposals, therefore, were heavy

2 See 4.17-20, esp. 19.1, and cf. also Ar. *Pax* 1082, and de Romilly 1963: 187.

3 Cf. 4.17.4 and 21.2. *A fortiori*, the Athenians were reaching out for more after they had captured the Spartans of Sphacteria; cf. 4.41.4: οἱ δὲ μειζόνων τε ὠρέγοντο καὶ πολλάκις φοιτῶντων (Spartan envoys kept coming to Athens to solicit peace) αὐτοὺς ἀπράκτους ἀπέπεμπον. See also below n. 9.

4 This description *per se* (as well as 4.22.2: Κλέων δ' ἐνταῦθα πολλὸς ἐνέκειτο [= pressed hard]) is, unwarrantedly in my view, regarded by Woodhead 1960: 311 as an indication of Thuc.'s bias against Cleon. For a politician to exert influence through his persuasiveness is not a fault, and thus *piشانōtatos* is not a derogatory term (*pace* John Finley 1940/1967: 285/154; Westlake 1968: 8; Dover 1973: 36; Kagan 1974: 234 n. 53), but rather a complimentary one; cf. also Hornblower 1991: 420 ('not an unflattering word') and Rhodes 1998: 220. As for δημαγωγός, a *harpax* in Thuc. (plus δημαγωγία in 8.65.2), even though this term was perhaps still free from the sinister connotations it subsequently acquired (see Westlake above), it can hardly be regarded, *pace* Gomme 1956b: 461-62, as a respectable one; the quotation from Ar. *Eq.* 191-93, which Gomme

on the Spartans, yet their envoys agreed to discuss them all the same; not openly and in front of the whole assembly, though, but in a private session with the representatives whom the Athenian assembly would appoint; a quite reasonable request, given that the interests of the Spartan allies were also involved in these talks (4.22.1). Cleon, however, persuaded the Athenians to reject this request and even accused the Spartan envoys of duplicity. The latter eventually realized that the Athenians had no intention to grant their proposals on tolerable conditions and left Athens.<sup>5</sup> Interestingly, we hear nothing of Nicias in connection with this Spartan embassy, and generally Thucydides' account gives the impression that the Athenian mood was so openly warlike that Cleon simply took advantage of this mood and perhaps exacerbated it even more. This might also explain why Thucydides chose not to provide the Athenian counter-speech to the Spartan proposals; finding, that is, the arguments of the envoys weak and unconvincing – let alone the unbearably didactic tone of their speech which probably made their rejection easier – and Nicias' (?) counter-arguments in favour of accepting the Spartan peace offer not particularly compelling either, Thucydides decided against taking down Cleon's spectacular show of belligerence and his easy public triumph.<sup>6</sup> Yet, other sources suggest that the situation may not have

himself adduces, seems to suggest the opposite, I think. Cf. also Classen & Steup 1900: 45; Moses Finley 1962: 4-5; 1972: 56, 58, and John Finley 1967: 154-55. At Xen. *Hell.* 5.2.7 *demagōgos* is already a derogatory term.

5 See Kagan's 1974: 231-38 relevant account and cf. Westlake 1968: 65-66.

6 Cf. Cornford 1971: 125 and Hornblower 1996: 170 (Thuc. 'was unwilling to dwell on Cleon's victory in the debate'). Most scholars, on the basis of 4.21.2, 27.2, 5.14.2, believe that Thuc. favoured the acceptance of the Spartan proposals: Adcock 1927: 233-34; Finley 1942: 194-95; de Romilly 1963: 172-77; Westlake 1968: 68-69 and n. 1; Kagan 1974: 232; Rhodes 1998: 220. Yet this does not necessarily mean that Thuc. was convinced by the Spartan arguments, as Gomme 1956b: 460 and Connor 1984: 113 n. 10 point out. It may be worth noting also that 5.14.2 (μετεμέλοντό τε ὅτι μετὰ τὰ ἐν Πύλῳ καλῶς παρασχόν οὐ ξυνέβησαν – 'they regretted not having come to terms [sc. with the Spartans] when a good opportunity arose after the events at Pylos'), may well be an *a posteriori* assessment and, in any case, it reflects the Athenian feelings and mood in 421, not in 425. On the other hand, Marshall's 1984: 20, 28 and 32 view that 'Thucydides really wishes Sparta had won, and regards the Athenian victory [sc. at Pylos-Sphacteria] as *aischron*', is extreme and totally groundless.

been so clear-cut: Plutarch, to begin with, implies that Nicias was in favour of the Spartan peace offer, contrary to Cleon who urged the Athenians (and eventually persuaded them) to reject it (4.22.2).<sup>7</sup> Then we have a fragment of Philochorus suggesting that the assembly was divided over Cleon's negative recommendation, but the supporters of war prevailed in the end.<sup>8</sup> Philochorus' fragment in its entirety is indeed somewhat muddled, as Westlake (1968: 69 n. 2) and Hornblower (1996: 177) note, but it cannot be ignored. Aristophanes' *Peace*, produced in 421, might refer to this ambivalent assembly meeting,<sup>9</sup> and the ancient scholiast here seems to agree with Philochorus' information.<sup>10</sup>

- 7 Cf. also Plut. *Nic.* 7.2: ἀπέωσαντο δὲ Κλέωνος ἐναντιωθέντος οὐχ ἥκιστα διὰ Νικίαν· ἐχθρὸς γὰρ ὦν αὐτοῦ, καὶ προθύμως ὀρῶν συμπράττοντα τοῖς Λακεδαιμονίοις, ἔπεισε τὸν δῆμον ἀποψηφίσασθαι τὰς σπονδὰς (the Athenians 'repulsed [the Spartan embassy] because Cleon, chiefly because of Nicias, spoke against it; for Nicias was his political enemy and, as he saw him zealously cooperating with the Lacedaemonians, persuaded the popular assembly to reject the truce' – transl. Perrin [Loeb]).
- 8 Jacoby 1954: 407 (on 328F128): Κλέωνος δὲ ἀπειπόντος ταῖς διαλύσεσι στασιάσαι λέγεται τὴν ἐκκλησίαν ... ἐνίκησαν δὲ οἱ πολεμεῖν βουλόμενοι. Rhodes 1998: 221 also refers to Philochorus, but regards his information as 'unlikely to be right'.
- 9 Cf. *Pax* 211-19, 665-67 (ἐλθοῦσά φησιν αὐτομάτη μετὰ τὰν Πύλω / σπονδῶν φέρουσα τῇ πόλει κίστην πλέαν ἀποχειροτονηθῆναι τρις ἐν τῆκκλησίᾳ – 'when, after the events at Pylos, she [sc. *Peace*] came here of her own accord offering to the city a basket full of treaties, she was voted down three times in the assembly') and cf. de Romilly 1967: 178 (on 4.21.2), Gomme 1956b: 461 ad loc., and Lewis 1992: 416. See also Ar. *Eq.* 668-74, 794-97, and cf. Neil 1901: 115. Yet Sommerstein 1985: 164 and Olson 1998: 111 hold that the above lines from *Pax* and *Equites* refer to Thuc. 4.41.3-4 and the later pacific attempts of the Spartans. Cf. also Gomme 1956b: 482 and Hornblower 1996: 197.
- 10 Jacoby's remarks (above n. 8) that Thuc. 4.21.2 only seemingly conveys the impression that the mood of the assembly was uniform (cf. also Hornblower 1996: 177) and that 'the report as a whole shows that opinions were divided, and Cleon was obliged to speak twice' are not very cogent. Cleon did speak twice indeed, yet not in this but in the following assembly (4.27-28) and only after he was somehow impelled to accept the command; not because the opinions were divided. Flower 1992: 42-45, 46-47, 49, 56-57 argues that the unclarity over the situation is due to the fact that Thuc. failed to record the assembly that had discussed Demosthenes' request for reinforcements and had voted the Pylos campaign to Nicias. Hornblower 1996: 170 adopts Flower's suggestion, but Gomme's (1956b: 468) explanation at 4.28.3 renders it unnecessary: 'Nicias, as *strategos*, would have good claim to their command' (sc. of the reinforcements that might be sent) and so no special assembly was needed for that; cf. also Classen &

Be that as it may, after the rejection of the Spartan peace proposals, the war was resumed, but concerning the situation at Pylos a stalemate ensued. The Athenian blockade of Sphacteria proved not entirely successful, while the besiegers themselves were also harassed by the scantiness of food and water in an uninhabited and rather barren place. Upon realizing the distress of their army and in view of the winter (which would naturally make things worse), the Athenians repented having rejected the Spartan peace offer (4.27.2: καὶ μετεμέλοντο τὰς σπονδάς οὐ δεξάμενοι),<sup>11</sup> and Cleon could easily figure out that it was he whom they were mostly blaming for their current predicament.<sup>12</sup> So, when another assembly met to discuss the situation, he first denied that the conditions in the Athenian camp were so distressful as reported; but, challenged to go and see things for himself, he dismissed this mission as a waste of time and proposed instead that they should immediately send out reinforcements, land on Sphacteria and capture the Spartans there. It was an easy matter, he added, pointing at Nicias, and something that our generals should have already done, if they were real men, and, in any case, this was what he himself would have done, had he been in their place.<sup>13</sup>

Some critics now have overinterpreted, I think, if not misinterpreted, Thucydides in this passage. Hornblower (1996: 186), for instance, commenting on Cleon's realization that the Athenian discontent was being directed against him (naturally of course, since it was he who had thwarted the acceptance of the Spartan peace proposals), adopts Mabel

Steup 1900: 62. Philochorus' fragment suggests, then, that, despite his persuasiveness, Cleon's victory was not so easy as Thuc. allows us to suppose (incidentally, neither in the Mytilenean debate was Cleon in the end persuasive; see 3.49.1).

11 As they also repented for a similar reason at 4.41.3-4 and 5.14.2. Thuc. disagreed and criticized his compatriots for all these rejections of peace which he regarded as a major strategic blunder (see esp. 5.14.2), according to Olson 1998: xxvi and 112. See also de Romilly 1963: 177, 186-87, where she argues that Thuc. gradually changed his views and became more of a pacifist, whereas he initially approved of Pericles' imperialistic policies and his firm opposition to Sparta. But see also n. 6.

12 So also Grote 1872: 247.

13 4.27.5: καὶ ἐς Νικίαν τὸν Νικηράτου στρατηγὸν ὄντα ἀπεσήμαιεν ... ῥάδιον εἶναι παρασκευῆ, εἰ ἄνδρες εἶεν οἱ στρατηγοί, πλεύσαντας λαβεῖν τοὺς ἐν τῇ νήσῳ, καὶ αὐτὸς γ' ἂν ἦρχε, ποιῆσαι τοῦτο. For a similar appeal to manliness cf. 3.14.2 and see also below n. 54.

Lang's (1995) observations on Thucydides' technique to ascribe motives through the use of participles, and regards the use of the participles γνούς, ὄρων, ὠρμημένους below as evidence of Thucydides' arbitrary attribution of motives, and by extension as evidence of his bias against Cleon (4.27.3):<sup>14</sup>

Κλέων δὲ γνούς αὐτῶν τὴν ἐς αὐτὸν ὑποψίαν περὶ τῆς κωλύμενης τῆς  
 ξυμβάσεως ... 27.4: καὶ γνούς ὅτι αναγκασθήσεται ἢ ταῦτ' ἀλέγειν οἷς  
 διέβαλλεν ἢ τ' ἀναντία εἰπὼν ψευδῆς φανήσεσθαι, παρήνει τοῖς  
 Ἀθηναίοις, ὄρων αὐτοὺς καὶ ὠρμημένους ... στρατεύειν, ὡς χρῆ, ... εἰ  
 δὲ δοκεῖ αὐτοῖς ἀληθῆ εἶναι τὰ ἀγγελλόμενα, πλεῖν ἐπὶ τοὺς ἄνδρας.

But Cleon, knowing that their suspicions were directed against him because he had prevented the agreement ... 27.4: and realizing now that he would either be obliged to bring the same report as the messengers whose word he was impugning, or, if he contradicted them, be convicted of falsehood, he advised the Athenians, also seeing that they were now somewhat more inclined to send an expedition, that ... if they themselves thought the reports to be true, to send a fleet and fetch the men (transl. Smith [Loeb] slightly modified).

But 'The idea of Cleon confiding his thoughts and plans to Thucydides seems absurd', Lang (1995: 50) argues, Thucydides could not have known what Cleon had in mind, and so by writing 'Κλέων γνούς' and 'Κλέων ὄρων', he arbitrarily ascribes concrete motives to him. Almost thirty years earlier Westlake (1968: 72) also remarked that Thucydides 'tacitly claims to see into the mind of Cleon and to know precisely why he acted as he did at each stage of the [Pylos] debate'. And Woodhead (1960: 313), one of the most eminent admirers of Cleon, made the same diagnosis

14 Hornblower 1996: 185: 'One of Thuc.'s least objective sections'. Cf. also Lewis 1992: 417 ('redolent of bias and dislike'), and Westlake 1968: 70 (Thuc. purposely expatiates on the Pylos episode, because it affords 'the opportunity of underlining the personal failings of Cleon'; cf. also p. 75). Yet Grote 1872: 246-48 and Gomme 1956b: 468 (on 4.27.4) see no bias against Cleon on the part of Thuc. here (and with justice so).

even earlier.<sup>15</sup> To my mind, however, the situation is so clear that no psychologist or Sherlock Holmes is required here to perceive the self-evident; for it was absolutely natural and expected that Cleon should have felt (γνοῦς) the tide of opinion moving against him, after the news about the multiple distress of the Athenian army at Pylos had reached Athens.<sup>16</sup> Thus, Cleon's first, almost instinctive, reaction was to deny the veracity of the report, then, challenged to go and inspect the situation himself, he realized (γνοῦς) that the report might be true after all and so he refused to go, while seeing (ὄρῶν) in the sequel that the Athenians were inclined to send an expedition anyhow (ὄρμημένους ... στρατεύειν),<sup>17</sup> he urged them to do this right away; exactly as he had inflamed their belligerent mood one month or so earlier with the Spartan embassy pleading for peace.<sup>18</sup> Almost anyone present at that assembly could deduce all this, regardless of his feelings or opinion about Cleon; logical deductions after all are legitimate and do not necessarily indicate prejudice,<sup>19</sup> and if Thucydides was present at that assembly, as it is very probable that he was,<sup>20</sup> he was an eyewitness of Cleon's reactions and the successive shifting of his position and simply described them; he did not need to discover and

15 Similarly Dover 1973: 31 and Kagan 2009: 133. But see below n. 24.

16 See also Lewis 1992: 417.

17 Why were the Athenians now inclined to send an expedition? Apparently because, contrary to Cleon's (probably) sham protests (see below pp. 139 and n. 63), they believed the messengers' reports from Pylos (4.27.3: οὐ τάληθῆ ἔφη [sc. Cleon] λέγειν τοὺς ἐξαγγέλλοντας. Παραينوῦντων δὲ τῶν ἀφιγμένων, εἰ μὴ σφίσι πιστεύουσι, κατασκόπους τινὰς πέμψαι...), who in all likelihood must also have requested reinforcements; see below n. 66.

18 Cf. 4.21.2-3 and see de Romilly 1963: 203 with n. 1 and 174 with n. 2. The chronological sequence of the main Pylos events, as can be gathered from 4.39.1-2 and other calculations is the following: Late May-beginning of June: The Athenian victory in the bay and the start of Sphacteria blockade (Wilson 1979: 126; Gomme 1956b: 478: not earlier than May 25-30; cf. also p. 719). First fortnight of June: Spartan envoys in Athens unsuccessfully soliciting peace. Middle July: The assembly meeting that decides to send Cleon to Pylos (Gomme 478: c. July 28). Beginning of August: The final victory and the surrender of the Spartans (August 1, according to Wilson: 126; August 5-10, according to Gomme: 478 and 487). On these chronological estimates cf. also Rhodes 1998: 232 (on 39.1).

19 See, for instance, Westlake 1968: 79 n. 2.

20 Cf. Woodhead 1960: 315 and Westlake 1968: 73 n. 1.

attribute motives, because Cleon's intentions and corresponding behaviour unfolded in the broad daylight and were therefore public and visible to all. As Westlake (1968: 73) remarks, Thucydides "may well be perfectly right in his interpretation of each move by Cleon throughout this episode; the available evidence certainly does not provide adequate grounds for believing that any of his interpretations must be wrong", regardless of the fact that one could also argue for different interpretations, as Westlake himself does in the sequel.<sup>21</sup> *Pace*, therefore, the opinion of the scholars who defend Cleon and find fault with Thucydides here, I think that Gomme's (1956b: 468) reading of the same passage is more trenchant and right on the mark: 'There was no question', he notes (on 4.27.4), 'of Cleon's leading the people or opposing them; he observed which way the wind was blowing before making his proposal'.<sup>22</sup>

The foregoing observations are not intended to question the usefulness of Lang's study; for participial motivation is indeed a feature of Thucydides' narrative technique, as Lang 1995: 53 has convincingly established. Yet the motivation of an action, whether emerging from mere observation or from elementary reasoning, is often fairly obvious and does not necessarily presuppose direct factual knowledge or reading the doer's mindset, as Lang (1995: 50-51) seems to postulate. If either of the latter was inescapably required, passing judgements would become almost impossible in many cases; and insofar as there are cases where the motives of individuals are entirely obvious or may legitimately be inferred from their recorded actions or from the situation in which they

21 Sure, Westlake 1968: 73-74 notes that there are more interpretations of Cleon's behaviour, but this does not prove that the historian's one was dictated by his bias against Cleon. All interpretations are subjective after all (see Westlake's protest on p. 73n. 1), but their trustworthiness is tested on the criterium of their logical coherence and plausibility; see Westlake 1968: 79n. 2.

22 Cf. also Marshall 1984: 21. That Cleon's proposal was 'eminently sensible', as Gomme above adds, is a completely different matter, of course.



were involved or from subsequent developments, as Westlake convincingly argues elsewhere,<sup>23</sup> I cannot see why Cleon's motives on the episode above may not belong to one of these cases.<sup>24</sup>

However – to return to the second Pylos debate – no decision has been taken as yet and Cleon faces, during the same assembly meeting, a second and far more important challenge. At first, he was asked, as we saw, to go and check for himself if the reports from Pylos were true, but this challenge he smartly eluded by overriding the desire of the multitude to send an expedition; yet now that Nicias, whom he had practically called a coward (see n. 13), offers to resign his command and urges him, along with the crowd of Cleon's own supporters, we may guess, to take any force he

- 23 For motives deducible from recorded actions see Westlake 1989: 201, 205, 210; deducible from the context or pertinent situations see 201, 204, 222n. 24; deducible from subsequent developments see Westlake 1947: 28 with n. 1; cf. also 4.79.2 and 83.1, 6. Elsewhere Westlake 1962: 283-84 maintains that Thuc. does not as a rule 'give information about the motives and feelings of individuals based upon mere surmise or even upon inference from his knowledge of their character' (with the exception of Cleon and Nicias though; see id 1980: 333 n. 3 and 1968: 69-85, esp. 83 and 93-6). He must be right in most cases, but since the sources of Thuc.'s information are not always verifiable, the possibility that some of his judgements may rely on mere surmise or inference from knowledge of the character of the personage concerned cannot be ruled out; see also id. 1989: 201, 207; Dover 1973: 31, and also next note.
- 24 Another source for discerning motives and intentions is good information: with reference to the moderate terms which Brasidas offered to the people of Amphipolis, for example (4.105.2, 108.2), Westlake 1962: 283 believes that they were moderate because the Spartan commander had heard about Thucydides' mining interests in the area and feared that his arrival with ships from Thasos would stiffen the will of the Amphipolitans to resist (4.105.1); this, Westlake argues, must be 'an authentic report of what Brasidas thought', as our historian was 'remarkably well-informed about the motives and feelings of Brasidas on many occasions' (see p. 284 n. 2 and cf. Westlake 1980: 334). Yet it is not at all certain that this information was derived directly from Brasidas (see p. 333 n. 3 and 339: 'Direct contact between Thucydides and Brasidas seems unlikely'; cf. also Westlake 1989: 205; apparently a change of mind after 1968: 148), whom Thuc. may have met and questioned while in exile (so Adcock 1927: 243 and Proctor in Westlake 1989: 205 n. 14). True, Thuc. to be sure never inquired of Cleon about his motives and intentions, as he might have done with Brasidas; but why, if his own judgement and percipience as an eyewitness at that crucial assembly of 425 were not enough, could he not have been informed about them through Demosthenes, a close collaborator of Cleon and one of Thuc.'s sources (see below p. 150 and n. 65), or some other friend or supporter of Cleon?

wanted, sail to Pylos, and try to do better himself, Cleon could not evade any longer despite his initial refusal.<sup>25</sup> Thus, not only does he accept the command, but also he promises, apparently to everyone's astonishment that, within the following twenty days he will either capture and bring the Spartan garrison of Sphacteria to Athens alive or slay them all on the spot; and this without taking a single Athenian soldier with him, except some light troops that happened to be in Athens at that time and 400 archers from other places (4.28.4).<sup>26</sup> Cleon's frivolous promise (κουφολογία), so unnecessarily specific,<sup>27</sup> even made the Athenians laugh, Thucydides tells us, but the sound-minded (*sōphrones*) among them took pleasure in the thought that they would profit from either eventuality:

25 4.28.2-4: τὸ μὲν πρῶτον οἰόμενος αὐτὸν λόγῳ μόνον ἀφιέναι, ἐτοιμος ἦν, γνοὺς δὲ τῶ ὄντι παραδωσειόντα ἀνεχώρει καὶ οὐκ ἔφη αὐτὸς ἀλλ' ἐκείνον στρατηγεῖν ... 28.3: οἱ δέ, ... ὅσῳ μᾶλλον ὁ Κλέων ὑπέφευγε τὸν πλοῦν καὶ ἐξανεχώρει τὰ εἰρημένα, τόσῳ ἐπεκελεύοντο τῷ Νικίᾳ παραδιδόναι τὴν ἀρχὴν καὶ ἐκεῖνῳ ἐπεβόων πλεῖν· 28.4: ὥστε οὐκ ἔχων ὅπως τῶν εἰρημένων ἔτι ἐξαπαλλαγῆ, ὑφίσταται τὸν πλοῦν. One might read the above scene as a duel of bluffing wits: Cleon offends Nicias, but does not expect to go to Pylos instead of him; Nicias offers the command to Cleon, but does not expect him to accept it. (I owe this remark to a relevant point in the report of the anonymous referee).

26 Cf. also below p. 139 and nn. 63 and 65.

27 Κουφολογία is the light or empty or thoughtless talk ('*levitas verborum*', according to Bétant's 1843-47 Lexicon; 'propos étourdis', according to de Romilly 1967: 21, a consistent manifestation of Cleon's vanity (κουφότης) in general (see Plutarch's example of it at *Nic.* 7.6-7). On the *braggadocio* and irresponsibility of Cleon's promise see Lewis 1992: 418 and Rhodes 1998: 227. Thuc. calls it mad (μανιώδης) at 4.39.3, and Gomme 1956b: 479 rightly explains that the promise was mad not because it was most unlikely to be fulfilled *per se*, but to be fulfilled within a fixed time-limit in the midst of military operations. Cf. also the ancient scholiast ad loc. (Hude 1927: 249: μανιώδης· ἀντὶ τοῦ ἢ περὶ τοῦ μέλλοντος προπετῆς ἀπόφασις). For Grote 1872: 260-61, however, Cleon's promise was not at all presumptuous, but, on the contrary, 'a reasonable and even a modest anticipation of the future'. Similarly Kagan 1974: 244 and 247 n. 99. As for the 20 days time-limit, it was not tight, according to Wilson 1979: 124-25 and, as Vlachos 1970: 130 put it, 'une fois l'opération engagée, elle ne pouvait être que très rapidement menée et c'est sur cette donnée que table, fort justement, Cléon'.

they would either get rid of Cleon, which they rather expected, or Cleon would indeed manage to capture the Spartans of Sphacteria for them.<sup>28</sup>

George Grote was furious with the aforesaid *sōphrones* and established a school by proclaiming their conduct a treacherous one. Because, as he puts it (p. 251):

‘Of all the parties here concerned, those whose conduct is the most unpardonably disgraceful are Nicias and his oligarchical supporters; who force a political enemy into the supreme command against his own strenuous protest,<sup>29</sup> persuaded that he will fail so as to compromise the lives of many soldiers and the destinies of the state on an important emergency – but satisfying themselves with the idea that they shall bring him to ruin.’<sup>30</sup>

And (p. 250):

‘...while his [sc. Cleon’s] political adversaries (Nicias among them) are deplorably timid, ignorant and reckless of the public interest; seeking only to turn the existing disappointment and dilemma into a party-opportunity for ruining him’.

This approach, which has largely been adopted by most modern scholars, is, in my view, another case of over-interpretation of what Thucydides actually says, no matter if one agrees or disagrees with the historian’s opinion here. First, we ought to observe that the Athenian assembly did not comprise only the *sōphrones*, namely Nicias’ oligarchical supporters according to Grote;<sup>31</sup> Cleon’s supporters were also there, of course, and

28 4.28.5: Τοῖς δὲ Ἀθηναίοις ἐνέπεσε μὲν τι καὶ γέλωτος τῇ κουφολογίᾳ αὐτοῦ, ἀσμένους δ’ ὁμῶς ἐγίνετο τοῖς σώφροσι τῶν ἀνθρώπων, λογιζομένοις δυοῖν ἀγαθοῖν τοῦ ἐτέρου τεύξεσθαι, ἢ Κλέωνος ἀπαλλαγῆσεσθαι, ὁ μᾶλλον ἤλπιζον, ἢ σφαλεῖσι γνώμης Λακεδαιμονίους σφίσι χειρώσεσθαι.

29 But for this strenuous protest see also below n. 62.

30 Cf. also Dover 1973: 37; Westlake 1968: 70 speaks more generally of ‘the irresponsibility of the Athenian assembly’, not only of the *sōphrones*.

31 According to Plut. *Nic.* 2.2, Nicias was primarily supported by the rich and notable as an opposing force to Cleon’s repulsive brazenness (ὑπὸ τῶν πλουσίων καὶ γνωρίμων ἀντίταγμα ... Κλέωνος βδελυρίαν καὶ τόλμαν), but was held in some repute already

most probably outnumbered the *sōphrones*; yet their own responsibility and share in the decision taken is not criticized by the denouncers of the latter. The argument that Cleon's supporters believed that their leader would succeed does not necessarily mean that his opponents considered the feasibility of the operation impossible, irrespective of how they assessed Cleon's chances. Graves (1884: 168), for instance, remarks that these Athenians, the *sōphrones*, 'may have considered the enterprise feasible, but were not unwilling that its risks should fall upon Cleon, while they knew that Demosthenes would be at hand to advise and direct'; and certainly, we may add, the destinies of Athens were hardly compromised on this occasion, as Grote's exaggerated rhetoric wants us to believe. After all, Grote himself argues that this operation, given the enormous military inequality between the two armies, must have been fairly easy and that failure would imply 'an idea not only of superhuman power in the Lacedaemonian hoplites, but a disgraceful incapacity on the part of Demosthenes and the assailants' (260). But if so, neither the lives of many soldiers nor the destinies of the state would actually be compromised, as the outcome of the operation bore out after all.<sup>32</sup>

Further, there is nothing in Thucydides suggesting that the conduct of Nicias and his oligarchical supporters, the *sōphrones* of 4.28.5, is unpardonably disgraceful, and nowhere in Thucydides is Nicias charged with cowardice. But Grote as well as those who agree with him all of a sudden choose to part company with Thucydides at this juncture and follow instead Plutarch's account, an author who writes five centuries later and whose historical acumen and judgement, incidentally, they hardly admire otherwise. In any case, Plutarch alone writes that Nicias resigned

since Pericles' time (ἦν μὲν ἔν τινι λόγῳ καὶ Περικλέους ζῶντος), and well-liked by the common people too, who supported his ambitions (ἀλλὰ καὶ τὸν δῆμον εἶχεν εὖνον καὶ συμφιλιτιμούμενον).

32 Cf. 4.38.5: Ἀθηναίων δὲ οὐ πολλοὶ διεφθάρησαν (see Gomme 1956b: 478). For the relative easiness of the operation and perfect feasibility of Demosthenes' plan and Cleon's promise see also Kagan 1974: 244-47 and n. 99. However, even recently Tompkins 2017: 106, discussing 4.28.5 (n. 28), wonders 'how ... could "prudent" men hope for disaster'.

his command to Cleon out of cowardice and regards this act as disgraceful and detrimental to the interests of Athens.<sup>33</sup> Yet, no other ancient source supports this assessment and, more importantly, we do know – and we cannot overlook this fact – that in the *Life of Nicias* Plutarch, the biographer, has his own axe to grind, and that his *Nicias* must be read along with his pair, *Crassus*, if we want a thorough and trustworthy evaluation of the two men; and these are factors that may offer another explanation of Plutarch's attitude toward Nicias, as I have argued in detail elsewhere.<sup>34</sup> Besides, the fact that some years later Nicias offers to resign also his Sicily command, a far more important assignment,<sup>35</sup> and this despite his supposed disgrace in the Pylos affair, allows perhaps the suspicion at least that what Plutarch considered to be disgraceful five centuries after the Pylos episode – and *a fortiori* what modern era regards as such – might not coincide after all with the pertinent viewpoint of most people in those times and those circumstances. For as we shall see below, Nicias was not at all disgraced on account of his resigning the Pylos command. Conclusion: Plutarch's evidence here cannot, I believe, annul or thrust aside that of Thucydides.

However, what the historian says at 4.28.5 (n. 28) does indeed give rise to several queries and is open to various interpretations. What is, for instance, the ultimate meaning of ἀπαλλαγῆσθαι in that context? Did the

33 Plut., *Nic.* 8.2: Οὐ γὰρ ἀσπίδος ῥῆψις, ἀλλ' αἴσχιόν τι καὶ χεῖρον ἐδόκει τὸ **δειλία** τὴν στρατηγίαν ἀποβαλεῖν ἐκουσίως ... 8.5: καὶ τὴν πόλιν ἔβλαπεν οὐ μικρὰ τῷ Κλέωνι τοσοῦτον προσγενέσθαι δόξης ἑάσας καὶ δυνάμεως ... ('Nicias was thought not merely to have cast away his shield, but to have done something far more disgraceful and base in voluntarily throwing up his command out of cowardice ... and besides, he wrought no little harm to the city in allowing Cleon to acquire such a high reputation and political power...') -- Perrin's transl. [Loeb] with slight modifications); cf. also *Comp. Nic.-Cr.* 3.1,3,5.

34 See Nikolaidis 1988: 331-33.

35 Cf. 6.23.4: ταῦτα γὰρ τῇ τε ξυμπάσῃ πόλει βεβαιότατα ἡγοῦμαι καὶ ἡμῖν τοῖς στρατευσομένοις σωτήρια. εἰ δὲ τῷ ἄλλως δοκεῖ, παρήμιμ αὐτῷ τὴν ἀρχήν ('For these precautions I regard as not only surest for the whole state but also as safeguards for us who are to go on the expedition. But if it seem otherwise to anyone, I yield the command to him' – transl. Smith [Loeb]). Pace Rhodes 1998: 227, his reference to 7.15.1 as a similar case is unfortunate; Nicias does not actually resign his command there, but only asks the Athenians to replace him because he is sick and cannot perform his duties.

*sōphrones* expect Cleon to get killed or simply to fail in carrying the operation through? If he only failed, why would they necessarily get rid of him? More importantly, on what grounds did they believe that Cleon had more chances of being killed or failing than of succeeding? I shall discuss these questions in turn, but first I will try to address, opening a parenthesis at this point, another crucial question: who were these *sōphrones*?

Despite the etymological transparency of the term σώφρων (σῶς, sound + φρήν, mind), Thucydides' use of the words *sōphrōn* and *sōphrosynē* is very complex because, following the practice of the Sophists, he too played with several possible meanings or shades of meaning according to the context.<sup>36</sup> Helen North (1966: 100-1) astutely argued that the contrast between Athens and Sparta, one of the major themes in his *History*, often takes the form of a contrast between rival conceptions of *sōphrosynē*. Extreme though this view may initially sound, it is very well documented. *Sōphrosynē* in its primary sense arising from the etymology of the word (i.e. sound-mindedness),<sup>37</sup> is a Spartan quality *par excellence*;<sup>38</sup> and so are such qualities as orderliness (εὐταξία), propriety or decorum (εὐκοσμον, κοσμιότης, αἰδώς), quiet or peacefulness (ἡσυχία), abstention from politics (ἀπραγμοσύνη), slowness in action and procrastination (βραδυτής, μέλλησις) out of concern for safety (ἀσφάλεια) and so forth, as natural consequences of sound-mindedness or prudence.<sup>39</sup> The Spartans themselves regard the quality of *sōphrosynē* as peculiarly their own (see nn. 38 and 41), their allies openly recognize this fact and appeal to it,<sup>40</sup> and thus democratic Athens, as opposed to oligarchic

36 See Georgiadou 1988: 140, 142, Gomme 1956a: 301, and more generally North 1966: 100-16.

37 According to Bétant's 1843-47 Thucydidean Lexicon, the two primary connotations of *sōphrosynē* are *sapientia* and *prudentia* (the other two *moderatio* and *modestia*).

38 Cf. 1.84.2-3. Also 1.79.2, North 1966: 102-4, Edmunds 1975: 74 and 79.

39 See, for instance, 1.32.4-5, 69.4-5, 70.4, 8, 71.1-4, 84.1-3, 124.1-2, 8.1.3. See also North 1966: 101-4, and cf. [Arist.], *IV* 1250b12: παρέπεται δὲ τῆ σωφροσύνη εὐταξία, κοσμιότης, αἰδώς, εὐλάβεια (caution).

40 See, e.g., 1.68.1 and 3.59.1 with Gomme 1956: vol. 2, 345. See also Georgiadou 1988: 142-43, 192-93 and North 1966: 102.

Sparta, is not very keen on laying claim to this quality.<sup>41</sup> The words *sōphrōn* and *sōphrosynē* are missing from all Pericles' speeches (the terms *metrios* and *metriotēs* are used instead),<sup>42</sup> and Thucydides never calls Pericles *sōphrōn*,<sup>43</sup> although in his celebrated portrait of him at 2.65 he describes him exactly as such (2.65.5):<sup>44</sup>

Ὅσον τε γὰρ χρόνον προύστη τῆς πόλεως ἐν τῇ εἰρήνῃ, **μετρίως** ἐξηγεῖτο καὶ **ἀσφαλῶς** διεφύλαξεν αὐτήν ... 7: ... **ἡσυχάζοντάς** τε ... καὶ ἀρχὴν μὴ ἐπικτωμένους ἐν τῷ πολέμῳ μηδὲ τῇ πόλει κινδυνεύοντας ἔφη περιέσεσθαι.

For so long as he presided over the affairs of the state in time of peace he pursued **a moderate policy** and kept the city **in safety** ... 7: ... for he had told the Athenians that if they would maintain **a defensive policy** ... and not seek to extend their sway during the war or do anything to imperil the existence of the state, they would prove superior (transl. Smith [Loeb])

In view of the above, it is difficult, I think, to dissociate the *sōphrones* of 4.28.5 from the political dimension of the term, in other words, to avoid their connection with aristocratic principles and oligarchic-sympathisers in Athens. Gomme (1956b: 470) and other scholars deny this and maintain that the word *sōphrones* here bears only its primary and generic

41 For *sōphrosynē* as a Spartan and a more or less oligarchic (aristocratic) quality see n. 38 and further 8.1.3, 24.4, 53.3, 64.5. See also North 1966: 112 ('*Sōphrōn* is the operative word denoting oligarchy'); Edmunds 1975: 76 and n. 17 *ibid.* ('an oligarchic slogan'), and cf. Gomme 1956a: 300 and 379 on 3.37.3 and 3.82.8; Dover 1973: 37; Gomme, Andrewes & Dover 1981: 159-61; Georgiadiou 1988: 143-46; Hornblower 1991: 77 (on 1.32.4), 124-5 (on 1.79.2), 486 (on 3.82.8); Tompkins 2017: 106; see also Balot 2017: 331-32.

42 See, for instance, 1.76.4, 77.2, 2.65.5 and cf. North 1966: 102, 104-6, and Gomme, Andrewes & Dover 1981: 160. Cf. also n. 37.

43 But in Isocr. 16.28 Pericles is praised as *σοφρονέστατον, δικαιοτάτον καὶ σοφώτατον τῶν πολιτῶν*, while Aristotle describes him as *φρόνιμος* (*Eth. Nic.* 1140b8).

44 Thus, the aforementioned concomitant qualities of *sōphrosynē* are also shared by the Athenians at times; cf. Georgiadiou 1988: 142-43, 195-96. For Thucydides' own views about *sōphrosynē* and its political significance, see North 1966: 113 (8.24.4-5; 53.3; 64.5; 97.2).

meaning and thus simply refers to the sensible and prudent men of the assembly at large. That these sensible men might have laughed at Cleon's frivolous promise is perfectly understandable, but why would the same persons have looked forward to his ruin, whether physical or political, if a factional or political more broadly antithesis was not also simmering? On the other hand, some critics believe that the use of the term *sōphrones* here is ironic, given the successful outcome of the Sphacteria enterprise and the fulfillment of Cleon's promise.<sup>45</sup> Yet, this reading is not particularly convincing either. For, if the use of *sōphrones* here is ironic, it must be self-ironic, because Thucydides, who calls Cleon's promise mad, as we shall see (4.39.3), would certainly have included himself among those *sōphrones*.<sup>46</sup> Thucydides now does occasionally make ironic remarks – he often sneers, for example, at the religiosity of the Spartans which he regards as specious,<sup>47</sup> but I can find no instance where he sneers at himself.

Here the parenthesis on *sōphrosynē* in Thucydides closes and we may proceed to the other questions which the historian's description at 4.28.5 engenders. In what sense did the *sōphrones* expect to get rid of Cleon?

45 Cf., e.g., Gomme, Andrewes and Dover 1981: 160, Babut 1986: 73, Georgiadou 1988: 144, and more recently Flower 1992: 56 and Tompkins 2017: 106. However, Hornblower 1996: 188 rightly, in my view, denies the ironic dimension of the *sōphrones* here.

46 This was Gomme's opinion too (1956b: 469: 'Thucydides doubtless reflected that he had been one of this group of 'sensible men' at that time'); see also Rhodes: 1998: 227, but Gomme, Andrewes & Dover 1981:160 seem to disagree; and so does Flower 1992: 56, who dissociates Thucydides from the *sōphrones* above.

47 Finley 1942: 311-12. For another ironic remark of Thuc. (Cleon being the butt) see 5.7.3, but on the whole 'irony is not a characteristic of the Thucydidean narrative', as Westlake 1960: 393 with n. 34 rightly observes. On the contrary, Connor 1984: 36 n. 36 sees irony in many passages of the *History*, on the basis that the author knows that the reality eventually contradicted or conflicted with what a character had expected or affirmed or simply said on a certain occasion (see his 'irony' index on p. 264). But these instances are not necessarily ironical, in my view (cf. also Hornblower's 2008: 211 criticism on 5.82.5); nor is 6.23.3, *pace* Hornblower 2008: 359, while at 3.83.8 (ἀριστοκρατίας σώφρονος προτιμήσει), *pace* Gomme, Andrewes & Dover 1981:160, there is no irony at all (see Gomme 1956a: 379) and, if there is, it refers to the noun *aristokratia*, not to the adjective *sōphron* (see Hornblower 1991: 486 on 3.82.8).



Could they really have thought it more likely that Cleon would be killed<sup>48</sup> in a comparatively easy operation (see n. 32) or is what we have here simply an inadvertent expression of wishful thinking on the part of Thucydides? More on this shortly. The evidence, on the other hand, from the *Knights* of Aristophanes, produced soon after the events of Pylos and taken within the whole context of this play, appears to suggest the political rather than the physical ruin of Cleon;<sup>49</sup> thus, it is perhaps safer to take ἀπαλλαγῆσθαι in its general meaning and suppose that, if Cleon failed, as was rather expected, his disgrace would be so great, especially after his silly and boastful promise (see n. 27), that it would automatically put him out of the political arena once and for all. This is how the *sōphrones* may have seen things, as other critics also believe.<sup>50</sup> However, the political career of Nicias who was discredited – if only superficially, as it seems – by Cleon’s success, did not suffer any setback: as soon as Cleon returns triumphantly with the Spartan prisoners to Athens, it is Nicias who, as elected *stratēgos*, pursues with yet more vigour the war against the Lacedaemonians (4.42.1). Moreover, one might also question whether Cleon’s political power was enhanced commensurably to his spectacular success. Plutarch surely maintains that it was,<sup>51</sup> and the *Clouds* of Aristophanes, so far as the evidence from a play can fully be entrusted as historically accurate, suggests (581-94) that Cleon was elected *stratēgos* in the following year.<sup>52</sup> However, Thucydides does not mention this, and indeed the only mention he makes of Cleon in office

48 So Thibaudet 1922: 36; de Romilly 1963: 156; Woodhead 1960: 314; Baldwin 1968: 214.

49 Cf. Ar. *Eq.* 973-76: ἡδιστον φάος ἡμέρας / ἔσται τοῖς παροῦσι καὶ / τοῖσι δεῦρ’ ἀφικνουμένοις, / ἢν Κλέων ἀπόληται (Sweetest will the bright daylight be / for both those already in town / and those who are to come / if Cleon gets lost). But this comedy was staged in 424 while Cleon was still alive.

50 Cf. Classen & Steup 1900: vol. 4, 64. ‘indem Cleon, wenn sein Versprechen sich nicht erfüllte, jedenfalls seine politische Rolle ausgespielt haben würde’. See also Grote 1872: 251.

51 See *Nic.* 8.5 (above n. 33) and cf. also Ar. *Eq.* 280, 702, 709, 766, 1404 (all referring to Cleon’s free meals at the *Prytaneion*).

52 So Dover 1968: lxxxii and 174 (on l. 582); Westlake 1968: 61; Kagan 1974: 250, 260 and n. 1; Mitchell 1991: 171 and 188.

again is with regard to the Amphipolis expedition in 422.<sup>53</sup> That Thucydides suppressed Cleon's election as *stratēgos* in 424 – a fact that could easily be verified or disproved – due to his bias and antipathy toward him is not at all convincing and, in any case, Gomme (1956b: 506, 526-27) is particularly meticulous on this matter and gives very plausible reasons why Cleon could not have been one of the ten generals in 424.

Finally, were the *sōphrones* justified in expecting that Cleon's command at Pylos would probably lead to his physical or political extermination? If the able and resourceful Demosthenes, the commander in charge of the operations there, had already unsuccessfully attempted a landing on Sphacteria, the Athenians would perhaps have had some grounds for believing that Cleon could not fare any better. Such an attempt, however, had not taken place, according to Thucydides' account: once the Lacedaemonian proposals for peace, after their mishap in Sphacteria, had been turned down and the envoys went back to Sparta (4.17-23.1), the war was resumed, but it was trench warfare, so to speak, with no party gaining or losing anything substantial: the Spartans kept ineffectually assailing the Athenian fortress at Pylos, and the Athenians kept sailing round Sphacteria, so that the entrapped Spartan contingent might not be able to escape. Cleon, however, probably in some collaboration, not necessarily secret, with Demosthenes, as we shall see, proposes now something quite different: immediate and drastic action. He reproves the Athenians for needless dallying and urges them to invade the island and capture the Spartans. This easy business, he alleges, tauntingly pointing at Nicias, our generals should have already accomplished, if they were real men,<sup>54</sup> and this was, in any case, what he himself would have done, had he been in command (4.27.5).

What follows is well-known: Nicias, feeling gravely insulted by Cleon's insinuation of cowardice, offers to relinquish the command to him so that he may try his own way. But he does so – and this point is as a rule suppressed – only after the people of the assembly, the *dēmos*, with

53 See also Grote's (1872: 369) remark to the same effect: Cleon 'obtained no command during this immediately succeeding period' [sc. after his achievement at Pylos].

54 For the added 'real' in the translation (4.27.5 in n. 13) see Rhodes 1998: 226, Kagan 2009: 132, and note that such appeals to masculinity are already known from Homer: cf. *Il.* 5.529, 6.112 etc. See also Eur. *El.* 693.

shouts challenged Cleon to sail to Pylos himself, since this operation seemed so easy to him.<sup>55</sup> As Robert Connor (1984: 116) rightly remarks, ‘almost any Greek male would be outraged by such an insult and challenge his critic to do better’. Plutarch, however, and several modern scholars have severely criticized Nicias’ conduct here, regarding it as tantamount to treason, since he offered the command to someone without military experience and of whose failure he was certain.<sup>56</sup> But there is no evidence whatsoever that Nicias believed that Cleon would certainly fail, much though Thucydides would doubtless have included him among the *sōphrones* of that assembly. One might also with reason suppose that Nicias gave up the command because he wanted either to compromise Cleon by calling his bluff or, taking into account the stalemate at Sphacteria, to give him in earnest the opportunity to try his own way and do some notable service to the city.<sup>57</sup> Plutarch, after all, who is so critical of Nicias in this matter, clearly allows this possibility, whereas several modern scholars ignore his evidence here, and affirm that Nicias believed Cleon to be incompetent.<sup>58</sup> On what evidence? Plutarch does not say such a thing, for what we read in the *Nicias-Crassus Comparison* is clearly the opinion of Plutarch and not of Nicias;<sup>59</sup> and Thucydides himself, despite his prejudice against Cleon, makes no negative remark about Cleon’s strategic abilities before Amphipolis. In the final analysis, what options did Nicias really have before him after Cleon’s offensive innuendoes? He must either act on his prodding and sail to Pylos himself or do

55 See 4.28.1: Ὁ δὲ Νικίας τῶν τε Ἀθηναίων τι ὑποθορυβησάντων ἐς τὸν Κλέωνα, ὃ τι οὐ καὶ νῦν πλεῖ, εἰ ῥάδιον γε αὐτῷ φαίνεται, καὶ ἅμα ὀρῶν αὐτὸν ἐπιτιμῶντα, ἐκέλευεν...τὸ ἐπὶ σφῶς εἶναι ἐπιχειρεῖν. Cf. Plut. *Nic.* 7.3: ...τοῖς Ἀθηναίοις εἰπεῖν παρέστη· ‘τί δ’ οὐχὶ καὶ νῦν αὐτὸς σὺ πλεῖς ἐπὶ τοὺς ἄνδρας;’ Upon which Nicias offered to relinquish his command for him; see n. 59.

56 Cf., for instance, Grote 1872: 251 and Vlachos 1970: 106: ‘Une telle attitude frise la trahison’. For Plutarch’s evidence see above n. 33.

57 Cf. Plut. *Nic.* 7.4: Ὁ τε Νικίας ἀναστὰς ἐξίστατο τῆς ἐπὶ Πύλον στρατηγίας αὐτῷ, καὶ λαμβάνειν ὀπόσην βούλεται δύναμιν ἐκέλευσε, **καὶ μὴ θρασύνεσθαι λόγοις ἀκινδύνοις, ἀλλ’ ἔργον τι τῇ πόλει παρασχεῖν ἄξιον σπουδῆς.**

58 See, for instance, Woodhead 1960: 314 and Vlachos 1970: 107.

59 Cf. *Nic.-Crass. Comp.* 3.5: ... τῇ Κλέωνος ἀπειρία καὶ θρασύτητι...στρατηγίαν ἐμπειρίας ἄκρας δεομένην παραδιδούς (‘handed over [sc. Nicias] to the inexperience and rashness of Cleon... a command requiring the utmost experience’ – Perrin’s transl. [Loeb]); cf. also *Nic.* 8.5 (n. 33).

what he actually did, in the belief that either Cleon was bluffing (in which case he would be ridiculed, should he refuse the command) or that his plan (Demosthenes' plan in fact) might indeed precipitate the surrender of the Spartans. In any case, to carry out Cleon's proposals himself would not be so honourable after he had been openly accused of cowardice, and in those circumstances, even if he were successful, part of his success would with justice be attributed to Cleon who had recommended that course of action.

It appears, as I see things, that Thucydides' text clearly suggests that in that assembly over the Pylos expedition Nicias tried to disparage Cleon by calling his bluff, in other words, by demonstrating the vanity of his challenge; so clearly that it prevents us from contemplating the possibility that Cleon with his bizarre behaviour might actually have tricked Nicias into handing the Pylos command to him.<sup>60</sup> Recently, Geoffrey Hawthorn (2014: 113) does not exactly revive the well-known theory that wants Cleon to be secretly collaborating with Demosthenes to this effect,<sup>61</sup> but, as he puts it, Cleon 'may have engineered the confrontation

60 Note that Nicias did not quit his generalship, namely the office to which he had been elected; he only allowed Cleon to command this specific campaign; cf. 4.28.3: Νικίας...ἐξίστατο τῆς ἐπὶ Πύλῳ ἀρχῆς (so also the ancient scholiast [Hude 1927: 245: ἐξίστατο: παρεχώρει]; cf. Mitchell 1991: 188 and Flower 1992: 42). In other words, Cleon's role in Pylos was somewhat unofficial from the military point of view, because the actual commander there was Demosthenes, even though he was not an elected *stratēgos* either; so Grote 1872: 369, Gomme 1956b: 438; Westlake 1968: 107; Connor 1984: 108. More recently, however, the dominant view has been that Demosthenes was a general-elect in the spring of 425 bound to officially enter office in the following mid-summer (see Kagan 1974: 220; Hornblower 1996: 152; Rhodes 1998: 207-8). Yet if these critics are right, the somewhat scorning attitude of the other two generals towards Demosthenes (see 4.3 and cf. Westlake and Kagan above) is not easily understood and rather seems to militate against their view. On the other hand, Strassler 1990: 111-12, argues that the generals were not that contemptuous of Demosthenes (they reassured him that they would come later to help him; see 111 n. 4), but he is least convincing.

61 Cf., e.g., Woodcock 1928: 103; Westlake 1968: 72n. 1; Connor 1984: 110, 116; Mitchell 1991: 173 and n. 7.

to enhance his own reputation'.<sup>62</sup> Indeed, Cleon's conduct, after he had secured the command, in combination with his promise to capture or slaughter the entrapped Spartans, leaves this possibility wide open. Gomme (1956b: 469) remarks here: 'Cleon's immediate demand for light-armed troops shows that he already had a good idea of what was wanted at Pylos'.<sup>63</sup> I fully endorse this comment, but I would like to advance it to its logical conclusion: is it reasonable for one to imagine that Cleon, as soon as he was given the command, without having been to Pylos before, without knowing the terrain there, and with no military experience till then (as far as Thucydides allows us to know), should have demanded to take with him a specific military force (peltasts and archers), without being in some contact and understanding with Demosthenes, the commander of the Athenian army at Pylos and the man who organized and directed all the operations there?<sup>64</sup> It was Demosthenes, after all, the man whom he immediately chose as his fellow-commander for this enterprise, exactly because he had heard of his plans to land on Sphacteria; that much at least is recorded by Thucydides (4.29.1-2:... τῶν τε ἐν Πύλῳ στρατηγῶν ἓνα προσελόμενος, Δημοσθένη, ... πυνθανόμενος τὴν ἀπόβασιν αὐτὸν ἐς τὴν νῆσον διανοεῖσθαι).<sup>65</sup>

62 Similarly Flower 1992: 55. See also Connor 1984: 117 and cf. Westlake 1968: 73-74, esp. 74: 'He [sc. Cleon] may have adopted the subterfuge of pretending to be unwilling.' If so, Cleon's 'strenuous protest' against accepting the Pylos command (see Grote 1872: 251 with n. 29) was a sham one.

63 Cf. also Woodhead 1960: 315; *contra* Flower 1992: 55: Cleon 'is simply exploiting a crisis for his own gain, without a clear policy in mind'. Besides, Flower 1992: 45 and 47 offers a good answer (adopted also by Rhodes 1998: 227) to Kagan's (1974: 241) question of how these light troops happened to be so conveniently in Athens at that time ('open preparations for the implementation of Demosthenes' plan had been underway for some time'), although one might speculate and other reasons that do not necessarily presuppose some secret collaboration between Demosthenes and Cleon.

64 Cf. also Connor 1984: 116: 'Would someone who has just been forced into an unwelcome command act in this way?' Besides, let me add, Demosthenes was not at all disinclined to secret dealings and agreements, as 3.109.2 evinces.

65 For Gomme 1956b: 471 this information was enough and 'there is no need to suppose any *secret* understanding between him [sc. Demosthenes] and Cleon' (cf. also Flower, above n. 63); Gomme is probably right for another reason: as Westlake 1968: 97 remarks, Thuc. was a colleague of Demosthenes in the board of *stratēgoi* in 424/23, perhaps also a relative of him by marriage (97 n. 3), held him in some esteem, and

Be that as it may, Cleon eventually accepted, as we saw, the command of the expedition to Pylos and even promised his compatriots that he would finish the job within twenty days; and he did deliver. Thucydides nonetheless, although he knows that Cleon's promise was fulfilled, characterizes it as mad (4.39.3: Καὶ τοῦ Κλέωνος καίπερ μανιώδης οὔσα ἡ ὑπόσχεσις ἀπέβη· ἐντὸς γὰρ εἴκοσι ἡμερῶν ἤγαγε τοὺς ἄνδρας, ὥσπερ ὑπέσθη).<sup>66</sup> 'No sentence throughout the whole of Thucydides astonishes me so much as that in which he stigmatises such an expectation as "insane"', confesses Grote (260), who subsequently attributes this characterization to the historian's prejudice against Cleon. And so do most scholars.<sup>67</sup> Yet, this passage can also be read from a different perspective. To my mind, for instance, Thucydides' statement here, much though it apparently discredits his judgement and prestige, is ultimately to his credit and in fact comprises one of our best testimonies to his historical

used him as a principal source (see also id. 1989: 205-6); how likely is it, then, that Demosthenes should have concealed from Thuc. his secret collaboration with Cleon? Be that as it may, the information above that Demosthenes was thinking of invading the island did not specify the nature of the troops required. Nor do we know for sure that Demosthenes had asked for reinforcements, although Grote's (1872: 246-47 n. 1) remarks to the contrary are well-argued; when Cleon alerts Demosthenes that he is coming with the troops he had asked (ἔχων στρατιὰν ἦν ἠτήσατο), we are not certain if the subject of the verb is Cleon or Demosthenes (see here Gomme 1956b: 473 on 4.30.4). At 4.30.3 Thuc. tells us that Demosthenes was summoning troops from the allies in the neighbourhood (στρατιὰν τε μεταπέμπων ἐκ τῶν ἐγγὺς ξυμμάχων), which might suggest that he did not ask for reinforcements from Athens, but Woodcock 1928: 103 cogently argues that Cleon acted upon the instructions he had received from Demosthenes; so also Babut 1986: 72 with n. 39 *ibid.* and Flower 1992: 44-45 and 56.

66 Unlike the common rendering 'insane as Cleon's promise was', Connor 1984: 116 n. 15 follows Schneider 1974: 21 n. 29 ('das Versprechen, so wahnwitzig es aussah') and makes the point that the suffix -ώδης gives the adjective a certain ambiguity (denoting as it does either fullness or similarity) which the translation should preserve: 'although it had seemed quite crazy'. Hornblower 1994 and Rhodes 1998 *ad loc.* adopt his translation, but, in my view, the characterization of Cleon's promise as μανιώδης, made after its fulfilment at that, represents not the Athenians' impression, but the historian's fixed and unequivocal opinion; cf. also de Romilly 1963: 172 n. 2. Had Thuc. meant to say that Cleon's promise seemed (not was) mad to the Athenians (which might well have been the case also), he would have written, I think, δόξασα in lieu of οὔσα.

67 See, for instance, Gomme 1956b: 478: 'Thucydides' bias is once more clear'; Woodhead 1960: 314; Westlake 1968: 75; Kagan 1974: 247 n. 99; Schneider 1974: 21 n. 29.

scrupulousness. Of course did he dislike Cleon and was prejudiced against him,<sup>68</sup> especially since he most probably held him responsible (with good reason more or less) for his exile following his failure to recover Amphipolis.<sup>69</sup> Yet what really matters, as far as historical trustworthiness is concerned, is not the historian's feelings as such, but whether these feelings make him tell lies about Cleon, suppress his successes<sup>70</sup> or distort facts in order to present him in an unfavourable light or even slander him. Nor do Thucydides' characterizations of Cleon as a most violent citizen (βιαίτατος at 3.36.6) and a demagogue (4.21.3) necessarily indicate bias, as Woodhead (1960: 311-12) would have us believe.<sup>71</sup> No ancient source denies that Cleon was a violent demagogue and thus, insofar as the attributes *biaiotatos* and *demagōgos* describe Cleon accurately, the historian's duty, Gomme (1962: 112) rightly argues, is to represent him as such, regardless, I would add, of the fact that the Athenian *demos* apparently supported Cleon and followed his policies freely and gladly.<sup>72</sup>

68 This is above everything else manifest in 5.16.1; cf. Gomme 1956b: 637, Baldwin 1968, and see notably Woodhead 1960 *passim*, and Kagan 1974: 247 n. 99. But as regards the narrative in the Pylos episode, I would not agree with Westlake's (1968: 75) verdict that 'all other considerations are subordinated to his desire to expose the unworthiness of Cleon'.

69 See 4.104.4-106.3-4 and cf. Marcellinus' *Vita Th.* 46; Grote 1872: 261; Gomme 1956b: 585, 587; Kagan 1974: 299. *Contra* Pope 1988: 284, who argues that Thuc.'s hostility to Cleon cannot stem from a private reason but rather from a public, namely a political one (Cleon's overall standing as a public figure).

70 These successes are mostly connected with Cleon's fatal expedition to Amphipolis, but only few of them are confirmed or actually supported by the historian's narrative; see below.

71 Cleon is a violent demagogue also in Diodorus (12.55.8: Κλέων ὁ δημαγωγός, ὡμὸς ὢν τὸν τρόπον καὶ βίαιος); cf. de Romilly 1963: 156 n. 1. Further, Kagan 1974: 156, 234 with n. 53 *ibid.*; Rawlings 1981: 224; Westlake 1989: 207, and others argue that Thuc.'s introductions of Cleon at 3.36.6 and 4.21.3 are meant to present him in an unfavourable light, disregarding that he is also described as *πιθανώτατος*, a positive rather than negative characterization (see above n. 4). Connor's 1984: 85 n. 15 estimate of these introductions of Cleon above is more balanced and more convincing. See also next note.

72 So Kagan 2009: 161, who also shrewdly remarks that Thuc.'s account of Cleon's career 'represents a radical revision of contemporary opinion'. On the other hand, it is worth reminding ourselves that all ancient evidence regarding Cleon is unanimously damning: besides Aristophanes and Plutarch, see Arist., *Ath. Pol.* 28.3, Theopompus

When Thucydides, then, describes Cleon's promise as crazy in a passage where Cleon's prediction is juxtaposed to his own, and where Cleon's prediction and not his own came true in the end, he at the same time shows that any antipathy and bias he had do not interfere with his respect for historical truth. For in all likelihood Thucydides was present, as we saw, in that notorious assembly and heard the arguments and counter-arguments set out during it; he was therefore in a position to see and assess for himself the mood of the people, and so he accurately, more or less, took it down for us. As Westlake (1968: 72) also notes, in connection with the second Pylos debate, 'there is no reason to suspect that Thucydides has given a fictitious or distorted account of what actually happened in the course of the debate'.<sup>73</sup>

In conclusion, I would further like to suggest another possible explanation for Thucydides' position at 4.28.5, namely, for the reaction of the *sōphrones* to Cleon's promise; an explanation that is perhaps related to the well-known but insoluble problem regarding the composition of Thucydides' work.<sup>74</sup> That our historian often narrates or reflects on a certain event having in mind subsequent events or even the end of the whole war is beyond doubt;<sup>75</sup> but how exactly and to what degree this *a posteriori* knowledge affects, sometimes perhaps unawares, his judgement or the shaping and flow of his narrative is a moot point. In this particular case I would suggest that, speaking as he does about Cleon and the

115 F 92-94 (Jacoby 1962: 556), and Luc. *Hist. conscr.* 38; that a descendant of Cleon took pride in him (Ps.-Dem. 40.25) barely changes the overall picture, and certainly constitutes no evidence of 'a pro-Cleon tradition after Thucydides', as Baldwin 1968: 214 n. 24 contends.

73 See also above p. 125-26 and n. 21. And as Pope 1988: 284-85 more generally observes, Thucydides is not 'guilty of manipulating [sc. the public figures] so as to give an unfavourable impression. We shall find him innocent, a reporter not a propagandist'.

74 Cf. de Romilly 1963: 6. On this important issue see briefly Dover 1973: 14-20 and Rawlings 1981: 250-54; in more detail: Finley 1940; de Romilly above: 187-92, 213-29, 262-70, 275-86; Pohlenz 1968; Gomme, Andrewes & Dover 1981: 361-444; cf. also Hornblower 1996: 119-22 and 2008: 1-4, 41-57.

75 As de Romilly 1963: 188 argues, when Thuc. underlines and stresses some ideas in book 4, it is because 'of the greater significance given to them by later events'; cf. also Rawlings 1981: 252. Some other passages indicating knowledge of later events: 1.8.1; 13.3; 18.1, 119-24, 142-43; 2.65.5-13, 100.2; 4.48.5, 81.2, 108.4; 5.26; 6.15.3.



conservative Athenians, Thucydides is anticipating or rather projecting, by way of wishful thinking perhaps, what happened three years later, namely Cleon's failure to recover Amphipolis, his poor and superficial strategy there, and his rather inglorious death on the battlefield.<sup>76</sup> The events of Pylos, at any rate, were certainly written after 422, that is to say, after the Amphipolis campaign and during the peace of Nicias; and according to some scholars, even after 404 when the whole war was over.<sup>77</sup>

*Prima facie*, one should not expect any similarity between the operations at Sphacteria and Amphipolis; if for no other reason, because no island and no naval force are involved in the latter. Nevertheless, the two campaigns have been linked together through their common denominator, Cleon, by Thucydides himself. Speaking somewhat contemptuously about Cleon's strategy at Amphipolis (5.7), the historian says that he acted in the same way as he had acted with success at Pylos and so had acquired confidence in his own wisdom,<sup>78</sup> the ultimate implication being

76 However, according to Diodorus 12.74, Cleon fought bravely at Amphipolis. But since all generals fight and fall with bravery in Diodorus (see Westlake 1968: 81 and n. 2), this testimony is of little or no value, given also Diodorus' very poor account of the battle of Amphipolis (see Grote 1872: 380 n.1 and cf. Kagan 1974: 299 n. 141). Grote 1872: 383-85 and Westlake 1968: 81-2 criticize both Cleon's strategic incompetence in Amphipolis (cf. also Spence 1995: 423 with n. 34 *ibid.*) and his cowardice on the battlefield, but Gomme 1956b: 652 and Kagan 1974: 328-30 defend him on both counts (although Gomme 1962: 117-18 speaks of 'Cleon's poor generalship' at Amphipolis); perhaps with some justice, given Thuc.'s prejudice against the author of his banishment.

77 According to Gomme 1956b: 448-49, 'not long after 421 B.C.'; according to Rawlings 1981: 227, after 412, probably after 407; according to others, even after 404 (see Gomme above and cf. de Romilly 1963: 188-90). Ed. Meyer believed that the whole Pylos episode was written later on the basis of 5.29.3 (see de Romilly 1963: esp. 187-88 nn. 2-3); cf. also 4.12.3 (ἐν τῷ τότε), 4.48.5 (ὄσα γε κατὰ τὸν πόλεμον τόνδε), 4.74.4. De Romilly: 190 believes (in agreement with Meyer) that the Pylos episode was written after the Sicilian adventure, possibly between 407-404 (p. 191).

78 Cf. 5.7.3: καὶ ἐχρήσατο [sc. Cleon at Amphipolis] τῷ τρόπῳ ὥπερ καὶ ἐς τὴν Πύλον εὐτυχήσας ἐπίστευσέ τι φρονεῖν. For the meaning of *tropos* here (plan/procedure or spirit/temper) see Gomme's 1956b: 639-40. According to Balot 2017: 325 n. 4, it was due to his success at Pylos that Cleon became overconfident and hence made critical mistakes at Amphipolis, where he not only lost his own life but also squandered many of his 'exceptional soldiers'.

that Cleon believed that he would carry Amphipolis by force as he had done with Sphacteria, but also, one might add, with Torone which he had similarly taken by storm only a few days earlier.<sup>79</sup> Yet the way he conducted the operations in Amphipolis and the miscalculations that he made, so far as Thucydides' narrative allows us to judge correctly, was lamentable, although one can hardly turn a blind eye to the historian's prejudice against Cleon here.<sup>80</sup> Intriguing as they are, I will omit here the details of Cleon's military plans and maneuvering,<sup>81</sup> but I will pause on the comments of Gomme, who has drawn several parallels between the events at Pylos and Amphipolis, and especially between the respective narratives of Thucydides. The actual battles in particular must have been

79 Several scholars adduce this accomplishment as one more example of Thuc.'s bias against Cleon, on account of which the historian is inclined to suppress the latter's successes: e.g. Woodhead 1960: 304-5; Gomme 1962: 115; Westlake 1962: 287; Baldwin 1968: 211-12; Kagan 1974: 319; Schneider 1974: 20 and n. 28. This may be true in some cases, but, as regards Torone, it is worth considering perhaps that its capture was an easy military operation, since Cleon had already been informed that Brasidas was away (5.2.3), the wall of the town was partly dismantled (4.112.2, 5.2.4; see Gomme 1956b: 631), and its inhabitants were too few to resist the Athenians (5.2.3: οὔτε οἱ ἐνόντες ἀξιόμαχοι εἶεν); moreover, the latter would attack from land and sea, so that the Spartan force of Pasitelidas would be unable to defend the town on both fronts at the same time (5.3.1-2). Yet, in discussing Torone's capture, some critics set aside Thuc.'s curt and composed narrative and see instead a brilliant strategy on the part of Cleon (Kagan 1974: 321), the organizer of 'a remarkable *coup de main*' (Woodhead 304). With all his admiration of Cleon, Grote 1872: 371 modestly speaks only of a 'not unimportant success'; and rightly so, since Torone was not strategically that significant and this is why 'Brasidas' reputation is scarcely tarnished, and Cleon's not at all whitened' after its capture, as Gomme 1956b: 632 perceptively concludes. After all, since the aim of Cleon's expedition was primarily the recovery of Amphipolis (Pritchett 1973: 379; Spence 1995: 432), Thuc. may not have thought it necessary to dwell on all Athenian operations and territorial gains in the area; let alone the possibility (the certainty rather) that some of Cleon's supposed successes (see mainly West & Merrit 1925 and Adcock 1927: 247-48) may actually never have been accomplished or may have taken place in other periods or occasions or after his death; cf. Gomme 1956b: 636; 1962: 115 n. 2; Pritchett 1973; Mitchel 1991: 170, 179; Spence 1995: 426-29.

80 See above and nn. 67, 68, 76.

81 For the relevant detailed accounts see Gomme 1962: 114-20 and Hornblower 1996: 435-36 with more bibliography there.

very similar and, as Gomme (1962: 120) says, “with a very slight alteration of language, just a shift of emphasis, a longer and more detailed account of Athenian casualties, the story of Amphipolis could have been made very like that of Sphacteria”.<sup>82</sup> It may be just as possible then that, when Thucydides was writing that the *sōphrones* of the Athenians expected to rid themselves of Cleon during the Sphacteria operations, he had Amphipolis in mind.<sup>83</sup> For indeed, as Grote (370) also remarks, the first alternative of the Athenian expectations concerning Cleon’s initiative in the Pylos affair (see n. 28) was really the more probable at Amphipolis. In other words, Thucydides anticipated, and thus also presents the Athenian conservatives as anticipating, that Cleon, owing to his poor generalship as shown at Amphipolis three years later, would not be able to defeat the Spartans, while his frivolity and impetuosity could even expose him to mortal peril in a hand-to-hand battle, as was expected given the situation, with the most renowned Greek warriors.<sup>84</sup>

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82 See also Woodhead 1960: 306 and cf. de Romilly 1963: 188 n. 2. On the other hand, Rawlings 1981: 217-33 has drawn interesting parallels between Pylos and the Cyzicus campaign of 410.

83 Cf. Marshall 1984: 32; Flower 1992: 46 n. 23.

84 In fact, however, that battle was not fought at close quarters; cf. 4.38.5: ... ἡ γὰρ μάχη οὐ σταδαία ἦν.

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