

WHAT HAPPENED AFTER THE ECLIPSE IN SICILY, AUGUST 413 BCE?

Thucydides 7.50.4

An hour and a half after sunset on August 27th 413 BCE, Athenian troops, ready to withdraw by cover of night from their camp near Syracuse, witnessed a full eclipse of the moon. They postponed their withdrawal and subsequently experienced disastrous defeat.

The most familiar version of what happened, based on Thucydides 7.50.4, is of this sort:

... the full moon suffered an eclipse. The superstitious army regarded the phenomenon as a heavenly warning and cried out for delay. Nicias was no less superstitious than the sailors. Unluckily his best prophet, Stilbides, was dead, and the other diviners ruled that he must wait thrice nine days... Never was a celestial phenomenon more truly disastrous than that lunar eclipse. With the aid of Nicias it sealed the doom of the Athenian army. (J.B. Bury and Rissell Meiggs A History of Greece fourth edition (New York, St. Martin's Press 1975) p.302)

That, however, is not quite what Thucydides says. His account is structured to emphasize that two things led to the decision to stay; the connectives ... te... kai... bracket the two. The first was a reversal of military norms as the majority of the troops (hoi te pleious," not hoi polloi, *many of them*) gave orders to (ekeleuon) their commanders to stay in Sicily. Translators often render the verb *urged*, but LSJ s.v. κελεύω is correct, I believe, in indicting that when the verb is used with infinitive and accusative of the person, "ordered" is normally the best translation. (That is the meaning in 7.1.3, for example.) Blander translations, *urge*, *encourage*, miss the reversal of the normal military command structure.

The second pressure for delay came from the commander Nicias. (The καί that precedes his name in line 8 of the OCT parallels him with *the majority*, hoi te pleious, in the preceding clause. Nicias, however, went on to say that he would not even discuss a withdrawal until the 27 days were over. To whom and where did he say this? It is not likely that Thucydides would know about a private conversation between Nicias and his fellow commander, Demosthenes, for both died soon thereafter. The context demands an announcement to the whole army,.

The manteis come into the story late and almost parenthetically, as an explanation of where the thrice nine days in Nicias' promise came from: It was the mantes interpretation of the meaning of the eclipse: wait for a fresh cycle of the moon. Their role is grammatically, and perhaps politically, subordinate to Nicias'. What, then, is intended by Thucydides' comment that Nicias was somewhat excessively disposed to theiasmos and the like? If Thucydides meant "divination, consulting seers," as is often assumed, manteia would be the right word. Nor is theiasmos synonymous with deisidaimonia, *superstition*. Commenting on this passage K.J. Dover criticized LSJ for this mistranslation, advocating instead an "utterances which claims to reveal through a human medium the intentions of the gods." LSJ backed away in its Corrigenda, but its alternative, "inspired utterance," was only a marginal improvement, as one can see from the use of the cognate theiasantes in 8.1. This cannot mean that the Athenians were angry at the manteis and chrēsmologoi because *they were genuinely inspired*; the contexts implies they had used ta theia to manipulate the Athenians into making a bad decision.

The noun theiasmos in 7.50.4 has a similar sense, as one might also infer from its formation. Word with a -smos ending often denote some thing or activity to be understood not by itself (the act of divination) but in its performative aspect, that is, its verbalization or utilization in some public setting. For example, paionismos in Thucydides 7.44.6 refers not to the words or tune of the paeon, but to its performance as a battle begin. Thus in 7.50.4 Thucydides means not that Nicias was overly inclined to consulting diviners, or excessively inclined to believe them, but that he overused the widespread practice of invoking omens, prodigies, entrails and the like to achieve his political or strategic goals.

How then are we to visualize the sequence to the eclipse? The troops, deeply distressed from one defeat after another, are understandably upset by the eclipse, regarding it ("making of it," Thucydides says with scorn) an enthymion, that is, something that requires scrupulous attention, as in Euripides Ion 1347, or Sophocles OI 739. They wanted to take time to be sure that the planned course was right, religiously and practicaly.

At this point the commanders, recognizing the mood of the army, adopted a radical idea they had already contemplated (7.47 - 48): convening their force and putting the matter to a vote (psēphizomenous meta pollōn 7.48. 1). Nicias expressed strong strategic and constitutional objections to that idea and was still opposed to it just before the eclipse (7.50.3) but after the eclipse, with the troops greatly upset, "the Athenians" convened and by majority vote instructed the commanders to hold on (epischein). That may seem a surprising outcome but the opportunity for a surprise withdrawal by night had now in all probability been lost, and the prospect of facing their fellow citizens at home with nothing to show for the expenditure of time, treasure and lives was daunting. The vote was also an opportunity for Nicias to keep alive his hope that a faction within Syracuse would hand the city over to the Athenians (7.48.2). That would take time, but by calling on the judgment of the manteis Nicias was able to define the length of the necessary delay as twenty seven days.

If this is correct, it was Nicias, not the manteis acting independently, who persuaded the Athenians to wait for another full period of the moon, as Plutarch points out at the end of Nicias 23.

Did that decision "seal the doom of the Athenian army"? Perhaps, but at the time the decision was not entirely unreasonable. Thucydides is convinced (7.49.1; cf. 7.73.3) that Nicias did indeed have exact intelligence about dissent in Syracuse. That was, he thinks, one reason why Nicias was killed when captured rather than being sent to Sparta, as Gylippus wished (7.86.4). Given the prospect of a coup in Syracuse a month's delay may at the time have seemed a reasonable gamble. If no coup d'état emerged in that time a withdrawal by sea would not be out of the question; to be sure, it would require a victory over the Syracusan navy, but the Athenians were likely to be able to man more ships than the Syracusans (86 vs. 76 in 7.52.1). The option of withdrawing by land to Thapsus or Catana, as Demosthenes himself had conceded (7.49.2), remained open. It is easy in retrospect to condemn the decision to stay on but at the time it was not unreasonable. What really sealed the doom of the expedition was the refusal of the Athenian sailors to engage again after their defeat in the Great Harbor (7.72.4).

Finally, did the Athenians wait out the full twenty seven day? That is by no means clear. Thucydides' chronology here is vague, but his narrative shows that although the Syracusans took some time to improve the training and readiness of their rowers, their intention was to engage "as quickly as possible" (hōs tachista, 7.51.1). Once they did so and defeated the Athenian fleet, the Athenians try to withdraw as swiftly as possible, indeed are the first to push forward in the final great naval battle (7.69.1). Again defeated, on the second day after the battle (7.74.1), they begin the retreat by land. The twenty seven days are now as completely eclipsed as the moon was on August 27th 413 BCE.

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I am grateful to Michael Flower and Hunter Rawlings and Jeffrey Rusten for suggestions and criticism.

December 2015