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Thucydides on the evacuation of Athens in 480 B.C.

By Mikael Johansson, Göteborg

What does Thucydides mean when writing the following in his *History of the Peloponnesian War*?

Th. 1.18.2 καὶ μεγάλου κινδύνου ἐπικρεμασθέντος οἱ τε Λακεδαιμόνιοι τῶν ξυμπολεμησάντων Ἑλλήνων ἠγήσαντο δυνάμει προύχοντες, καὶ οἱ Ἀθηναῖοι ἐπιόντων τῶν Μήδων διανοηθέντες ἐκλιπεῖν τὴν πόλιν καὶ ἀνασκευασάμενοι ἐς τὰς ναῦς ἐσβάντες ναυτικοὶ ἐγένοντο.

In the *Loeb Classical Library*, Forster Smith¹ translates the passage the following way:

In the face of the great danger that threatened, the Lacedaemonians, because they were the most powerful, assumed the leadership of the Hellenes that joined in the war; and the Athenians, when the Persians came on, resolved to abandon their city, and packing up their goods embarked on their ships, and so became sailors.

According to Michael Jameson², the finder of the famous decree from Troizen (EM 13330) and also its first publisher, Thucydides, together with Lysias and Cornelius Nepos³, could have been familiar with the forerunner of this decree, and that is why Thucydides, in concordance with the history implied by the decree from Troizen, possibly is placing the evacuation of Athens earlier than e.g. Herodotus⁴. This point of view, that Thucydides 1) knew the text of the in-

1 C. Forster Smith, *Thucydides. History of the Peloponnesian War*, Books I–II, The Loeb Classical Library (London 1919, repr. 1999) 32.

2 M. Jameson, “A decree of Themistokles from Troizen”, *Hesperia* 29 (1960) 202, n. 6, and 204.

3 Jameson (above n. 2, 204) first states that “Thucydides ... offers no indication of a precise date”, then writes that after Thucydides and Lysias (2.30) “only Nepos (*Them.* 2.6–3.1) places the evacuation before Thermopylai”. Lysias (2.33) explicitly places the evacuation *after* Artemision and Thermopylai. Cornelius Nepos, apart from being untrustworthy at large, is not elsewhere in concordance with the text of the inscription from Troizen. The inscription (lines 11–12) orders the *treasurers* and the priestesses to remain on the Acropolis in order to guard the property of the gods, while Nepos (*Them.* 2.8) states that they “left the citadel to the priestesses and a few of the elderly to attend to the sacred rites” (*arcem sacerdotibus paucisque maioribus natu ad sacra procuranda tradunt*). Further, the number of Athenian ships in the *classis communis* at Artemision was, according to Nepos (*Them.* 3.2), 200 (*ducentae erant Atheniensium*) while the inscription from Troizen (lines 40–44) places 100 ships at Artemision (and 100 guarding the coast of Attica). We simply cannot assume that Nepos was familiar with the text of the inscription from Troizen, and the only way of explaining the early evacuation of Athens in the text of the inscription and in the text of Nepos must be that the originator of the inscription from Troizen and Nepos both made an error in placing the evacuation of Athens as early as they did.

4 Herodotus (8.41) places the evacuation of Athens after the battles of Thermopylai and Artemision.

scription from Troizen and 2) was familiar with the early evacuation of Athens, I have already to a certain extent discussed and refuted in an earlier article⁵. But two things, closely connected to one another, need to be further investigated in the phrase οἱ Ἀθηναῖοι ἐπιόντων τῶν Μήδων διανοηθέντες ἐκλιπεῖν τὴν πόλιν, if we are going to be able to establish the Thucydidean date of the evacuation. First of all, the verb διανοέω; what exactly is the meaning of this word here? Secondly, we need to investigate the phrase ἐπιόντων τῶν Μήδων; exactly what does this genitive absolute mean?

The verb διανοέω, we learn from *LSJ*, is in early writers (thus also in Thucydides⁶) always a deponent. We find three rather similar meanings of the verb, 1) *to be minded, intend, purpose*, 2) *have in mind*, 3) with adverbs, *to be minded, or disposed*. Then one wonders why the translator above translates the words διανοηθέντες ἐκλιπεῖν τὴν πόλιν “resolved to abandon the city”⁷. The translation of διανοέω as “resolve” is not to be found in *LSJ*. Already in the first paragraph of Thucydides’ first book we find the word διανοούμενον in its original meaning “intending to”. Thus the meaning of the phrase must be that the Athenians “intended to abandon their city”, not that they “resolved” to do so. The difference between “intend to” and “resolve” might at first hand seem small, but it is of great importance to be clear on the point that it is not an Athenian resolution to abandon Athens that Thucydides has in mind when writing διανοηθέντες ἐκλιπεῖν τὴν πόλιν, but the actual historical events studied in the rear-view mirror. He simply reports the emergency plan for the defence of Athens, the plan that was to be carried out if the defence at Thermopylai and Artemision should fail. And in the rear-view Thucydides of course knew that the emergency plan was carried out.

Having determined the meaning of διανοέω, we move on to a more difficult task; to establish the meaning of the phrase ἐπιόντων τῶν Μήδων⁸. According to the translation above we should translate it “when the Persians came on”,

5 M. Johansson, “The Inscription from Troizen: a Decree of Themistocles?”, *ZPE* 137 (2001) 69–92.

6 See E. A. Betant, *Lexicon Thucydideum*, vol. I (Geneva 1843) 243–244.

7 The translation *consilium capere* in the *Lexicon Thucydideum* (see note above) is doubtful. In the commentary by Classen-Steup (Berlin 1890–1919, rev. 1963, 66) we read the following: “διανοηθῆναι, sich entschliessen, wie dieser Aorist von Th. überhaupt nur von dem Fassen von Entschlüssen, Plänen oder Gedanken gebraucht zu sein scheint (vgl. c. 1.141.1; 1.143.5; 4.13.4; 6.91.1; 7.40.5; 7.47.3; 7.74.2; 7.80.1; 8.4; 8.87.3).” At several of these places the interpretation “sich entschliessen” is impossible, and at others unnecessary.

8 Richard Crawley (Worldsworth Classics) does not translate ἐπιόντων τῶν Μήδων, neither does Robert B. Strassler (*The Landmark Thucydides. A Comprehensive Guide to the Peloponnesian War*, New York 1996, 14): “And the Athenians having made up their minds to abandon their city, broke up their homes, threw themselves into their ships, and became a naval people.” In Jacqueline de Romilly’s translation (*Thucydide. La Guerre du Péloponnèse, Livre I*, Paris 1953), “les Athéniens, eux, devant l’avance mède, décidaient d’abandonner leur ville et montaient avec leurs affaires à bord des navires, devenant alors des marins”, the Athenians abandon their city *in the face of* the Persians’ advancing.

which, of course, is possible. But whether we interpret ἐπιόντων τῶν Μήδων this way or, as I will argue, conditionally “if the Persians came on”, one important question remains; to what word or phrase does this genitive absolute belong? Are we to take it as a qualification of the whole phrase καὶ οἱ Ἀθηναῖοι ἐπιόντων τῶν Μήδων διανοηθέντες ἐκλιπεῖν τὴν πόλιν καὶ ἀνασκευασάμενοι ἐς τὰς ναῦς ἐσβάντες ναυτικοὶ ἐγένοντο, or just of (διανοηθέντες) ἐκλιπεῖν τὴν πόλιν? Grammatically both interpretations are possible, but the meaning differs greatly. If we take the genitive absolute to be a temporal qualification of the whole sentence we will have the following meaning: “When the Persians came on, the Athenians, after firstly having intended to abandon their city and having packed up their goods, thereafter embarked their ships and became sailors.” According to this interpretation, the Athenians became sailors when the Persians were already marching against Greece. This seems strange, to put it mildly. The other possible interpretation, if we assume that ἐπιόντων τῶν Μήδων is a conditional qualification only of ἐκλιπεῖν τὴν πόλιν, gives the following translation: “The Athenians, after having intended to abandon their city if the Persians came on and after having packed up their goods⁹, embarked on their ships and became sailors.” This interpretation of Thucydides 1.18.2 gives us a version that is in many ways in concordance with other ancient writers:

1) The Athenians, as in Herodotus and other Greek authors, did not desert their city before the Persians’ arrival at Artemision, but were forced to a hasty, but probably carefully planned, evacuation since the Greeks did not manage to stop the Persians at Thermopylai. The decree from Troizen implies that Athens was evacuated before Thermopylai and Artemision.

2) It is, at least if we choose to interpret the genitive absolute conditionally, in concordance with the general opinion that Thermopylai was more than just a delaying-action (cf. Herodotus 7.175 and Diodorus Siculus 11.4.1)¹⁰.

3) It is in concordance also with the history told by Herodotus, Plutarch and others, that the Athenians did not become a naval power when the Persians

9 The verb ἀνασκευάζω seems itself to be troublesome (in the middle voice it occurs only here in Thucydides). *LSJ* gives two (probably unintentionally) different translations of the word in the middle voice for our phrase (Th. 1.18): 1) *break up camp, march away* 2) *dismantle one’s house*. The translation in the *Lexicon Thucydideum* (see note above) is *colligere vasa*, i.e. to collect one’s military equipment. In Xenophon’s *Cyropaedia* (8.5.2) ἀνεσκευάζετο must mean “packed up”. But in Xenophon’s *Anabasis* (6.2.8) the active voice τὴν ἀγορὰν εἴσω ἀνεσκευάσαν means “they moved the market within the walls”. I wonder if not this meaning of the active verb, “to move something”, also could be transferred to the reflexive middle voice? Thus ἀνασκευασάμενοι perhaps will have the meaning “to move one’s belongings up”. This meaning would perhaps be useful here indicating that the phrase διανοηθέντες ἐκλιπεῖν τὴν πόλιν καὶ ἀνασκευασάμενοι could mean that the Athenians had the intention of leaving their city and drew themselves in to the city from Attica in order to more easily be able to evacuate should it be necessary.

10 Also Cornelius Nepos, in concordance with Herodotus and Diodorus Siculus, states that the purpose of occupying Thermopylai was to stop the Persians from advancing further (Nep. *Them.* 3.1 *Itaque missi sunt delecti cum Leonida, Lacedaemoniorum rege, qui Thermopylas occuparent longiusque barbaros progredi non paterentur*).

were already advancing, but that they had begun to create their fleet some years earlier, under the threat of a Persian invasion (i.e. *μεγάλου κινδύνου επικρεμασθέντος*)¹¹.

We can find some arguments in the text in favour of the second interpretation. The first genitive absolute in Thucydides 1.18.2, *μεγάλου κινδύνου επικρεμασθέντος*, is placed at the beginning of the whole sentence indicating that it is the temporal expression giving the background for the *whole* sentence. The second genitive absolute, *ἐπιόντων τῶν Μήδων*, is placed differently, as it is placed between οἱ Ἀθηναῖοι and *διανοηθέντες ἐκλιπεῖν τὴν πόλιν*. It seems as obvious as can be, considering the often ambiguous language of Thucydides, that the first genitive absolute is the more emphasised one, giving the background for the whole action. The phrase *ἐπιόντων τῶν Μήδων* is connected only with the second part of the sentence, or more probably only with (*διανοηθέντες*) *ἐκλιπεῖν τὴν πόλιν*. This alone, however, is not enough for excluding the first interpretation. We need stronger arguments. Therefore, let us examine the four conjunctions and particles of the sentence (*καί, τε, καί, καί*). The first *καί*, before the phrase *μεγάλου κινδύνου επικρεμασθέντος*, is merely a conjunction tying the sentence closely together with the preceding one. The last *καί* is merely connecting the two participles to one another, *διανοηθέντες* and *ἀνασκευασάμενοι*. Then we have to examine the two remaining particles. The first phrase containing the particle *τε* (*οἱ τε Λακεδαιμόνιοι τῶν ξυμπολεμισάντων Ἑλλήνων ἠγήσαντο δυνάμει προύχοντες*) must be closely united with the second containing *καί* (*καὶ οἱ Ἀθηναῖοι ἐπιόντων τῶν Μήδων διανοηθέντες ἐκλιπεῖν τὴν πόλιν καὶ ἀνασκευασάμενοι ἐς τὰς ναῦς ἐσβάντες ναυτικοὶ ἐγένοντο*). *τε ... καί* often serves to unite clauses, and *τε ... καί* is often used of actions coincident in time. Thus the two phrases beginning with *οἱ τε Λακεδαιμόνιοι ...* and *καὶ οἱ Ἀθηναῖοι ...* are both qualified by the temporal expression *μεγάλου κινδύνου επικρεμασθέντος*, and both of them are coincident in time. The second genitive absolute, *ἐπιόντων τῶν Μήδων*, as is shown by its place, must be taken as belonging only to (*οἱ Ἀθηναῖοι διανοηθέντες*) *ἐκλιπεῖν τὴν πόλιν*. The whole second part of the sentence is, as stated but as ought once again to be observed, just as the first part is, temporally qualified by *μεγάλου κινδύνου επικρεμασθέντος*. The meaning of *οἱ Ἀθηναῖοι ἐπιόντων τῶν Μήδων διανοηθέντες ἐκλιπεῖν τὴν πόλιν* could be, as suggested above, that the Athenians intended to abandon their city if the Medes came on¹². This is a strong argument against Thucydides' having been familiar with an evacuation of Athens taking place as early as the one implied by the inscription from Troizen. The Athenians became a naval power already when threatened by the

11 Some 100 or 200 ships were built in 483/2 B.C. from the riches of Laurion, on the advice of Themistocles (cf. Hdt. 7.144; Nep. *Them.* 2.2; Arist. *Ath.* 22.7).

12 The audience of Thucydides would not have at all reflected on this expression, since the evacuation of Athens was well known and the phrase hardly could have been misunderstood.

Persians, not when the Persians were advancing through Greece, but they did not evacuate Athens until later. Thus, the translation of Thucydides 1.18.2 ought to be something like this:

In the face of the great danger that threatened, the Lacedaemonians, because they were the most powerful, assumed the leadership of the Hellenes that joined in the war; and the Athenians, who intended to abandon their city if the Persian would advance and who packed up their goods, embarked on their ships, and so became sailors.

To sum up, we can be quite sure that Thucydides in his work did not intend to put the evacuation of Athens as early as some modern scholars have argued. He is quite in concordance with Herodotus and others. It is understandable though, that the discussion has taken place, considering Thucydides' often obscure ways of expressing himself. Of course there is also the possibility of Thucydides not having paid too much attention to the evacuation of Athens in 480 B.C. (the Persian Wars, as we know, was not his main theme¹³). And most certainly, Thucydides could not really have imagined the difficulty ἐπιόντων τῶν Μήδων would bring. He did not foresee that someone almost 2400 years after his own death would find an inscription at Troizen that would give a reason to question the meaning of the phrase.

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13 Simon Hornblower's statement that "we should not, however, forget the last two words ναυτικοὶ ἐγένοντο, 'became sailors', which suggests that Th.s' mind was more generally on the development of an Athenian naval tradition than on the specific mobilization and evacuation before Salamis" is noteworthy (S. Hornblower, *A Commentary on Thucydides*, vol. I, books I–II, Oxford 1991, 54).