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Nicias of Gortyn

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In 429 B.C., Phormio, the famous Athenian admiral, then in command of only twenty ships, defeated a more powerful Peloponnesian fleet in the Corinthian Gulf. When the Peloponnesians retreated to rebuild their strength for another engagement, Phormio sent an urgent request to Athens for reinforcements. The Athenians voted to send him twenty ships more; but despite the urgency of Phormio's situation, they instructed the commander of the new squadron to sail first to Crete (Thuc. 2.84.1–86.1). In the words of Thucydides: (5) οἱ δὲ ἀποπέμπουσιν εἴκοσι ναῦς αὐτῷ, τῷ δὲ κομίζοντι αὐτὰς προσεπέστειλαν ἐς Κρήτην πρῶτον ἀφικέσθαι. Νικίας γὰρ Κρὴς Γορτύνιος πρόξενος ὢν πείθει αὐτοὺς ἐπὶ Κυδωνίαν πλεῦσαι, φάσκων προσποιήσειν αὐτὴν οὖσαν πολεμίαν· ἐπῆγε δὲ Πολιχνίταις χαριζόμενος ὁμόροις τῶν Κυδωνιατῶν. (6) καὶ ὁ μὲν λαβὼν τὰς ναῦς ᾤχετο ἐς Κρήτην, καὶ μετὰ τῶν Πολιχνιτῶν ἐδῄου τὴν γῆν τῶν Κυδωνιατῶν, καὶ ὑπ' ἀνέμων καὶ ἀπλοίας ἐνδιέτριψεν οὐκ ὀλίγον χρόνον· (86) οἱ δ' ἐν τῇ Κυλλήνῃ Πελοποννήσιοι, ἐν τούτῳ ἐν ᾧ οἱ Ἀθηναῖοι περὶ Κρήτην κατείχοντο, παρεσκευασμένοι ὡς ἐπὶ ναυμαχίαν παρέπλευσαν ἐς Πάνορμον τὸν Ἀχαϊκόν, οὗπερ αὐτοῖς ὁ κατὰ γῆν στρατὸς τῶν Πελοποννησίων προσεβεβοηθήκει.

Thucydides says that Nicias was able to accomplish this because he assured the Athenians that he could bring Cydonia, then hostile to Athens, over to their side. Thucydides further informs us that Nicias' motives were to assist Polychne, a neighbor of Cydonia. In M. B. WALBANK's opinion, Thucydides suggests that Nicias was playing a »double game«, but that the alleged duplicity is merely Thucydides' opinion rather than fact.[1] W. R. CONNOR, who has questioned the reliability of the text, finds two difficulties with this passage: the failure to identify both τῷ δὲ κομίζοντι and ὁ μὲν λαβὼν on the one hand and the double ethnic Κρὴς Γορτύνιος on the other.[2] Therefore, he proposes two emendations: the bracketing of Κρής as a gloss, a suggestion originally made by C. G. COBET,[3] and the substitution

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[1] M. B. WALBANK, Athenian Proxenies of the Fifth Century B.C., Toronto and Sarasota 1978, 175.
[2] W. R. CONNOR, Nicias the Cretan, AJAH 1, 1976, 61–62.
[3] C. G. COBET, Variae Lectiones, Leiden 1873, 441.

of Γορτυνίων for Γορτύνιος. CONNOR justified the latter by stating that Thucydides with the sole exception of 3.70.1 normally specified the city whose interests a *proxenos* represented, even when he referred to those of Athens (4.78.1; 5.59.5; 5.76.3; 3.52.5). In effect, CONNOR's emendations would mean that Nicias of Athens, the famous politician, commanded the Athenian squadron and was *proxenos* of Gortyn in Athens instead of the common interpretation that a Cretan Nicias was the Athenian *proxenos* at Gortyn.

WALBANK (l.c. 175–176) rejects CONNOR's emendations on the grounds that they require the acceptance of two separate levels of corruption in the passage: both the failure to identify τῷ δὲ κομίζοντι and ὁ μὲν λαβὼν and also the double ethnic Κρὴς Γορτύνιος. He also suggests that the Athenian Nicias could not have commanded enough influence with the Cydonians to have persuaded them to set aside their hostility to Athens in order to form an alliance. It would make much more sense, WALBANK argues, if the *proxenos* in question were a native of Crete, which would have put him in a better position to exert influence there than could an Athenian. WALBANK attributes Thucydides' failure to identify the commander of the Athenian squadron to a minor omission and the double ethnic to the existence of two cities possessing the ethnic Γορτύνιος: Gortyn in Crete and Gortys in Arcadia. He also points out that at the end of the fifth century B.C. another Gortynian, Polypos, who may have been a relative of Nicias, was awarded the *proxenia* by the Athenians.

Unfortunately, both WALBANK and CONNOR fail satisfactorily to support their respective treatments of the passage in question. WALBANK's dismissal of CONNOR's emendations is neither based on substantial evidence nor capable of explaining the problem of τῷ δὲ κομίζοντι and ὁ μὲν λαβὼν. CONNOR, on the other hand, proposes an emendation that would leave us with Nicias commanding an Athenian expedition but ready to betray the interests of his city for the sake of Polychne, only because he is the *proxenos* of Gortyn. Yet Thucydides (8.86.5) later describes this same Nicias as having led a life that had been regulated by ἀρετή. In effect, there are two potential objections standing in the way of CONNOR's thesis: one is grammatical, to be dealt with first, the other historical in that it involves the nature and practice of *proxenia*.

It is fundamental to examine very closely the sequence of events in Thucydides in order to understand the narrative and the author's intentions. The main objective of this part of Book Two was to recount the events taking place in the Corinthian Gulf. Other events elsewhere that affected them were of secondary importance.

Reference is made to Nicias simply because Thucydides must explain the diversion of the Athenian ships originally intended to join Phormio. This had to be done in a manner that would account for the diversion of the squadron without taking the reader too far away from the main action, namely, the events in the Corinthian Gulf. It is quite evident from the few details provided that Thucydides

is not very interested in the diversion of the Athenian ships to Crete or in the part that Nicias played in the matter. Thus he reports that Nicias had originally persuaded the Athenians to send Phormio's reinforcements to Crete, but he does not go on to provide any information about what happened to Nicias after his failure to deliver Cydonia. This is readily understood if we consider the reference to Nicias as parenthetical. The narrative, dealing with events in the Corinthian Gulf, is broken just long enough to account for the diversion of the Athenian ships to Crete. Of the two participals τῷ δὲ κομίζοντι refers to the Athenian commander, whose name is omitted, and ὁ μὲν λαβὼν to Nicias, of whom Thucydides does not state that he was given command of the twenty Athenian ships, but only that he conceived the expedition and accompanied it to direct the operation against Cydonia. Indeed, as is the case of other episodes, ὁ μέν comes at the end of Thucydides' treatment of one incident (3.18.5; 3.24.3; 7.20.3) to connect it to the sequel, and in this particular instance ὁ μέν contrasts with οἱ δ' ἐν Κυλλήνῃ Πελοποννήσιοι of the following sentence, which resumes the treatment of the main sequence of events in the Corinthian Gulf.

Even if we can solve the problems of the participles, we are still left with the double ethnic Κρὴς Γορτύνιος and an unnamed commander of the Athenian squadron. The purpose of employing the double ethnic is not necessarily to avoid confusion between Gortyn in Crete and Gortys in Arcadia, as mentioned by WAL-BANK, and to differentiate these places from yet another Gortyn in Macedonia, to which Thucydides (2.100.3) refers a bit later in the same book. There are, as well, several epigraphic examples that combine Κρής with the ethnic of a town, so that Κρὴς Γορτύνιος is not an unusual expression.[4] In fact, during the Hellenistic period, Κρής with the name of a city was inscribed on epitaphs outside of Crete. In addition, there is no manuscript tradition to support Κρής as a later interpolation.

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[4] Κρής: Ἀνωπολίτης IG XII 9,819; Ἄξιος IG VII 3197,12; Ἀπτεραῖος Plutarch, Pyrrhos 30; Δρήριος IG XII 9,830. 839; Ἐλευθερναῖος IG XII 5,718. IX 1²,31,48. SEG 8,401; Κνώσιος SEG 11,414. 17,263; Κυδωνιάτης SEG 11,414 (twice); Λαππαῖος SEG 11,414; Λύττιος IG IX 2,365. XII 9,812; Μαλλαῖος IG XII Suppl.248,33. 57; Πολυρρήνιος IG XIV 406. SEG 11,414; Φαίστιος SEG 20,698. Κρής alone, for example IG XII 9.832.841. The date of these inscriptions is not certain, some ranging from the second to the third centuries B. C. while some may even belong to the Roman Imperial Period. According to M. MUTTELSEE, Zur Verfassungsgeschichte Kretas im Zeitalter des Hellenismus, Hamburg 1925, 46–47, Κρής indicated national origin while the name of the city designated citizenship, thus the unification of both words expressed a feeling of community of the Cretan states and not a Cretan koinon. Whereas after 250 B. C., M. MUTTELSEE (p. 46) argues, the words πάντες Κρηταιεῖς and ἄλλοι Κρηταιεῖς can be understood to mean a Cretan koinon. M. MIJNSBRUGGE, The Cretan Koinon, New York 1931, 33, suggests that Κρής is, in conjunction with the name of a town, simply an ethnicum without any political meaning. The double ethnic, consequently, may not be a reflection of a Cretan koinon in the late third and early second centuries B. C. but of a συγκρητισμός of earlier times (Plut. de frat. amore 490b. Etym. magn.), although this is not well attested according to V. EHRENBERG, The Greek State, New York 1960, 130.

None of the major editors of Thucydides except COBET has seen any reason to question tradition here.[5]

Although CONNOR argues that the city whose interests were represented by a *proxenos* should be specified, there is no need for such detail when the narrative is straightforward. A case in point is Thucydides' analogous treatment of the Corinthian *proxenoi* in Corcyra (3.70.1) noted as an exception by CONNOR. A Cretan Nicias, described as the *proxenos* who persuaded the Athenians in Athens to pursue a particular policy in Crete can only be a *proxenos* of the Athenians there. Another argument against CONNOR's hypothesis is the fact that it was not customary for a man to hold the *proxenia* of more than one state. There seems to be no literary or epigraphic evidence to document even a single exception to this rule, at least for the fifth century B.C. WALBANK's collection of ninety-four extant Athenian *proxenias* offers not a single example of a man holding two *proxenias*.[6] Since the Athenian Nicias was the *proxenos* of Syracuse,[7] he is unlikely also to have been the *proxenos* of Gortyn.

The heart of CONNOR's argument is the premise that a non-Athenian commanded Athenian forces. Thucydides (2.85.4–6), as has been demonstrated, does not state this. According to the passage, the anonymous Athenian officer placed in charge of the twenty Athenian triremes was ordered to proceed to Crete. GOMME, who finds no reason for the omission of the commander's name, merely quotes BUSOLT's (III. 60) explanation that the suppression of the name was due to personal and political reasons.[8] Nicias, for that matter, may have served as an advisor to the commanding officer, since as a native of the region he was familiar with both the coastline and the hinterland. Actually, we are not told even that much. We can speculate that since the effort against Cydonia was political subversion and not military assault, Nicias would have been required to facilitate negotiations with the Cydonians.

This episode in Thucydides' history raises two interesting problems: Why did the Athenians send to Cydonia twenty triremes so desperately needed in the Corinthian Gulf, and what role did the *proxenia* play in the designs of the Athenian leaders? A glance at the map of the Mediterranean supplies an answer to the first question. Cydonia, an Aeginetan settlement, had the best harbour on the direct route to Egypt and Cyrene. Access by sea to Egypt and Libya was important to Peloponnesian trade. Consequently, Athenian triremes based at Cydonia would be

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[5] E.g. I. BEKKER, Berlin 1821; G. BOEHME, Leipzig 1856; H. HUDE, Leipzig 1896; H.S. JONES, Oxford 1898; J. CLASSEN, Berlin 1914.

[6] It is important to note, however, that by the third century B.C. this was no longer the case. For example, Glauco, the brother of Chremonides, was *proxenos* at Delphi (Syll.³ 395), Rhodes (IG XII 1.25) and Orchomenos in Arcadia (MORETTI, ISE 53).

[7] Diod. 13.27.4; F.E. ADCOCK – D.J. MOSLEY, Diplomacy in Ancient Greece, London 1975, 60.

[8] Also see E. BADIAN – J. BUCKLER, The Wrong Salamis, RhM 118, 1975, 237.

able continuously to pose a threat to Peloponnesian merchant ships.[9] At the same time, the Athenians would secure their own trade route to the Levant, which would become exposed if enemy ships gained access to Cydonia. According to T. KELLY, Spartan strategy was not confined to ravaging Attica but also aimed at challenging Athenian power at sea.[10] Both of these factors illustrate the strategic considerations then available to the Athenians and justify their desire to seize Cydonia. It was equally important that the acquisition of Cydonia would demonstrate to friends and foes alike the capacity of Athenian forces to intervene effectively in order to protect Athenian interests. None of this, however, explains the timing of the mission.

According to Thucydides (2.85.5), the Athenians took action at this time only because their *proxenos,* Nicias, promised that he could bring Cydonia over to their side. Thucydides is quite clear on this point. He does not state that Nicias proposed to attack Cydonia, but only that he could bring it over (προσποιήσειν) to the Athenians. The implication is that Nicias had associates in Cydonia who were prepared to betray their city and that a demonstration of Athenian support was necessary. This explains the timing of the attempt and why the Athenians sent insufficient forces to Cydonia. Any other consideration could have waited until Phormio could have secured the Corinthian Gulf. The twenty triremes assigned to the expedition were hardly adequate to capture a city but enough to intervene on behalf of Athenian sympathizers in Cydonia. During the Peloponnesian War there were twenty-seven attempts to capture cities by betrayal, and in some of these instances *proxenoi* played a significant role.[11]

It is possible that Nicias supplied Athens with political and military information about Crete. As the *proxenos* of Athens, he was obliged to pursue Athenian interests; and in that capacity he managed to arrange for the betrayal of Cydonia. As it happened, Nicias and the Athenian contingent failed to take the city. The attempt, however, was worth the risk, and the mission was not a total failure. Unable to take Cydonia, the Athenian force nevertheless assisted the Polychnitans in ravaging the territory of Cydonia (Thuc. 2.85.6). This may have permitted the Athenians to develop a closer relationship with Polychne, which could serve as a counterweight to Cydonia's strategic importance, while giving Athens a still stronger foothold in the important corn route from Egypt.

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[9] R. MEIGGS, The Athenian Empire, Oxford 1972, 217.
[10] Thucydides and Spartan Strategy in the Archidamian War, AHR 87, 1982, 25–54.
[11] F. E. ADCOCK, The Greek and Macedonian Art of War, London 1957, 27; L. A. LOSADA, The Fifth Column in the Peloponnesian War, Leiden 1972, 16–23.