Themistocles: A Loyal Traitor

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Themistocles is undoubtedly one of the greatest political and military figures of fifth century Athens, and while his life is certainly one worth remembering there is yet ambivalence as to how he should be remembered. It is apparent from ancient sources that even Themistocles’ contemporaries found it difficult to form a stable opinion of him as either good or bad; in the centuries since he lived there has remained conflict as to where his loyalties truly lay. There is still no clear answer to the question: what was the extent of his medizing both in magnitude and duration? While the accounts of Herodotus, Thucydides and Plutarch differ on a number of points, what emerges from all three is a fairly significant body of evidence which suggests that Themistocles was a man whose highest calling was the satisfaction of his own ambition. He consistently prioritized his own self-interests and in this way was more akin to a modern proponent of free enterprise in his political conduct than the ‘Defender of Greek Civilization’¹ he has often been hailed as.

Themistocles began as a man of no particular distinction. He was born to a middle-class Athenian father and a foreign mother.² Although he lacked the assistance of a noble background to boost him in political matters or incline him towards such a career, as Plutarch states “there seems to be no doubt that Themistocles’ longing for fame laid an irresistible hold on him, and

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that he was swiftly drawn into public affairs while he was still in the vigour of youth.”

In all things he was characterized by his great ability to persuade and manipulate situations to his own purpose. One of his earliest manipulations occurred during his enrollment at the gymnasium of Cynosarges into which all the Athenians from mixed or foreign parentage were inducted.

Having recognized the discrimination he faced as an Athenian of mixed descent, he sought to lessen the stigma and convinced some young men from good families to join him in exercising at Cynosarges. By this action he was able to at least briefly transcend the possible limitations of his social status; he was unwilling to be constrained by anyone else’s belief about how things ought to be.

The first substantial indicator of Themistocles’ initiative and arguably the most significant in its consequences was his initially highly unpopular proposal that the surplus from the silver veins at Laurium in 483 BC be put towards a new fleet rather that distributed among the citizens. He was able to convince the assembly to accept this by playing off Athenian fears of their traditional enemy Aegina. At first this appeal to the assembly might appear to have been driven by Themistocles’ desire to defend the state however, it seems more likely that Themistocles viewed this as an opportunity to strengthen his own influence. Whether he anticipated the Persian threat or not is irrelevant. As a cunning and ambitious man Themistocles chose to forgo immediate capital gains as a citizen in favour of an investment, which had the possibility of giving him not only a greater monetary return, but also the added value of prestige.

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Regardless of the enemy to be faced, Themistocles’ used the opportunity of the unexpected spike in Athenian wealth to command the more powerful political tool of military strength. The construction of a new fleet at his suggestion gave Themistocles the opportunity to take some credit for any gains the state made by virtue of said force. By putting forth such a building proposal and receiving the demos’ acceptance Themistocles set himself up not only to gain political distinction but to take a larger portion of booty acquired through the enterprises of what would become the greatest naval power in the Aegean. Later, Themistocles’ desire for wealth would appear among his top priorities as he showed himself to be more than willing to take a piece for himself even in dealings with other Greeks. When the Spartan commander Eurybiades wanted to withdraw from Salamis the Euboeans, fearful that the rest of the Greeks might abandon them, sent Themistocles thirty talents with which to bribe the commander to stay. Themistocles fulfilled his obligation, successfully bribing Eurybiades and Adeimantus the Corinthian to hold the position while only using eight of the talents and keeping the rest for himself.\textsuperscript{10} This was almost certainly not the only instance of Themistocles hoarding money either: for having begun his career with less than three talents he came to amass an enormous fortune, and although he is likely to have been able to smuggle some of his wealth with him when he fled to Persia, the Athenian treasury confiscated between eighty and a hundred talents upon his exile.\textsuperscript{11}

Having only recently completed their new navy the Athenians, and indeed all the Greeks, found themselves threatened by the Persian Empire. It is during this period that it becomes most clear that Themistocles was a man with no higher master than himself. With the necessity of the new fleet now apparent Themistocles’ position at home was quite secure, however, home itself


was not. In an effort to guard his own future Themistocles continued to publicly advocate the Greek cause but sent two messages to Xerxes, which created a positive relationship with the adversarial Empire that would eventually be his salvation. Preceding the battle of Salamis, internal conflicts arose among the Greeks over a growing desire to abandon their position and retreat to the Peloponnese, and it was at this time that Themistocles sent his first message.

Themistocles dispatched Sicinnus, his trusted slave, to Xerxes with correspondence that encouraged the king to attack while the Greeks were disunified. Believing this message to be in good faith Xerxes attacked before the Greeks were able to leave and was soundly defeated in the narrow straight.\textsuperscript{12} Because the Greeks proved victorious this action was celebrated as a successful trick at the expense of the Persians.\textsuperscript{13} Had the outcome been reversed Themistocles would almost certainly have been condemned as a traitor by the Greeks, but would have been able to take refuge with the Persians. By his own duplicity Themistocles assured himself both safety and prestige no matter how the tide of battle was to turn.

Following the Greek victory Herodotus relates another incident which supports the notion that Themistocles was medizing for his own personal security. According to Herodotus, Themistocles first tried to convince the Greeks to pursue the Persians and destroy their bridge at the Hellespont. When he found that he would be unable to persuade the others Themistocles quickly switched strategies and is said to have suggested that rather than pursue the Persians it would be better to let them go so that the Greeks could return home to tend to their crops.\textsuperscript{14} Thucydides’ version of the tale indirectly confirms the opposite, suggesting that it was not

actually Themistocles who convinced the Greeks to return home.\textsuperscript{15} Regardless of which account one takes to be true both sources indicate that Themistocles sent a second message to Xerxes at this time in which Themistocles took credit for restraining the Greeks.\textsuperscript{16} Whether or not he did so, the indebting effect of the letter is the same. By sending this second message, Themistocles was able to absolve himself from some, if not all, of the responsibility for the defeat of the Persians at Salamis and portray himself as a friend of the Persian king without threatening his position in his own country—“so sowing what would bring enormous profit years later.”\textsuperscript{17} Then, after failing to extort booty from the Persians Themistocles’ went on to make raids on the allies.\textsuperscript{18} Before returning to Attica and without informing his fellow commanders Themistocles extorted money from the inhabitants of the Cyclades for his own personal gain.\textsuperscript{19} Themistocles’ actions are desultory if he were truly loyal to either power but make perfect sense if he was only motivated by his own self-interest.

Given his own apparent medism and willingness to play both sides of the coin whenever it proved most advantageous for him, Themistocles’ persecution of others who would appear to have been doing the same might at first appear unexpectedly harsh. However, it is exactly such treatment that further confirms Themistocles’ own mercurial morality, for what better way to turn attention away from one’s own behaviour than by denouncing that same behaviour in others? The Greeks greatly admired Themistocles for the judicial example he made of one interpreter who asked the Athenians for earth and water on behalf of the Persian king.\textsuperscript{20}

\textsuperscript{15} Edith Foster and Donald Lateiner, \textit{Thucydides and Herodotus}, (United Kingdom: Oxford University Press, 2012), 232-233.
\textsuperscript{16} Edith Foster and Donald Lateiner, \textit{Thucydides and Herodotus}, (United Kingdom: Oxford University Press, 2012), 230-231.
\textsuperscript{17} Edith Foster and Donald Lateiner, \textit{Thucydides and Herodotus}, (United Kingdom: Oxford University Press, 2012), 230.
Themistocles had this interpreter executed most brutally by a special decree of the people for conveying Persian ideas in the Greek language.21 On another occasion a man by the name of Arthmius came and offered Persian gold to the Greeks and Themistocles had him outlawed for this apparently treacherous behaviour.22 By these actions Themistocles was able to increase his popularity among the Athenians who were, at that time, the source of his power. When he fell out of favour with the Greeks, however, Themistocles showed himself to be in no way above accepting Persian money or adopting Persian ways. He fled to the Susa and prostrated himself before Artaxerxes, an undignified action by Greek standards. He was received into the king’s court and given revenues from five cites to sustain him.23 There is no consensus as to when he learned the Persian language (before or after he joins Artaxerxes’ court), but the sources indicate that he was the only Greek of the classical period to do so.24 If the majority of the sources are to be believed and Themistocles learned the Persian language after he arrived at court, then he was guilty of both the charges he had the aforementioned messenger and Arthmius punished for. If he learned the Persian language before pleading his case then he was, at the very least, guilty of something very akin to the messenger’s crime.

Having successfully pushed back the Persian threat by virtue of their cooperative efforts, relations between Athens and Sparta following the war were initially very positive. Themistocles had become famous among and revered by both groups; the Spartans went so far as to award him a prize for wisdom.25 Now that he had earned the Spartans’ trust Themistocles betrayed them when the first occasion where it would be advantageous to do so presented itself. The Athenians wished to build fortifications around their city and the Spartans opposed this plan, so

Themistocles conceived of a plan to trick the Spartans. He first travelled to Sparta and induced the allied state to send ambassadors to Athens.²⁶ Because they believed Themistocles to be a friend they took his words in good faith and did as he suggested.²⁷ Upon arriving at Athens the ambassadors were taken hostage and held until the walls were completed.²⁸ Themistocles remained at Sparta and discouraged them from looking into the situation further, reassuring them that “rumors are deceptive and should not be trusted”²⁹ thereby giving the Athenians enough time to finish constructing their fortifications. Theopompus suggested that Themistocles did not actually trick the Spartans but bribed them.³⁰ The inconsistency of his allegiances here is further evidence of his self-interestedness. He was loyal to the Spartan allies when he needed them, but once a conflict of interest arose he was quick to ally himself with the group, which gave him the most prominent position.

Given the continually inconsistent relationship between the various Greek states and the incoming Peloponnesian war it is perhaps not surprising that Themistocles was so willing to betray the Spartans, but it would appear that his opinion even of his fellow Athenians was very much the same. He was willing to trick them as can be seen from his manipulation of the oracle at Delphi whom he most likely bribed to suggest that the Athenians would be safe behind the ‘wooden walls’ of the acropolis.³¹ In describing the Athenian people’s attitude towards himself he is also cited as having said, “I do not admire the sort of men who use the same vessel as wine

²⁶ Edith Foster and Donald Lateiner, _Thucydidès and Herodotus_, (United Kingdom: Oxford University Press, 2012), 216-217.
²⁷ Thucydides, _The History of the Peloponnesian War_, trans. Richard Crawley, 96-97.
²⁸ Edith Foster and Donald Lateiner, _Thucydidès and Herodotus_, (United Kingdom: Oxford University Press, 2012), 216-217.
pitcher and a chamber pot.” Both of these instances show that Themistocles did not have a particularly good opinion of his fellow citizens, and it is much easier to betray people for whom one does not have much respect. From Themistocles’ words and actions it is apparent that he had regard for people only to the extent that they contributed to his personal wealth or eminence.

In 471 BC it would appear that the Athenians had had enough of Themistocles’ rampant ambition and as Plutarch states, “Themistocles was forced to remind the Assembly of his achievements until they could bear this no longer.” Thus they ostracised him. While he was in exile the Spartans claim to have found proof of Themistocles’ medism and the Athenians brought him up on charges of treason. Rather than return and face trial before the pan-Hellenic council Themistocles confirmed his guilt by fleeing to Persia. Once accepted into the Persian court, true to character, Themistocles proceeded to manipulate his new surroundings to his own advantage. He learned the Persian language so that he no longer needed an interpreter and used his free exchanges with Artaxerxes to convince the monarch to make changes to the court, which benefited Themistocles at the expense of the Persian nobles. Even when removed from Attica Themistocles’ behaviour remained true to character for the setting he found himself to be in was irrelevant as long as he could successfully pursue wealth and power.

Themistocles was a man who possessed enormous powers of cunning, foresight and persuasion. He was loyal to whatever cause would secure him the most powerful position: for in

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politics the appearance of integrity is just as valuable as the quality itself. Themistocles protected Greece while it served to make him powerful, fought for Athens at the expense of the Spartans when he saw he had nothing more to gain from the ally and finally abandoned his culture and its laws altogether when he was able to live on as a man of wealth and influence. Themistocles is a loyal traitor because he was always loyal to a cause provided it was advantageous to his own personal betterment.

Works Cited


