

ARMIES AND NAVIES

Lecture 5: Naval tactics

The need for Provisions

- ▣ Themistocles, however, picked out the seaworthiest Athenian ships and made his way to the places where drinking water could be found. Here he engraved on the rocks words which the Ionians read on the next day when they came to Artemisium. This was what the writing said: “Men of Ionia, you do wrongly to fight against the land of your fathers and bring slavery upon Hellas. Herodotos 8.22

The need for haste

- ▣ Another trireme was at once sent off in haste, for fear that the first might reach Lesbos in the interval, and the city be found destroyed; the first ship having about a day and a night's start. Wine and barley-cakes were provided for the vessel by the Mitylenian ambassadors, and great promises made if they arrived in time; which caused the men to use such diligence upon the voyage that they took their meals of barley-cakes kneaded with oil and wine as they rowed, and only slept by turns while the others were at the oar. Luckily they met with no contrary wind, and the first ship making no haste upon so horrid an errand, while the second pressed on in the manner described, the first arrived so little before them, that Paches had only just had time to read the decree, and to prepare to execute the sentence, when the second put into port and prevented the massacre. The danger of Mitylene had indeed been great. Thucydides 3.49

Athens–Mytilene



- Distance: 345km = 214 miles = 186 nautical miles.
- The first trireme would have spent meal-times and the night on land.
- The second trireme rowed continuously all the way.

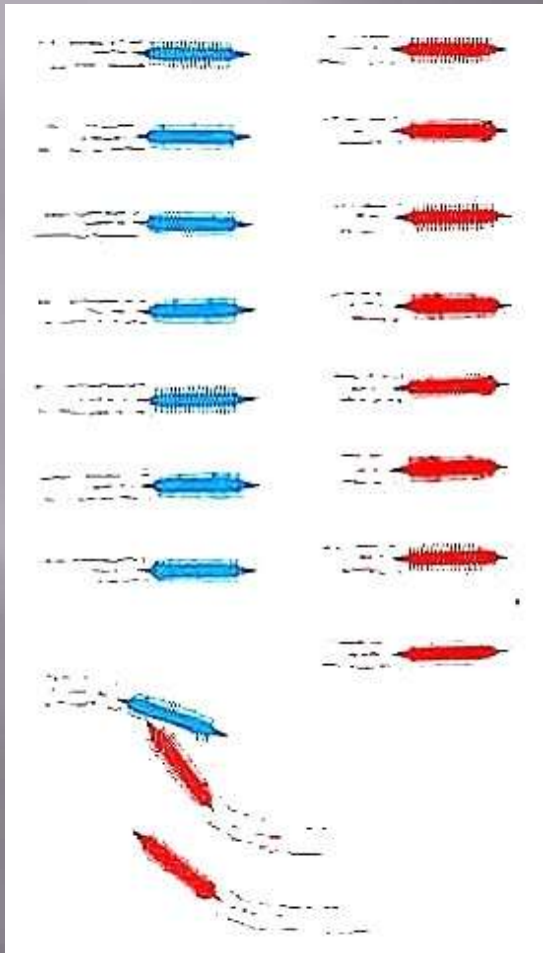
Trireme Tactics

- ▣ There are various tactics described in the historical sources.
- ▣ The most important tactics employed by a trireme are the periplous and the diekplous
- ▣ the Athenians for want of room would be unable to use their favorite manoeuvre of breaking the line (diekplous) or of sailing round (periplous), as the Syracusans would do their best not to let them do the one, and want of room would prevent their doing the other. Thucydides 7.36

The debate

- ▣ The debate regarding trireme tactics is whether the periplous and the diekplous are tactics employed by a ship or by a fleet.
- ▣ A lot of the debate centres on terminology and the use of words in different circumstances.
- ▣ Thucydides is probably the best author to work with in this case, since he not only commanded triremes in warfare but also is very precise in his phrasing (unlike Herodotos).

The Periplous as Fleet Manoeuvre



- ▣ The two opposing fleets would arrange themselves in opposite lines.
- ▣ The fleet with the longer line would try to attack the flank of the enemy.

The flanking manoeuvre

- ▣ While the Corcyraeans, attacking without judgment and in small detachments, were already crippled by their own misconduct, the Athenians, afraid of the numbers of the enemy and of being surrounded, did not venture to attack the main body or even the center of the division opposed to them, but fell upon its wing and sank one vessel. Thucydides 3.78
- ▣ This fleet manoeuvre of flanking is called by Thucydides **perikyklōsis** (surrounding), not **periplous**.

Quality versus Quantity

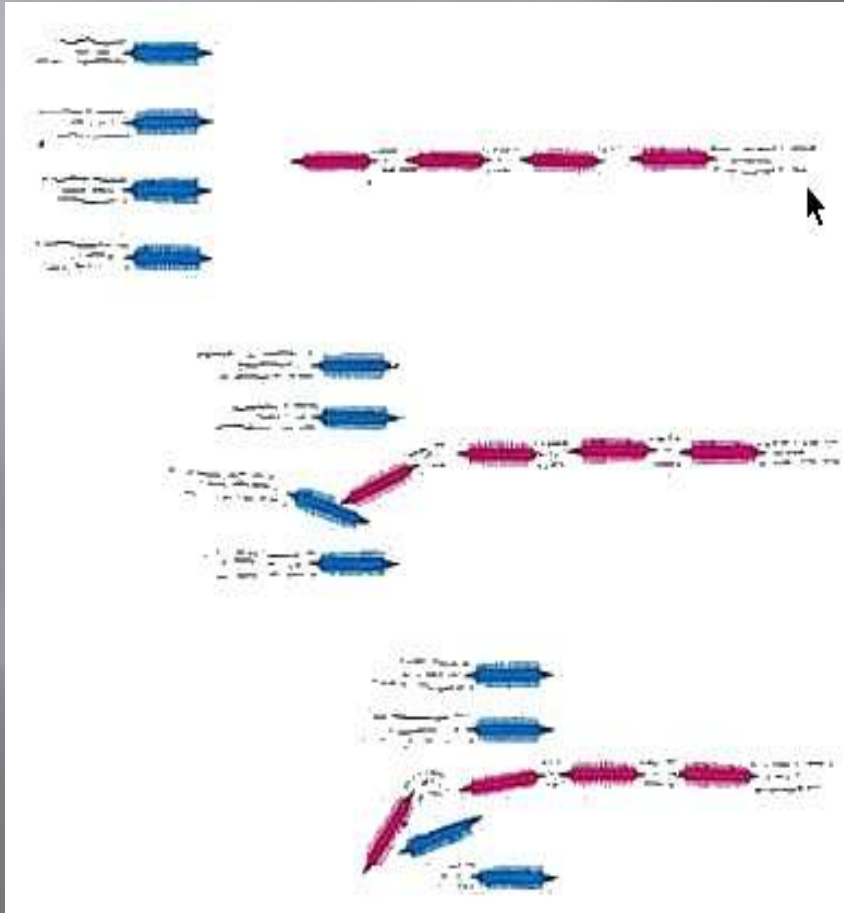
- ▣ The ships were arranged in this way so as not to give the enemy a chance of breaking through the line; for the Athenians were inferior in seamanship. But all the vessels of the Lacedaemonians were arranged in single line, with a view to breaking through the enemy and circling round him, inasmuch as they had superior seamen. And Callicratidas was on the right wing. Xenophon *Hellenika* 1.6.31

Periplous and quality

- ▣ Xenophon is clear that the diekplous and the periplous are manoeuvres depending upon the quality of seamanship and expertise of the fleet.
- ▣ If the periplous is just a flanking manoeuvre then it is no longer a question of quality but merely of quantity, since the longer line would perform it invariably.

The diekplous as fleet manoeuvre

- In the diekplous as fleet manoeuvre, the weight of the initial charge was on the flagship of the attacking fleet.

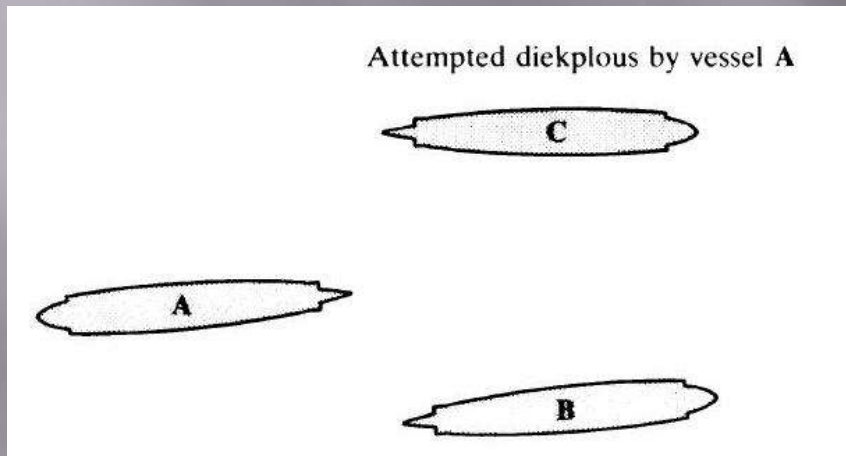


Quality and Quantity in the Diekplous

- ▣ Since the periplous and the diekplous are always mentioned together, it is illogical that one would be a single ship manoeuvre and the other a fleet one.

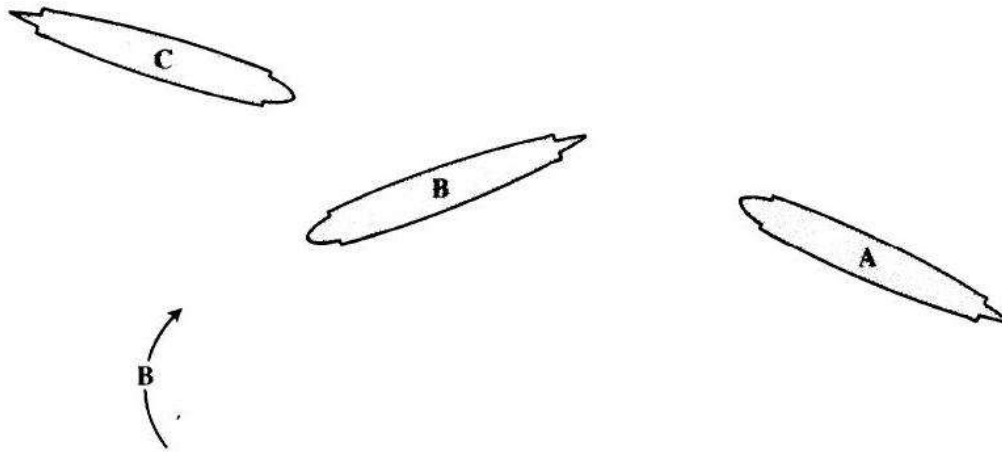
Diekplous and Periplous as single ship tactics

- ▣ Firstly a ship would attempt to pass between the ships of the enemy without getting damaged.
- ▣ This would be the diekplous.



Diekplous and Periplous as single ship tactics

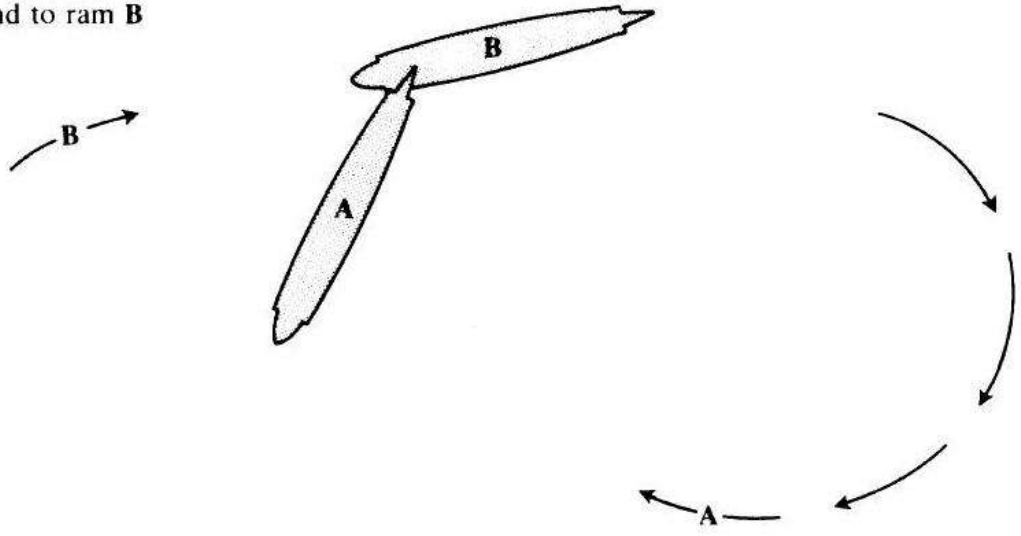
Vessel **B** turns on to **A**'s stern



- When a ship had completed the diekplous, the enemy ships would try to either run or turn.
- A trireme was vulnerable at its flanks and stern (remember the steering oars!)

Diekplous and Periplous as single ship tactics

A wheels round to ram B



- ▣ The periplous.
- ▣ Essentially the attacking ship (A) would turn in a circle and ram the defender (B) either at the side or stern.

Defensive Tactics

- ▣ While the Corcyraeans, attacking without judgment and in small detachments, were already crippled by their own misconduct, the Athenians, afraid of the numbers of the enemy and of being surrounded, did not venture to attack the main body or even the center of the division opposed to them, but fell upon its wing and sank one vessel; **after which the Peloponnesians formed in a circle, and the Athenians rowed round them and tried to throw them into disorder.** Thucydides 3.78

Strength vs Agility

- In addition to other improvements suggested by the former sea-fight which they now adopted in the equipment of their navy, they cut down their prows to a smaller compass to make them more solid and made their cheeks stouter, and from these let stays into the vessel's sides for a length of six cubits within and without, in the same way as the Corinthians had altered their prows before engaging the squadron at Naupactus. The Syracusans thought that they would thus have an advantage over the Athenian vessels, which were not constructed with equal strength, but were slight in the bows, from their being more used to sail round and charge the enemy's side than to meet him prow to prow, and that the battle being in the great harbor, with a great many ships in not much room, was also a fact in their favour. Charging prow to prow, they would stave in the enemy's bows, by striking with solid and stout beaks against hollow and weak ones; and secondly, the Athenians for want of room would be unable to use their favorite manoeuvre of breaking the line or of sailing round, as the Syracusans would do their best not to let them do the one, and want of room would prevent their doing the other. Thucydides 7.36

A way to defeat a superior enemy

- ▣ This charging prow to prow which had hitherto been thought want of skill in a helmsman, would be the Syracusans' chief manoeuvre, as being that which they should find most useful, since the Athenians, if repulsed, would not be able to back water in any direction except towards the shore, and that only for a little way, and in the little space in front of their own camp. The rest of the harbor would be commanded by the Syracusans; and the Athenians, if hard pressed, by crowding together in a small space and all to the same point, would run foul of one another and fall into disorder, which was, in fact, the thing that did the Athenians most harm in all the sea-fights, they not having, like the Syracusans, the whole harbor to retreat over. As to their sailing round into the open sea, this would be impossible, with the Syracusans in possession of the way out and in, especially as Plemmyrium would be hostile to them, and the mouth of the harbor was not large.
Thucydides 7.36

Questions?

Follow-up Reading

- ▣ Ian Whitehead 'The Periplous' *Greece & Rome*, Second Series, Vol. 34, No. 2 (Oct., 1987), pp. 178-185 Stable URL:
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/642945>
- ▣ J. F. Lazenby 'The Diekplous' *Greece & Rome*, Second Series, Vol. 34, No. 2 (Oct., 1987), pp. 169-177 Stable URL:
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/642944>