

ARMIES AND NAVIES

Lecture 21: Siege Warfare

Troy

- ▣ The earliest siege mentioned in Greek literature is of course that of Troy in the Iliad.
- ▣ However, there is no mention of siege-machines of any kind.
- ▣ Troy fell through a trick and it is clear from the poem that the Greeks did not even try to starve the city out.
- ▣ The usual way for sieges to be successful was through treachery and starvation.

Persian Siegecraft: Siege Mounds

- ▣ After his death, Harpagus, a Mede like Mazares, came down to succeed him in his command; this is the Harpagus who was entertained by Astyages the king of the Medes at that unnatural feast, and who helped win the kingship for Cyrus. [2] This man was now made general by Cyrus. When he came to Ionia, he took the cities by means of earthworks; he would drive the men within their walls and then build earthworks against the walls and so take the cities. Herodotos 1.162

Persian Siegecraft: Undermining

- ▣ This the Amathusians did, and have done to this day. When, however, the Ionians engaged in the sea-battle off Cyprus learned that Onesilus' cause was lost and that the cities of Cyprus, with the exception of Salamis which the Salaminians had handed over to their former king Gorgus, were besieged, they sailed off to Ionia without delay. [2] Soli was the Cyprian city which withstood siege longest; the Persians took it in the fifth month by digging a mine under its walls. Herodotos 5.115

Fifth century

Athenian Expertise

- ▣ The Lacedaemonians meanwhile finding the war against the rebels in Ithome likely to last, invoked the aid of their allies, and especially of the Athenians, who came in some force under the command of Cimon. [2] The reason for this pressing summons lay in their reputed skill in siege operations; a long siege had taught the Lacedaemonians their own deficiency in this art, else they would have taken the place by assault. Thucydides 1.102

First Instance of Greek Siege Engines: Samos 440BC

- ▣ The Samians, believing that because of the departure of Pericles they had a suitable opportunity to attack the ships that had been left behind, sailed against them, and having won the battle they were puffed up with pride. [2] But when Pericles received word of the defeat of his forces, he at once turned back and gathered an imposing fleet, since he desired to destroy once and for all the fleet of the enemy. The Athenians rapidly dispatched sixty triremes and the Chians and Mytilenaeans thirty, and with this great armament Pericles renewed the siege both by land and by sea, making continuous assaults. [3] **He built also siege machines, being the first of all men to do so, such as those called "rams" and "tortoises," Artemon of Clazomenae having built them;** and by pushing the siege with energy and throwing down the walls by means of the siege machines he gained the mastery of Samos. Diodoros 12.28

The siege of Potidea

- ▣ The same summer Hagnon, son of Nicias, and Cleopompus, son of Clinias, the colleagues of Pericles, took the armament of which he had lately made use, and went off upon an expedition against the Chalcidians in the direction of Thrace and Potidaea, which was still under siege. As soon as they arrived, they brought up their engines against Potidaea and tried every means of taking it, [2] but did not succeed either in capturing the city or in doing anything else worthy of their preparations. Thucydides 2.58

Plataia: Siege Mounds

- ▣ First he enclosed the town with a palisade formed of the fruit-trees which they cut down, to prevent further egress from Plataea; next day they threw up a mound against the city, hoping that the largeness of the force employed would insure the speedy reduction of the place. [2] They accordingly cut down timber from Cithaeron, and built it up on either side, laying it like lattice-work to serve as a wall to keep the mound from spreading abroad, and carried to it wood and stones and earth and whatever other material might help to complete it. [3] They continued to work at the mound for seventy days and nights without intermission, being divided into relief parties to allow of some being employed in carrying while others took sleep and refreshment; the Lacedaemonian officer attached to each contingent keeping the men to the work.
Thucydides 2.75

Plataia: Towers

- ▣ While raising the mound the Peloponnesians also brought up engines against the city, one of which was brought up upon the mound against the great building and shook down a good piece of it, to the no small alarm of the Plataeans. Others were advanced against different parts of the wall but were lassoed and broken by the Plataeans; who also hung up great beams by long iron chains from either extremity of two poles laid on the wall and projecting over it, and drew them up at an angle whenever any point was threatened by the engine, and loosing their hold let the beam go with its chains slack, so that it fell with a run and snapped off the nose of the battering ram. Thucydides 2.76

Plataia: Fire

- ▣ First, however, they determined to try the effects of fire and see whether they could not, with the help of a wind, burn the town as it was not a large one; indeed they thought of every possible expedient by which the place might be reduced without the expense of a blockade. [3] They accordingly brought faggots of brushwood and threw them from the mound, first into the space between it and the wall; and this soon becoming full from the number of hands at work, they next heaped the faggots up as far into the town as they could reach from the top, and then lighted the wood by setting fire to it with sulphur and pitch. [4] The consequence was a fire greater than any one had ever yet seen produced by human agency, though it could not of course be compared to the spontaneous conflagrations sometimes known to occur through the wind rubbing the branches of a mountain forest together. [5] And this fire was not only remarkable for its magnitude, but was also, at the end of so many perils, within an ace of proving fatal to the Plataeans; a great part of the town became entirely inaccessible, and had a wind blown upon it, in accordance with the hopes of the enemy, nothing could have saved them. [6] As it was, there is also a story of heavy rain and thunder having come on by which the fire was put out and the danger averted. Thucydides 2.77

Plataia: Blockade

- ▣ All being finished by about the rising of Arcturus, they left men enough to man half the wall, the rest being manned by the Boeotians, and drawing off their army dispersed to their several cities. [3] The Plataeans had before sent off their wives and children and oldest men and the mass of the noncombatants to Athens; so that the number of the besieged left in the place comprised four hundred of their own citizens, eighty Athenians, and a hundred and ten women to bake their bread. [4] This was the sum total at the commencement of the siege, and there was no one else within the walls, bond or free. Such were the arrangements made for the blockade of Plataea. Thucydides 2.78

By exhaustion

- ▣ The same winter the Potidaeans at length found themselves no longer able to hold out against their besiegers. The inroads of the Peloponnesians into Attica had not had the desired effect of making the Athenians raise the siege. Provisions there were none left; and so far had distress for food gone in Potidaea that, besides a number of other horrors, instances had even occurred of the people having eaten one another. So in this extremity they at last made proposals for capitulating to the Athenian generals in command against them, Xenophon, son of Euripides, Hestiodorus, son of Aristocleides, and Phanomachus, son of Callimachus. [2] The generals accepted their proposals, seeing the sufferings of the army in so exposed a position; besides which the state had already spent two thousand talents upon the siege. Thucydides 2.70

By storm

- ▣ This was the largest town in Amphilochia, and its inhabitants the most powerful. [5] Under the pressure of misfortune many generations afterwards, they called in the Ambraciots, their neighbors on the Amphilochian border, to join their colony; and it was by this union with the Ambraciots that they learnt their present Hellenic speech, the rest of the Amphilochians being barbarians. [6] After a time the Ambraciots expelled the Argives and held the city themselves. [7] Upon this the Amphilochians gave themselves over to the Acarnanians; and the two together called the Athenians, who sent them Phormio as general and thirty ships; upon whose arrival they took Argos by storm, and made slaves of the Ambraciots; and the Amphilochians and Acarnanians inhabited the town in common.
Thucydides 2.68

Fourth Century

Invention

- ▣ In fact the catapult was invented at this time in Syracuse, since the ablest skilled workmen had been gathered from everywhere into one place. The high wages as well as the numerous prizes offered the workmen who were judged to be the best stimulated their zeal. And over and above these factors, Dionysius circulated daily among the workers, conversed with them in kindly fashion, and rewarded the most zealous with gifts and invited them to his table. [2] Consequently the workmen brought unsurpassable devotion to the devising of many missiles and engines of war that were strange and capable of rendering great service. Diodoros 14.42

Missile-Throwing Catapults

- Consequently, using the multitude of his soldiers, he hauled his vessels over the land with no difficulty and launched them safely in the sea outside the harbour. Himilcon attacked the first ships, but was held back by the multitude of missiles; for Dionysius had manned the ships with a great number of archers and slingers, and the Syracusans slew many of the enemy by using from the land the catapults which shot sharp-pointed missiles. **Indeed this weapon created great dismay, because it was a new invention at this time.** As a result, Himilcon was unable to achieve his design and sailed away to Libya, believing that a sea-battle would serve no end, since the enemy's ships were double his in number. Diodoros 14.50

Philip's Siege Engines

- ▣ Philip, whose fortunes were constantly on the increase, made an expedition against Perinthus, which had resisted him and inclined toward the Athenians. He instituted a siege and advancing engines to the city assailed the walls in relays day after day. [3] He built towers eighty cubits high, which far overtopped the towers of Perinthus, and from a superior height kept wearing down the besieged. He rocked the walls with battering rams and undermined them with saps, and cast down a long stretch of the wall. The Perinthians fought stoutly in their own defence and quickly threw up a second wall; many admirable feats were performed in the open and on the fortifications. Diodoros 16.74

Not Enough

- ▣ When they had again become a match for the enemy, they took courage and resolutely bore the brunt of battle for their homeland. Still the king persevered in his determination. He divided his forces into several divisions and with frequent reliefs kept up a continuous attack on the walls both day and night. He had thirty thousand men and a store of missiles and siege engines besides other machines in plenty, and kept up a steady pressure against the besieged people. Diodoros 16.75

Questions?

Follow-Up Reading

- ▣ Eric W. Robinson 'Thucydidean Sieges, Prosopitis, and the Hellenic Disaster in Egypt' *Classical Antiquity*, Vol. 18, No. 1 (Apr., 1999), pp. 132-152 Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25011095>