

The rivers of the goat

Prologue

Arginusae Islands. A Spartan navy is about to face an Athenian navy come from Athens to aid the town of Mytilene. Stormy winds are blowing on the sea. The soothsayers are consulted. When could we fight the battle? the commanders of the triremes ask. We must wait. The time to fight is not still come, is the soothsayers' answer. Whereas on the shore the sacrifices are celebrating, a wave higher than the others drags the head of the victim into the sea. "This is a bad omen", says a soothsayer looking at Callicratidas, the Spartan admiral. "During the battle, the commander will lose his own life".

Callicratidas looks firmly at the soothsayer and answers: "The fate of Sparta does not depend on the life of one man."

On the life of one man perhaps no, but on the triremes of the navy surely yes.

Two dresses for Lysander.

Athens was a maritime Power, Sparta a continental Power. Till when the Athenian navy had ruled the seas, Sparta could not have won the war; till when Sparta had had the supremacy on the mainland, Athens would never have won. War will be over only if Athens would have defeated Sparta in a decisive battle on the mainland or if Sparta would have defeated Athens in a decisive naval battle. There were no alternatives.

Athens came one step away from victory. In 406 BC, near Arginusae Islands, the Athenian admirals had swept out the Spartan fleet. The battle at Arginusae seemed the end of everything. Instead, it was only the beginning. The victorious Athenian admirals were called back to Athens on charges of not having rescued the castaways, trailed, charged to death and executed. Two of them did not come back and survived. After Arginusae, Sparta offered peace; Athens denied. The Athenian refusal and the loss of experienced and capable commanders will have been paid at a high price the following year.

War fleets are very expensive. Building and keeping effective a trireme need a lot of money. And what about the oarsmen? It is necessary to pay them well and, above all, regularly. Who does not remember Lysander's answer to Persian prince Cyrus? "Are you telling me I can have what I want? Well, give me much money, in order I can pay my oarsmen more than Athens can do." Lysander was well aware of this: attracted by a bigger salary, many oarsmen in the pay book of Athens (since some time, Athens was using mercenary oarsmen) would have defected and tried to join the Spartan side. Those who had remained, would have rowed badly and reluctantly.

Athens had still a powerful navy but, in respect of money, it was scraping the bottom of the barrel. On the contrary, Sparta was receiving conspicuous funds by the Persians, with whom it had signed an alliance treaty after the Athenian intromission in Caria to support Amorges¹. According to the treaty, who had been an enemy of Persia, would have been also an enemy of Sparta.

Persian money changed the course of the war. After Arginusae, Sparta rebuilt its fleet in a few time and resumed the raids along the coast of Asia Minor. It was commanded by the navarch(i.e. admiral, in ancient Greek *ναύαρχος*) Lysander, even though, formally, the commander was an other one. The Spartan law did not allow the admirals to have the command twice. Lysander had been already admiral in 407 and he could not be appointed admiral another time. But Lysander was estimated by his sailors, he was experienced and

was favoured and helped by Cyrus. Renouncing to him would have been a big mistake. Worse: a gift to the enemy. After Callicratidas' death at Arginusae Islands, the Ephors, forced to choose his successor, appointed admiral a certain Aracus, flanking him with Lysander as vice(*epistoleus*). All the ancient sources agree: Aracus was not the very commander, Lysander had the very command.

Ambitious, clever, ruthless, opportunist, wheeler-dealer, Lysander would be liked by Niccolò Machiavelli. He was a tough man, incorruptible, but, sometimes, he fell into more than a contradiction. An example? When he receives two precious dresses by tyrant Dionysius of Syracuse as a gift for his two daughters, he refuses them. With this explication: I don't want that my daughters, dressed with those robes, look ugly. A very Spartan man, one could say. Some years later, while he is at Syracuse as ambassador of Sparta, Lysander receives two precious dresses again. Which of them do you want for your daughter? Dionysius asks him. His answer is: " My daughter is able to choose better than I can do." And brings with him both one and the other.²

And what about the manoeuvres, the intrigues, the attempts of corruption even of a high rank people (priests, priestesses), in order to take off the power to the royal families and to become himself king of Sparta? And what about the pleas of Farnabazus about Lysander's behaviours in the satrapy of Frigia Hellepontica? And so on.

Contradictory or not, Lysander is a capable commander. And cautious. He knows Athens' economic difficulties, he is aware of the strength of his own navy, he does not want to lose all his advantages moving recklessly. He is waiting the favourable moment. Sooner or later Athens will act, will get caught up by the hurry, will make some mistake. Then and only then the Spartan fleet will hit. Definitely.

His cat-and-mouse game along the coasts of Asia Minor brings him to occupy the town of Lampsacus. Situated on the eastern bank of the Strait of Dardanelles(for the ancient Greeks: Hellespont), Lampsacus (today Lepsel in Turkey) controls the maritime way through which the grain of the territories around the Black Sea arrives to Athens.

When the news of Spartan triremes and hoplites heading Lampsacus reaches Athens, a fleet of 180 ships with 36.000 men onboard is sent to Hellespont: its task is to avoid the conquest of Lampsacus by Lysander. But when the Athenian fleet reaches Lampsacus it is too late: the town has been occupied and the Spartan triremes are at anchor into its very good harbour. The Athenians admirals lead, then, their fleet to the western side of Hellespont and deploy their triremes in front of the Spartan ones in a place named *Aegospotamoi* (literally: "The rivers of the goat").³

It is a bad place. There is no harbour, only a large shore. There is no town where one can find supplies(food and water, in particular). When the ships are not in action, they must be run aground. For there is scarce food, the sailors and the oarsmen come outboard and spread here and there looking for food. So, there is a moment that the Athenian navy is very, very vulnerable- ships aground, oarsmen and soldiers who knows where- and the enemy could exploit it.

At this point one could wonder: why Aegospotami? Why not Sestos, about fifteen kilometres southwards? The answer is easy: the Athenian navarchs are in a hurry. They are in a hurry to wipe out the enemy fleet, they are in a hurry to attack, they are in a hurry to open again that water way so vital for Athens. Unlike Lysander, they can not afford to wait, to procrastinate, to drag it out. Athens is starving and its coffers are empty. For these reasons, every morning the Athenians admirals leave the beach of Aegospotami and sail towards the enemy. They want to provoke him, they want to force him to leave Lampsacus, they want to plunge over him and repeat the victory of Arginusae.

If they chose Sestos, they would have a plenty of food and supplies, but they could not either control closely the enemy fleet, or sail out towards it every morning. The voyage

from Sestos to Lampsacus is a long and tiring voyage. The sailors, the oarsmen would have been exhausted at the moment of the combat.

Lysander, however, dismisses “the lion skin” and wears the “skin of the fox” (Plutarch): he ignores deliberately the Athenian provocations and remains into the harbour of Lampsacus. He can do it: time and Persian money are playing in his favour.

The Athenian admirals, on the contrary, are more and more nervous: we sail every morning in order of battle for fighting and every evening they come back without having fought. And the more time goes by, the more the nervousness and the frustration increase. The Athenian admirals are at least six, maybe seven, if we consider true an affirmation about a certain Eryximachus reported by Lisia the orator. Conon is good, but he is the only one. Philocles is inexperienced ; Menander is ruthless and hasty; Tydeus is brave, but he has never commanded; Cephisodotus is a mystery; Adeimantus can only boast his friendship with Alcibiades; Eryximachus- assuming he is present- is of little value if either Xenophon or Diodorus do not mention him in their reports.

By law, they command one day each alternately. And this can be a trouble, because of the poor experience of the most part of them. And that is not all. To make the things more complicate, a big personality appears on the scene: Alcibiades. And his arrival adds problem to problem, tension to tension.

A bulky presence

Expelled from Athens after the defeat suffered by the Athenian navy at Notium (407 BC), Alcibiades had reached Thrace where he lives now in a kind of castle not far from Aegospotami. When the Athenian fleet arrives there, he sees in its arrival an opportunity to come out from the shadow and to return on the political scene.

Alcibiades has had a central role in that war. Rich, smart but dissolute, Socrates' friend (and lover), able to inflame the crowds, incline to more than an excess ⁴, he has won battles and has lost battles; he has betrayed and has been forgiven, he has changed political opinion many times, he has wanted the disastrous expedition to Sicily(415-413). His star, once so bright, is going down, by now. Maybe only Adeimantus trusts still in him; the other commanders are suspicious. But they cannot fail to listen to him.

Alcibiades has advices for everybody and says to have meaningful friendships. In particular with the Thracian kings Medoc and Seuthes. Move the fleet to Sestos, he suggests. There you will find a plenty of supplies, food, and better conditions. We will attack the Spartans by land and by sea. Medoc and Seuthes will give us the necessary troops in order to win the decisive victory. But I, too, wants to have an active role and share the command with you.

The Athenian commanders are, perhaps, inexperienced, but they are not completely stupid. If we listen to Alcibiades' advices, attack and win the battle, the merit will be his. If, on the contrary, our navy will be defeated, we, not he, will be considered guilty. The Thracian troops? They are on the opposite bank of the Hellespont and we will be forced— assuming that Medoc and Seuthes want to help us—to move them by ships to the other bank. And looking at that movement, will Lysander be idle? And , last but not least, has Alcibiades sent here by Lysander himself, in order to make us more nervous and tense? He already betrayed in the past, he can betray again. No, dear Alcibiades, thanks for your advices, but we are the commanders. And ours are the decisions.⁵

A controversial day

On the sixth day, at dawn, as usual the Athenian navy with Philocrates in command is preparing itself to leave Aegospotami in order to defy the enemy fleet. Maybe the oarsmen and the sailors are thinking that day, too, will be an useless day. And, in fact, at evening, the Athenian navy come back to the Aegospotami without having fought. The crews bring

ashore the ships and then spread here and there looking for food. They are unaware to be watched. Lysander, in fact, has sent a trireme-- as he made in the previous days-- to spy at distance the enemy fleet.

At a certain moment, a signal starts from the spy-ship. Received that signal, the Spartan ships leave the harbour of Lampsacus, plunge on the Athenian ships, which are aground and without crew, and capture them. Conon with nine triremes and the sacred ship *Paralus* break the blockade and escape.

This is the well-known version given us by Xenophon(*Hellenica*, 2.2.15-29). According to him, then, at Aegospotami there was no naval battle: the Athenian triremes were captured when they were still ashore. Someone, of course, has objected. In a Lisia's fragment, Aegospotami is linked to the Greek term " *naumachia*", that is " battle between ships", " Naval battle". Then, according to Lisia, a naval battle was fought at Aegospotami is the first objection.

Furthermore, what kind of signal(a shield, a flag?) was sent by the spy-ship to Lysander? And how did he make to receive it so quickly, seen the distance between the spy-ship and the harbour of Lampsacus? Thence the obvious conclusion: Xenophon has gone beyond the mere description of the battle, romanticizing, if we can say so, the events only in order to celebrate Lysander's military genius, author at the right moment and in the right place, of a formidable lightning attack. Furthermore, if we wants to tell the things as they are, Xenophon is not very expertise about the naval things in general, and the naval battles in particular. So, according to those who see some flaws in Xenophon's report, we have to take everything he says about Aegospotami with a grain of salt or with some caution.

On the sixth day, at dawn, as usual the Athenian navy with Philocles in command, is preparing itself to leave Aegospotami in order to defy the enemy fleet. Preparations are still under way, when thirty ships led by Philocles himself, sail off towards Sestos. Informed by some deserters, Lysander comes out with his fleet from Lampsacus, engages a short fight with Philocles, pursuits him, and plunges on the Athenian empty ships still in the shore , destroying or capturing them. In the same time, an amphibious force under Eteonicus attacks the enemy camp, bringing panic everywhere. Conon manages to escape with ten ships and reaches Cyprus.

This is Diodorus Siculus' equally well-known version(*Biblioteca Historica, Library of History*, 13.104.8- 106.8) According to him, then, a naval battle- though of low intensity- was fought at Aegospotami. But how to explain Philocles' move? Is it a planned move in order to force Lysander out from Lampsacus? Should his thirty ships act like a bait and only Tydeus', Mander's and Adeimantus' inability does not allow that the trap work? Or has he sailed out as usual to provoke the Spartan fleet and has he lost the contact with the rest of the Athenian navy? Or does he want to reach Sestos in order to obtain supplies of food, considered that the Athenian soldiers and sailors were starving? Or does he want, simply, follow Alcibiades' advice?

In the ancient sources there are no elements to answer in a clear way to all these questions. We can only try to guess the reasons why Philocles acted in that way . The ambush? Possible, but unlikely. Dividing the fleet signifies to make it weaker and Lysander could exploit at once this situation. Furthermore - and Diodorus writes clearly about it- the sea loch around Aegospotami is very narrow. And if the sound is narrow, the space for manoeuvring is reduced. And if it is reduced, Philocles cannot feign to sail away, attract the enemy ships and, then, come back to close the trap.

But let's suppose that he can arrive to Sestos. Could he come back in time to help the bulk of the navy? Unlikely. But, even though he managed to come back in time, his sailors and oarsmen would be so tired and exhausted that they could not combat effectively. Has Philocles lost the contact with the rest of the fleet? Unlikely. It makes no sense to sail off and make a sortie when the bulk of the fleet is still unprepared. Philocles will be

inexperienced , too; but he is not blind. Surely he would have waited. Reaching Sestos according with Alcibiades' advice? Possible. But, then, why does not the entire fleet sail to Sestos? The likeliest assumption is that Philocles heads toward Sestos looking for food and water. Or, at least, this is the opinion of a modern scholar, Graham Wylie.

But one speaks of betray, too. Lisia and Pausanias speak openly of betray. According to them, Philocles' manoeuvre – apparently senseless --was owed to the confusion and disorganization provoked by one or more traitors. Not Philocles(he will pay with his own life), not Conon. Perhaps Adeimantus(his life will be spared by Lysander), maybe Eryximachus. And what about Alcibiades? Why does he arrive at Aegospotami? For patriotism? Or for a different reason? It is difficult to give a clear answer. Surely sudden Alcibiades' arrival at Aegospotami gives life to a more than a suspect.

War criminals

Athens had issued by decree that the right hand (according to Plutarch, the right foot) was cut off to the prisoners of war, in order to avoid them fighting or rowing anymore. Because of this decree(uncertain and controversial and perhaps never applied) the Athenians captured at Aegospotami were considered “war criminals”, and, according to Xenophon, executed. On explicit order of Lysander, their corpses were not buried. Only Adeimantus was spared, because, in the past, he had refused to execute that decree.

But how many were they? And were they really executed en masse? Xenophon give no clear figures. According to him, almost the most part of those who fought at Aegospotami was captured. According to Diodorus, on the contrary, almost all of them managed to escape and reached Sestos. Thence, he does not tell of massive executions. The only name that appears in his tale is the name of Philocles. Instead, Plutarch gives us clear figures. He writes that at least three thousand Athenians were executed in the aftermath of Aegospotami (*Life of Alcibiades*).

If we have to believe Xenophon, at least twenty five - twenty eight prisoners should have be questioned, gathered on the basis of their nationality (the non-Athenians would have not been executed), guarded by a few thousands of Spartans. It would have been a long, hard and exhausting job. Be clear: Lysander would have authorized it, if it had been useful to him. But would it have been useful to him? Probably Sparta would not have approved⁶; the whole Greece would have been horrified when it had known of that slaughter. Lysander was aware of this way of feeling and if he had slaughtered the prisoners cold- blood , would have risked to lose the whole prestige acquired on the battlefield. It is true: the most part of the Athenian prisoners belonged to the popular classes and to the democratic party. Lysander, deeply oligarchic, would have reduced consistently the democratic party in Athens, weakening it. But was it worth? Or, on the contrary, would not freeing them have been better? Because of the arrival of new mouths to feed, an Athens already starving could not withstand for a long time. When he conquered Sestos, did not he stipulate a truce -- as Diodorus writes-- and free those who had found shelter in Sestos after Aegospotami?

And then: where? How? Carrying the prisoners to Lampsacus would have required a further effort. Cutting their throat, one by one-- for hours, for days-- would have strained the nerves of anyone, even the toughest soldiers' nerves . Because of those reasons, many modern scholars have some doubts about the executions en masse ordered by Lysander after Aegospotami.

Anyway a thing is clear: after Aegospotami, Athens has no navy anymore. Neither the money necessary to built another one. It is at the enemy's mercy. Totally.

Epilogue.

In the darkness, the sacred ship Paralus is approaching the harbour of Piraeus. She is bringing news from Aegospotami. And it is no good news. Soon, running from mouth to mouth, the news reaches the inhabitants of the city. The sadness is general. It is a night full of mourning and pain, nobody can sleep. The dead at Aegospotami are mourned; one looks at the future with concern; one fears retaliations and revenges. The rumours do not stop. One speaks of treason. The following day, the entrances of the harbours are blocked. Only one is kept open. The walls are strengthened, guard posts are increased. Athens is waiting for a siege and is getting ready to face it. The day of reckoning is at hand.

¹ In 420 BC, Amorges, bastard son of Pisutnes, Lydia's satrap, rebelled to King of Persia Darius II. He occupied the harbour of Iasus, located between Miletus and Halicarnassus (the today Bodrum, in Turkey), engaged some mercenaries, asked and obtained Athens' support. In the winter 412/411 BC, Spartan ships entered the harbour of Iasus. The town, not protected anymore by Athens, whose fleet had been destroyed during the disgraceful expedition to Sicily, was occupied. Amorges was captured and delivered to Tissaphernes, who had been ordered by Darius to repress the uprising.

² The anecdote is told by Plutarch (*Life of Lysander*, 2. 4-5), who, in a first moment, uses the plural (daughters) and then, some line after, the singular (daughter). It is, thus, probable that only one Lysander's daughter has gone with her father to Syracuse. But this is only a guess.

³ Jean Francois Bommelaer, a modern scholar, locates Aegospotami southeast of the today Sutluce, close to the mouth of a river called Buyuk Dere. In the nearby, in fact, there are two rivers (Buyuk Dere and Kozlu Dere)-- in ancient Greek *potamoi*, singular *potamos*. This fact would justify the use of the plural by the ancient authors in the place-name *Aegospotamoi*. According to others scholars, Bommelaer's guess is more plausible than the guess that wants the third river (Kerkova Dere) as place of the Athenian landfall. From there, in fact, the Athenian navy-- if the Spartan fleet had come out from Lampsacus-- should have rowed upstream-- with a huge amount of energy-- in order to intercept the enemy. [Clicking this link](#) you open a text page (author one of the most important scholars of the Peloponnesian War, Donald Kagan).. The location of Aegospotami is described At the note number 35. In the following page, you can have access to a map of the places.

⁴ Xenophon defines him ruthless, excessive, insolent (*Memorabilia*, I, 12)

⁵ About the role played by Alcibiades at Aegospotami, the ancient sources disagree. Xenophon writes that he arrived, criticized soldiers' mild discipline and did not add anything else. In other terms, according to Xenophon, Alcibiades did not ask either to share the command or promised the intervention of Thracian troops. Plutarch, for his part, does not mention Alcibiades' ask to share the command, but writes about the advice to reach Sestos. (*Life of Alcibiades*, 36.5/37.1). According to Diodorus, instead, Alcibiades asked the command in return for his advices and for the promise to gain to Athens' cause the Thracian kings Medoc and Seuthes but Tydeus and Menander refused. The guess of Alcibiades' betrayal is possible according to some modern scholars (cfr: Graham. Wylie (*What really happened at Aegospotamoi?* L'Antiquité classiques, 55).

⁶ In 404 BC, for example, Sparta opposed to the destruction of Athens, as Corinthians and Thebans had required. Athens saved Greece against Persians: it can not be destroyed. This was the Ephors' motivation.