

Brasidas' shield

Prologue

The sea is crowded by ships. They are Spartan triremes commanded by the admiral (*navarch*) Trasimelidas. They have to reach the shore and land the hoplites , who have to attack the Athenians deployed on the shoreline.

The space for manoeuvring is cramped, the landing points are difficult and dangerous. The ships have to operate within a cramped space. For this reason they could clash the ones against the others and to be damaged. This is the reason why the *trierarchs* (the commanders of the triremes) and the helmsmen are taking easy that matter. They are manoeuvring cautiously, they are sailing very slowly.

Too much slowly according to one of those commanders, the only one who is invoking more speed and more determination. “ Would you want to spare your ships while the enemy is occupying the sacred ground of our fatherland? he is screaming from his trireme's deck. “ Don't take care of the ships. Bring them to the land. If necessary, also against the rocks. But land the hoplites: we have to occupy the enemy positions.” And making the words followed by the facts, he orders his own helmsman to bring the ship at full speed towards the dry land.

The name of that Spartan commander is Brasidas.

A war of attrition

Pylos, modern-day Navarino, is situated in Messenia, in the south western part of the Peloponnese and looks out on the homonymous bay. The Sphacteria island protects it from the winds, allowing the ships to remain smoothly at anchor into its small port.

In the late spring of the year 425 BC – the sixth year of war- an Athenian fleet of forty triremes under the command of the *stratego*i Eurimedon and Sophocles arrives in sight of the promontory. The fleet is coasting the Peloponnese, headed to Sicily, where Syracuse has conquered the pro-Athenian Messene (actual-day Messina) and are expanding itself at the expense of the other *poleis* and where the city of Locri has attacked Reggio(actual day Reggio Calabria), an Athens' ally.

Along with them there is also Demosthenes, very good general, to whom the Athenian government has given the permission to use those ships to make raids, if necessary, in the enemy territory , in retaliation of the Spartan attacks. While the Athenian fleet is sailing towards Corcyra, in fact, an enemy army, under the Spartan King Agis, Archidamus's son, is camped not far from Athens and it is devastating the nearby campaign.

Nothing new. Those earlier years of war between the superpowers of those time – known as Peloponnesian war (431- 404 BC)- have seen the Spartans invading periodically the Attica region and destroying the crops in the attempt to starve the Athenians or to force them to fight a pitched battle. But the Athenians, protected by their “long walls” and by a formidable fleet, have not take the bait.

They are the masters of the sea, they have plenty of money and formidable defences. Food and supplies can be bought elsewhere and made arrive in security by sea to the Piraeus port. Why, then, to risk everything in a sole day by accepting to fight a pitched battle? And against the invincible Spartans in addition? Did we always do so? The rivalries and the disputations have always been solved by an one day battle fought according to shared rules? Well, now the time to go against the tide has come, the time to ignore the rules and see how much the enemy is going to withstand.

That *ante litteram* world war will be, then, a war of attrition. Who will win? Who will have more resources, who will able to better motivate his public opinion, who will able to keep high the morale of his population, who will be able to protect himself by a system of stabilized alliances. And who will have – why not?- the favour of the Gods .

The old Spartan king Archidamus just from the start of that war had said : are we sure to want this war? To win Athens we must have a fleet stronger than its. And we have not it and perhaps we will never have it. If Athens avoid fighting a pitched battle, how will we able to win the war?

A stroke of luck

From some time Demosthenes is cultivating an idea: to form an Athenian base into the Spartan territory. And Pylos would be the ideal place. Here, at Pylos, there are a harbour, strong natural defences, plenty of timber and stone to built fortifications, no enemy garrison nearby.

When the Athenian fleet arrives in view of the promontory, Demosthenes suggests to the fleet’s commanders: let us stop here, fortify our position and devastate the Spartan territory. And he adds: we are in Messenia and its inhabitants do not like the Spartans. Encouraged by our presence and by our raids, they will take arms causing many troubles to our enemies.

It is a good idea. And if we want, also a revolutionary idea: the pitched battle substituted by the guerrilla warfare. Accompanied by the rebellion of the submitted people (or by submitted social classes).

But Eurimedon and Sophocles are old fashioned military men and reject his proposal. They claim: our mission is different. We have to head towards Corcyra (the modern-day Corfu, ndr) . The Corcyrians are in trouble and we have to aid them. In addition, enemy triremes have reached the island. We have to intercept and attack them, get rid of them and get Sicily. Demosthenes

insists, he defends with ardour his own idea, he does not yield. But he obtains nothing.

And at this point, the case (the Fate?) does help him. The sea, beaten by stormy winds, becomes rough; the fragile and expensive triremes run the risk to capsize. It is necessary to find a shelter. And which shelter is surer than Pylos' port? But do not try to convince us to remain here, Eurimedon and Sophocles make it clear. As soon as the winds will calm down, we are going to take the sea. Demosthenes does not insist, even though, within himself, he struggles to give up. His thought is: we are losing a great opportunity.

Pylos as a lost opportunity? Never say never. The soldiers, the sailors, the oarsmen do not bear that forced idleness. They do nothing and they have nothing to do. They need physically to be occupied. And so they carry stones and tree trunks, carry the containers full of mortar on their shoulders, built walls and dig trenches. Thanks to their work, in less than six days, Pylos becomes a small, walled fortress. Also Eurimedon and Sophocles are forced to acknowledge it. Once the winds have calmed, Eurimedon and Sophocles take the sea towards Corcyra, but Demosthenes remains at Pylos. Along with thousand men, one hundred hoplites and five ships.

And the Spartans? It seems they are sleeping. Or, better, that they are taking it easy. In Sparta, the ephors, the gerontes(elders), and all the Spartiates are aware of the Athenian raid at Pylos and they are shivering when they think to their violated fatherland, but they do not stop the period of sacred feasts. Nor they mobilise soon a contingent to nip in the bud that attempt. Also because the bulk of the Spartan army is still in Attica. And then – it is their reasoning-what do these Athenians hope to obtain? They are far from their city, they are few, they cannot be supplied regularly. At the right moment we will get rid of them in no time. Or, they will run like hell when they will see us.

Agis, the king, has got a different opinion: Pylos is an offense to me, to Sparta, to our allies. We must not hesitate. And making follow the facts to the words , he leaves Attica and comes back to Peloponnese. Thucydides writes: the king takes it personally and brings up the wounded honour. Sacrosanct reaction. But the abandonment of Attica had also a different explanation: the crop was still green, food was beginning to be scarce and that operation should have been interrupted within a short time. Pylos has only accelerated the process.

By land and by sea.

Demosthenes is in trouble, now. The Spartan triremes coming from Corcyra – they have avoided the Athenian fleet- are ready to attack or to block the port in case of the attack's failure; the enemy army is deployed in front of Pylos, becoming more numerous day by day; the woody and rough island of Sphacteria has been occupied. Everything seems to be lost. However there is still a hope: Eurimedon and Sophocles have been reached around Zakynthos island and warned. Will they be able to come back in time?

Battle cannot be avoided. It is necessary to prepare themselves to fight. And, in the wait for the fleet's return, it is necessary to fight alone. Demosthenes orders, then, the ships still at anchor at Pylos(he had sent three of them to alert Eurimedon and Sophocles) were brought ashore, guards them by a palisade , arms the sailors by wicker shields and armours, deploys the most part of his men on the heights and behind the fortifications with the task to block the enemy infantry. Then, along with around sixty hoplites and some archers he leaves the fortifications and takes position in the south western part of the promontory, where he believes more probable the enemy' s landing.

And he says to his men: “ It is true: the enemy is more numerous than we are. But we can count on our fortifications and on the asperity of these places. In addition, the port is cramped and the enemy ships cannot attack all together, but only land small groups . And this, for us, will be an advantage.”

The Spartans attack by sea and by land. The fortifications withstand, the attacks are rejected. Demosthenes was right: only small groups can land from time to time and the Spartans cannot use completely their military power. Because of a strange game of the destiny, the positions are changed now: Sparta – land power - is attacking from the sea, Athens – naval power – is fighting on the dry land.

For a couple of days, things do not change; nobody wins, nobody loses. The Spartans think then to build siege machines in order to assault the Demosthenes' fortifications. But they do not have time. Come back from Zachynthos , Eurimedon and Sophocles enter Pylos' port with their fleet and launch their ships against the Spartan triremes, capturing some of them, damaging many of them and forcing to fled the rest of the enemy fleet. Cut off from the dry land, unable to receive food and supplies, the Spartan hoplites on Sphacteria island are now besieged.

In Sparta the news coming from Pylos cause consternation. The Spartan army and what remains of the fleet are still here, around Sphacteria, but what can they do? Denying the reality is completely useless: the hoplites of Sphacteria are, in all respects, hostages. For trying to save them, treating is the only solution.

Epilogue

The impact with the dry land is violent. Brasidas falls on the deck of his trireme, but he stands up immediately. Weapons in hand, he heads towards the catwalk to land. He is still on the ships, when is attacked by the enemies. Many of them fall, stabbed by his spears, hit by his sword. Hit by numerous arrows, he, although wounded, continues to combat. Then, at a certain point, he loses conscience. His shield slips out from his arm and falls into the sea. The sailors and the hoplites raise his body and bring him to the dry land , to a

safe place, opening their road among bunches of corpses. Brasidas' shield is recuperated by the Athenians and kept like a trophy.

The following year, embracing a shield again, Brasidas will have his own revenge in Thrace.

This post is an automatic translation of a post published in Italian on my blog and named “*Lo scudo di Brasida*”. Consulting it, it is possible to take a look at a bibliography written in Italian.

In English, two are the main works about the Peloponnesian war that should be consulted: Donald Kagan's *The Peloponnesian war* and Victor Davis Hanson's *A war like no other*. The first main source is, of course, *The Peloponnesian war* by Thucydides.

But the bibliography about the war between Sparta and Athens is almost exterminated. On web, too, there is a plenty of choices.