

The mysterious expedition of Thrasybulus of Miletus

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Abstract. *A cursory mention of a mysterious expedition against Sicyon, mounted by Thrasybulus, the tyrant of Miletus, can be found in Frontinus' "Strategemata". The author of the present article is of the opinion that in this way Thrasybulus was helping his ally Periander, the tyrant of Corinth. The probable aim of Periander's military campaign was to reinstate the exiled Isodemus as tyrant of Sicyon and to include the Sicyonians' territory in Corinth' sphere of influence.*

Rezumat. *O mențiune superficială a expediției misterioase împotriva cetății Sicyon, dusă de Thrasybulus, tiranul Miletului, este întâlnită în „Strategemata” lui Frontinus. Autorul acestui articol este de părere că în acest mod Thrasybulus îl ajută pe aliatul său Periander, tiranul Corintului. Scopul probabil al campaniei militare a lui Periander era acela de a-l reinstala pe exilatul Isodemos ca tiran al Sicyon-ului și de a include cetatea în sfera de influență a Corintului.*

Keywords: Greece, Corinth, Sicyon, Archaic age, tyranny.

In his treatise “Strategemata”, Sextus Julius Frontinus makes a reference to a rather mysterious expedition against Sicyon, led by Thrasybulus, the tyrant of Miletus in the 7th century BC: *Thrasybulus, dux Milesiorum, ut portum Sicyoniorum occuparet, a terra subinde oppidanos temptavit et illo, quo lacessebantur, conversis hostibus classe in /ex/ spectata portum cepit.* (Thrasybulus, leader of the Milesians, in his efforts to seize the harbour of the Sicyonians, made repeated attacks upon the inhabitants from the land side. Then, when the enemy directed their attention to the point where they were attacked, he suddenly seized the harbour with his fleet) (III, 9, 7).

Upon reading this fragment it seems logical to surmise that Thrasybulus was unlikely to pursue his own interests in Sicyon, far from his native Ionia. Most probably the expedition was mounted to support one of the allies of Milesians, which ally wished to extend his influence in this area. We consider Periander, the tyrant of Corinth, the most likely candidate for the role of such an ally².

Amicable relations between the above-mentioned rulers are fairly well-documented in classical historiography. Herodotus, for one, gives a rather detailed description of an embassy

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² ZHESTOKANOV 2010, 25 ff.; cf. WADE-GERY 1925, 535; LAPTEVA 2009, 349; LOLOS 2011, 62.

sent by Periander to Miletus in order to obtain advice on the methods of controlling his populace:

Periander accordingly, at first, shewed himself of a milder disposition than his father; but after he had communicated, by means of ambassadors, with Thrasybulus, tyrant of Miletus, he became far more bloody and murderous even than Cypselus; for sending a herald to Thrasybulus, he enquired what was the surest policy he could adopt in order to govern most securely. Thrasybulus took the person who came to him from Periander out of the capital; and coming to some arable land which was sown, passed with him through the corn, examining and cross-examining the herald on his coming from Corinth, and meanwhile cut off any of the ears that he happened to see rising above the others; and when he had cut them off, cast them aside, till at last he had in this manner destroyed the finest and tallest of the corn: having passed through the field, he sent back the herald without giving him any answer. When the herald was returned to Corinth, Periander was anxious to know the advice of Thrasybulus; but the messenger declared, that Thrasybulus had made him no answer; and said, that he was astonished at the sort of man Periander had sent him to, since he was mad, and wasted his own property, describing, at the same time, what he had seen done by Thrasybulus. Periander, understanding the meaning of the action, and concluding that Thrasybulus counselled him to put to death the most eminent of the citizens, forthwith exercised all sorts of cruelties toward the inhabitants; for all that Cypselus had left undone in the way of slaughter and exile, Periander completed (V, 92).

Aristotle's "Politics" contain reference to this same embassy, although according to the version of the philosopher from Stagira, it was Thrasybulus who had caused the mission to be sent:

The story is that Periander, when a herald was sent to ask counsel of him, said nothing, but cut off the tallest ears of corn till he had brought the field to a level. The herald did not know the meaning of the action, but came and reported what he had seen to Thrasybulus, who understood that he was to cut off the principal men in the state (III, 8, 3, p. 1284a).

Another account provided by the Father of History states that Periander knew the oracles given to the rulers of Lydia at Delphi (with Periander acting as an intermediary); consequently, the tyrant of Corinth informed Thrasybulus of their content, so that he could make preparations for the Lydians' actions:

Periander son of Cypselus, a close friend of the Thrasybulus who then was sovereign of Miletus, learned what reply the oracle had given to Alyattes, and sent a messenger to Thrasybulus so that his friend, forewarned, could make his plans accordingly (I, 20).

Herodotus, and Diogenes Laertius citing him in his "Lives of Eminent Philosophers", explicitly call Periander a 'xenos' — a guest-friend of Thrasybulus, tyrant of Miletus (Herod., I, 20; Diog. Laert., I, 95–96).

The reasons behind this alliance between the two tyrants were probably of both economic and political nature. Unlike his father, whose interests were mostly centered on the West³, Periander, while maintaining relations with Magna Graecia, directed his attention to the East as well⁴. The tyrant of Corinth could have been motivated to establish strong ties with eastern states in order to enter their profitable markets⁵. It is conceivable that western colonies which had achieved considerable success in developing their own handicraft production by the end of the 7th century B.C. no longer needed Corinthian imports on the scale these imports had grown to under the Cypselids. In order to partly redirect exports to eastern states it was essential to forge friendly relations with the key players in that region, and most importantly with Miletus⁶. An alliance with Miletus would give Corinthian traders access not only to the interior regions of Asia Minor, but to the Pontus which had been colonized mainly by the Milesians, and to Egypt in the relationship with which Miletus enjoyed a special status⁷. The Ionian city was one of the few allowed to have its own sanctuary in Egypt's territory (Herod., II, 178). Another example testifying to the benevolent attitude Egyptian rulers had towards Miletus is the offering of body armour that pharaoh Amasis made at the temple of Apollo at Didyma after his victory in Syria (Herod., II, 159).

The rapprochement between Corinth and the once hostile Ionic polis was facilitated by the entrenchment of power in the person of the tyrant Thrasybulus. The alliance between the two poleis having the same political structure became not only possible but necessary to the rulers for extending their influence in Greece and withstanding the onslaught of internal and external enemies of tyranny⁸.

Both Miletus and Corinth profited from the alliance. Milesian traders gained access to the colonies of Magna Graecia — the wide spread of Milesian pottery in the West at the end of the 7th century B.C. corroborates the assertion⁹. According to written sources, Sybaris became one of Miletus' main trading partners (Herod., VI, 21)¹⁰. Corinthian imports dated to the end of the 7th century B.C. appeared in the Pontus region, in Egypt and Lydia¹¹. Another indication of the ties between Corinth and Egypt is the name of Periander's nephew Psammetichus, which is

³ NOVIKOVA 1965, 117, 122; BERVE 1967, 20; SALMON 1984, 222.

⁴ BURY 1900, 151–152; URE 1922, 191; BERVE 1967, 20–21; SALMON 1984, 222; ZHESTOKANOV 1996, 90 ff.

⁵ BURN 1929, 23–25; BLAKEWAY 1932/1933, 207; MURRAY 1980, 145; ZHESTOKANOV 1996, 90 ff.; cf. ROEBUCK 1959, 73

⁶ BURN 1929, 21–23; MURRAY 1980, 145; SALMON 1984, 225–226

⁷ KOLOBOVA 1951, 210, 218; SALMON 1984, 225–226

⁸ ZHESTOKANOV 2010, 25 ff.; cf. BURY 1900, 151; BURN 1929, 23.

⁹ BLAKEWAY 1932/1933, 207; BOARDMAN 1964, 179, 185 ff., 200, 211, 224 ff.

¹⁰ Cf. GARDNER 1920, 90.

¹¹ *Northern Black Sea coast*: PAYNE 1931, 271, n. 30a; COOK 1946, 76, n. 91, 82; SCHMIDT 1952, 223–248; ROEBUCK 1959, 118, 125; 1972, 117; BOARDMAN 1964, 249, 252, 255–260, 266; *Egypt*: GARDNER 1918, 60–61; BURN 1929, 24; BLAKEWAY 1932/1933, 205, 207; ROEBUCK 1972, 117–118; MURRAY 1980, 145 *Lydia*: BUTLER 1922, 119; ROEBUCK 1959, 58, 78; BOARDMAN 1964, 109–110.

the Hellenized form of the name of the pharaohs ruling Egypt at that time, Psamtik I (664–610 B.C.) and Psamtik II (595–589 B.C.)¹².

The final question arising after reading Frontinus' story is which undertaking of the ruler of Corinth was supported by his Milesian ally. J.B. Salmon, the author of one of the few works on the history of Corinth, associates this expedition with the First Sacred War and believes it to be aid that Thrasybulus gave to the tyrant of Corinth who was supporting Krisa against the Greek coalition headed by Cleisthenes of Sicyon¹³. In our opinion the assumption made by the British scholar is questionable. There is not even indirect evidence of the Corinthians participating in the First Sacred War in the extant sources.

Besides, we know about friendly relations between the tyrants of Corinth and the Delphic sanctuary: just before the seizure of power Cypselus received an encouraging oracle from the priests of Pythian Apollo predicting success of his coup and subsequent transfer of power to his son (Herod., V, 92). Cypselus was the first Greek to build a treasury filled with rich gifts to the Pythian deity at Delphi (Plut. De Pyth. or., 13, p. 400d–e; Paus., X, 13, 5). This treasury also had in its keeping the offerings of the kings of Lydia who fostered amicable relations with the tyrants of Corinth (Herod., I, 14; 50–51; Paus., X, 13, 5). Moreover, the Cypselids acted as intermediaries when the Mermnads of Lydia sought advice from the oracle at Delphi (Herod., I, 19)¹⁴. A change in the attitude of the servants of Pythian Apollo towards the Cypselids happened only after the overthrow of tyranny in Corinth, when by popular demand the priests removed the name of Cypselus from the dedicatory inscription on the treasury, replacing it with a dedication from all the Corinthians (Plut. De Pyth. or., 13, p. 400d–e). It is worth mentioning that the priests of Zeus at Olympia, unlike their colleagues at Delphi, refused to condemn the memory of the Cypselids to oblivion and declined a similar request from the Corinthians for the removal of the dedication of the tyrants from the statue of Zeus. According to Plutarchus, that was the reason the Eleans were banned from participating in the Isthmian Games administered by Corinth (loc. cit.).

It appears more likely that the expedition of Thrasybulus was connected with the events that had accompanied Cleisthenes' ascent to power, as they are described in the account given by Nicolaus of Damascus:

The Sicyonian tyrant Myron, who was descended from Orthagoras, was a man dissolute in everything, including his behaviour with women. He defiled them, assaulting them both in secret and in open view. Finally, he involved the spouse of his brother Isodemus in adultery. Upon learning about it Isodemus remained calm at first, but later he confessed everything in anguish to his second brother who had returned from Libya. Now Isodemus was said to be ingenuous and honest by nature, while his brother Cleisthenes was devious. When asked how

¹² WADE-GERY 1925, 553; HAMMOND 1959, 147; BERVE 1967, 21; FORREST 1966, 119; JEFFERY 1976, 149.

¹³ SALMON 1984, 219, 227–229.

¹⁴ KULISHOVA 2001, 161, 164.

he would act under the circumstances, Cleisthenes answered that he would not put up with it for a single day, but would kill the adulterer with his own hands. Thus he was pitting Isodemus against Myron, hoping to obtain the throne if the latter perished and the former, stained with his brother's blood, would be barred from making the sacrifices. And so everything came to pass as he hoped. In the eighth year of his reign Myron was killed by Isodemus upon catching him in the act of adultery with Isodemus' wife. Then, weeping and wailing, Isodemus told everything to Cleisthenes who said that he pitied both of them — the dead one, for he had been killed by his brother, and Isodemus, for a fratricide could not make the offerings to the gods so it was necessary for somebody else to do it. Isodemus, convinced of his brother's veracity and unwilling to lose the throne, made Cleisthenes a joint king for a year. Thus Cleisthenes accomplished his purpose through his brother's credulity, and they began to jointly rule Sicyon. But the citizens were more drawn to Cleisthenes since he was resourceful and awe-inspiring; even Isodemus' friends changed sides. Finally, Cleisthenes deposed Isodemus by the following trick. Among the citizens there was one Chaeredemus, a friend of Isodemus. Seeing that Cleisthenes was the more enterprising brother, Chaeredemus visited him and offered his friendship. Since Chaeredemus made numerous pledges, Cleisthenes ordered him, in keeping with his words, to see Isodemus and persuade him to go into voluntary exile, as custom dictated, in order to purge his pollution so that he could again make the offerings and his sons could rule. Otherwise he, being guilty of fratricide, would find it difficult to keep the tyranny and bequeath it to his children. Chaeredemus approved of the stratagem and set about convincing Isodemus to go into exile for a year. Isodemus, gullible as he was, believed the sincerity of his words, and went to Corinth leaving the throne to Cleisthenes. No sooner had he left than his brother started to slander him saying Isodemus together with the Cypselids was conspiring against him in order to become sole ruler. Arming the soldiers under this pretext Cleisthenes prevented Isodemus from returning and became sole king himself, the most tyrannical and cruel of all his predecessors (FGrHist 90 F 61, 1–5).

The above-cited extract illustrates how Isodemus, removed from office under false pretences, took refuge in Corinth. Moreover, according to Cleisthenes, he secured the support of the ruler of Corinth. The information on Cleisthenes arming the troops, given by Nicolaus of Damascus, implies that Isodemus attempted to regain power in his native polis. If so, Periander was likely to assist him in this venture. The military aid provided by the Cypselids was of paramount importance to Isodemus, since in Sicyon itself the supporters whose help he could have enlisted had changed sides, according to Nicolaus of Damascus.

Attempting to reinstate Isodemus as tyrant, or possibly using the intra-dynastic struggles of the Orthagorids to seize control over Sicyon, Periander obviously sought the help of his Milesian ally. Though we do not know the outcome of Periander's Sicyonian campaign, it is logical to assume that the attempt to wrestle control over the neighbouring city from its ruler

failed. In any case, there is no information on Cleisthenes' being even temporary unseated in the extant sources.

Nevertheless, we can assume that eventually the conflict between Corinth and Sicyon was resolved. In particular, the account given by Herodotus seems to corroborate the assumption. It is said that among his daughter's suitors Cleisthenes particularly favoured Hippocleides son of Tisandrus because he was related to the Cypselids of Corinth (VI, 128).

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