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NIKIAS AND SYRACUSE

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Diodorus Siculus provides a long account of the debate at Syracuse on the treatment of the Athenians who were captured in 413 (13.19.4-33.1). One of his speakers, Nikolaos, in the course of arguing that Nicias should be spared, states that he was the Syracusan *proxenos* at Athens, and had always looked after the interests of Syracusan metics there (13.27.3). Neither Thucydides nor Plutarch mentions this claim, which has generally been ignored by historians.¹

There are no strong grounds for doubting its truth. It is just possible that it was invented to explain Nicias' lack of enthusiasm for the expedition.² But it may well derive ultimately from the *Sicelica* of Philistus, who might be expected to be well informed on the recent history of his own city. The silence of Thucydides will be considered below; that of Plutarch is perhaps more worrying, since he claims to have used Philistus.³ On the other hand, he does no more than allude to the debate, and clearly relied mainly on Thucydides for his account of the expedition.

There are, however, two further pieces of evidence which, although of little weight on their own, reinforce the possibility of a link between Nicias and Syracuse. First, he is represented by Thucydides as being very well informed about the situation inside the besieged city. Thucydides says that there was a pro-Athenian faction which sent messages to Nicias (7.48.2); that he had detailed and reliable knowledge of Syracuse's financial plight (7.49.1); that the other generals suspected that he had a special source of information about what was going on in the city (7.49.4); and that Hermokrates' ruse to delay the Athenian retreat succeeded because Nicias was already in communication with some Syracusans, and was therefore not suspicious when he received a further message (7.73.3). Of course, the pro-Athenian faction could be expected to try to contact the commander of the Athenian forces, whoever he was. It is, however, striking that Nicias' knowledge derived from private sources which were unknown even to his colleagues. Since a *proxenos* necessarily had close contacts with the city which he represented, such a link would provide a neat explanation for the quantity and quality of Nicias' information.⁴

More speculatively, a western connection may be detectable in the company that Nicias kept. Plutarch tells us about a certain Hieron, who acted as his public relations adviser, and

¹ The only exceptions known to me are P. Green, *Armada from Athens* (London, 1971) 4-5, and J. R. Ellis Characters in the Sicilian Expedition, *Quaderni di Storia*² 10 (1979) 39-79 at 59-60. Both these works are cited by author's name alone; references are to Thucydides unless otherwise stated.

² Ellis 60 n. 44, who regards this explanation as 'conceivable but weak'.

³ Plutarch discusses his sources at *Nicias* 1.

⁴ We can only guess why Nicias might have been appointed *proxenos*. Green 5 suggests that his mining interests initially took him to Sicily, which was a good source of slaves.

who claimed to be the son of Dionysios Chalkos, the poet and founder of Thurii (*Nicias* 5.2).⁵ Plutarch does not say whether this claim was correct, and tells us nothing further about Hieron. If he was indeed the son of Dionysios, the latter's involvement in the foundation of Thurii suggests that the family had at least an interest in the west.⁶ Moreover, although Hieron is not an uncommon Athenian name, it would be particularly apt for one with Syracusan ties.⁷

If we accept that Nikias was Syracusan *proxenos*, this has implications both for his role in the Sicilian Expedition, and for Thucydides' account of it. First, it explains why he was, as it turned out, better informed about Sicily in the debate at Athens than was Alkibiades. Second, it suggests an additional, personal, reason for his reluctance to command the expedition (6.8.4). Third, it gives particular point to his fear that if they abandoned the expedition he and his colleagues would be charged with having accepted bribes (7.48.3-4). The generals who led the first Athenian expedition to Sicily were charged with taking bribes and either exiled or fined (4.65.3); how could the Syracusan *proxenos* hope to avoid the same suspicions and the same fate?⁸ No wonder he preferred to take his chances in Sicily.

It might also explain why the Athenians were so keen that he be one of the generals, despite his manifest reluctance. Plutarch states that they thought that his experience would be valuable, and that his caution would balance Alkibiades' rashness (*Nicias* 12). This is doubtless true, but the Syracusan connection suggests additional reasons. First, he would have local knowledge, unlike the bulk of his compatriots (6.1.1). Second, it was perhaps hoped at Athens that he would be able to use his contacts in the city to win over Syracuse without a fight.⁹

Our final task is to explain Thucydides' silence. It is possible that he omitted the proxeny as a personal detail, and as such irrelevant. Perhaps he felt certain that Nikias did not allow his conduct to be influenced by his connection with Syracuse. But if he did omit it for this reason, he is guilty of misleading his readers when he represents Nikias as denying that he has any personal interest in speaking against the expedition (6.9.2).

⁵ Ἰέρων ... προσποιούμενος δ' υἱὸς εἶναι Διονυσίου τοῦ Χαλκοῦ προσαγορευθέντος, οὗ καὶ ποιήματα σώζονται, καὶ τῆς εἰς Ἰταλίαν ἀποικίας ἡγεμὼν γενόμενος ἔκτισε Θουρίους. Cf. Photius s.v. Θουριόμαντις for Dionysios' involvement with Thurii (he is wrongly referred to by Photius as τῷ Χαλκιδικεῖ Διονυσίῳ). On Dionysios see further Kirchner *PA* 4084. Nothing else is known about Hieron.

⁶ It is of course mere coincidence that Dionysios shares the name of a later tyrant of Syracuse.

⁷ Other examples are collected in M. J. Osborne and S. G. Byrne (edd.), *A Lexicon of Greek Personal Names: II Attica* (Oxford, 1994) s.v. Ἰέρων.

⁸ See e.g. Dem. 15.15 for the suggestion that a *proxenos* might be biased in favour of the city which he represents. See in general G. Herman, *Ritualised Friendship and the Greek City* (Cambridge, 1987) 130-61.

⁹ For both these points see Green 5. For the hope (associated however with Alkibiades) that the goals of the expedition could be achieved by diplomacy alone see 6.17.4, 48.

Ellis suggests further that Thucydides omitted Nicias' proxeny because he wished to show that he had sound reasons for his opposition to the expedition.¹⁰ Any reference to the proxeny, even to deny its relevance, might distract the reader from the strength of the arguments which Nicias advances. This is convincing, and one might compare his failure to mention the personal allegations made against Perikles in connection with the outbreak of the Peloponnesian War.¹¹

But personal sympathy may also have played a part. In his account of the Sicilian Expedition, it has been well argued that Thucydides underplays the extent to which Nicias was culpable for the Athenians' double failure, first to capture Syracuse, and then to extricate their forces.¹² Rather, it is the *demos* and its worthless leaders who were at fault (2.65.11). Thucydides was perhaps reluctant to impute a conflict of interests, still less a dishonourable motive, to a good man who, whatever his faults and errors, did not deserve his wretched fate.¹³

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¹⁰ Ellis 60.

¹¹ See Plutarch *Pericles* 31-2.

¹² For a forceful statement of the case see D. Kagan, *The Peace of Nicias and the Sicilian Expedition* (Ithaca NY and London, 1981) 360-72.

¹³ For Thucydides' epitaph on Nicias see 7.86.4. A. W. H. Adkins, *The Arete of Nicias: Thucydides 7.86, GRBS 16 (1975) 379-92*, argues convincingly that it is not meant ironically, and that Nicias is not being praised for his piety but 'evaluated primarily in terms of traditional criteria of excellence'. He also suggests that, socially and politically, Nicias and Thucydides had more in common than is often assumed.