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**FROM MINNOW TO LEVIATHAN: TRANSFORMATION OF THE
ATHENIAN NAVY (499-480BC)**

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FROM MINNOW TO LEVIATHAN: TRANSFORMATION OF THE ATHENIAN NAVY (499-480BC)

Abstract:

*Several, if not many, scholars and historians have written about the exploits of the Athenian Navy during the 5th century BC, especially, during the Persian Wars, (480-479) the **pentekontaetia** period (478-432) through to the Peloponnesian War period (431-404), until the destruction of the Athenian fleet at Aegospotami (405 BC). This interest in the Athenian Navy and its achievements in the Classical period has led to the writing of several specialist works on that phenomenon; and we note that no general work on Greek history is deemed complete without an excursus on the Athenian Navy and how it helped save Greece from the tyranny of Persia. Our intention in this paper is not to tread the same path and recount the exploits of the Athenian navy, but rather to attempt to account for the transformation of the Athenian navy from a minnow to a leviathan within a twenty year period. We shall, through a critical examination of extant primary sources, primarily Herodotus and, to a lesser extent, Plutarch, argue, firstly, that in terms of naval strength and sea power, Athens was a minnow as at 499 BC, and secondly that it was through a recognition of this deficiency and at the urging of Themistocles that Athens commissioned a fleet to bolster its sea power and naval strength, and thus became a leviathan as at 480 BC when the Persian Wars broke out in earnest in main land Greece.*

Keywords: minnow, leviathan, pentekonter, trireme, Themistocles, Persian Wars, Athenian Navy

Introduction

*“By virtue of their **naval power**, the Athenians have mingled with various peoples and discovered types of luxury. Whatever the delicacy in Sicily, Italy, Cyprus, Egypt, Lydia, Pontus, the Peloponnese, or anywhere else, - all these have been brought together into one place by virtue of **naval power**.”* (bold case ours)

(Pseudo-Xenophon, *The Constitution of the Athenians*, II, 7)(trans. G. W. Bowersock)

The above words, ascribed to the so-called Old Oligarch, were penned when Athens was at the heights of its seapower, during the Peloponnesian War period in the 5th century BC. But was Athens always so well endowed in the naval sphere, even throughout the same period, that is, the 5th century BC?

Several, if not many, scholars and historians have written about the exploits of the Athenian Navy during the 5th century BC, especially, during the Persian Wars, (480-479) the *pentekontaetia* period (478-432) through to the Peloponnesian War period (431-404), until the destruction of the Athenian fleet at Aegospotami (405 BC). ¹Even after the defeat in the Peloponnesian War, the Athenian Navy bounced back under the admiralship of Conon in the 4th Century BC and became a force to reckon with after the temporary Theban hegemony, before finally suffering defeat at Macedonian hands in the Battle of Amorgos. ² It bears mentioning that interest in the Athenian Navy and its achievements in the Classical period has led to the writing of several specialists works on that phenomenon; notably, the works of John Hale,³ Borimir Jordan ⁴ and that of Vincent Gabrielsen,⁵ to mention but a few. Of course, no general work on Greek history is deemed complete without an excursus on the Athenian Navy and how it helped save Greece from the tyranny of Persia, if albeit, the Athenians eventually, for a while, also imposed themselves on the other Greeks. ⁶ If so much has been said about the Athenian navy and its exploits why this present paper? Our intention in this paper is not to trod the same path and recount the exploits of the Athenian navy, but rather to attempt to account for the transformation of the Athenian navy from a minnow to a leviathan within a twenty year period. In

effect, we shall try to find out the state of the Athenian navy before 480 BC and trace its development from the status of an ordinary navy to that of saviour of Greece at Salamis, noting that at just the start of the 5th century BC Athens was not a naval power in Greece. ⁷

We shall, through a critical examination of extant primary sources, primarily Herodotus and, to a lesser extent, Plutarch, argue, firstly, that in terms of naval strength and seapower, Athens was a minnow as at 499 BC, and secondly that it was through a recognition of this deficiency and at the urging of Themistocles that Athens commissioned a fleet to bolster its sea power and naval strength, and thus became a leviathan as at 480 BC when the Persian Wars broke out in earnest in main land Greece.

We shall first begin with a brief review of some related literature, and then consider the state of the Athenian navy before Athens' commissioning of a new fleet. We shall do so by addressing the issue of the Athenian navy as a minnow by examining its operations within that period. After that, we shall consider the transformation of the Athenian navy from a minnow to a leviathan, through its fleet building and expansion programme. We shall then conclude our paper by pointing out how Athens through a conscious effort, based on an assessment of its needs, improved its standing as a naval power of note in the Greek world, at least in terms of its fleet size. We shall not address the exploits of the Athenian navy in the Persian Wars and afterwards, since that is not the thrust of this paper, seeing that erudite scholars have dealt very effectively and thoroughly with that issue. ⁸

Brief Review of Related Literature

As we previously noted in our introduction, several, if not many, works have been done on the Athenian navy, its exploits and organisation among others in contemporary times. General works on Greek history by J. B. Bury and R. Meiggs, Anton Powell, Victor Ehrenberg, John Fine and Sarah Pomeroy et alii⁹ are worthy of mention, whereas there exist specialized works by John Hale, Borimir

Jordan and Vincent Gabrielsen among others¹⁰. None of these works however treat the issue of the Athenian navy by considering its period of being an ordinary navy struggling to hold its own in the Aegean Sea, up to the great fleet building venture instigated by Themistocles. This is because the writers either had too broad a scope to cover, as in the case of Bury and Meiggs, Anton Powell, Victor Ehrenberg, John Fine and Sarah Pomeroy et alii, or had trajectories of interest that did not cover the period this article seeks to cover, because of the specialized nature of their work. This fact notwithstanding, for a good appreciation of the Athenian navy and its exploits and the role played by Themistocles in the ship building enterprise, John Hale's work, *Lords of the Sea*, is a must read.

In their monumental work, *A History of Greece*, Bury and Meiggs though writing a general history of Greece treat the rise and fall of Athens in the 6th century BC in a way that gives us valuable information about the Athenian navy, even in its nascent stages¹¹. Nonetheless, they do not treat in a systematic way the formation and growth of the Athenian navy during the first two decades of the 5th century BC before the battle of Salamis. Sarah Pomeroy et alii like wise do not treat the issue of the transformation of the Athenian navy in the period in question, although their work is comparatively a current work¹². Victor Ehrenberg invariably follows the same track as Bury and Meiggs and Sarah Pomeroy et alii, notwithstanding the fact that his work, *From Solon to Socrates*, covers the period in question. So does John Fine, who though writing a critical history about the ancient Greeks, leaves us none the wiser about the transformation of the Athenian navy, although he presents a brilliant exegesis on the Greeks and Persians¹³. Regrettably, Powell's expository work on Athens and Sparta in which he (re)constructs Greek history is silent on the growth of the Athenian navy. But this is understandable in that he begins his account in the year 478 BC, two years after the battle of Salamis when Athens had already announced its presence on the seas as a leviathan¹⁴.

After looking at some of the general works on Greek history we now turn our attention to some specialist works on the Athenian Navy.

Arguably, John Hale's *Lords of the Sea* is expertly written and constitutes a mine of information on the exploits of the Athenian navy and accounts for its major and decisive battles before its decisive defeat and final destruction at the hands of Macedon in the 4th Century BC. John Hale however begins his account from 489BC, when Themistocles first broached the topic of modernizing the Athenian navy in the Athenian assembly, after the battle of Marathon. He goes on to forcefully argue for a linkage between Athenian democracy and hegemony to its navy. Our current article though goes farther to 499 BC and seeks to account for the state of the Athenian navy before the fleet building enterprises. We note also that Borimir Jordan's work, which treats the Athenian Navy in the classical period, is almost entirely devoted to studying the navy and its administration and military organization, thus it does not trace the formation of the Athenian navy, as we seek to do, although it has invaluable information on the navy, which is useful for the student of naval studies. Lastly, Gabrielsen's work, although examining the workings, ships and gear of the Athenian navy, concentrates on the financial organization of the Athenian navy and its social ramifications.

In sum, we note that in spite of the various usefulness of the sources we have briefly reviewed here none appears to treat the issue of how Athens, a minnow in so far as naval matters was concerned, fared between 499 and 480 BC in the naval sphere and managed to transform its navy into a leviathan as at the time of the battle of Salamis. As already indicated our enquiry shall not proceed beyond 480 BC, since that period lies beyond our scope. Our major primary sources here are Herodotus and Plutarch¹⁵.

Athenian Navy as a Minnow (499-483 BC)

To begin with, it must be stated that although Athens had a fleet of warships it was not of such importance as to put her in a position of ascendancy over the other island city states; not even Aegina which was much closer in distance to her¹⁶. Bury and Meiggs¹⁷ contend that as early as 506B.C.

Aegina was the strongest naval power in the Aegean, and that she had long standing hostile feelings to Athens dating even to the time of the Pisistratids. But it seems for the most part that this rivalry was commercial-oriented. However, soon after the fall of the Pisistratids, Aegina was able to exercise her naval superiority in a military fashion by siding with the Thebans in their quarrel against the Athenians. Herodotus records that, while the Athenians were away in Boeotia, the Aeginetans raided and ravaged the port of Phaleron and the Attic coast¹⁸. The reason why I refer to the above incident is to show that Athens as at this period relied more on her *hoplites* than on her sailors. Moreover, the warships at her disposal were mostly used to transport troops to engage in land-based operations. This was probably due to the fact that the warships in their possession were either less suited for tactical manoeuvres on the sea or they were numerically inferior¹⁹. It stands to reason to suggest that the Athenian fleet at this time was adequate for a land based force. This was because with the social classification of the Athenians into the *pentacosiomedimnoi*, *hippeis*, *zeugitae* and *thetes*, in the Solonian era, much emphasis was placed on the infantry; and the *thetes* class that later on played a great role in the navy as oarsmen had not yet risen to that responsibility. Thus with an armed force based on land, a large navy for military purposes at sea was not deemed very necessary²⁰ not until the many confrontations with Aegina forced Athens to look to the naval wing as a feasible alternative. However, that turn of events will be discussed later below.

We now look at the role of the Athenians in the Ionian revolt before returning again to their struggles with Aegina. The fact that Athens was able, in 498 BC, to despatch twenty ships to Asia Minor upon the persuasion of Aristagoras did not mean that it had a sizable navy, but as Aristagoras pointed out, "Miletus had been founded by Athenian settlers"²¹ and the Ionians were of the same stock as the Athenians. However, we wish to submit that the most convincing factor for Athens' involvement was her conviction that the engagement was going to be an infantry affair, and that she could count on her heavily armed *hoplites* to defeat the Persians "who used neither shields nor spears

and were easy to beat”²². The Athenians were certainly of the conviction that they, at this stage, could not defeat a Persian fleet, even with all Ionia in attendance, but could hold their own on land. Also it seems likely that during this period, the ships were no more than naval transports (at least in the Athenian view) that ferried the soldiers to the battlefield and disembarked them. The basis of our argument is as follows: prior to 480 BC, in the several instances when the Athenians took to their ships, the main import was to send heavily armed troops to the coast of their enemies and there engage them on land. For instance during the confrontation between Epidaurus and Aegina, when Athens went to the aid of Epidaurus, the troops sent in the ships did not battle on sea but landed and trusted to their prowess on land, until the Argives came to the aid of the Aeginetans and cut them off from their ships²³. Moreover, when the Athenians followed Aristagoras to Asia Minor and helped in the sack of Sardis – on land, but were later defeated by a Persian force near Ephesus in a *hoplite* encounter they at once sailed back home and “would have nothing more to do with the Ionian rebellion, and in spite of frequent appeals from Aristagoras refused to help him”²⁴. Our point here is that up until 480 BC Athenian might rested on its *hoplites* and not on the navy. This assertion is based on the assumption that the Athenian navy presumably consisted mainly of *pentekonters* and a few *triremes*, if any. Our assumption is based on the later evidence in 484/483 B.C. when on the instigation of Themistocles, and the Athenians’ desire to face up to Aegina, they ordered a fleet of one hundred *triremes* to be constructed from the proceeds of the mines at Laurion²⁵ (or Laurium), *the place of silver*.

It seems therefore that prior to the establishment of a navy, worth the name, the Athenian practice was to pack their warships with infantry, send them to the battlefield, disembark and fight on land. It was only on a few occasions that ship met ship in combat on the sea, and even in those instances the major tactic was to ram the enemy vessel²⁶.

Another point worth considering, proving that Athens had no strong or standing navy, is the issue of Marathon. It is our contention that if Athens had a fleet of warships worth its timbers, they

would have prevented the Persians from effecting a landing anywhere on the Attic coast including at Marathon. This is because the Athenians had fore knowledge about the Persians' intention of attacking and subduing Athens. This claim is based on the fact that the Athenians before the landing of the Persians on their soil knew of what had happened at Eretria, which had been sacked by the Persian expeditionary force led by Datis and Artaphernes, a nephew of King Darius. Even before Eretria's destruction, the Athenians probably knew of Darius' intention to bring Athens and Eretria to heel for their role in the burning of Sardis. Also they could not have been unaware of Hippias' prodding at the Persian Royal Court to have Athens subjugated²⁷. Moreover, when the Athenians were approached by Eretria for help, they sent not even a supporting fleet but rather ordered some of their colonists at Chalcidice – who were *hoplites* – to assist the Eretrians. Even after Eretria's fall, which took about a week, the Persians waited a few days before setting off for Attica. What prevented the Athenians from meeting the invaders on the sea? They had no naval force worth the name to face the Persians. Certainly, they had some sea worthy vessels but they were definitely no match for the Persians. Of course, Herodotus' figure of six hundred galleys for the Persian force is a gross exaggeration²⁸, but even after deducting the horse transports and pruning down the number to about two hundred or even one hundred and fifty warships, which is quite a conservative figure, we come up with the realisation that Athens did not have even half of that number of warships²⁹. The point being belaboured here is that the Athenians themselves never put much trust in their navy as a strong deterrent force and as usual trusted to the might of their infantry. For even at this juncture, they sent a fast runner, Pheidippides, to Sparta to secure help from the Lacedaemonians, well known for their prowess in pitched land battles. As Bury and Meiggs put it:

As the story is told by Herodotus, one would almost think that the enemy had already landed on Attic soil before the Athenians thought how they were to defend their city and their land³⁰.

In our view, that is exactly what happened. The Athenians, it seems, were ready and willing to withstand a siege in the Eretrian fashion, before it became obvious to the *strategoï* that there might be fifth columnists in the city who might betray the city to the Persians, as happened to Eretria. Moreover, Athens at this time was unwalled³¹. So it would have been to her advantage, if she were in a position to do so, to have met the Persians in a naval engagement. Furthermore, after the Athenians had successfully beaten off the Persian assault at Marathon and the enemy had embarked, ostensibly to effect a landing probably at Phaleron, the victorious but exhausted Athenians had no option than to double up and hasten to the city's defence; once again seeking a land based encounter by encamping at Heracles' sanctuary in the Cynosarges. It must be noted that, at this point in time Phaleron (or Phalerum) was the chief harbour of Athens³² and it had no defensive ramparts about it. In fact, the Athenians used to beach their ships by dragging them up across the sand of the beach instead of weighing anchor at sea and tying the ships up at the quay. It was not until Themistocles' initiative of making Athens dependent on the sea that the Piraeus with its three natural harbours became the port for Athenian ships. Having shown that Athens did not have much of a navy in existence as at Marathon, we will go on further to prove that, even Marathon's aftermath did not make the Athenians trust to the sea until quite later. For, as Plutarch notes:

The rest of the Athenians supposed that the Persian defeat at Marathon meant the end of the war. Themistocles, however, believed that it was only the prelude to a far greater struggle³³

It might well be said that Plutarch's comments or observations were made with benefit of hindsight. We now return to the Athenian struggle with Aegina, and to an incident, which proves further that the Athenian navy, if it existed at all as a military force to be counted upon, was, but in its nascent stages.

In 487 BC, Athens had the chance of overthrowing the oligarchic party in Aegina, when one Nicodromus conspired with them to take over the city. True to his word, Nicodromus succeeded in

capturing that part of Aegina called the old town, but the Athenians failed to attack Aegina at the appointed time, thus the impetus of the concerted action was lost. What is of interest to us here, however, is the reason given for the Athenians inability to keep to their appointment with Nicodromus. The Athenians had only fifty ships as against seventy of the Aeginetans, thus Athens, feeling disadvantaged in the forthcoming encounter contacted the Corinthians from whom they borrowed twenty ships. With their morale boosted, the Athenians initially defeated the Aeginetans but were later repulsed³⁴. However, because of the delay caused in securing the Corinthian vessels, the upper hand, which Nicodromus had offered, was evidently lost. This state of affairs led to protracted warfare between the two cities, characterised by plundering raids on their respective coasts. This episode brings out clearly that Athens even at this stage, after defeating the Persians and gaining the praise of even Sparta, was not potent enough at sea to put the Aeginetans in their rightful place. This view was what evidently led Bury and Meiggs to remark:

The necessity of protecting Attica from Aeginetan depredations, the ambition perhaps of ultimately reducing Aegina to subjection or insignificance, sensibly accelerated the conversion of Athens into a naval power³⁵.

We now therefore move to looking at efforts made by the Athenians at rebuilding, refitting and militarising their navy.

The Case for a Transformation

Almost all, if not all, of our major sources of the history of this period point out Themistocles as the person most responsible for the Athenians becoming a naval power. Plutarch quotes a phrase of Plato to the effect that it was Themistocles who turned the Athenians “from steadfast *hoplites* into sea-tossed mariners” and subsequently “earned for himself the charge that he had deprived the Athenians of the spear and shield and degraded them to the rowing bench and the oar”³⁶. However, before

Plutarch wrote, Herodotus and Thucydides had both indicated about five centuries earlier, their conviction that it was Themistocles who had secured Athens' survival and subsequent greatness by turning her into the strongest naval power in Greece³⁷. Indeed, Thucydides had this to say concerning Themistocles.

Indeed it was he who first ventured to tell the Athenians that their future was on the sea. Thus he at once began to join in laying the foundations of their empire ... It was particularly on the navy that his thoughts were concentrated³⁸.

There is no gainsaying the fact that, long before the threat of Persia to Greece in general and Athens in particular had become evident to his fellowmen, Themistocles had long foreseen it, and had consequently begun laying the ground work needed to make Athens ready for the pending upheaval.

As far back as 493-492B.C., during the first archonship of Themistocles, he had already conceived the idea of turning the peninsula of the Piraeus into a strong citadel that would provide a safe haven for Athenian warships by carrying through the Assembly a measure for the fortification of Piraeus. This was necessary because Piraeus, unlike Phaleron lay outside the view of the Acropolis and was also comparatively farther from the city of Athens. It seems very probable that it was Aegina's hostility that persuaded the *demos* to accept this policy of Themistocles. However, taking Themistocles' farsightedness into account, "there is little doubt that he himself already had primarily the danger from Persia in mind"³⁹. We must keep in mind that this measure was implemented, and attempts at fortification began, about three clear years before the Persian landing at Marathon. By this time the Ionian revolt had effectively been quelled during the great battle at Lade; by all accounts the greatest naval encounter in Western European history before the battle of Salamis. The defeat of the Pan-Ionian fleet, before the capture of Miletus, left no doubt in the mind of Themistocles as to how Athens would fare, if and when Darius turned his attention to that city. In fact, the three largest islands, Samos, Chios and Lesbos, which had fleets respectively surpassing that of Athens, had all

pooled armaments to engage Persia in this naval tussle but to no avail. So how was Athens going to fare? It is true that Herodotus⁴⁰ attributed, as a major factor of defeat, treachery on the part of the Samian fleet and the subsequent desertion of other Ionian fleets. This factor notwithstanding if we are to believe Herodotus' figures stated for the numbers of warships on both sides, then one can conclude that the Ionians with their three hundred and fifty three triremes were no match for the six hundred of Persia,⁴¹ seeing that the engagement took place on the open sea where the superior manoeuvring tactics of the Phoenician sailors in the Persian armada could be brought to bear⁴². Now with Ionia pacified for the time being what was to prevent the Persians from attacking Athens and Eretria; which they eventually did. For Themistocles that threat was more disturbing than Aegina's depredations on the Attic coast. Nevertheless it will be a slight on the intelligence of the Athenians as a whole to assume that none, apart from Themistocles, thought of the danger from Persian warships. For

After the quelling of the Ionian revolt, Persian warships were cruising about the Aegean, and the possibility of an attack on Phaleron seems to have opened the eyes of the Athenians to the need of reforming their naval establishment.[However] The hostility of Aegina was a nearer and more pressing motive⁴³.

It seems then that several Athenians in the top hierarchy as it were, were aware of this potential threat, but the fact of the matter is that, it was Themistocles who vigorously pursued his plan of making a sea power out of Athens. It would be no exaggeration, we believe, to assert that he did more than any other person to turn Athens into a great state. He surpassed even the hero of Marathon, Miltiades. Athens was indeed fortunate to have such a far-sighted statesman at this point in her history. And as we previously stated, able leadership is a pre-requisite to the imperial ambitions of any state; most especially a democratic one like Athens where power lay in the will of the people and not in the hands of a mighty potentate. Bury and Meiggs observed that from their viewpoint "it seems strange that they (the Athenians) had not before made use of the Piraeus ..."⁴⁴. And almost instantly they answered by

inferring that the reason was probably because the Piraeus was not within the sight of the Acropolis. That view, for all we know, may be correct, however I think another compelling factor was that the Athenians relied more on their land forces and regarded the navy as being secondary to the infantry. Having said that however, it stands to reason to ask why the leaders of the people had not fortified Phaleron then? Why had they not increased the numerical strength of their navy during their struggles with Aegina when it stood in their best interests to do so (keeping in mind that in 487 BC they had to borrow twenty ships from Corinth)? The only answer we can come up with is that they had no leader of the capabilities of Themistocles until he came into prominence. During his archonship in 493/92 BC, Themistocles planned to fortify the whole circuit of the Piraeus peninsula by erecting a wall around it and also build docks in the three harbours thus created for the docking of the warships. These harbours were the Piraeus itself, which was to serve as the main harbour since it was the largest, and there were two smaller harbours, namely, Zea and Munychia. However, the Persians interrupted the fortification of the Piraeus with the invasion of Attica when they landed at Marathon. Needless to say, Athens' salvation once again proved to come from the *hoplites*, who crowned themselves with glory by triumphing over the Persian forces that until then had triumphed over all Greeks they had met in battle, thus instilling fear in the Greeks. In fact this deed of the Athenians compelled Herodotus to say this about them:

The Athenians ... fought in a way not to be forgotten. They were the first Greeks, so far as I know, to charge at a run, and the first who dared to look without flinching at Persian dress and the men who wore it; for until that day came no Greek could hear even the word Persian without terror⁴⁵.

Well it goes without saying that, the above statement was definitely prompted by Herodotus' pro-Athenian stance and his desire to immortalise the exploits of the Athenians at Marathon⁴⁶. But it can be asserted also that the Athenians did indeed deserve the praise of the Historian. By his comments, Herodotus strove to show that Athens was largely responsible for the defeat of the Persian forces in the

Persian wars that were later to follow; it clearly shows where his sympathies lay. However, it is not our intention to delve into the sympathies of the 'Father of History', but to point out that Athenian strength lay in the infantry at this moment of their military history. The victory at Marathon increased the prestige of Miltiades and garnered support for the oligarchic or better still the aristocratic party. Thus with Themistocles' desire to shift the army's importance into second place behind the navy, one will have to appreciate the difficulty he faced; what with the political wranglings generated, or likely to be generated. As already stated, the outbreak of the Persian invasion of 490 BC interrupted Themistocles plan concerning the fortification of the Piraeus. However, Bury and Meiggs also cited as another interrupting feature, the party struggles that ensued after the Athenian victory of Marathon⁴⁷.

With regard to party struggles, it must be emphasised that such a feature had been long existent in Athens; from the time of Draco through Solon's period right up to Cleisthenes' era. Prior to Cleisthenes' reforms, it was the *Areopagus* that had the political function of safeguarding the constitution and "protecting the state against the danger of a tyranny"⁴⁸. However, Cleisthenes' reforms brought into existence the institution of the *ostrakismos*⁴⁹ or ostracism, which was to serve as a safety valve to gauge the political ambitions of popular Athenians, and check their potentiality of aspiring to a tyranny. The fact that the *ostraka* was not cast for about fifteen years after its institution, and that it became widely used two years after Marathon and shortly thereafter, shows the intensity of party struggles after the first defeat of the Persians by the Athenians⁵⁰.

Consequently, after Marathon, Miltiades rightfully became the hero of the day and Themistocles saw in him a political opponent who had to leave the scene before he, Themistocles, could advance and also bring to fruition his plans that he had in mind for the people of Athens⁵¹. However, as fate would have it, Miltiades played right into the hands of Themistocles. Indeed, what is of interest to us, is that, Miltiades' downfall and subsequent demise came out of a naval incident; namely, his ill-fated Parian expedition. As Herodotus reports it⁵², Miltiades cashed in on his fame and

high reputation after Marathon to convince the Athenians to give him a fleet of seventy ships to be used in a punitive expedition against Paros. The Parians were accused of having aided the Persian expedition of 490 BC by contributing a ship to the Persian effort, but what actually convinced the Athenians to assent to Miltiades' request was his assertion that he would enrich them if they agreed to the expedition. Needless to say, this expedition was a failure in that it brought no riches to the Athenians. Miltiades came back injured, was arraigned before court, and although he escaped with his life he was fined fifty talents. Not long afterwards Miltiades died in 489 BC. What is of interest to us here is the number of Athenian ships used in the expedition; seventy ships. This event occurred in 489 BC. But barely two years later in 487 BC, we read of the Athenians being in possession of only fifty ships in their fleet and consequently being forced to borrow twenty ships from the Corinthians in their military encounter against the Aeginetans⁵³. The issue of interest is what happened to the twenty ships; that is the shortfall in numbers of ships between 489 BC and 487 BC that necessitated the loan of Corinthian ships? In our view, there are three possibilities to consider in an attempt to find out what caused the shortfall in the number of ships. First and foremost, it may be conjectured that those ships were lost as a result of the Parian expedition; either through a naval engagement or through storms. Our major source Herodotus⁵⁴, is silent as to why the shortfall. He tells us nothing about the voyage or about an engagement at sea between the Athenians and the Parians. Nevertheless, our conjecture is based on the reaction of the Athenians against Miltiades upon his return. Initially he was tried for his life, but his supporters in his defence pointed to his services to the state emphasizing his exploits at Marathon and his capture of Lemnos. Consequently, he was fined fifty talents - a huge sum for an individual. His son Cimon paid this fine after his death. In fact, Miltiades achieved nothing for "he did not bring home a single penny"⁵⁵. However, considering the court action brought against Miltiades and its implications, one is led to believe that Xanthippus and other opponents of Miltiades had a greater reason to propose the death sentence; and in this case it probably was the loss of ships in

the ill-fated expedition. It could not have been only on account of defrauding the public; that is the court action. The second plausible reason for the difference in number of ships between 489 BC and 487 BC could be a case of the twenty having been decommissioned because they were not seaworthy. It is a plausible assumption that the Athenian fleet in existence at 489 BC up to 487 BC were not wrought in the same year. Some were probably crafted before others, thus these were liable to age before the comparatively newer ones, naturally. If that was the case then one might safely assume that these twenty ships which we find missing in 487 BC may have been out of service; they had become rotting hulks that were no longer seaworthy. With regard to the lifespan of ancient warships, specifically the *trireme*, Hignett, citing Labarbe as his source, indicates that in the fourth century B.C. the average life of a trireme was twenty years⁵⁶. On the other hand, we realise that during the Persian wars of 480 BC to 478 BC and thereafter, the main vessels used were *triremes* and only the most backward and poor Greek city states still possessed *pentekonters*⁵⁷. The *trireme* had been invented by the Phoenicians and introduced to the Greek island states in the Aegean Sea, whence several states had been quick to refit their navy accordingly. According to Herodotus, Polycrates of Samos had begun his reign with one hundred *pentekonters* in his fleet but before his death, circa 523 BC, he had included forty *triremes*⁵⁸. What we want to infer is that, Athens had *pentekonters* in her fleet as at 489 BC, but seeing that these ships were not fashionable and were militarily inferior to the *triremes* in terms of speed and manoeuvrability, had put them out of service before 487 BC. Thus, the shortfall of twenty ships and the necessity of borrowing twenty ships from Corinth. (On *triremes* and *pentekonters* see reference note 59)⁵⁹. The third and last possibility is the contention that the Athenians probably maintained a regular fleet, at the top level of fifty ships and when the need arose they hired any extras that they needed. This would mean that in 489 BC upon Miltiades' request for a fleet and men to undertake the Parian expedition the people hired twenty more ships to supplement their regular fifty and put the fleet under Miltiades' command. The question then arises, from where did they secure

these ships? Our answer is Corinth. Why not Corinth, seeing that the Athenians were quick to contact them in 487 BC when they needed more ships to balance the scales against Aegina? The Corinthians' readiness to accommodate the request of the Athenians, it is suggested, smacks of a precedent. Anyway Herodotus' comment on why the Corinthians agreed to the Athenian request is an eye-opener in some respects:

The Corinthians were on the best of terms with Athens at this period and when the Athenians asked them for ships they had put twenty at their disposal, charging five drachmae apiece (for it was illegal to make a free gift of them); and with these ... the Athenians manned seventy vessels, and sailed for Aegina⁶⁰.

The statement, "for it was illegal to make a free gift of them" seems to suggest that, Corinth had before given out some of its ships to another state that had approached her. And what prevents the thought that that other state had probably been Athens?

Whatever the flaws may be with our three conjectured possibilities, there is one unassailable fact, the Athens of 500-483 BC was seriously deficient in the naval department and was far away from the maritime super power that she was soon to be; courtesy Themistocles, and of course the rich vein of silver struck in the mines of Laurion in 483 BC.

From Minnow to Leviathan: 483-480 BC

It is on record that around 484-483 BC, Athens came into fortune courtesy the silver mines in Laurion and it was Themistocles who had the courage to propose to the people that the money thus gained be set aside for refitting the Athenian navy⁶¹. Although the ships were meant to be used against Aegina they eventually came in handy during the Persian War. Indeed had it not been for these ships the Greeks might probably have been defeated by the Persians. From what we know the Athenians were probably the first Western people to embark upon a fleet building venture specifically

to serve a military need – that is, for offensive and defensive purposes. Indeed one might argue that the far-seeing Themistocles had the threat from Persia in mind when he suggested that the revenue from Laurion be used in building a fleet⁶². What is worthy of note here is the fact that the Athenian populace agreed to this naval building scheme, making it a national effort and desire to rule the seas or at least to be protected against attacks from the sea. Certainly the people bought wholeheartedly the scheme that Themistocles sold to them, and took it further when special contributions for the same object were probably made soon afterwards for more ships to be built⁶³. Thus two years later, Athens could muster nearly two hundred *triremes* to face the Persian threat. The Athenians and their leadership had noticed that to be safe and secure against all potential enemies and invaders they had to militarise their navy efficiently. This course of action called for a national conscientization and resolve to change the focus of Athenian military might. Athens as hitherto stated depended on its heavily armed infantry to fight its battles, with the navy playing a secondary role. Thus this sudden change in military plans called for a national debate since the army was a citizen army and not a professional one. Moreover, Athens was a democracy and such a revolutionary plan needed to be exhaustively discussed in the *ecclesia*. Most notably, the *thetes* class now came into prominence since the task or duty of serving as rowers invariably fell to them, because the hoplites who came from the wealthy classes served as marines, *epibatai*, on board the ships, still clad in their heavy armour. At this juncture however we will propose to look at the Athenian armament. This will be done by considering the nature of ships, their capacity and manoeuvrability at sea.

The new fleet of Athens was composed entirely of *triremes*, which was the typical warship in the fleets of strong maritime states like Syracuse, Corcyra and Aegina, and even in the Phoenician navies. In 480 BC the normal complement of a *trireme*, whether Persian or Greek, was two hundred, including marines as well as rowers⁶⁴. Plutarch indeed says that the fighting-men on board each Athenian ship at Salamis numbered only fourteen *hoplites* and four archers. However, the ships from Chios which

fought so brilliantly at Lade had forty marines to each ship⁶⁵; nevertheless it is hardly conceivable that the Greek ships in 480 BC had less than thirty. Possibly, Plutarch's source transferred to Salamis evidence relating to the Athenian navy of a later date⁶⁶. Indeed, as an instrument of war the *trireme* was much superior to the *pentekonter* and it depended essentially on oar-power; sails were carried and occasionally used, but their function was subsidiary and they were left ashore before a big battle⁶⁷. The *trireme* had three banks of oars rowed by oarsmen at three levels. Importantly there is the steering oarsman who was an expert. For *triremes* to be handled effectively the rowers must all be well trained since a fouling up of oars could endanger the ship. With regard to availability of seafarers Athens was fortunate in that around 480 BC there were many people in the city who had experience in naval duties as sailors in the commercial vessels.

The composition of the Athenian or Greek trireme oarsmen was as follows: the *thranite* oarsmen, those at the topmost level, who worked their oars through an outrigger; the *zugioi*, sat below or behind the *thranite*, worked their oars over a gunwale or through oar ports; and the *thalamioi*, sitting at the lowest level below and behind the *zugioi*, rowed their oars through an oar port which was scarcely eighteen inches above the waterline and was thus fitted on the outside with a leather sleeve to prevent water coming in. In addition to the above were the officers on board ship who numbered twelve, which included the steersman, the 'time caller', the sail-trimmers, and the *trierarch* among others. The fighting men on board numbered at most thirty heavily armed marines or *epibatai* and some archers⁶⁸. The Athenians as we have seen made conscious efforts at effectively militarising their navy and did not only stop at refitting their navy but also built *neosoikoi* or *neorion*, that is, dock yards or better still ship sheds⁶⁹. Their erection and use showed the conscious Athenian effort to have and maintain a navy, since the sheds served to house the ships for maintenance work and refitting. Indeed, "the most famous ship-sheds in Greece and the best known from preserved remains, were those of Piraeus"⁷⁰. Others existed probably at Munychia and Zea, the other harbours of Athens. These ship-

sheds were roofed with a pitched roof sloping seawards, and were divided into groups closed off by solid walls for extra security and to protect against fire. As it can be seen, Athens went to extreme lengths to turn itself into a naval power and put its military might in the navy. However, numerical superiority in ships alone was no guarantee of naval victory, as witnessed at Salamis, where the vast Persian armada was defeated by the numerically smaller Greek vessels, but rather the appropriate tactical manoeuvres. For the Greeks in general and the Athenians in particular, the major naval warfare tactics were the *diekplous*, *anastrophe*, and or the *periplous*⁷¹. The tactic of the *diekplous* had been developed among the Ionian Greeks before the Persian invasions and it was the manoeuvre of the faster fleet. Other naval tactics were those of ramming the opponent's ship and boarding. However, those were for less skilled fleets. Nevertheless, when engaged in a battle that made nonsense of skilful manoeuvres like backing water, encirclements and others the only option was to ram and use boarding gangways; however Thucydides being a military man regarded this style as unscientific⁷².

Another thing in favour of the Athenian navy was the fact that they had for the most part, efficient leadership in admiralty duties. There were *stratego*i (generals) who doubled as *navarchs* (admirals) like Themistocles, Aristides, Cimon, and later on Pericles among others. Also the fact that the Athenians had long been familiar with the sea was also a deciding factor since when they decided to shift their military focus onto the sea, they did not have to contend with the issue of turning land lubbers into seafarers, unlike the Romans.

By and large, Athens satisfied the requirements that according to Mahan, a would be seapower needed to meet.⁷³

One further thing that needs touching upon is the nature of the Athenian *triremes* as opposed to the Phoenician in the Persian armada. The Athenian *triremes* were heavily built (that is, the newly commissioned ones from 483-480 B.C.) had higher prows and were relatively slower as compared to the Phoenician *triremes*. However in the straits of Salamis, the Athenians used the bulky nature of

their ships to good advantage, coupled with their naval tactic of *diekplous* and *periplous*. An interesting observation is that although the Athenian or Greek, vessels were slower in the water as compared to the Persian navy's vessels, the confederate fleet at Salamis used the strategy of the *diekplous* which as we have stated was rather suited to faster vessels. The Greeks in the confederate fleet were able to achieve this feat of the *diekplous* because they were fresh and newly embarked as against the enemy crew that had been at the oar most of the night⁷⁴. This was the nature of the Athenian navy, namely the crew, officers, tactics and type of vessel, prior to the establishment of their hegemony on the Aegean seas from 480-431 BC and beyond.

Thus, when the Greek naval forces under Spartan leadership met the Persians in battle, first, at Artemisium and second, at Salamis in 480 BC, the Athenians had the largest contingent of warships. They contributed 147 warships at Artemisium, manning 127 of them and 200 triremes at Salamis, manning 180 of that number⁷⁵. Indeed a great transformation had occurred. The Athenians, who in 487 BC had to borrow 20 warships from the Corinthians to augment their fleet, could now muster 180 warships in 480 BC. Truly, the minnow had become a leviathan.

Conclusion

In this paper, we have tried to show how Athens managed to transform its navy from the status of a minnow to that of a leviathan within a period of two decades. It must be admitted that the acknowledgement of a clear and present danger, in the form of Aegina, helped Athens to modernise and sufficiently militarise its navy, such that it was ready to come to the defence of Greece when the gargantuan Persian armada invaded the mainland of Greece, after defeating Ionia Greece. We aver that Athens was able to achieve this feat because she had farsighted leaders like Themistocles, among others. Moreover, Athens did an assessment of her needs and the citizenry decided or agreed to

contribute or assign national resources towards re-constituting and re-equipping their navy and also agreed to serve on the warships.

We have succeeded in showing, we believe, that Athens' pride of place, in Greek and Mediterranean annals as a sea power through which she established a thalassocracy from 479-404 BC, was not always a given. For at a point in time, in fact, just at the turn of the 5th century BC, Athens was but a minnow in sea power.

REFERENCE NOTES

1. Herodotus, *The Histories*; Thucydides, *The Peloponnesian War*; Xenophon, *Hellenica*; Plutarch, *Nine Greek Lives*.
2. J. S. Morrison & R. T. Williams, *Greek Oared Ships: 900-322 BC*, Cambridge Univ. Press. UK. 1968.pp. 232-236; cf. P. Grant, *The Navy in Rome's Rise to Empire: 264-146 BC*, LAP, Saarbrucken, Germany. 2010. p.38, note 21.
3. John Hale, *Lords of the Sea: the Epic story of the Athenian Navy and the Birth of Democracy*, Viking, Penguin Group, USA. 2009
4. Borimir Jordan, *The Administration and Military Organization of the Athenian Navy in the fifth and fourth centuries BC*, Univ. of California Press, USA. 1980
5. Vincent Gabrielsen, *Financing the Athenian Fleet: Public Taxation and Social Relations*, Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, USA.2010
6. J.B. Bury & R. Meiggs, *A History of Greece to the Death of Alexander the Great*, (4th ed.) Macmillan Educ. Ltd., UK. 1975; S. Pomeroy, S. M. Burnstein, W. Donlan & J. Tolberts, *Ancient Greece: a Political, Social and Cultural History*, Oxford Univ. Press, New York. 1999; J. Fine, *The Ancient Greeks: a Critical History*, Harvard Univ. Press, USA. 1983; A. Powell, *Athens and Sparta: Constructing Greek Political and Social History from 478 BC*, Routledge, London. 1988; V. Ehrenberg, *From Solon to Socrates*, Methuen & Co, Ltd., London. 1968
7. The major naval powers at this stage were the islands of Samos, Lesbos and Chios. Even Athens' immediate neighbours, Aegina and Corinth, outstripped her in the naval department.
8. J. Hale, *Lords of the Sea*, 2009
9. See reference note 6
10. See reference notes 3-5
11. Bury & Meiggs, *A History of Greece*, 1975.pp. 127-166
12. S. Pomeroy et al., *Ancient Greece*, 1999. pp. 158-200
13. J. Fine, *The Ancient Greeks*, 1983.pp.244-328
14. A. Powell, *Athens and Sparta*, 1988.pp.1-5
15. Herodotus, *The Histories*, (trans. Aubrey de Selincourt), Penguin Books Ltd., England. 1954; Plutarch, *The Rise and Fall of Athens: Nine Greek Lives* (trans. Ian Scott-Kilvert), Penguin Books Ltd., England. 1960
16. This notwithstanding the fact that, in the reign of the Pisistratids, the elder Miltiades had been mandated to establish a tyranny in the Chersonese. Cf. Herodotus, VI, 38-41.

17. Bury and Meiggs, *op. cit.*, p. 162.
18. Herodotus, V, 81-82; cf. Bury and Meiggs, *op. cit.*, p. 162.
19. Herodotus, V, 84-86. For instance, although Miltiades took over the Chersonese with a single warship, when faced with assault from Phoenician warships he fled because he could muster only five ships. (cf. Herodotus, VI, 38-42)
20. A case in point is Sparta; at Artemision in 480 BC she could muster only ten ships (Herodotus, VIII, 1); and at Salamis, sixteen ships (Herodotus, VIII, 42). This despite the fact that she had the strongest and largest land based force.
21. Herodotus, V, 96ff.
22. Ibidem.
23. Herodotus, V, 82-86
24. Ibidem, 100-103f.; cf. Bury and Meiggs, *op.cit.*, p.155.
25. Herodotus, VII, 144 ff.; Plutarch, Themistocles, 4.
26. Bury and Meiggs, *op. cit.*, p. 163.
27. Herodotus, VI, 94-98.
28. Ibidem, 95ff
29. Ibidem, 88-90. Marathon was in 490 BC, and the incident referred to above was in 487 BC. Nevertheless, Herodotus' reference to it before he dealt with the battle of Marathon serves to highlight the virtual non-existence of an Athenian navy.
30. Bury and Meiggs, *op. cit.*, p. 158.
31. Herodotus, VI, 105-116; cf. Bury and Meiggs, *op. cit.*, pp. 158 & 159.
32. Herodotus, VI, 116f
33. Plutarch, *Themistocles*, 3.
34. Herodotus, VI, 87-93 ff.
35. Bury and Meiggs, *op. cit.*, p. 163
36. Plutarch, *Themistocles*, 4; cf. Plato, *The Laws*, IV, 706.
37. Herodotus, VIII, 143-145; cf. Thucydides, I, 93.
38. Thucydides, I, 93
39. Bury and Meiggs, *op.cit.*, p.165
40. Herodotus, VI, 10-14.
41. Ibidem, 7 and 8f.
42. One must keep in mind that at Salamis the deciding factor, for the Greeks, was the narrowness of the straits that rendered virtually impossible any tactical advantage based on manoeuvring that the Persians might have had. Cf. Hignett, *Xerxes' Invasion of Greece*, Oxford University Press, London. 1963. pp.231-237.
43. Bury and Meiggs, *op. cit.*, p. 165
44. Ibidem.
45. Herodotus VI, 112ff.
46. Herodotus intentionally exaggerates to highlight the achievement of Athens; for in his *Histories*, I, 150ff. he recounts how the Lacedaemonian envoys fearlessly told Cyrus to avoid harming any Greek city. This belies his statement above that all Greeks feared the Persians; even the mention of their names. cf. Herodotus, V, 100-120ff.; viz. the Ionian revolt and implications.
47. Bury and Meiggs, *op. cit.*, p. 166.
48. Ibidem, 164 and 165.
49. The law of ostracism stipulated that at the beginning of each year the people had to decide whether to ostracise anyone, and then follow up with a casting of the *ostrakon*. There had to be at least 6,000 votes in all before the *ostraka* was deemed valid. The citizen whose name was

inscribed on the majority of the potsherds (*ostrakon*) was deemed ostracized. He had to leave Attica within ten days and not to come back, until the expiration of ten years. However, the ostracized retained his property and citizenship. cf. Bury and Meiggs, *op. cit.*, p. 164; J. Fine, *The Ancient Greeks*, 1983. pp. 290-292

50. Bury and Meiggs, *op. cit.*, pp.164 & 165.
51. Plutarch, *op. cit.*, 4. 24-38
52. Herodotus, VI, 132-137.
53. For a detailed account about the reason for this military encounter against Aegina see Herodotus VI, 87-93. cf. Bury and Meiggs, *op. cit.*, p. 163.
54. Herodotus VI, 132-137.
55. Ibidem.
56. Hignett, *op. cit.*, p. 52.
57. Herodotus, VIII, 1.2; 46-48.
58. Ibidem; III, 39 and 44; cf. Hignett, *op. cit.*, p. 52.
59. The *pentekonter* was a fifty-oared ship with twenty-five rowers on each side. During the archaic period it had been the normal type of warship in Greece, and right up to the early fifth century BC some Greek city states still employed the *pentekonter*. The *trireme* was a little bit longer than the *pentekonter*, but could carry more than three times the number of rowers than its predecessor. In central Greece the *trireme* became popular from about 514 BC onwards. cf. Hignett, *Xerxes' Invasion of Greece*, 1963. pp. 51-53.
60. Herodotus, VI, 88ff
61. The mines at Laurion were worked by hereditary tenants, who handed over a fixed proportion of the yield to the state. In 484-483 BC the profits were very high and amounted to 100 talents. This was the amount that was assigned to the fleet building scheme. Plutarch, *Themistocles*, 4.
62. Plutarch, *op. cit.*, 4.
63. J. Fine, *op. cit.*, pp. 292 & 293; cf. Bury and Meiggs, *op. cit.*, p. 166.
64. Herodotus, VII, 184.1 (Persian); VIII, 17 (Athenian)
65. Plutarch, *op. cit.*, 14.2.
66. According to Herodotus each ship in the Persian navy had in addition to its own marines 30 fighting-men who were native Persians, Medes, or Sakans, But this statement is difficult to accept, and it is more likely that thirty was the total number of marines and fighting men on each ship, Greek or Persian. cf. Herodotus VII, 24.2; VIII, 96.1
67. Thucydides, VII, 24.2; cf. Xenophon, *Hellenica*, II, 1.29
68. Morrison. J.S, 'The Greek Trireme', *Mariner's Mirror*, 1941. p.14ff.
69. After Athens's defeat in 404 BC the sheds were destroyed, but in the 4th century BC they were rebuilt and used until Sulla destroyed them finally in 86 BC. For more on Athenian ship-sheds check Morrison and Williams, *Greek Oared Ships*, 1968.pp. 181-183ff
70. Morrison and Williams, *op. cit.*, p.181.
71. *Diekplous* – The fleet using this tactic, when confronted by an enemy fleet in line abreast, deployed line ahead and broke through at a chosen point. One of its main aims was to shear off the oars of the enemy vessels.
Anastrophe- This was the sequel to the *diekplous*. After rowing through the enemy's line the column turns back to attack the enemy line in the rear.
Periplous - this was similar to the *anastrophe* and might well have been the same thing. Here a smaller fleet facing a bigger one attacked at the wing and rounded up the ships in the flank. cf. Morrison and Williams, *op. cit.*, pp. 313-317.
72. Thucydides, I 49.

73. A. T. Mahan, *The Influence of Sea Power upon History: 1660-1783*, Methuen & Co. Ltd., London. 1963. pp. 25-59; cf. P. Grant, *The Navy in Rome's Rise*, 2010. pp. 27-36
74. Morrison and Williams, *op. cit.*, p. 314
75. Herodotus, VIII, 1& 42; cf. J. Fine, *op. cit.*, pp. 293, 303, 310 & 311. Twenty Athenian triremes had been manned by Plataeans and Chalcidians, the Athenian colonists.