

The Amphibious Battle at Cyzicus

In March or April of 410BC the campaigning season began with the Athenians assembling their fleet to seek a decisive battle. The Peloponnesians had concentrated their land and naval forces at Cyzicus, a harbour which would help them dominate the Sea of Marmara, where they assaulted the city in concert with Pharnabazes and his army. Persian cooperation was going from strength-to-strength. Indeed, Alcibiades the Athenian general, had been taken prisoner when he had tried to negotiate with Tissaphernes during the winter but he had made a dramatic escape to rejoin the fight.



The Athenians had managed to assemble a large fleet early in the campaign season, beyond the expectation of the Peloponnesians. The Athenians kept their numbers secret by sailing into the Hellespont at night and passing Abydos unseen. They now had their fleet at Prokonnesos unobserved by the enemy.

Again sources conflict and this seanario is a logical compilation of Xenophon, Plutarch, Diodoros, Justin and Frontinus.

Kyzikos was a harbour town, abandoned in the 11th century AD, but which lay on the landward side or on the isthmus that joined Arkonnesos to the mainland. The harbour access must have been to the south opening into the modern Gulf of Erdek. It was a sheltered harbour base very suitable for a large fleet seeking to dominate the Sea of Marmara which would seal the Hellespont and the Bosphoros.

It was to Kyzikos that Mindaros brought his fleet to lie in Phrygian territory near a fort established by his ally Pharnabazes. They would cooperate in the taking of Kyzikos, an Ionian thorn in the Persian's side.

The allied forces besieged and took Kyzikos. Mindaros was with his fleet but Pharnabazes somewhere inland when the Athenian fleet secretly put in to the island of Prokonnesos 35 miles away. They had successfully slipped through the Hellespont unobserved.

The colourful Athenian general Alcibiades seems to have dominated the leadership of the Athenian force. He had deserted to the Spartans but returned to the fold, He then flirted with the Persians, aiming to get them on side against Sparta but misjudged that enterprise so badly he ended up a prisoner. Now he had escaped and resumed some dominance in command, probably much to the chagrin of his opponents within the Athenian forces.

THE BATTLE

The Athenians were determined to fight a decisive naval battle and cripple Spartan sea-power. They also wanted Kyzikos back in their sphere of influence. To this end they planned the battle, as they did their approach, carefully.



Alcibiades returns to aid Athens after betraying the city for the previous 5 years..

First, Athenian hoplites were landed west of Kyzikos on Arktonnesus, maybe near Artake, perhaps during the night, under a commander, Cheirias, and advanced towards the city aiming to retake it. This force was, I think, the same squadron which was led by Theramenes in the following battle.

The main Athenian fleet then moved into the Gulf of Erdek.

The Naval Engagement

Some complex constructions have been made to describe the ensuing battle as a tactical masterpiece with coordinated action by different parts of the Athenian fleet. It is rare to see any coordinated action of separate groups of ships in the Peloponnesian Wars due to the difficulties of signalling and varying sailing conditions. Alcibiades was a well-connected 'Golden Boy' whose supporters would have lost no chance to report favourably on his projects. Personally, I think his achievement in surprising the Spartan fleet was enough of a coup without reading a great deal more into the action.

The day started with bad weather. Visibility was poor. Alcibiades used this to get closer to Kyzikos unseen. He did not have all his ships with him in one body. The squadron which landed hoplites on Arktonnessus had not yet rejoined and must have been on the way towards Kyzikos.

Another part of the Athenian force was under the command of the general Thrasybullus. This squadron had become detached from Alcibiades squadron on the way over from Prokonnessos and was some distance to the south west.

The total Athenian fleet may have been as many as 86 ships. Alcibiades squadron was significantly smaller than the Peloponnesian force which was between 60 and 80 strong.

If we give Thrasybullus 20, the northern force, under Theramenes, 20 and Alcibiades 40 we may be some where close to a feasible order of battle. The 200 hoplites and 100 archers which could have been landed from 20 triremes with Cheirias may have been a reasonable force to approach the city from its landward side.

Alkibiades must have been aware of the relative location of his forces but to say he actively coordinated their actions is stretching things, in my opinion.

The next part of the action is again possible to interpret as a stroke of genius or a happy accident. Alcibiades bumps into Mindaros who is at sea with his fleet. It is uncertain what Mindaros would be doing at sea in bad weather early in the morning. Triremes would not be moored offshore overnight. They may have been training, but again, the poor weather makes this doubtful. Plutarch says they are offshore from Kyzikos. Maybe they were in the process of putting to sea. In any case, Alcibiades' squadron was sighted and pursued. If the Peloponnesians sighted an inferior force Mindaros would have tried to sieze a chance to reduce Athenian forces while he had his ships concentrated.

*View from
Kyzikus over
Artiki
Bay: Scene of
the naval
battle*



Alkibiades was outnumbered and withdrew in front of the enemy. He reckoned on the rest of his forces coming up to help. It would be possible for Thrasybullus' force to be further out to sea and visible to Alkibiades but not to the Spartan commander, in the limited visibility.

The Peloponnesian fleet may or may not have been engaged at sea, but at some point saw at least Thrasybullus' force and realised their predicament. They ran for the shore some way south of Kyzikos – maybe because the Athenian northern squadron had come into sight , maybe because they would then lie closer to the camp of Pharnabazes Phrygian troops - and drew their ships together to defend the prows which pointed out to sea from Athenian attempts to drag them away.



The beach where the Peloponnesians probably drew their ships up: Looking north to Artkonnesus

The sea battle was largely over now, and a complex engagement followed onshore.

It is possible to orchestrate an interesting sequence of events to make for a good wargame of the naval engagement. The outcome of this will then give an interesting scenario for the land battle. A simple set of land battle rules will allow the whole action to be fought.

Some modern descriptions, based on the ancient sources make out this battle was a naval Cannæ, with Alcibiades expertly luring the enemy fleet into the jaws of a trap he had set. If this was true, why was the victim not chopped to pieces out at sea? I think reading the ancient authors reveals an amount of lily-gilding and joining-of-dots. However, we are not best placed to gainsay them at this distance in time. In my opinion one should examine the degree to which ancient fleets generally singularly failed to synchronize their efforts or even cooperate at all and consider whether a better performance was likely in poor conditions. It is enough to commend Alcibiades for surprising the enemy without accrediting him some unique plan. Running before a superior force when one knew allies were nearby is mentioned several times as a stratagem by Thucydides. There is no way Alcibiades could know how many enemy ships he would meet, in the poor weather – where he would meet them nor could he know their reaction. At best, we should credit him with planning to sweep the bay ensuring no enemy ships could escape and counting on a major clash off Kyzikos due to his early start and approach under cover of poor visibility.



NOTE: EARTH MOVEMENTS OVER 2400 YEARS MEAN MODERN COASTS NO LONGER MATCH THE ANCIENTS' DESCRIPTIONS

The Battle on the Beach

Mindaros' ships escaped the clutches of the Athenians and beat them in a race to the shore. This was a standard tactic for a disadvantaged side. The idea was to draw one's ships up onto the beach close together and man the bows with all possible men. In this way the enemy could not make ram attacks, could not outflank the beached fleet, and had to engage in a costly frontal assault if he wished to capture any prizes.

60 or so Peloponnesian ships now lay side-by-side on the beach south of Kyzikos on the shore of the bay of Erdek. Some distance inland lay a camp, maybe fortified, occupied by Pharnabazes' troops. Pharnabazes was cooperating with the Spartans to damage Athenian power and gain influence over the Greek cities on the coast of Asia Minor. His forces were based on a core of Hellenic mercenaries – it required hoplites to deal with hoplites – and his own Phrygian troops which were the usual Persian infantry who were lightly armoured and armed with bows and spears. He also had a body of cavalry, his elite troops, which were not in the camp but some distance away, probably with Pharnabazes himself.

Xenophon implies that Alcibiades landed first, nearer to the town with twenty ships and it was this which forced Mindaros to beach some distance away. It is, in any case, unlikely that a large fleet could take refuge in a small town's harbour. The proximity of supporting troops was more likely the deciding factor.

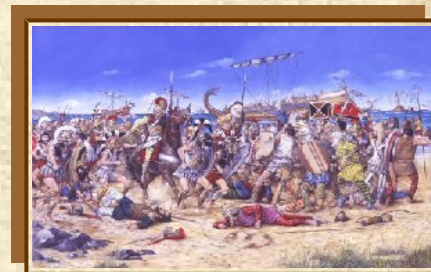


Alcibiades attacked the right of the beached fleet. His ships sought to grapple and drag-off the enemy ships. This battle was fierce, both commanders closely involved, and Phrygian troops came up to help the Peloponnesians.

Then Thrasybullus' squadron attacked the Peloponnesian left and landed his hoplites and archers to roll up the enemy flank.

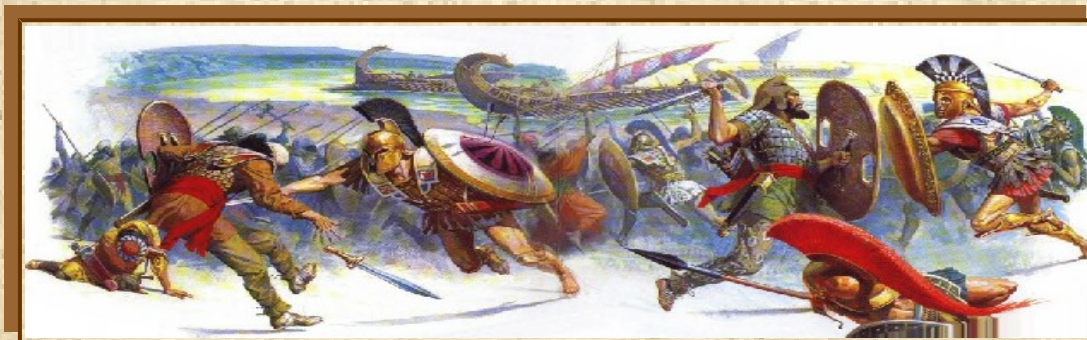
This was countered by Mindaros sending half the Peloponnesian hoplites and the Hellenic mercenaries of Pharnabazos under the commander Clearchos to block them. The two forces of heavy infantry clashed violently and Thrasybullus was struggling.

At this point the Athenians were outnumbered overall and the battle was stale-mated.



Then Theramenes landed on the Kyzikos flank and Cleirias' troops also arrived. This gave the Athenians new wind and disheartened their opponents. The mercenaries began to give way on the Peloponnesian left and their Greek allies to be beaten by the Athenians.

Mindaros' was now forced to face the enemy behind him and at sea simultaneously. He divided his troops and fought bravely on. When he fell, fighting, his troops broke and ran inland.



The Athenian victory was total. The entire enemy fleet was captured. No pursuit of the defeated troops was possible due to reports that Pharnabazes was approaching with his cavalry. They withdrew to Prokonessos with their prisoners and prizes. Unusually, they set up two trophies for this battle, one for the victory at sea and one for the victory on land.

The city of Kyzikus was reoccupied and taken back into the Athenian fold, paying a large fine for the privilege.

The Spartans now sent home one of the most hapless messages in military history:
'Ships lost, general (Mindaros) dead, men are starving, do not know what to do'.....

WARGAME

There are many possibilities for gaming the battle. The player must decide what the focus of his game will be and proceed from there. This gives us several seanario possibilities.

1. BATTLE AT SEA
2. BATTLE ON THE SHORE
3. WHOLE ACTION (TOO LONG AND TOO MUCH SPACE REQUIRED)
4. START FROM FIRST LIGHT (TOO LONG, TOO MANY VARIABLES)
5. START FROM FIRST CONTACT (TOO MANY VARIABLES)
6. START FROM POINT AT WHICH PELOPONNESIANS REALISE SITUATION AND FLEE

A quick evaluation gives us 3 main variants: Sea Battle(1), Shore Battle(2), Whole Action(6).

THE SEA BATTLE

The crucial thing here is to start from the point at which the Peloponnesians see they are up against superior Athenian forces. The player then has decisions to make and goals can be set.

A simple pursuit of Alcibiades squadron just wastes playing time.

Using the deployment diagram the initial deployments can be semi-randomly decided. Set deployments are hard to decide upon and render the game boring to replay.



THE FORCES

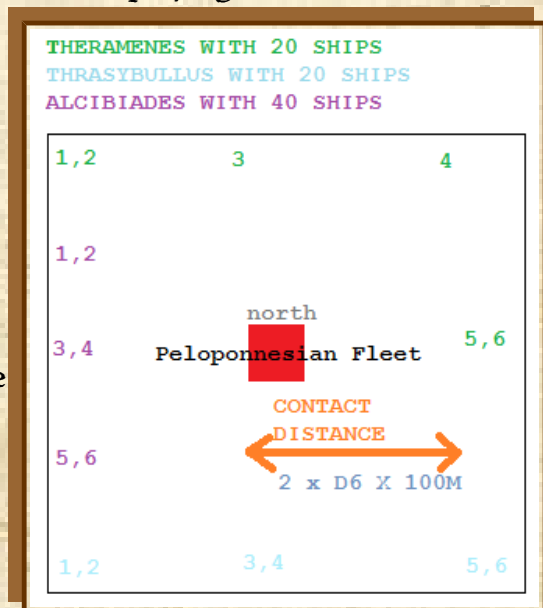
Ship numbers can be reduced if the strength ratios are preserved. Though reducing the action down to a total of less than 40 participants may detract from the very nature of an ancient sea battle.

SQUADRON	NUMBER	TYPE	CREW SKILL	COMMAND SKILL	SHIP CLASS	EPIBATAI
ATHENIAN ALCIBIADES	40 2	TRIEME PENTEKONTER	12 - 4 34 - 5 56 - 6	123 - 4 456 - 5	12 - SLOW 56 - FAST	2 HOPLITE 1 ARCHER
ATHENIAN THERAMENES	20 2	TRIEME PENTEKONTER				
ATHENIAN THRASYBULLUS	20 2	TRIEME PENTEKONTER				
Peloponnesians MINDAROS	30 2	TRIEME PENTEKONTER	1,2,3 - 3 4,5 - 4 6 - 5	123 - 3 45 - 4 6 - 5	123 SLOW 6 FAST	2 HOPLITE 1 ARCHER
Peloponnesians ARISTEDES*	25 2	TRIEME PENTEKONTER				
Peloponnesians DEXIOS*	25 2	TRIEME PENTEKONTER			* MADE-UP NAMES	

Use the dice throws to generate 'unknown value' units. Squadrons should be assembled using an average dice to divide them into units, i.e. Count 2 as 5 and roll average dice for ships in a unit.

DEPLOYMENT

- 1) The Peloponnesian player makes a sketch of his fleet's configuration. Showing how each ship and squadron is deployed along a course direction/axis. Peloponnesians and Alcibiades have course due west. Thrasybullus has course due east. Theramenes has course due south. (This could be further randomised..)
- 2) At the same time the Athenian player makes fleet maps for each of his 3 squadrons.
- 3) Using the large deployment map dice to see where the Peloponnesian fleet starts. This position can allow calculation of how long it takes them to get back to shore,
- 4) The Peloponnesians are deployed in the centre of the playing area.
- 5) The separation and location of Alcibiades squadron to the Peloponnesians is established with a dice roll. $2 \times d6 \times 100m$ gives the separation and the squadron of Alcibiades is deployed centred on a point determined by a d6 roll as per the deployment diagram.
- 6) Throw a dice to see which of the other Athenian squadrons is visible on turn 1. The highest is the one to be deployed. The separation distance and location is determined as per (4) and the diagram.
- 7) The game starts with these three forces deployed.
- 8) Each subsequent game turn start the Athenian must throw a 6 on d6 to deploy his other squadron as per (4) and they must move onto the table from the edge as per their deployment map. i.e not all may arrive same turn.



BLOOD-DARK SEA : SEANARIO 3 : KYZIKOS



GAME ACTION

In this phase of the action the Peloponnesians had two aims. The main aim was to escape the clutches of the Athenians and escape to the shore. The secondary aim was to damage the Athenian fleet.

Victory Points :

Athenian ship damaged ($\frac{1}{2}$ ave. Dice - rounded up) points, sunk, (ave. dice) points
Peloponnesian ships damaged 1 point, sunk, 2 points, escaped from table edge 3 points.
C in C lost - -25% points. Sub-Cdr lost -10%.
Holder of the field gets double points for enemy sunk ships.

When one side concedes or all the enemy ships are damaged, sunk or fled then he is considered to hold the field of battle. He may not necessarily have won according to the points tally.



This means that if the Peloponnesians choose to stand and fight they can win just by giving more than they get.

Once this action is ended the players can use the tally of remaining vessels to fight the shore action.

