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THE CAPTURE OF SYBARIS (510 BC) AND THE SIEGE OF
MANTINEA: HISTORY REPEATED?

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Strabo states that Sybaris was situated between the Crathis and Sybaris rivers and had walls which extended for fifty stadia (5.7 miles or 9.2 kilometres), and that a war between this city and Croton, lasting just seventy days, resulted in its complete destruction.¹ The ancient sources, such as they are, are unanimous in their estimation that this community was destroyed on account of its citizens' addiction to a luxurious lifestyle and for an utter disregard for the gods (Strabo 6.1.13; Athenaeus 12.521c-f).² Diodorus (12.9.2-10.1), moreover, gives some indication of the

¹ For a map see, e.g. O.H. Bullitt, *Search for Sybaris* (London 1971) 195; and for a more recent analysis of the site and a resumé of the problems, see M. Kleibrink, 'The search for Sybaris: an evaluation of historical and archaeological evidence,' *BABesch* 76 (2001) 33-70.

² The argument of R.J. Gorman & V.B. Gorman, 'The *tryphē* of the Sybarites: a historiographical problem in Athenaeus,' *JHS* 127 (2007) 38-60, that a direct causal link between luxury and downfall at Sybaris or elsewhere was probably not a Hellenistic creation, but rather that of Athenaeus 'or an intermediate' source is probably incorrect since it overlooks the evidence of Strabo. Strabo (6.1.13) plainly refers to a connection between luxurious living, *hubris* and ultimate disaster and he does not relay this connection as if it was an uncommon concept. Of course, he does not describe these aspects of the Sybarites' lifestyle as if it were a mathematical equation, which seems to be the main thrust of the argument of Gorman & Gorman (p. 58). Arguably, although it is no longer extant, this connection was almost certainly made in Diodorus' history (Book 10), where a chronological coverage of the capture of Sybaris would have been located; and this would have been derived from his Hellenistic source. In Book 12.9.1 Diodorus provides a brief summary of the history of Sybaris before he recounts the re-foundation of the city as Thurii in 445/444, and in which he contrasts the arrogant behaviour of the Sybarites' tyrant Telys with the restraint and correct behaviour of Pythagoras and his followers. This, no doubt, ought to reflect and reiterate a more detailed account earlier in his work. Note also that Strabo and

bitterness between the two states and the relentless slaughter of Sybarite troops by their Crotoniate opponents following their rout in battle. This war had begun because the citizens of Croton, encouraged by the Samian philosopher Pythagoras who was a resident in that city, refused to return five hundred Sybarite citizens from elite families who had been expelled from their city. These had arrived as suppliants in Croton. When Telys, who had recently seized sole power in Sybaris, demanded that they be surrendered to him the Crotoniates declared war and marched against Sybaris, led by their general Milo (Diod. 12.9.5). The Sybarite army was defeated in a battle and their city was besieged, captured and sacked. But how were the Crotoniates able to occupy Sybaris at a time before invading armies employed elaborate siege engines? In some of the earliest records of siege warfare, for example, of Eretria on Euboea in 490 BC the defenders were betrayed by sympathisers of the Persian besiegers (Hdt. 6.101), but a similar action by fifth columnists is not recorded for the end of the siege of Sybaris. All that is mentioned is that after the siege the city was obliterated by the diversion of one of the two rivers which flowed nearby over the urban site: 'having taken the city they (the victors) brought in (or on) the river and flooded it (Sybaris)' (Strabo 6.1.13). Unlike the fate of mythical Atlantis, historical Orobiae on Euboea (426 BC; Thucydides 3.89) and Helice in Achaia (372 BC; Strabo 8.7.2), all of which were destroyed by the sea, the city of Sybaris was flooded after it had been captured by the victorious enemy.³ Strabo is the sole informant for this inundation and is both specific and at the same time tantalisingly vague. Inundation is an exceptional form of destruction and unique to Sybaris, yet is the assertion of Strabo really possible? It is the contention here that an inundation of the site is highly unlikely considering the geographical location of, and assessments of the archaeological evidence from, Sybaris and that the literary sources actually yield insufficient information to explain and recreate the last days of the siege of this city.

Excavations have confirmed that the location specified by Strabo is almost certainly correct, but the situation of the site identified as ancient Sybaris does not lend itself readily to the idea of a catastrophic inunda-

Diodorus probably used the same source, both noting that the city lay between two rivers and give identical figures for the total number of citizens.

³ For all the obvious similarities with the fate of other cities engulfed by water, in their case a tsunami, no ancient source still extant ventures to voice a link between these and the fall of Sybaris.

tion.⁴ Not only does Sybaris occupy a part of a low-lying plain (Athenaeus 12.519f), but the land in the immediate vicinity is waterlogged (see Fig. 1).



Fig. 1: The plain at Sybaris showing the waterlogged nature of the surrounding countryside

Furthermore, the river (the modern Crati) which flows close by simply lacks the volume and breadth to cause wholesale destruction to an area which must have been mostly above its course. It may be argued that the entire aspect of the land and its rivers have altered radically since antiquity, especially since the region is prone to earthquake activity and the modern landscape is often at a variance with the ancient on account of urban development and industrialisation. However, the site of Sybaris is described as being close to the sea (Athenaeus 12.519e-f), which has retreated by a few kilometres since the 6th century BC, and the land around continues to be mostly an agricultural zone. The one major exception to this observation is that the rivers Crathis and Sybaris now converge someway upstream from the ancient site.

⁴ For recent discussion of the archaeological material which lends further support to this contention, see L. Cerchiai, 'Sybaris and Thurii,' in L. Cerchiai, L. Janelli & F. Longo (edd.), *The Cities of Magna Graecia and Sicily* (Los Angeles 2004) 114-21, with bibliography. For the argument that Sybaris and its successors, Thurii and Copia, suffered from a long-term slow inundation caused by alluvial deposits, see J.-D. Stanley & M.P. Bernasconi, 'Sybaris-Thurii-Copia trilogy: three delta coastal sites become land-locked,' *Méditerranée* 112 (2009) 82.

Still other diversions in the bed of a river can be made to occur and could also become a contributory factor in the capture and sack of a city. When Cyrus the Great besieged and occupied Babylon (Hdt. 1.190-191) in 539/538 BC, it was only after a long and costly siege. When it appeared that Cyrus might be foiled in his ambitions and forced to retreat he, or one of his advisers, concocted a plan which involved entering the city through the river bed of the Euphrates whose course bisected Babylon. For much of the year the Euphrates was too wide and too deep to allow military forces, whether these were infantry or cavalry, to cross without the use of pontoon bridges; and the Babylonians believed that their city was therefore impregnable in that quarter. However, Cyrus ordered two contingents of his troops to assemble, one at the spot where the river entered the city and the other at the river's exit. In the meantime, the king led another contingent consisting mostly of servants or slaves to the lake which had been excavated by Nitocris, a previous queen of Babylon (Hdt. 1.185), and which by then had become merely a marsh. The Euphrates' course was diverted into this dried-up lake and as the water fell to about thigh height Cyrus' troops were able to storm into the city and it fell without much further fighting.⁵ Quite clearly, such a strategy did not occur at Sybaris, but it is worth noting that the existence of a river in or around a city could become a vulnerable, not a strong, point in its defence.⁶

The diversion of another river caused a dramatic failure in the defences of Mantinea in the winter of 386/385 BC (see Fig. 2). The Spartans, led by their king Agesipolis, were besieging their neighbour Mantinea, an event recorded by Xenophon (*Hellenica* 5.2.3-6). He notes that the Spartans dug a trench and constructed a palisade around the city, but knowing that the Mantineans were well provisioned and either not wanting to chance a lengthy siege or lacking the resources to remain for too long, decided on another tactic. Xenophon states that a river ran through (δία) the city and that this was dammed at a point close to where it flowed out from

⁵ Herodotus also states that the Babylonians could have withstood this assault if they had not been taken by surprise, since a festival was taking place in the centre of the city and the population only became aware of the incursion after Cyrus' troops had already seized the suburbs.

⁶ Note the much later siege of Nisibis in AD 338 when the River Mygdonius was first dammed and then the dam broken up by the besieging Parthians so that the flood was directed against a section of the walls which collapsed. Fortunately for the besieged, the Parthians did not take advantage of this breach and the walls were rebuilt; cf. Julian, *Orat.* 2.62b-67b; Zonaras 13.7; J.R. Morgan, *A Commentary on the Ninth and Tenth Books of the Aithiopika of Heliodorus* (Oxford University PhD Thesis 1979) vii-ix.

underneath the city's walls.⁷ Gradually the water level rose and began to inundate Mantinea as if from below, soaking the foundation (θεμέλιος) of the houses and walls and causing subsidence.

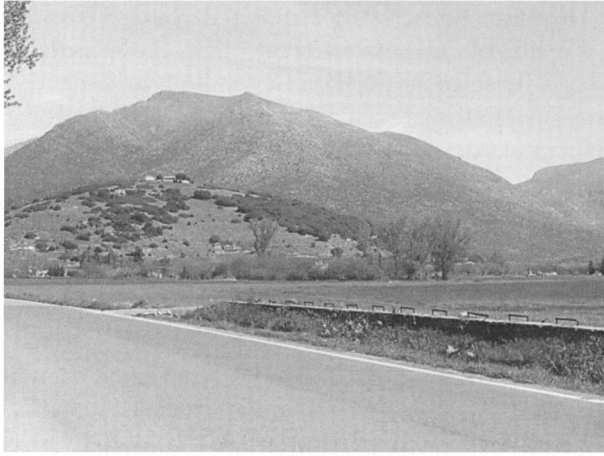


Fig. 2: *The Plain around Mantinea*

Although the besieged used timbers in an attempt to keep upright a tower in that sector of their fortifications where the water was accumulating, they were unable to hold back the rising flood. When they realised that there was no solution to overcoming this problem they offered to demolish their walls and surrender their city.

Diodorus (15.12.1-2) also has an account of this siege, and although he will surely have known Xenophon's *Hellenica*, there are too many differences in the details they contain – which indicates that the later historian used another source.⁸ In Diodorus' account the siege of Mantinea,

⁷ A study of recent maps does not confirm Xenophon's assertion and he was perhaps not present in the Spartan army, although he knew the geography of the Peloponnese. As ever in ancient historical prose, some element of invention is possible, although Xenophon is not usually regarded as being creative in his descriptions. Xenophon may also have been influenced by Herodotus' account of the siege of Babylon by placing the river 'through' rather than 'close' to Mantinea.

⁸ While Book 15 of Diodorus' history is complete, the coverage of particularly the 380s has all the appearance of an epitome. Moreover, departing from his usual style, Diodorus has no references to his sources at any stage in this book. The information for Peloponnesian affairs in the 380s would have been contained in, amongst others, the histories of Ephorus and Timaeus, and both are used

rather like that of Babylon by Cyrus, is shown to have been much longer than is claimed by Xenophon, and to have extended well into the winter months. By then there was a spate from the river which ran beside the fortifications (note here Diodorus' use of *παρά* 'running beside' Mantinea).⁹ The Spartans therefore diverted or redirected (*διαλαμβάνω*) the flow of the swollen stream by means of great dams (*χώματα*) and trenches (*τάφροι*), perhaps those mentioned by Xenophon in connection with the circumvallation of Mantinea, against the city's fortifications, then they 'turned the river into the city and made a lake of the whole area' (Diod. 15.12.1). Once the city had been successfully inundated, the defenders were forced into surrender as their homes began to collapse around them.

The end of Sybaris, as narrated by Athenaeus, dwells on an episode which occurred, perhaps, following the Sybarite defeat in battle and therefore at the start of the siege of the city. The Crotoniates sent a thirty-member legation to Sybaris, possibly to negotiate a truce. On the order of Telys, the Sybarites murdered these envoys and threw their bodies from the walls of the city where they lay unburied outside. According to Athenaeus (12.521d-e), this mistreatment of the dead incurred the anger of the gods; and the Sybarite magistrates received an omen of their impending doom in a dream, where the statue of Hera in the centre of the agora vomited bile, while blood poured like a fountain in the goddess's temple. Heraclides of Pontus, cited as the source for the next extract, is said by Athenaeus to have related the subsequent death of Telys and his supporters, including those who had sought sanctuary in temples and at shrines. As a result of this further impiety, the statue of Hera, in its temple, which for the previous sacrilege had already been drenched in blood, averted its gaze from the *polis*. At the same time another fountain of blood began to rise up through the foundations (*ἔδαφος*), and bronze doors were used in an attempt to hold back this flood. And on account (*διόπερ*) of this (flood) the city of the Sybarites was sacked and destroyed.

Two well-defined layers in Athenaeus' text seem identifiable here. The more visible element is the mythologising of the entire event, either the author's own creation or that of his source, in which the dénouement is presented in the most dramatic fashion possible. But, leaving aside the apocalyptic elements, what is left is a relatively straightforward account of, as in the siege of Mantinea, the undermining of the city walls by an

elsewhere. The tenor of the account is also less positive towards Sparta and hence an Athenian origin, on balance, is likely.

⁹ Confusion between 'through' and 'besides' is again evident in Julian, *Orat.* 2.62b-67b; cf. Zonaras, 13.7.

adjacent river and the disintegration of the foundations of homes and public buildings; and this was followed by the successful occupation of Sybaris by the Crotoniates. It is possible that the otherwise sluggish streams which flowed across the low plain at Sybaris were also, by then, in flood following a lengthy siege into the autumnal wet season, and the diverted additional volume of water caused the Sybarite defences to fail. The blood which reportedly emerged from all points, but mainly from below ground level, can then simply be attributed to reddish muddy water oozing up through the foundations. The use of bronze doors to stem this flood then becomes explicable if they were removed from the *cellae* of temples. Bronze doors could also be a more elaborate version of what the timbers were for the Mantineans (Xenophon), propping up walls in an unsuccessful attempt to hold back a rising flood.

In conclusion it should, therefore, be noted that it was the River Crathis flowing to the south side of the city and not the Sybaris River to the north which was partially diverted to cause damage to the walls of the city. This is confirmed by the earliest and nearly contemporary source, Herodotus (5.45), who reports the existence of a shrine to Athena Crathias which the Sybarites claimed had been dedicated by the Spartan Dorieus after the end of the siege, and which was located near the dry (ξηρός) bed of the River Crathis.¹⁰ The inundation following the siege in Strabo (6.1.13) is probably not his creation and must, therefore, have been extracted from a source which is likely to have been in a history which covered late sixth-century events in Magna Graecia, such as Timaeus. Athenaeus' account is highly embellished, but can be shown to have some basis in a real, not legendary, drama. Timaeus is also known to have been a historian who indulged in writing particularly elaborate and dramatic narratives.¹¹ Therefore, the tale of destruction by a flood of rising blood followed by a still further watery oblivion may be attributed to the imagination of this historian. No really substantive details can have been available to later historians who wrote about the fall of Sybaris, which

¹⁰ The Sybarites, according to Herodotus, claimed that Dorieus in his travels participated in the siege of the city as an ally of Croton, although this was disputed by the Crotoniates. Herodotus is reported to have been a resident and to have died at Thurii. It is worth noting, however, that he reports that this information was provided by others and he does not claim to have seen the shrine to Athena Crathias himself, although neither shrine nor dry river bed should have been unknown to him.

¹¹ L. Pearson, *The Greek Historians of the West: Timaeus and His Predecessors* (Atlanta 1987) 39.

occurred at a time before historical documentation began.¹² The brief mention of a dry river bed by Herodotus may well have become the basis for Timaeus' much more extensive version, and his account was later related in various degrees by Diodorus, Strabo and Athenaeus. The destruction of Mantinea, which is found in Xenophon and Diodorus, may also have provided a useful framework into which the end of Sybaris could have been reworked by Timaeus. The end of Sybaris caused by the diversion of a river is not unique, but the known examples are few. Sybaris was unlike Babylon with a river whose course ran through the urban site, but there were distinct similarities between the geographical locations of Sybaris and Mantinea. The siege of Sybaris, following a defeat in the field, probably also began in the summer when river levels were low; but, as at Mantinea, with the onset of autumn or winter the rivers would have been flowing more strongly and so the volume in the Crathis would have been more than sufficient for causing the fatal damage to the fortifications and the buildings inside the city, and so brought about its capture in 510 BC.

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¹² J. Davies, 'Athenaeus' use of public documents,' in D. Braund & J. Wilkins (edd.), *Athenaeus and his World* (Exeter 2000) 204, suggests that, since Athenaeus (12.521b) refers to Sybarite sumptuary laws, which he claims he obtained from the history of Phylarchus, public documents belonging to this time remained intact for a Hellenistic historian to consult. If the destruction of Sybaris was as complete as Strabo and others maintained, then this surely could not have been the case, but less damage to the city by the Crotoniates may have preserved some documentary evidence.