THEMISTOCLES AND THE SUPPOSED SECOND MESSAGE TO XERXES: THE ANATOMY OF A LEGEND.

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Themistocles' deceptive message to Xerxes on the eve of the battle of Salamis was the most famous of all the stratagems attributed in antiquity to that wily operator. All the sources agree that it had the effect of inducing Xerxes to undertake the naval engagement within the narrow straits between Salamis and mainland Attica, and that this afforded the numerically inferior Greek navy an advantage which they were able decisively to exploit.1

Our sources also mention another message, supposedly sent by Themistocles to Xerxes after the battle of Salamis was over. However they differ very considerably over the circumstances, purpose, and details of this second message. The purpose of this article is to examine the various versions of the story, as it is presented in the sources, to explain how these versions developed, and to assess the historicity of the story itself.2

The evidence

1. Our earliest authority for the story (which, interestingly, is not found in Aeschylus' *Persians* of 472 B.C.—the earliest literary source for the battle of Salamis) is Herodotus, *Histories* 8. 108–110, a passage written probably in the 430's or early 420's. This is a complex, and strongly anti-Themistocles version, in which:

a. After the battle of Salamis, at a council of the commanders of the Greek fleet, which had advanced as far as Andros, Themistocles urged them to sail at once to the Hellespont to break the bridge of boats there, so cutting off Xerxes' forces and stranding them in Greece.

b. He was strongly opposed by the Spartan Eurybiades, the commander-in-chief, supported by the other Peloponnesian commanders, and overruled on the grounds that this would make Xerxes desperate, and force him to devastate mainland Greece.

c. Themistocles returned to the Athenian contingent, who most strongly wished to sail to the Hellespont, alone if necessary, and, changing his position completely, made a public speech successfully dissuading them and
advising them to return home and to leave any expedition to the Hellespont to the following spring.

d. But, in saying this he was not sincere, he had an ulterior motive, since he now wished to turn the situation to his personal advantage, and be able to make a claim on the King in the future, if ever he should get into trouble with the Athenians and need a place of refuge, 'something which did in fact occur' (a comment on the historian's part which should arouse suspicion).

e. He thereupon immediately sent a secret message to Xerxes via a trusted group, who travelled in a boat to Attica. They included Sicinnus, who had also been the bearer of the pre-Salamis message. The message said that Themistocles had done Xerxes a favour, by preventing the Greeks from pursuing the Persian fleet to the Hellespont and destroying the bridges there. So Xerxes could now return home at his leisure.

It should be noted that there is no mention of Aristides at any point in this account.

2a. Diodorus, 11.19. 5-6 (the source for which was probably the fourth century B.C. 'universal' historian Ephorus), says of Themistocles, after the battle, but apparently still at Salamis, 'he devised another stratagem, no less clever than this (previous) one.... He succeeded in greatly reducing the numbers of the Persian army in the following way. He sent the tutor of his sons to Xerxes to reveal to him that the Greeks intended to sail to the span of boats and to destroy the bridge'. Xerxes believed this 'because it was plausible' (cf. 11.17.2), and, fearing that he might be completely prevented from getting back to Asia, since the Greeks already controlled the sea, decided to return to Asia as quickly as possible, leaving behind Mardonius with a picked force, still considerable in size, (400,000 men!), but much reduced in comparison with the original.

In this account the message is presented as a successful patriotic stratagem, and there is no mention of any expressed intention on Themistocles' part to delay or prevent the Greek pursuit, let alone a claim to have done so (as in Herodotus). The message is simply a (bogus) intelligence tip-off about the Greeks' intentions. The messenger, though not named, seems to be Sicinnus (as in Herodotus' version), since he was the tutor of Themistocles' sons (cf. Hdt.8.75).

2b. Diodorus 11.59.2. This passage comes within an interesting encomium on Themistocles' life and achievements. As before, Diodorus follows the tradition that the message concerning the Hellespont bridge was a successful patriotic stratagem, which, we are this time told, reduced Xerxes' forces in Greece by half: 'by the one plan concerning the bridge of boats he reduced the land forces of the enemy by half, so it could be easily dealt with by the Greeks'.
3. Nepos Themistocles 5. 12. Xerxes was discomfited a second time by the same man; Themistocles, fearing that Xerxes would prolong the war, informed him (Nepos does not say how, via whom, or from where) that there was a plan to destroy the bridge which he had made at the Hellespont, and to cut off his return to Asia; and he persuaded him of this. Xerxes therefore returned speedily (in less than 30 days) to Asia and considered that he had not been defeated but saved by Themistocles.

Here again the message is presented as a successful patriotic stratagem, which got Xerxes and his forces out of Greece, and in it Themistocles does not promise to do anything, or claim that he has done anything. Xerxes' gratitude towards Themistocles is due simply to the warning that the Greeks planned to destroy the bridge, a warning which he mistakenly believes is sincere.

4. Plutarch Themistocles 16. 2-6. Themistocles proposes to his fellow Athenian and political rival, Aristides, apparently while the Greeks are still at Salamis, that they should sail to the Hellespont and destroy the bridge of boats. Aristides opposes this suggestion, offering the 'trapped rat' theory which Herodotus assigned to Eurybiades (8.108). Themistocles then changes his position. There is an implication in this account that his original proposal was not serious, but no suggestion that he is acting out of pique, or that he is exploiting the rebuff to further his own self-interest. He suggests that everyone should concentrate on devising a plan to get Xerxes out of Greece as quickly as possible. Aristides agrees. Themistocles then sends Xerxes a message, via a captured royal eunuch, Arnaces, to say that the Greeks have decided to sail to the Hellespont to destroy the bridge, but that Themistocles, out of regard for the King, urges him to get back across it quickly, while he (Themistocles) would cause some delays in, and postponements of, the Greeks' pursuit. This Xerxes does, and so, thanks to Themistocles and Aristides, when the Greeks fought afterwards against Mardonius in the decisive battle at Plataea, the numerical odds against them were much reduced.

Here again, as in Diodorus and Nepos, the message is presented as a patriotic stratagem, in this version planned jointly with Aristides the Just. However, it is more than just a tip-off. Themistocles promises action on his part, i.e. delaying tactics. This detail, like the change of position, recalls the version of Herodotus, where, however, Themistocles claims he already has prevented a Greek pursuit. But, according to Plutarch, Themistocles' promise to delay the Greeks' pursuit out of his supposed concern for Xerxes, is not sincere. It is just part of the deception plan (though it does seem to involve a certain lack of logic—why should Xerxes hurry to leave, if the Greek pursuit is going to be delayed?).

On the name of the messenger, Plutarch has gone to a different, unknown,
source (cf. Polyaeus I.30.4), presumably because of the credibility problem involved in Herodotus’ assignation of both deceptive messages to the same bearer, Sicinnus.

5. Plutarch Aristides 9.5-6. This version is similar to that at Themistocles 16.2-6, in that Themistocles’ original suggestion is to sail to the Hellespont at once, and it is made to Aristides, who opposes it. But here it is not followed by a jointly devised patriotic stratagem to get Xerxes out of Greece as quickly as possible. Instead Plutarch says simply ‘So Themistocles sent a eunuch prisoner of war, Arnaces, secretly, to tell the King that he, Themistocles, had succeeded in turning back the Greeks after they had set out intending to destroy the bridge, because he wished to save the King’. In this version the message is a secret one, unknown to Aristides or the other Greeks, and, though Xerxes and part of his army do subsequently withdraw from Greece, there is no suggestion in this account that this was Themistocles’ patriotic objective, or that the claims in the message of concern for the King were merely a deception. Themistocles reacts in an apparently purely self-interested way to having his original proposal rejected, and in his message he claims that he has already done the King a favour by stopping the Greek pursuit. This version is much closer to that of Herodotus, though again as in Plut. Themistocles 16.2-6, there is a certain lack of logic about Xerxes’ haste to retreat, which it presents as a consequence of the message.

6. Thucydides 1.137.4. Themistocles, after being exiled by the Athenians, spent some time in N.W. Greece, and then travelled across the Aegean to Asia. He reached Ephesus, and travelled inland with one of the Persians who lived on the coast. He then wrote a letter to King Artaxerxes, the son of Xerxes, ‘who had recently come to the throne’ (i.e. in late 465 or 464, some 15 years after Salamis). Thucydides quotes some of the text of this letter, and summarises the rest (the clause in parenthesis):

\[\text{εὖδηλου δὲ ἡ γραφὴ ὅτι ὅς θεμιστοκλῆς ἐκὼ παρὰ σέ, ὅς ἐστὶ\}
\[\text{κακὰ μὲν πλείστα Ἑλλήνων εἰρήνασμα τὸν ὑπάτουν ὀδοῦν, ὅσον \}
\[\text{χρόνον τὸν σὺν πατέρα ἐπίνακα ἐμοὶ ἀνάκηρ ἁμνὸν \}
\[\text{πολὺ δ’ ἔτι πλεῖον ἄγαθα, ἐπειδὴ ἐν τῷ ἀσφαλεῖ μὲν ἐμοί, \}
\[\text{ἐκεῖνῃ δὲ ἐν ἐπικινδύνῳ πάλιν ἡ ἀποκομιά ἐγίνετο. καὶ μοι \}
\[\text{ευεργεσία ὑφελέσται (γράφας τὴν τε ἐκ Σαλαμίνος προάγεσθι \}
\[\text{τῆς ἀναγκώριας καὶ τῆς τῶν γεμυριῶν, ἡς ἐπειδὸς προσποιήσατο, \}
\[\text{τότε δ’ ὅτινος ὦ διάλυσιν), καὶ τὸν ἐξαν σὲ μελὰν ἄγαθα \}
\[\text{ἄγαθα δράσατε πάρειμι διωκόμενος ὑπὸ τῶν Ἑλλήνων διὰ τὴν \}
\[\text{φιλίαν. Ὅμολογοι δ’ ἐναυτὸν ἐπισχὺν ὅτους σοι περὶ ὃν ἡκὼ \}
\[\text{δηλώσατε}.
\]

‘I, Themistocles, have come to you, a man who more than any other Greek did harm to your house, during the time when I was forced to defend myself
against your father, who was attacking me; yet I did even more good at the time of his withdrawal, when I was safe and he was in danger. I am owed a favour in return ... and now I am here, an exile pursued by the Greeks because of my friendship for you, with the power to do you much good ...'

There has been much dispute over the correct translation and interpretation of the parenthesis here. For the moment I leave it untranslated, but I will return to this point in the next section of the paper.

7. Diodorus 11.56 5–8, records Themistocles' request for asylum from the Persian King on the same occasion as that referred to by Thucydides, though, following Ephorus (cf. Plutarch Themistocles. 27.1), he makes the King Xerxes, not Artaxerxes, and refers not to a letter, but to speeches before the King, the first delivered on Themistocles' behalf by one Lysitheides, acting as an intermediary, the second by Themistocles himself. However, Diodorus does not report any of the arguments used by Themistocles, or on his behalf, apart from commenting rather vaguely that the King 'realised that Themistocles had done him no wrong and so absolved him from punishment'. It has been thought that Diodorus' probable source, Ephorus, did report the arguments. A second century A.D. papyrus (Pap. Oxy.1610 F1, 7–12 = FGH 191.1) has λέγοντοι δ' οί μὲν δὴ ὑπέμνησαν αὕτην ἄνων περὶ τῆς νίκης καὶ τῆς γεγομένης προδοσίας ἰδίως.

Some say that he reminded him of the warnings he had given concerning both the sea battle and the bridge'. However, whoever this author was, it was almost certainly not Ephorus.

8. Nepos Themistocles 9.1–4. Nepos is obviously following Thucydides, 1.137. 3–4, very closely here. In 9.1 he refers to the tradition that Themistocles met Xerxes, but says that he prefers to believe Thucydides, who was a fellow Athenian, and the authority closest in time to the actual events. Is (i.e. Thucydides) autem ait Artaxerzen cum venisse atque his verbis epistulam misisse 'Themistocles venit ad te, qui plurima mala omnium Graecorum in domum tuam intulisset, quandiu mihi necesse fuit adversum patrem tuum bellare patriamque meam defendere. Idem multo plura bona postquam in tuto ipse et ille in periculo esse coepit. Nam cum in Asiam reverti velit, praelio apud Salaminam facto, litteris cum certorem feci id agi, ut pons, quem in Hellesponto fecerat, dissolveretur atque ab hostibus circumiretur, quo multo ille periculo est liberatus. Nunc autem configi ad te exagitatus a cuncta Graecia, tuam petens amicitiam ...' It is, surely, very significant that Nepos does not make Themistocles in his letter mention, or claim any credit for, his famous pre-battle message; he refers back only to his post-battle message, praelio ... facto. Since Nepos is following Thucydides virtually word for word here, the obvious
inference is that he did not interpret Thucydides' parenthesis at 1.137. 4 as containing any reference to Themistocles' pre-battle message.

9. Plutarch Themistocles 28. 1–5. Themistocles' letter to Artaxerxes in 465/4 has here become a speech, delivered in person (cf. Diodorus 11.56.8, passage no 7). Plutarch, like Nepos, is obviously following Thucydides' text at 1.137.4 closely; he employs a number of very similar expressions. Thus Themistocles refers to himself as a man ὁ πολλὰ μὲν ἀγάπησιν Πέρσαι κακά (i.e. his role in their defeat at Salamis), τὰ μὲν ἡγαθὰ καθῆκαν τῇ διώξει (by preventing the Greek pursuit), ἀρδεύσει γενομένης παρέσχε τὰ οἷαν σοφόμενα καθιστώμενα τι καὶ ζήσων. However, like Nepos, Plutarch does not make Themistocles claim any credit for the pre-battle message, and that, in my view, is a vitally important consideration for a correct interpretation of the parenthesis at Thucydides 1.137.4, to which we can now return.

The translation and interpretation of Thucydides 1.137.4 (passage no. 6)

Recent commentators (e.g. Gomme and Hornblower), have taken the first part of the parenthesis to mean 'citing the announcement (to Xerxes) of the (intended) retreat (by the Greeks) from Salamis', and assumed that Thucydides is saying that Themistocles in his letter of 465/4 made reference to both his 'first' (pre-battle) and his 'second' (post-battle) messages in 480, and claimed credit with Artaxerxes for both.

But the problem with this interpretation is that, as has been well pointed out, the deliberately deceptive character of the notorious pre-battle message was not something that could have been hidden from the Persian King, or even plausibly contested, in 465/4. In Aeschylus' Persians, a play performed less than eight years after Salamis, and seven years before Themistocles' flight to Asia, the true patriotic character of that message had been very publicly commemorated and celebrated. There were many influential Greek exiles at Artaxerxes' court, eager to ingratiate themselves with a new King, who, through their contacts, would have known precisely why Themistocles had become famous throughout Greece for his cleverness. It is inconceivable that Themistocles could have expected to be taken seriously by Artaxerxes in a claim in 465/4 that his pre-Salamis message had really been a favour conferred on the Persians.

There is a very clear division made in the quoted letter (signalled by μὲν ... δ'), to indicate two different periods of time, one when Themistocles claims he was under attack by Xerxes, and so forced to defend himself (hence the 'great harm' which he did to Artaxerxes' house at that time was, to some extent, pardonable); the other when he was 'safe' and Xerxes was 'in danger', which was when he did the Persians a service in return
for which he now claims to deserve some favour. But what else can these
two periods of time be but a) the period up to and including the battle of
Salamis and b) the period after the Greeks' victory there? And it seems
clear from the context that it is only to events within the latter period
that the phrase καὶ μοι εὐθείασα ὑπείλεται, and the following explanatory
parenthesis apply.

A close analysis of the word order of the phrase γράφας τὴν τε ἐκ
Σαλαμίνος προάγγελσιν τῆς ἁναχωρήσεως also suggests that the transla-
tion of Gomme and Hornblower, 'citing the announcement (to Xerxes) of
the (intended) retreat (of the Greeks) from Salamis', cannot be the right
one. The position of ἐκ Σαλαμίνος, coming between and framed by the ar-
ticle τὴν and its noun προάγγελσιν, suggests that the four words go closely
together in sense, 'the warning message sent from Salamis'. This is surely a
much more natural interpretation of the words than to take ἐκ Σαλαμίνος
with τῆς ἁναχωρήσεως 'the retreat from Salamis'. Thus if the more natural
interpretation is right, then τὴν ... προάγγελσιν τῆς ἁναχωρήσεως should
mean 'warning message for his retreat' i.e. to retreat from Greece. This
does not seem an inherently impossible sense for the word προάγγελσιν to
bear, especially as it is found only here in Greek literature.¹⁰

Both Nepos, Themistocles 9.2, and Plutarch, Themistocles 28 1–5, are
obviously following this passage of Thucydides very closely, with clear
similarities in their language. Yet they do not present Themistocles as
making any claims at all in his letter/speech about his first, pre-Salamis
message. The 'good things' which he alleges the Persians owe to him are
solely things which he did for them after the battle. The clear implication
is that neither Nepos nor Plutarch interpreted Thucydides' parenthesis as
involving any reference to Themistocles' pre-Salamis message.

The conclusion must surely be that there is no implication in Thucydides'
parenthesis that Themistocles, in his letter to Artaxerxes in 465/4, made
any reference at all to his pre-Salamis message to Xerxes.

Furthermore, Thucydides does not mean to suggest in the second half
of his parenthesis, καὶ ... οὗ δῆλουσιν, that Themistocles' claim to have
prevented the immediate destruction of the Hellespont bridges (presumably
by delaying the Greek pursuit) was a claim or a promise originally made
in his post-Salamis message. It is, surely, a fresh claim, made now for the first
time in his letter of 465/4. It presumably helped to explain to a sceptic
why, despite the supposed aggressive intentions of the Greeks in late 480,
they did not in fact venture as far as the Hellespont till late 479 (Herodotus
9.114).

Some manuscripts omit the τε between τὴν and ἐκ Σαλαμίνος, but it
seems preferable to retain it, and to translate the parenthesis in full as
follows.
'citing both the forewarning message sent (by him) from Salamis (to Xerxes) to withdraw (from Greece), and the (subsequent) Greek failure to destroy the bridges at that time, which he falsely claimed (in his letter) had been due to him'.

There is a slight discrepancy of detail between Herodotus and Thucydides (which has perhaps misled commentators) about the place from which the 'second message' was sent—Herodotus says Andros, after the Greek fleet had advanced there from Salamis. But there appear to have been two ancient traditions about this. Diodorus 11.19.5-6, and Plutarch, Themistocles 16.2-6, seem to be following the alternative tradition found in Thucydides, that it was sent from Salamis.

Thucydides' compressed and rather obscure expression in this parenthesis seems to have been misunderstood by the unknown authors quoted by the unknown author of the fragment preserved in a second century A.D. papyrus (see passage no. 7), as well as by many modern scholars. However, as we have seen, it was not misunderstood either by Nepos or by Plutarch.

To sum up. The conclusion must be that Thucydides' summarising parenthesis refers to only one message sent by Themistocles; this was the one supposedly sent after the battle of Salamis (the 'second message'), and the implication is that it said simply: 'You must retreat immediately, as the Greeks are intending to sail to the Hellespont and destroy the bridges'. For Thucydides this message had contained no promises to delay the Greeks' pursuit, or claims to have done so. It was purely an intelligence tip-off (as it is in Diodorus and Nepos).

Subsequently, in his letter to Artaxerxes in 465/4, Themistocles, according to Thucydides' informants, referred back to that message, and alleged that it had in fact been a service done on his part to the Persians, for which he now deserved a favour in return, i.e. political asylum. In addition he made the (untrue) further claim, that the fact that the Greeks had not immediately sailed to the Hellespont and destroyed the bridges was his (Themistocles') doing. He had delayed their pursuit.

The origins and development of the 'second message' tradition.

If we accept, following a unanimous ancient tradition going back to Aeschylus' Persians, that the famous pre-Salamis deceptive message sent by Themistocles to Xerxes is historical, then it is in the highest degree unlikely that, just a few days later, in the bitter aftermath of the Persians' stunning defeat, which was at least partly the result of their misguided belief in that message, either a) Xerxes and his high command would have been prepared to believe any further supposedly confidential messages emanating from anyone on the Greek side, let alone Themistocles again, or b) the Greeks could have thought that they would.
Furthermore, although there may have been some argument on the Greek side, in the days after Salamis, about how soon and how far to press the naval offensive in the light of their unexpected victory, it is surely incredible that any Athenians, however bold, would have suggested that the Greek fleet should do something as risky as to sail 150 miles north to the Hellespont, so late in the year (it was now October), while the territory of Athens and Attica was still under Persian occupation, and when they were still in the dark about the exact condition and morale of Xerxes’ fleet. It seems virtually certain that, in the immediate aftermath of Salamis, Themistocles did not urge the other Greek commanders (or Aristides, for that matter), to sail the fleet to the Hellespont, and hence that there was no argument about this, where he was opposed by Eurybiades (or Aristides), and as a result of which he was outvoted (or persuaded to change his mind). Thus the context provided by our sources for Themistocles’ supposed second message is a fictitious one, whether the message is to be viewed as a patriotic stratagem or as a self-serving piece of opportunism.

It is also surely significant that there is nothing in our earliest source for these events, Aeschylus’ Persians (472 B.C.), about a message, deceptive or otherwise, sent to Xerxes after Salamis, in the section of the Persian messenger’s speech where it might have been expected (lines 480-514). In fact the Hellespont bridge is not mentioned at all there, and Xerxes’ post-Salamis withdrawal is presented (admittedly with much patriotic exaggeration for a Greek audience) as a disorderly and disastrous rout, which did not require any further spurring on after the naval defeat.

After the victories at Plataea and Mycale in 479, and the siege and capture of Sestos, on the Hellespont, by the Athenians during winter 479/8, now that, for the first time since the invasion began, the security at Greece was properly assured, there may have been some argument over whether they should have sailed to the Hellespont earlier, and attacked the bridges sooner, and so won an even more crushing victory. Greeks being Greeks, it is quite likely that some national commanders claimed that they had wanted to do so immediately after Salamis, but had been opposed and outvoted by the others. Hence the notion, that there had been some argument about this issue immediately after the battle, may have got into circulation quite early on. But this was an erroneous notion, and, as we have seen, all the indications are that the alleged message, which is presented as a consequence of that argument, is unhistorical.

15 years after Salamis, in 465/4, Themistocles now an Athenian exile, was given sanctuary by the Persian King Artaxerxes. It seems to have been customary for those who sought favours from the King to claim they had done him or his family some services (cf. Pausanias’ remark in his letter to Xerxes, reported at Thucydides 1. 128.7). It is quite possible that in his initial approach, probably by letter, supported verbally by an intermediary,
Themistocles made the conveniently uncheckable claim that, at a council of the Greek commanders after Salamis, he had successfully opposed a suggestion that the Greeks should sail immediately to the Hellespont to destroy the bridges, and so had been intentionally instrumental in allowing Xerxes to get back safely to Asia. In this approach to Artaxerxes in 465/4 Themistocles made no claims about his fateful pre-Salamis message (how could he?), nor did he claim credit for what he had said in any post-Salamis message to Xerxes either, since no such message had been received or sent. However, for reasons which will soon become apparent, in later reports of his letter to Artaxerxes, such as the one at Thucydides 1.137.4, he is presented as referring to a post-Salamis message, and as claiming credit for it.

Any claim by Themistocles to have done the Persians some service was not very plausible, but doubtless what really counted with Artaxerxes, in acceding to Themistocles’ request at the time, was not any dubious claim of past services, or optimistic promises for the future, but the sheer propaganda value of the defection of the famous Themistocles at a time when Persian morale in the East Mediterranean was low.13

After Themistocles’ sons and family returned to Athens, probably in the early 450’s,14 there seems to have ensued a fierce and long-lasting propaganda battle between what may perhaps be called ‘conservatives’ (men such as Cimon and the Alcmaeonids, who were virulently anti-Themistocles) and ‘radicals’ (e.g. Ephialtes and Pericles, pro-Themistocles), and their respective political supporters.15

It was of course common knowledge in Athens in the 450’s that Themistocles had been given sanctuary and honours by the Persian King. But why was it that the victor of Salamis had been so favourably treated by the son of his bitterest foe? The conservatives were ready with an answer. They claimed that the reason Artaxerxes had responded so positively was that Themistocles—who, after all, had allegedly been involved in the treasonable activities of Pausanias in the late 470’s, and had consequently been condemned in absentia by an Athenian court in c.46916—had actually started his treasonable career very much earlier, immediately after the battle of Salamis. That was when he had, on his own authority, without consulting the other Greek commanders, sent a secret message to Xerxes, to the effect that Xerxes could get back to Asia safely and at his leisure, because Themistocles ‘would hinder and delay the Greek pursuit (and he did indeed do so, when others wanted to press on to the Hellespont); and they claimed that this message had been sent with a view to the future possibility of his defection to the Persian side.

This hostile version is substantially the one which appears in Herodotus and at Plutarch Aristides 9.6. Doubtless it came to Herodotus mainly from
his Alcmaeonid informants, themselves suspected of having sent a treasonable signal to the Persians at Marathon in 490, (cf. Hdt. 6.115,121–4), and so, for them, a particularly satisfying piece of revenge on their hated enemy. Herodotus and Plutarch in the Aristides actually make Themistocles claim in his message that he already has prevented any Greek pursuit. This particular variation of improvement on the original story may perhaps have been influenced by an originally separate tradition that Themistocles made a public speech to the Athenian sailors at the very end of the campaigning season in 480 (the substance of which is correctly reported by Herodotus, but which he misleadingly presents as preceding the second message) saying, in essence, ‘Let’s be sensible and go home for the winter sowing. We can push on to the Hellespont and final victory next spring’ (cf. Hdt. 8.109).

The ‘radicals’ ingeniously countered this allegation, not by denying that any message was sent by Themistocles at all after Salamis—they accepted the ‘tradition’ that there had been a message—but by asserting that the message had had a fine patriotic motive. It was another piece of classic Themistoclean deception of the enemy—just like his pre-Salamis message, which everyone knew about. It had been agreed to by the Greek high command, and approved even by his political rival, the paragon of virtue, Aristides the Just. It contained a bogus warning, and its purpose was to get Xerxes and a large chunk of his army to withdraw from Greece as quickly as possible, which it brilliantly succeeded in doing. Naturally, to ensure credibility, Themistocles had had to claim in it that he was acting out of friendship for Xerxes, but he had made no promises, or claims of action on his part. The message had said simply, ‘Retreat immediately, as the Greeks are about to sail to the Hellespont, and cut you off by destroying the bridges. Your friend, Themistocles’.

According to the radicals Themistocles had originally been all in favour of a bold strike at the Hellespont bridges immediately after Salamis, but he had been opposed and thwarted on this by the over-cautious Peloponnesians. (This is the one pro-Themistocles detail which has been incorporated into Herodotus’ otherwise hostile account. Hence Themistocles’ treasonable message is implausibly presented by Herodotus as motivated primarily by pique at having his first plan rebuffed.)

Themistocles loyally accepted this decision, they argued, and then came up with an alternative stratagem, designed to get a large part of Xerxes’ occupying forces out of Greece as quickly as possible. So there had indeed been a post-Salamis deceptive message, but it had been just as patriotic and successful as his pre-Salamis one.

Some years later, in 465/4, when Themistocles, in desperation, had had to approach Artaxerxes for sanctuary, he had (according to this sympathetic version) referred back in his letter to that post-Salamis message, and
had claimed that it had actually been a genuine warning to Xerxes, motivated by genuine concern; and he had bolstered his appeal to Artaxerxes by a further claim, that he had subsequently delayed the Greek pursuit, thus explaining why the Greeks had not in fact reached the Hellespont till late 479. All of this, of course, had been merely artful deception, to fool Artaxerxes into offering him asylum.

This sympathetic version is the one which is implicit in the parenthesis at Thucydides 1. 137.4, and is substantially the one we find in Diodorus, Nepos and Plutarch's Themistocles, except that at Themistocles 16.5 Plutarch makes Themistocles add to his message, with a certain lack of logic, a promise that he would delay the Greek pursuit. This element was not a part of the original pro-Themistocles version of the post-Salamis message (it belonged to the hostile version), but it is easy to see how it came to be attached to it subsequently, either by Plutarch or his source, since it was accepted even by the radicals that Themistocles had retrospectively, i.e. in his letter to Artaxerxes in 465/4, claimed that he had delayed the Greek pursuit after Salamis (though that was an untrue claim).

Thus, for the pro-Themistocleanse from the late 450's onwards, the reason Themistocles was given sanctuary by Artaxerxes in 465/4 was that the King was induced by their hero to believe mistakenly a) that Themistocles' post-Salamis deceptive message of warning about the Hellespont bridge had actually been a service to Xerxes, motivated by genuine concern for him, and b) that Themistocles had also deliberately delayed the Greek pursuit of his father, to allow him ample time to get back to Asia.

The tradition of a second message thus became a fable convene, 'an agreed fable' accepted by both sides; and these two rival versions of it, both of which originated in the 450's, were enthusiastically propounded by the pro- and anti-Themistocles camps in the battle for public opinion at Athens. At first they were oral traditions, the debate being conducted by argument in the assembly and other public fora at Athens. But within a generation, when accounts of, and details from, earlier fifth century Athenian history started to be written down in the works of, e.g., Herodotus, Thucydides and Hellanicus of Lesbos, the two rival versions were recorded in a more permanent form. They thus had a strong influence on the subsequent character of the Themistocles tradition in literature, though, inevitably, over time they became, to some extent, confused with and contaminated by each other. The co-existence of two rival original versions probably also accounts for some minor variations of detail found in the accounts in our sources i.e. the message was sent from Salamis/Andros; the messenger was Sicinus/Arnaces/the tutor of Themistocles' children; he was the same man as/different from the bearer of the pre-Salamis message.

The only trouble for historians was, and is, that they were rival versions of what was almost certainly a wholly fictitious event—the sending of a
supposed 'second message' to Xerxes, after the battle of Salamis.

NOTES

1. E.g. Aeschylus Persians 353–373, Herodotus 8.75-6, 79-80, Thucydides 1.74.1, Diodorus 11.17.1.4, Cornelius Nepos Themistocles 4.3-4, Plutarch Themistocles 12.4-5. The additional detail in Herodotus' account, which is found also in Diodorus and Nepos, that this message was also kept a secret from the other Greeks, and had the effect of forcing them to fight against their will, is extremely unlikely (see e.g. F.J. Frost, Plutarch's Themistocles [1980] pp. 139-143). It is, however, consistent with the strongly anti-Themistocles character of Herodotus' narrative throughout Book 8 of the Histories (for which see e.g. A.J. Podlecki, The Life of Themistocles [1973] pp. 67-72).

2. As one would expect, a very large number of secondary works and commentaries, which deal inter alia with the battle of Salamis and the role of Themistocles, refer to the story of the second message. Some scholars accept it as historical, e.g. Frost op.cit. p.164; some are sceptical of some of the details, e.g. A.R. Burn, Persia and the Greeks (2nd edition, 1984), pp. 468-470 and note 52, How and Wells, A Commentary on Herodotus (1912), vol.2 p.272; some reject it completely e.g. J.E. Powell, Herodotus Book VIII (1956), p.135, C. Hignett, Xerxes' Invasion of Greece (1963) pp. 241–2. However there does not seem to have been a comprehensive examination and comparison of the different versions of the story which are to be found in the sources.

3. See e.g. Podlecki, op.cit. p.92.

4. This detail may possibly have been familiar to Ctesias, a Greek doctor at the Persian court, who wrote a Persica, probably in the late 390's, cf. FGH 688 F13 (30).

5. For the date see M.E. White, 'Some Agiad dates: Pausanias and his sons', JHS 84 (1964), p.142 and note 13.


9. e.g. by Frost, op.cit. pp. 261–7.

10. See Liddell and Scott, Greek–English Lexicon, προέγραψαν.

11. Of recent authors only Hignett, op.cit. pp. 403–408, rejects the story entirely.


16. For the chronology see e.g. Podlecki, op.cit. pp.197–8.

17. See Burn, op.cit. p.470.
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