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Pericles' rhetoric of numbers

Berkel, T.A. van; Papaioannou, S.; Serafim, A.; Demetriou, K.N.

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The Ancient Art of Persuasion across Genres and Topics

International Studies in the History of Rhetoric

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The Ancient Art of Persuasion across Genres and Topics

Edited by

Sophia Papaioannou
Andreas Serafim
Kyriakos Demetriou



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To Michael Gagarin

*An influential scholar, an inspiring teacher,
a dedicated mentor, a real gentleman*



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Pericles' Rhetoric of Numbers

Tazuko Angela van Berkel

1 “Every Quantitative Measurement We Have Shows Us That We Are Winning the War”¹

Six hundred talents of silver from the annual tribute of the allies; six thousand talents of coined silver left in the Acropolis; an unspecified quantity of uncoined gold and silver in public and private offering, sacred vessels for the processions and games, Median spoils, together no less than five hundred talents; the treasures of the other temples and, in case of emergency, the gold ornaments of Athena (forty talents of pure gold, usable for the preservation of the city, but to be restored!); thirteen thousand hoplites; sixteen thousand more soldiers in the garrison-posts; twelve hundred cavalry, including mounted archers; sixteen hundred unmounted archers; three hundred triremes fit for service.

This may look like an empire's grocery list, but is, in fact, part of a speech purportedly delivered by Pericles in the summer of 431, at the beginning of the Peloponnesian War, when the Spartan troops were about to ravage the countryside of Attica. In Thucydides' presentation of events, Pericles addresses the Athenians' despair and lingering doubt in his strategy by reinstating the main lines of the war policy that he proposed in his earlier speech and that the Athenians had agreed upon earlier in 432/1 BC (1.143.5): to evacuate Attica, to not fight the Spartan infantry, to guard the city and to rely on the navy (2.13.2). Aware that simply rehearsing the previously established strategy will not be enough in the face of an imminent invasion, Pericles embarks on his impressive inventory of Athenian resources (2.13.3–8).

Between the other three Periclean speeches presented by Thucydides, 2.13 is the odd one out: it is the only one reported in indirect discourse and by that quality seems to offer little opportunity to study Pericles' rhetorical style. Instead, it is common to read this passage as a financial paragraph, representing new modes of communicating financial data² and adding to the characterization

1 U.S. secretary of defence Robert McNamara in 1962 about the Vietnam War. This chapter is part of my research program Counting and Accountability, financed by the Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research (NWO).

2 Cuomo (2013) 19–20.

of Pericles as a banker, or even as a Midas-figure,³ converting communal and religious values into cash ready to be expended on the war.

The leading interpretation of this passage is the one by Lisa Kallet-Marx who convincingly argued that in this passage Pericles displays a new style of leadership, teaching the Athenians that “money is power” and that wars are won “with intelligence and money” (γνώμη καὶ χρημάτων περιουσία).⁴ To Pericles’ fifth-century audience these were not self-evident truisms: the connection between money and Athens’ supremacy implied a conception of power that needed to be created and conditioned by Pericles and to be understood in sharp opposition to a traditional understanding of war in terms of military manoeuvres on land, manpower and private financing. Hence, Pericles’ detailed enumeration of the figures that constitute Athens’ strength is not a rehearsing of information well known to his audience, but an act of instruction by which Pericles adopts the role of a teacher in financial matters. Pericles is not merely an adviser (σύμβουλος) – a role that can (but does not need to) be construed as subservient to the community – but a teacher (διδάσκαλος) endowed with power over the populace. Kallet-Marx’s interpretation is in line with Harvey Yunis’ approach of Thucydides’ Pericles as a model of political rhetoric,⁵ credited with the ability to not only devise sound policy, but to also explain (2.60.5: ἐρμηνεύειν) complex decisions to the populace by adopting a didactic persona offering instruction (διδάσκειν)⁶ in deliberative contexts.

While both the financial subject matter and the didactic-authoritative communication style are highly relevant aspects to this speech,⁷ in this chapter I propose a different approach in order to both highlight other aspects of the speech, and at the same time appreciate the existing interpretations in a new light. I propose to read this paragraph not so much in terms of financial expertise but in terms of *numerical* rhetoric. There is one very obvious reason to do this: the simple fact that Pericles’ list not only includes financial data, but also other resources, as heterogeneous as the number of hoplites, guards, horses,

3 Foster (2010) 169, 172; cf. Edmunds (1975) 39–44.

4 Kallet-Marx (1994) 235, 239, 242–3, 244–6; cf. (1993) 111–2, 195–7. Cf. Foster (2010) 162–6; Edmunds (1975) 39–44.

5 Yunis (1991) and (1996); Tsakmakis (2006) 165.

6 2.60.6: σαφώς διδάξας; 2.40.2: προδιδασχθῆναι λόγῳ. Cf. Plut. *Per.* 15.3: Pericles as someone πείθων καὶ διδάσκων.

7 Both Kallet-Marx (1994) and Yunis (1996) attribute a large role for the orator in creating and shaping collective beliefs and attitudes, thereby opposing Ober’s (1989) understanding of the speaker-*dēmos*-relation according to which the orator was under pressure to simply follow the collective will of the *dēmos*.

triremes. Moreover, reading the speech as discourse about the use of numbers, rather than finances, allows us to recontextualize the passage and to read it in comparison with other passages that thematize the rhetoric of numbers in Thucydides as well as in other authors.⁸ Focusing on one specific aspect, the use of numbers for non-cognitive purposes in a context of war, i.e. to boost confidence in the audience, I propose to read this passage as an alternative to a battle-speech – i.e. a form of persuasion that does not aim at judgment formation (κρίσις) and decision-making but at exhorting its audience to action.

If we understand persuasion as “all the techniques, mechanisms and symbols, *both cognitive and emotional*, deployed in oral or written discourse, to influence (...) attitudes, behaviours and beliefs of target audiences”,⁹ this reading sheds a somewhat paradoxical light on the synergy between emotional arousal and persuasion. A traditional application of this definition would be to analyse the ways in which emotions are aroused in an audience in order to influence beliefs, interpretations and judgments. In this chapter, I will bring out a contrary motion. Numbers, symbolic instruments *pur sang*, tend to be associated with rational and instrumental cognition¹⁰ and are often treated as informative, neutral and rhetorically inert.¹¹ Thucydides' historiographical presentation of “number speeches” suggests an alternative understanding of the persuasive workings of numbers: they represent cognitive and verbal means that have the capacity to persuade a target audience to adopt an interpretation of a situation that *overrides* visceral emotions of fear and overwrites these with confidence.¹² It will be argued that in the case of a battle-speech, verbal means of persuasion compete with the direct persuasion of sight, and that the objective of persuasion is not judgment formation or decision-making, but mitigating such direct persuasion by controlling the audience's interpretation of what they see. It is against this light that Pericles' list in 2.13 should be read.

8 E.g. Aristophanes' *Wasps* (Papageorgiou 2004), Aeschylus' *Persians* and Herodotus (Irwin 2013, Greenwood 2018).

9 See the Introduction to this volume, p. 3.

10 Dehaene (1997), Everett (2017).

11 Ancient rhetorical theory is largely silent on the topic of numbers. Although the relevance and use of numbers may be implied in the questions of policy that *syboulōi* are expected to master (ways and means, war and peace, defence of the country, import and exports, legislation: Arist. *Rh.* I.4.7–13 (1359b–60a)), the fact that rhetorical theory does not identify arithmetic or quantitative reasoning as rhetorical tools in their own right suggests an instrumentalist view on numbers.

12 For the opposition between “calculation” or “instrumental reasoning” (λογισμός) and confidence (θάρσος) in Thucydides, see Section 5 below.

2 Thucydides 2.13 vs. Diodorus Siculus 12.39–40

The anomalous nature of Pericles' speech in 2.13 becomes more evident when we compare Thucydides' version with the account in the twelfth book of Diodorus Siculus.¹³ Diodorus' account goes back to Ephorus¹⁴ and seems to report the same, or a very similar, speech by Pericles, but with a presentation guided by different historiographical choices.¹⁵ For our purposes, the question of the historicity of both accounts is irrelevant; a comparison between the two speeches merely serves to shed light on some of Thucydides' choices.

The similarities between the two speeches are obvious, both in form (Diodorus' version too is in indirect discourse) and in content: the numbers mentioned in both accounts are largely compatible, with two exceptions, i.e. the estimate of Athens' annual revenue¹⁶ and the value of the gold on the statue of Athena.¹⁷ More interesting are the differences in the status and timing of the speeches. Whereas Diodorus' version refers to one specific speech, Thucydides' account indicates that Pericles performed such enumerations of the empire's resources habitually.¹⁸ Moreover, in Thucydides' version, the war has already started: the Peloponnesians are on the verge of invading Attica, the decision to opt for war has already been taken and the strategy to evacuate Attica and to rely on naval forces has been endorsed by the Assembly and executed (1.144 ff.). Diodorus Siculus, by contrast, seems to conflate material that we have come to know as two speeches in Thucydides (1.144 ff. and 2.13). This has implications for the function of the enumeration of resources: in Diodorus' account, Pericles' list precedes the Assembly's decision, which means that the list functions within a deliberative context, serving to defend (12.40.1) the course of action proposed by Pericles and to persuade the people to opt for this strategy (marked in the narratorial framing of the speech).¹⁹ Thucydides,

13 12.39.5–40.5. See also Irwin (2013) for a comparison between the two accounts. My analysis highlights different aspects of the comparison between the two texts, but I am indebted to Irwin for the idea of comparing the texts.

14 12.41.1: ὥς Ἐφορος ἀνέγραψε.

15 See Irwin (2013) 280 n. 38 for a discussion of the respective reliability of both Thucydides' and Ephorus' account.

16 600 talents according to Thucydides' Pericles, but 460 according to Diodorus. This is, significantly, the number mentioned by the Thucydidean narrator himself in 1.96.

17 Thucydides' Pericles does not mention a separate sum for the value of the gold on the statue of Athena, where Diodorus does specify it (50 talents).

18 2.13.2: ἅπερ καὶ πρότερον; 2.13.9: ἔλεγε δὲ καὶ ἄλλα οἷάπερ εἰώθει. Irwin (2013). Cf. Kallet-Marx (1994) 234 n. 30.

19 Ἐπεισε: 12.39.5, 12.40.5.

by contrast, presents the speech as a means of boosting confidence (θάρσος).²⁰ The rhetorical purpose is not decision-making, but encouraging the populace. It is a pep talk.²¹

This difference in communicative function of the speech as a whole accounts for differences in the meaning of the numbers on the list. In Diodorus' version, where Pericles' list serves the decision-making process, the numbers actually *mean* something because they are compared with the Spartan situation: the resources on the Athenian side compare favourably with those of the Spartans. Although this comparison only happens obliquely (Diodorus does not actually mention any Spartan numbers), the *fact* of comparison indicates that Pericles' numbers are meant to inform the people in a context of rational deliberation.

Whereas Thucydides' Pericles does a similar act of comparison in his earlier speech in Book 1 (a deliberative speech),²² in 2.13 such a comparison is lacking. The list does its work solely by being a list:²³ by containing *many* and *large* numbers. By themselves, these numbers do not mean anything (they are inherently relative and only meaningful in comparison to other numbers), nor does the enumeration really *add up* to something.²⁴ There is no clear inference to be drawn from these heterogeneous numbers.

This difference in function also explains the items lacking in Diodorus' account where no mention is made of the length of the walls and the man-power in the cavalry. These figures do not fit in the rhetorical goal of Diodorus' version of the speech where Pericles' numbers add up to a favourable comparison with Spartan resources. In Thucydides' version, the mish-mash of heterogeneous numbers does not add up to a decision, but to a sense of security about a decision already taken: the numbers persuade to action, not to judgment.

Pericles' use of a list of resources to boost people's morale points out that numbers can serve non-cognitive functions in contexts of mass communication. This is a recurring motif in Thucydides, its visual equivalent being the visceral effects of fear and panic produced by the mere sight (ὄψις) of an

20 3.12.3: θάρσειν τε ἐκέλευε; 3.12.6: ἐθάρσυνεν. Kallet-Marx (1994) 236, Foster (2010) 166. Cf. Thucydides' authorial analysis in 2.65.9 of Pericles' ability to restore the *dēmos* to confidence (θάρσειν).

21 On the difference between deliberative oratory and battle exhortations: Zoido (2007).

22 Foster (2010) 162.

23 Cf. Kirk (2011) on the "rhetoric of boundlessness" of poetic catalogues and epigraphic inventories that, while presenting numerical data, effectively discourage rather than facilitate precise quantification, comparison and calculation.

24 Cf. Irwin who persuasively reads this passage together with the Croesus-Solon-episode in Herodotus.

opponents' army,²⁵ or of pride and confidence at the sight of one's own magnificent troops.²⁶ The verbal counterpart, the *mentioning* of sizes of troops and numbers of ships, is an essential element of military speeches that are meant to boost or restore confidence.

Of course, in contexts of war, there is nothing unusual about using numerical information to make an estimation of one's chances in battle. But comparison of such speeches reveals interaction between these speeches and suggests a thematic significance of the role of numbers. In the following, I will briefly discuss three vignettes of numbers in war-speeches where the interplay between cognitive and non-cognitive functions of numerical reasoning is thematized.

3 Superior Numbers Do Not Guarantee Victory

Before the outbreak of the war, the Spartan king Archidamus advises against waging war with the Athenians (1.81–5) because they are superior in resources (naval, financial and political (allies)). The only asset on the Spartan side is their numerical superiority on land, in which “one *might* feel confidence” (τὰχ' ἄν τις θαρσοίη) – forging a direct link between the vocabulary of confidence and the idea of numerical superiority.

Note how Archidamus takes care to mark the link as hypothetical, effectively warning against simplistic inferences from the sheer fact of numerical superiority: superiority on land will merely enable the Spartans to devastate Attica, but will leave Athens itself untouched. The reason, according to Archidamus, is that Athens' tribute-paying allies are a game changer (1.83.2): war is no longer a matter of manpower, but of expenses,²⁷ not built on private wealth but on public funds.²⁸ In this deliberative context, Archidamus explicitly argues against simplifying inferences and in favour of sober inferential reasoning.²⁹

25 E.g. 4.126.5.

26 E.g. the effect of the majestic size of the Athenian fleet for Syracuse at 6.31.1 that “restored the Athenians' courage” (ἀνεθάρσουν).

27 Kallet-Marx (1994) 243 points out that here Archidamus too is exploiting (unsuccessfully) the “money = power”-equation, but in a much more elementary and explanatory way than Pericles does. Cf. Kallet-Marx (1993) 80–9.

28 Kallet-Marx (1993) 83.

29 E.g. 1.80.2–3: εἰ σωφρόνως τις αὐτὸν ἐκλογίζοιτο ... εὐροίτε δ' ἄν. εὐρίσκω is a common verb for (numerical) inferential processes.

Similar caution recurs outside deliberative context, in Archidamus' war-speech (2.11) right before the invasion of Attica.³⁰ Archidamus emphasizes the idea that the strength of the Peloponnesians lies with their numbers and the quality of their numbers (2.11.1) – in striking contrast with his earlier recognition of “the inadequacy of this asset”.³¹ However, here Archidamus is not arguing in a deliberative setting against an expedition, but exhorting his commanders on the verge of a military operation that is already decided on and that Archidamus is participating in against his better judgment.³²

Pointing out the unprecedented size and quality of the Spartan expedition, Archidamus guides his commanders in the kind of inference that can be drawn from this numerical superiority (πλῆθος; 2.11.3). The course of war cannot be foreseen (2.11.4),³³ and although confident warfare (θαρσαλέους στρατεύειν; 2.11.5) is appropriate for an invading army, it often happens that troops that are numerically inferior have success against superior armies (2.11.4) because overconfidence tends to lead to sloppy preparation (2.11.5).³⁴ Large numbers mean responsibility, not necessarily victory.³⁵

Moreover, the Athenians' impressive degree of preparation might turn against them. Their preparation increases the likelihood that they let

30 This exhortation differs from the subsequent war-speeches in that it addresses not the entire fighting force, but only the commanders of the Peloponnesians participating in the first invasion of Attica. See the introduction of the speech in 2.10.3. On the historical reality of battle speeches, see Hansen (1993) for a sceptical position, and Pritchett (1994), ch. 2, who credits Thucydides' battle-speeches with a higher degree of realism. For (later) rhetorical theory on battle exhortation, see Zoido (2007). Cf. Hornblower, *ad* 4.10. Thematically, the speech interacts with the narratorial exposition that precedes it (2.7–8), where the narrator shows how both parties' preparations reflect their enormous ambitions (2.8.1) and the Spartans' hope for a total of “up to five hundred ships” (ὥς ἐς τὸν πάντα ἀριθμὸν πεντακοσίων νεῶν ἐσομένων) seems megalomaniac (2.7.2). The combination of ὥς and participle marks that the focalization of the numerical estimate is with the Spartans: the estimate is a subjective expectation, not necessarily endorsed by the narrator. On the qualifier ἐς (“up to/almost”): Rubincam (1979); Foster (2010) 158 n. 16.

31 Kallet-Marx (1993) 96; cf. Allison (1989) 55–6.

32 Cf. Allison (1989) 55–6.

33 Cf. Archidamus in his previous speech (1.84.3) and Pericles' admission in his final speech (2.64.1) that, notwithstanding his correct anticipation of the Peloponnesians' strategy and the Athenians' reaction (2.59.3), in human matters not everything can be foreseen. Cf. Rhodes (1988) 190–1, 239–40.

34 As Allison (1989) 55–6 points out, Archidamus' expectation is based on hope and chance – factors that Archidamus had previously discarded as part of one's strategy but that here serve his exhortatory purposes: he uses the idea of the Athenians' losing control to encourage his forces.

35 Foster (2010) 160.

themselves be provoked by the Peloponnesian attacks and hence turn out to be unprepared in reality when θυμός, induced by the sight of their land being ravaged in the open,³⁶ takes hold of them making them lose their ability to use λογισμός, sober inferential reasoning (2.11.6–9).³⁷

Archidamus' cautious warning *not* to rely too much on numerical superiority prepares a striking contrast with Pericles' display of Athenian power and resources (2.13) that immediately follows it.³⁸ The speeches are commonly categorized as "complementary speeches":³⁹ speeches by different speakers, addressing different audiences, but on the same kind of topic.⁴⁰ On a substantial level, the two speeches reinforce each other:⁴¹ Archidamus stresses Athenian power and warns the Spartans not to underestimate it. Pericles gives a precise assessment of that power. On a more thematic level, the uses of the vocabulary of confidence (θάρος, θαρσύνειν) invite us to compare the styles of leadership of Archidamus and Pericles and the use they make of numbers to manage collective emotions. Archidamus attempts to *temper* overconfidence in numbers; Pericles manages to *arouse* Athenian confidence in the abundance of their resources; Archidamus expects that attacks on land will eventually provoke the Athenians to forego rational calculation (λογισμός); Pericles anticipates this strategy and attempts to counter it by offering a speech that *looks* like a calculation.

4 Numerical Inferiority as a Psychological Advantage

The trope of overconfidence in numerical advantage is most explicit in the set of complementary speeches before the battle at Naupactus: the Peloponnesian commanders and the Athenian general Phormio address their respective troops in a pair of speeches that can be understood as a "battle of argument",

36 Note the emphasis on the verb ὁρᾶν that is used thrice in this passage and the phrase ἐν τοῖς ὅμμασι.

37 In 2.21.2, the narrator confirms Archidamus' expectation of the effects of sight: when the Athenians see (εἶδον) the army at Acharnai, the young Athenians, "having never seen (ὃ οὐπω ἐοράχουσιν)" such a sight before, are, "as was natural (εἰχρός)", terribly distressed and are eager to go out to attack the Peloponnesians.

38 Hornblower (1991) *ad loc.*

39 West (1973) 6.

40 Cf. 2.87 (speech of the Peloponnesian commanders) vs. 2.89 (Phormio's speech) (see next section).

41 Hornblower (1991) *ad loc.*

or a battle of prediction and preparation, fought out in advance.⁴² The speeches are constructed antithetically and coordinated carefully to make the arguments correspond closely⁴³ – again inviting comparison. The upshot of the episode is that the Peloponnesians' preparation of the material preconditions (numerical superiority being on their side) is countered by the Athenians' awareness and anticipation of it.⁴⁴

The speech of the Peloponnesians immediately follows their first disgraceful defeat at Patrai against Phormio's ships in spite of their numerical advantage (47 Peloponnesian ships against merely 20 Athenian ones). Afterwards, reinforcements are added to the Peloponnesian fleet to secure their numerical superiority even more. The commanders address their troops, in what is probably best read as a general impression of several speeches delivered in front of several smaller contingents.⁴⁵ Their primary target is to address the fear of the troops (2.87.1), or, to be more precise, to address the fear of fear itself: the commanders systematically downplay the fear among the troops to prevent the brave individuals from losing faith because of their peers' fear.⁴⁶

The bulk of the speech is aimed at rectifying incorrect diagnoses of the causes of the defeat: to invalidate the idea that a past defeat could repeat itself in the future, the commanders blame the defeat on poor preparation and a concatenation of bad luck (2.87.2; 2.87.6). The importance of inexperience is downplayed (2.87.2–3), the importance of bravery (2.87.4)⁴⁷ and of the Peloponnesians' numerical advantage are exaggerated (2.87.6)⁴⁸ with slogans such as “numbers and equipment give victory” (2.87.6–7) giving the Peloponnesians reason to be confident (θαρσοῦντες) (2.87.8). In assessing their chances, the commanders resort to the language of straightforward calculation (2.87.5–7):⁴⁹ the argument is structured as a systematic comparison (ἀντιτάξισθαι) between the assets of two sides, setting advantages (the neuter

42 See Allison (1989) 135–6 for an analysis of the development of the concept of παρασκευή (occurring eleven times in 2.85–89) in this passage.

43 See for a detailed analysis of this pair of speeches Luschkat (1942) 26–32, De Romilly (2012) 80–7ff.; Leimbach (1985) 42–55.

44 Allison (1989) 135–6.

45 Cf. Hornblower (1991) *ad loc.*

46 The commanders use euphemisms to diagnose the situation: “defeat” (ἥσσαν, 2.86.6) turns into “naval battle” (ναυμαχία, 2.87.2), the soldiers' fear (2.86.6) is not treated as a given, but as hypothetical (εἰ) or incidental (τις, 2.87.1), i.e. as something unexpected taking the commanders by surprise, rather than a justifiable reaction to the situation. Leimbach (1985) 29.

47 Edmunds (1975) 98–9.

48 Cf. Allison (1989) 137.

49 De Romilly (2012) 136–7.

comparatives ἐμπειρότερον, τολμηρότερον) against each other from which the plausible inference follows (εὐρίσκομεν εἰκότως) that the surplus is in the favour of the Peloponnesians.

Though such a speech *is* appropriate to the specific circumstances, the emphatic presentation of the point of numerical advantage as a general rule again invites comparison with the cautious Archidamus who repeatedly warned against overconfidence in numbers. The ease with which the commanders reverse Archidamus' slogan in 2.11.4 is unsettling in its opportunism and expressive of their despair. It breeds irony considering the Peloponnesians' recent defeat against a numerically inferior Athenian contingent – an irony amplified by the course of events following this speech (the Peloponnesians will lose again) and contrastively highlighted by Phormio's subsequent speech to *his* men that is presented as a reaction to the Peloponnesians.

Given the Athenians' severe numerical disadvantage against the reinforced Peloponnesian fleet,⁵⁰ it should not surprise us that Phormio argues the exact opposite of the points made by the Peloponnesian commanders. Note, however, that the narratorial introduction to the speech is exceptionally long and explicit about Phormio's motivations behind the speech (2.88.1–3).⁵¹ Phormio, confronted too with the challenge of addressing “the fear for the fear of his men”, and having “noticed that [his men] were alarmed at the odds against them”, calls his troops together “to give them confidence” (θαρσύναι) in their present predicament. The narrator's repetition of the phrase τὸ πλῆθος τῶν νεῶν⁵² brings out Phormio's prognostic skills, as this is precisely the situation that he had anticipated and to which end he had conditioned the reaction of his troops.⁵³ Just like Pericles, who in 2.13 conditioned (2.13.2: παρῆναι ... ἅπερ καὶ πρότερον) the Athenians into understanding that *real* numerical advantage inheres in money, Phormio too has done this talk before (πρότερον) and repeatedly (αἰεὶ), having “accustomed their minds to thinking” “that there was no numerical superiority that they could not face”. It is only the present sight (ὄψις) of the Peloponnesian fleet that temporarily disheartens the troops; so, with conspicuous repetition, Phormio “wanted to refresh their confidence (τοῦ θαρσεῖν)”. The unusually long introduction aligns the two speeches around the theme of “numbers and military confidence”, highlighting that, in contrast

50 The Athenians with 20 ships in total (2.83.1) risked a battle against the 77 ships of the Peloponnesians (2.86.4). See 2.89.5 and Rhodes (1988) 259.

51 Hornblower (1991) *ad loc.*: “inartistically repetitive and long-winded”.

52 2.88.2, used in 2.87.6 by the Peloponnesians.

53 Allison (1989) 138.

to the opportunistic *ad hoc* arguments of Peloponnesians commanders, Phormio's pep talk is actually anchored in a pre-existing training practice.

Phormio's actual speech starts with explicitly addressing the fear for the enemy's numbers and can be read as a pre-emptive subversion of his opponents (and thus a demonstration of superior foresight [2.89.1–5]). The Peloponnesian commanders had stressed the importance of their troops' bravery and their numerical superiority. Phormio insists that the Peloponnesians are not the only people with a claim to courage and explains the vast numerical advantage as a sign of weakness and self-doubt (2.89.2). Using a language of comparison and calculation similar to that of the Peloponnesians,⁵⁴ Phormio argues that the advantage belongs to the Athenians, as the Peloponnesians are not superior to them in natural courage and the Athenians' superior confidence (θρασύτεροι) is based on their superior experience. Numerical superiority is a sign of their lack of confidence,⁵⁵ whereas experience on sea makes the Athenians *more* confident (ἐμπειρότεροι θρασύτεροι; 2.89.4).

In fact, as Phormio explains in an instance of reverse psychology, the Spartans have *more* reason to fear them, for a numerically superior adversary trusts more on strength than on intelligence, whereas outnumbered troops, in the psychology of the adversaries, must be motivated by the security of a firm conviction (2.89.6–7). This is the way the Spartans will reason (ἀ λογιζόμενοι), and hence they will fear the Athenians' unexpected resistance (τῷ οὐκ εἰκότι) more than commensurate preparation. This is a line of *eikos*-argumentation that has a sophistic ring to it, reminiscent of Protagorean stock-examples of "making the weaker logos stronger",⁵⁶ but also to Archidamus, who had insisted that the Spartans always prepare against an enemy on the assumption that his plans are good (1.84.3).⁵⁷

Each party has a different analysis of morale. The outcome of the battle unambiguously demonstrates that Phormio is one up on the Spartans: the Athenians win, and their victory is determined by the fear that overtakes the Peloponnesians, making them confused, counterproductive, and prone to mistakes, whereas the Athenians are encouraged (showing θάρσος) and capable of acting "from a single command" (2.92.1–4).

54 De Romilly (2012) 136–7.

55 2.89.2: the Peloponnesians' confidence (θαρσοῦσιν) is not constitutional to them but arises from successes on land.

56 E.g. Arist. *Rh.* 2.24 (1402a16–28). The technique already occurs in Antiphon's *Tetralogies* (e.g. the εἰκός-argumentation in *Tetralogy* 1.2.2.3). On the ancient tradition that Thucydides was a student of Antiphon, see Marcellinus, *Vit. Thuc.* 22.

57 Cf. Allison (1989) 138.

The mere use of numerical information naturally belongs to the subject matter of warfare. It is the interaction of a series of speeches in which such numerical reasoning occurs that suggests thematic relevance of the relation between numbers, confidence and certainty in warfare – especially the danger of overconfidence attached to numerical reasoning.

5 Inferior Numbers Do Not Necessarily Imply Defeat

Throughout his work, Thucydides uses the vocabulary of λογίζεσθαι to refer to general processes of inferential reasoning (ἐκλογίζομαι “to think”, λογισμός “reflection”) and specifically to cognitive inferential processes associated with numbers, such as calculation and other types of instrumental reasoning.⁵⁸ Both Archidamus and Pericles contrast confidence (θάρσος) with rational deliberation (λογισμός): when Archidamus ponders about the likelihood that the Athenians will after all succumb to anger and fight, he makes the observation that when suffering injuries and losses, people will be least inclined for reflection (λογισμός; 2.11.7–9) and, consequently, more prone to rush into action. Pericles, in his Funeral Oration, famously claims that the Athenians are exceptional in combining daring (τολμᾶν) and deliberation (ἐκλογίζεσθαι; 2.40.3), implying that confident courage (θάρσος) is usually the product of ignorance and hence the opposite of reflection (λογισμός) that breeds hesitation.

This standard opposition between confidence and rational calculation is echoed by Demosthenes in the precarious situation on the battlefield of Pylos when he paradoxically urges his men to forgo calculation (4.10.1–2), seemingly rejecting the Periclean virtues of intelligence and calculation.⁵⁹ Demosthenes urges his men that this is not the place or moment to show one’s wit⁶⁰ by “exactly calculating (ἐκλογιζόμενος) all the perils that surround us”, for “in emergencies calculation (λογισμὸν) is out of place”. The “calculation” that Demosthenes has in mind is the kind of inference that men tend to draw when confronted with intimidating relays of triremes, i.e. the seemingly incontrovertible conclusion

58 Price (2001) 265 argues that when Thucydides uses forms of λογίζεσθαι in his narratorial voice, there is always the connotation of calculation directed at immediate advantage, “neglecting not only ethical considerations but even one’s own long-range interests”.

59 For another rejection of intelligence: see Cleon’s speech in the Mytilinaean debate, 3.37.3–5.

60 See Rhodes (1998) 219 on ξύνεσις as a typically Athenian virtue in Thucydides.

that the battle is already lost at the outset. Instead, Demosthenes urges them to adopt an attitude of blind impetuosity.⁶¹

The rest of Demosthenes' speech contradicts this seemingly anti-intellectual sentiment:⁶² he offers a systematic reassessment of the situation, arguing that the difficulty of the landing on the shore will be in the Athenians' favour as long as they stand their ground.⁶³ Demosthenes, moreover, offers an alternative interpretation of the numerical odds (4.10.4–5). Numerosity itself (πληθός; 4.10.2, 4.10.4) needs not to alarm the troops. Given the rocky terrain, the Spartans may not get into a position where they can take advantage of their numerosity, as armies on land can reap the advantages of numerical superiority, "because everything else is equal", but sea battles require a *different* calculus because on sea there are more things beyond human control. The difficulties of the opponent counterbalance (ἀντιπάλους) the Athenians' numerical situation – appealing to the type of rational calculation, and to the language of comparison,⁶⁴ that he denounced at the outset of his speech. Demosthenes succeeds in encouraging his troops.⁶⁵

While Demosthenes denounces the use of overmuch λογισμός in an emergency situation, his own argument relies on a willingness and ability of his audience to recalculate the odds. Behind the overt rejection of the value of intelligence lies a general's monopolization of calculation: in war situations, it may not always be self-evident *what* it is that we need to count in order to assess our chances. Those are the times in which a general ought to take charge and position himself as a teacher of the masses by explicitly discouraging people from drawing their own conclusions from the facts at hand.

6 An Alternative Battle-Speech

The relation between numbers and confidence is a recurring theme throughout Thucydides' *History*. In moments of crisis, leaders take control over the

61 Leimbach (1985) 58–9 notes that Demosthenes uses only abstract nouns in describing the risks that the army is facing (δεινόν, ἀνάγκη) and seems to avoid a more concrete assessment of the situation.

62 Luschnat (1942) 35–6.

63 This command is carried out in the narrative at 4.12.2. Cf. Morrison (2006) 262, who shows that Demosthenes' anticipations are confirmed in the narrative of 4.12–13.

64 E.g. the use of the adjective ἀντίπαλος, also used in by the Peloponnesian commanders at Naupactus (2.89.6–7).

65 Retrospectively, the narrator refers to the speech with ἐθάρσησαν μᾶλλον "[the Athenians] felt more confident" (4.11.1).

way military numbers are interpreted and take charge over *what* needs to be counted in the situation at hand.

What are the implications for Pericles' list in 2.13? First, the emphatic framing in the vocabulary of boosting confidence, and its juxtaposition with Archidamus' battle-speech before the Peloponnesians, position Pericles' list in a series of battle-speeches that use numbers to boost collective morale. As battle-speeches do not function in contexts of decision-making, but serve to encourage troops to execute decisions already taken, the communicative function of the numbers used in such contexts should not so much be understood in terms of informative value, but in terms of their capacity to motivate and encourage, to incite confidence or inspire caution in their addressees – and hence should be evaluated as such by the reader.

Pericles' speech in 2.13 fits into this series and forms a complementary reaction on Archidamus' battle speech in 2.11. However, 2.13 also deviates from the pattern on three points: unlike the typical battle speeches where numerosity (πλῆθος) is talked *about*, Pericles' speech is the only one that *uses* actual numbers. Moreover, Pericles' speech does not precede a battle, nor does it address an army. Finally, Thucydides does not give us Pericles' words in direct speech but in *oratio obliqua*.

As we have seen in Section 3, the challenge that Pericles has to meet is to prepare the citizens for something that they are about to *see*: the sheer sight of Attica being destroyed will in itself be provocative – just as the mere sight of a magnificent army can inspire either panic or confidence. Part of what war-speeches do is to manage the visceral effects of this sight – to restrain overconfidence and fear, or to arouse confidence – by reinterpreting what people think they see or by downplaying the importance of what they see. Pericles' magnificent list of Athens' resources offers a verbal substitute for the visual effects of a magnificent army: it inspires θάρσος to stay on course and to abide by the strategy that was decided on.

Pericles' speech is not a typical battle-speech, because it does not take place before the troops, but before the citizens in the Assembly. It is not about inciting soldiers to actions, but about *inaction*, about refraining from reacting to the imminent provocations of the Spartan troops and the disturbing sight of the destruction of their homes. It is a demonstration of the superior foresight of Pericles, who correctly anticipates Archidamus' expectation that the Athenians would let go of rational calculation and who overrules the sight of destruction with the verbal and numerical display of Athens' power.⁶⁶

66 An instructive parallel is Pericles' funeral oration that can be seen (and has been seen already in antiquity, e.g. by Ps.-Dion. Hal. *Rhet.* 8.9) as a blending of epideictic and exhortative oratory. Cf. Zoido (2007).

The speech *is* didactic, in the way that battle-speeches are instructive: it is not meant to facilitate deliberation, but it rather resembles Demosthenes' corrective calculation or Phormio's habitual efforts to condition his troops towards a correct reaction to an opponent that is numerically superior, or, as in this case, to provocations of an opponent yet to be met with restraint. Hence, the speech is better assessed not so much in terms of factual correctness, but by the measure of its efficacy in a battle situation where an army may face odds that result from decisions already taken. The speech, moreover, *is* a financial paragraph, but its significance lies in the fact that it is delivered in lieu of another type of numerical pep talk that thematizes either the numerical inferiority of the opponent or the irrelevance of their numbers. To Pericles' long-term strategy, power is quantified in a different way: it is not landed manpower that counts; his war is won with other resources.⁶⁷

A final question emerges. It seems significant that later in Book 2, in Pericles' obituary, it is his foresight⁶⁸ that is praised by Thucydides' authorial judgment;⁶⁹ the plague was the only event not foreseen by Pericles; his assessment of Athenian resources had proven brilliantly correct.⁷⁰ This raises the vexed question of Thucydides' implicit authorial judgment of Pericles. Does Thucydides endorse Pericles' trust in numbers? Or does he present a Pericles who makes the fallacy of overconfidence in numbers?

This is a complex matter, involving the question why this speech is rendered in indirect discourse.⁷¹ One factor may be that the presentation in indirect speech enables the authorial voice to mediate between speech and external audience. The verbs of speaking used by the narrator colour our interpretation of the speech, making clear that we are not dealing with a symbouleutic speech, offering numerical data to inform the decision-making process, but with a range of speech acts. These include a pre-emptive declaration

67 Kallet (1993); (1994).

68 His *πρόνοια*, here evoked by the verbal form *προέγνω*.

69 2.65.11–13. Pericles' assessment of Athens' resources was correct as an assessment for a war with the Peloponnesians (not for other, irresponsible imperial adventures). Foster (2010) 216.

70 Yunis (1996) 67–71; Mader (2007). See Edmunds (1975) 70–88, however, who emphasizes the shortcomings of Pericles' calculations that underestimated the impact of chance in wars (2.74.4).

71 Drefke (1877) argues that Thucydides intended to insert a full speech here, but changed his mind on finding the subject "unsuitable for readers". Hornblower too judges the subject matter to be "too technical" to include in a speech; moreover, according to him, indirect discourse is an indication that the material is intended to be treated as factual. It seems relevant to me that the other key speech that features numbers, Nicias' final words in the Sicilian debate (6.25.2), is also rendered in indirect speech.

(προηγόρευε; 2.13.1), an instruction (παρήγει; 2.13.2),⁷² encouragement (θαρσεῖν ἐκέλευειν; 2.13.3, ἐθάρσυνεν; 2.13.6) and verbal display of the magnificence of Athens (ἀπέφαινε; 2.13.5; 2.13.8). Whereas direct speech may serve to *show* an oration and its effects, indirect speech allows the narrator to *tell* and *explain* how Pericles' extensive list of numbers is to be interpreted.

This interpretation is in line with the reading of Edith Foster, who emphasizes the importance of the narratorial intrusions in 2.13:⁷³ throughout we see the narrator interrupt the report of Pericles' words by explaining them.⁷⁴ The most salient example is the point where Pericles mentions the six thousand talents of coined money on the Acropolis in 2.13.3. The narratorial voice intrudes:

Ὑπαρχόντων δὲ ἐν τῇ ἀκροπόλει ἔτι τότε ἀργυρίου ἐπισήμου ἑξακισχιλίων ταλάντων (τὰ γὰρ πλείστα τριακοσίων ἀποδέοντα μύρια ἐγένετο, ἀφ' ὧν ἕς τε τὰ προπύλαια τῆς ἀκροπόλεως καὶ ἄλλα οἰκοδομήματα καὶ ἑς Ποτειδαίαν ἀπανηλώθη).

Thuc. 2.13.3

[T]here still remained on the Acropolis a sum of six thousand talents in coined silver (at its highest this capital reserve had stood at nine thousand seven hundred talents, from which had been drawn the expenditure on the Propylaea of the Acropolis and the other buildings, and on Potidaea).⁷⁵

Here, the narratorial voice intrudes by qualifying this statement with ἔτι τότε "still at the time" (the temporal orientation of the reporting narrator, instead of the speaking Pericles) and by explaining (γὰρ introduces an explanatory parenthesis)⁷⁶ that from the original 9700 in the Treasury, almost a third has been spent by Pericles on his building program. This reading of the parenthesis as an authorial comment is corroborated by the fact that the finite verbs in this sentence have aorist aspect (ἐγένετο, ἀπανηλώθη; the only two finite verbal forms in aorist in the entire speech), marking a transition from an "observing mode", that presents the speech from the perspective of an observer who remembers it (with imperfects expressing "displaced immediacy"), to facts

⁷² Or rather: urging to stick to the policy previously decided on.

⁷³ Foster (2010) 169 n. 42 on the high concentration of verbs of speaking in this part of the reported speech as a dissociating mechanisms on the part of the narrator.

⁷⁴ Foster (2010) 163 nn. 27, 28, 29.

⁷⁵ Tr. M. Hammond (2009).

⁷⁶ Stadter (2011–2) objects that the γὰρ-clause could equally plausibly introduce a clarification by Pericles himself.

that are presented in relation to the present by the intrusion of the knowing narrator.⁷⁷

This combination of report and commentary creates a tension: Pericles advises the Athenians to “keep the allies in check” (2.13.2);⁷⁸ Thucydides reveals that one third of the money kept in the Treasury is spent on Pericles’ building program.⁷⁹ Pericles boasts about the Athenian resources; Thucydides casts doubt about the sustainability of his policy. Pericles incites confidence in an invincible Athens⁸⁰ with calculable amounts of wealth as if they are secure;⁸¹ Thucydides suggests fragility. Pericles takes people out of the equation, by privileging money and resources as the fundamental explanation of power;⁸² Thucydides’ vividly emotional description of Attic migration (2.14–17)⁸³ and the effect of the sight that the Peloponnesian army has on the young Athenians (2.21.2), as well as his detached report of casualty numbers throughout the *History* brings people back into the narrative.

Thucydides may endorse Pericles’ foresight as far as his estimation of resources is concerned (2.13.9; 2.65.13). The narrator never disputes the accuracy of the list.⁸⁴ Moreover, Thucydides, more than once, displays deep appreciation for Pericles’ effectiveness in managing the mass psychology of his audience.⁸⁵ But by placing Pericles’ list of resources in a series of battle-speeches that show the speaker’s ability to steer mass emotions in crisis situations, Thucydides draws attention to the fact that numbers are not inert bearers of data that allow for mechanical inferences. Numbers are objects of interpretation, and battle situations call for leaders capable of taking control over the way numbers are interpreted, by engaging in reinterpretations of the calculations (Demosthenes) or of almost sophistic interpretations of interpretations of numbers (Phormio), or by taking control over the decision what *is* and what *is not* to be counted – as Pericles does in his unusual yet effective battle-speech.

77 Debnar (2013) 37.

78 Cf. Foster (2010) 168 on the costs of this policy: Athens’ intervention in the revolt at Potidaea may have costed about two thousand talents – an amount hard to justify for the control over such a small contributor.

79 Foster (2010) 168: “Where Pericles shows us how much money the city has, Thucydides shows us how much money the city spends”.

80 Cf. Kallet-Marx (1994) 104.

81 Foster (2010) 168.

82 Cf. Kallet-Marx (1994) 246.

83 2.14.1–15.1. Foster (2010) 174–5.

84 Foster (2010) 173.

85 Cf. Yunis (1996) 59–86.