



Summary :

The naval battle of Abydus (411 BC) marked the fight of the Athenian admirals of the Hellespont fleet against the alliance of the Lacedaemonians with Pharnabazus II during the Ionian War. The confrontation was judged by Alcibiades' intervention in favour of the Athenians.

Date

411 BC

Geographical Location

Abydus, Troad

1. The events according to the literary sources

The naval battle of Abydus was one of the first and most important events of the [Ionian War](#) (412-405 BC). It took place in November 411 BC and the opponents were the Peloponnesian fleet under [Mindarus](#), supported by the Persian infantry and cavalry of [Pharnabazus II](#) (440-373 BC), and the Athenian fleet under the generals Thrasybulus and Thrasylus.

The two ancient writers, [Xenophon](#) and Diodorus Siculus, who recount the events before and during the naval battle, present contradictory versions, which often cause confusion.¹ Diodorus' narration was rejected by earlier historiography. However, this tendency has been modified lately, as the retrieval of the historical events according basically to Xenophon is considered more convincing, but the missing details are provided by the more detailed descriptions of Diodorus.²

Both sources agree that cause of the war was Dorieus' attempt to join forces with Mindarus' fleet, which was at anchor at the [Hellespont](#). Dorieus was a Rhodian general, ally of the Peloponnesians and commanded 14 or 13 ships. Both sides, the Athenians and the Peloponnesians, aimed at assembling the greatest possible number of ships at the Hellespont, hoping for a crucial battle.

Dorieus' movements were noticed by the Athenians, who hurried to prevent him, either with 20 ships, according to Xenophon, or with their entire fleet (74 ships), according to Diodorus. Dorieus, in order to protect his forces, resorted to Rhoeteum, as Xenophon cites, or to [Dardanus](#), as Diodorus reports, where he also disembarked his soldiers, who were placed on strategic points on the coast along with the guard of the city. Xenophon reports that Mindarus realised Dorieus' plight and hastened from Ilium, where he had been sacrificing in [the temple of Athena](#), to help him. However, Diodorus gives a more convincing version as he claims that Mindarus had already been in [Abydus](#). As a consequence, there is disagreement in the sources about the location of the naval battle. Xenophon places it at the sea near Abydus, whereas Diodorus further south, off Dardanus' cape. At this point Xenophon's account of events is very concise, while Diodorus' is quite detailed, based undoubtedly on a reliable -but unspecified- source of that period.

The two fleets fought from dawn till dusk. Mindarus was commanding the right part and the Syracusians were placed on the left side of the Peloponnesian fleet, which numbered 97 ships in total. The infantry and the cavalry of Pharnabazus II had been lined up on the coast. The Athenian fleet, which numbered only 74 ships, was commanded by Thrasybulus on the right flank, who was also the leader, and by Thrasylus on the left.

The battle was fierce and uncertain until [Alcibiades](#) appeared accidentally, coming from Samos, to support the Athenians with 18 ships.³ Both sides felt heartened, believing that their reinforcements had arrived. Then Alcibiades raised a red flag on his boat to signal that he was behind the Athenians. The Lacedaemonians, according to Xenophon, fled to the port of Abydus and lined up their ships one next to another to set a barrier against the Athenians who tried to capture them. The intervention by the infantry and the cavalry of Pharnabazus prevented the complete destruction of the Peloponnesian fleet. It is noteworthy that Pharnabazus himself rode his horse in the water to protect his allies.



The Athenians in this battle captured 30 ships (Xenophon reports a loss of 30 Peloponnesian ships, while Diodoros 10 ships) and they recovered the 15 ships they had lost at the previous battle of Cynossema. When the naval battle had ended, they erected a trophy (*tropaion*) to commemorate their victory and they returned to Sestus. Thrasyllus sailed to Piraeus to announce the glorious victory and ask for reinforcements, while Thrasybulus, after leaving 40 ships at Sestus, led the fleet out of the Hellespont so that he would collect the tax from the allies. The Peloponnesians returned with their fleet to Abydos and at the same time asked Sparta for military and naval reinforcements.⁴

1. Xen., *HG*. 1.1.1-1.1.7; Diod. Sic. 13.45.1-13.47.2. Cf. Plu., *Alc.* 27.

2. Buck, R.J., *Thrasybulus and the Athenian Democracy* (Historia Einzelschriften 120, Stuttgart 1998), pp. 33-35; Bleckmann, B., *Athens Weg in die Niederlage. Die Letzten Jahre des Peloponnesischen Kriegs* (Stuttgart - Leipzig 1998), pp. 42-56; Καραμούτσου-Τέζα, Σ., *Ο Θρασύβουλος και ο Πελοποννησιακός Πόλεμος* (Dissertation, University of Ioannina 1988) p. 71-77.

3. Although the ancient sources emphasise the fact that the arrival of Alcibiades at the place of the battle was accidental, the signal he made to the Athenians implies that it might not have been unexpected after all. Cf. Kagan, D., *The Fall of the Athenian Empire* (New York 1987), p. 232. According to Xenophon, Alcibiades arrived with 18 ships but Diodorus reports 20 ships.

4. Xen., *HG*. 1.1.1-1.1.7; Diod. Sic. 13.45.1-13.47.2. Cf. Pl., *Alc.* 27; Buck, R.J., *Thrasybulus and the Athenian Democracy* (Historia Einzelschriften 120, Stuttgart 1998), p. 33-35; Kagan, D., *The Fall of the Athenian Empire* (New York 1987), pp. 231-233; Lewis, D.M. - Boardman, J. - Davies, J.K. - Ostwald, M., *The Cambridge Ancient History 3 V (The fifth Century B.C.)* (Cambridge 1992), p. 482; Bleckmann, B., *Athens Weg in die Niederlage. Die Letzten Jahre des Peloponnesischen Kriegs* (Stuttgart - Leipzig 1998), pp. 42-56; Χριστόπουλος, Γ.-Μπαστιάς, Γ. (επιμ.), *Ιστορία Ελληνικού Έθνους Γ1* (Αθήνα 1972), pp. 289-290; Καραμούτσου-Τέζα, Σ., *Ο Θρασύβουλος και ο Πελοποννησιακός Πόλεμος* (Dissertation, University of Ioannina 1988) pp. 71-77.

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