CHAPTER 1

One Man, One Vision [483 B.C.]

"So you tell your dream." "Oh, mine is great—all about the city and the ship of state." "Tell the whole thing now, ends and means, from the keel up."

—Aristophanes

ALL THE GLORY OF ATHENS—THE PARTHENON, PLATO'S Academy, the immortal tragedies, even the revolutionary experiment in democracy—can be traced back to one public meeting, one obstinate citizen, and a speech about silver and ships.

On the day of the meeting Themistocles awoke well before dawn. Athenians tended to be early risers, but for him this was no ordinary morning. The Assembly of Athens met on a rocky hilltop near his home about three times each month. The published agenda for today's meeting included a proposal to share out silver from a rich strike recently made in the mines of Attica. Themistocles intended to make a counterproposal. In near darkness he got up from the bed that he shared with

his wife, Archippe, put on his tunic and sandals, and went downstairs.

Breakfast was a simple affair of bread dunked in wine. Many others were astir besides Themistocles. The house was full of children: three sons and two daughters. Even so there was an empty place at the table. The oldest boy, Neocles, had died young, killed in an accident with a horse. As Themistocles prepared for his speech, his younger sons made ready for their daily round of lessons. The sky was brightening over the enclosed courtyard. Themistocles donned his wool cloak, opened the door, and stepped outside. If all went well, by the time he came home for dinner he would have mended his own fortunes and changed his city's future as well.

The house was modest even by Athenian standards. It stood on an unpaved street near a city gate that led to the sea. As Themistocles climbed the rocky hill to the place of the Assembly, Athens gradually came into view: a huddle of some ten thousand flat housetops divided by twisting lanes and by the open space of the Agora, the marketplace and civic center. Smoke rose from ovens, potters' kilns, foundries, and forges. Hemming in the mass of shops and houses was an irregular city wall, mud brick on a stone footing. In the center rose the Acropolis, citadel of Athens.

Athens was in those days a humble place. Many city-states overshadowed it in military strength, religious prestige, or commercial success. Arts and sciences flourished elsewhere. Athens could boast no famous monuments, no remarkable philosophical schools or

feats of engineering, no world-famous sculptures. Even the temples on the Acropolis were outclassed by those in other Greek cities and sanctuaries. Yet Themistocles cherished a vision in which Athens would surpass its rivals. “I cannot tune a harp or play a lyre,” he would say, “but I know how to make a small city great.”

He had no illusions about the rough yet slippery path that led to civic leadership. From their close-knit ranks the blue bloods of Athens looked down on him as an upstart and outsider. His father, Neocles, was neither very rich nor very famous; his mother was not even an Athenian citizen. When Themistocles was a young man, his father had taken him for a walk on the seashore, hoping to deter his son from seeking a career in politics. The two came to a place where old triremes had been hauled up on the beach and left to rot. “Look!” Neocles said, pointing to the abandoned hulks. “See how the people cast off their leaders when they have no more use for them.”

Themistocles reached the topmost ridge of the Pnyx, the hill where the Assembly met, with its wide view of Attica, territory of the Athenian city-state. The surrounding countryside was flat and fertile: good farmland ran right up to the city walls. Humpbacked hills surrounding the plain were clad with timber or scarred with stone quarries. To the south lay Phaleron Bay, the port of Athens, and beyond it the sea. Most painful in Themistocles’ eyes were the unfinished port installations at the Piraeus, four miles away to the southwest, toward the island of Salamis. The city

had undertaken the construction project on the rocky promontory at Themistocles' own recommendation ten years earlier. He had intended these walls to transform Athens into a sea power and to protect the citizens in case of an invasion—an invasion that Themistocles believed to be inevitable.

In the time of Themistocles' grandfather, the distant Persians had begun to build the largest and most powerful empire that the world had ever seen. Themistocles had believed, and still believed, that the Great King of Persia meant to conquer Athens just as he had already conquered Greek cities in Asia Minor and the Aegean islands. Ten years earlier there had been warning signs that the Persians would invade Attica with an army coming overland and a fleet attacking by sea.

As archon or chief magistrate for the year, Themistocles persuaded the Assembly to fortify the Piraeus promontory with its three natural harbors. The walled port would provide a safe refuge for Athenian families while the citizens manned their ships and repelled the Persian fleet. Trusting his foresight, the Athenians had expended much money and effort to raise a massive wall of stone blocks clamped together with iron and lead, a wall so thick that two oxcarts could pass along it. But within a few years the Persian threat seemingly evaporated, and the costly project was left unfinished. The wall and the stumps of towers at the Piraeus now stood to only half the height that Themistocles had envisioned, a constant reminder of his poor powers as a prophet.

Athens had incurred the wrath of the Persians when Themistocles was still in his impressionable twenties. At one of the most memorable meetings ever held on the Pnyx, Aristagoras of Miletus had asked the Athenians to support a rebellion of Ionian Greeks against their overlord, King Darius of Persia. With Athenian help, the revolt might grow from a limited fight for freedom to a war that would reach all the way to the Persian capital at Susa, beyond the Tigris River. The Athenians voted to aid their kinsmen in Asia Minor and sent twenty ships filled with troops across the Aegean Sea. These men joined the Ionians in attacking the Persian provincial capital at Sardis. A fire broke out during the sack of the city, burning most of the houses along with the temple of the Mother Goddess Cybele.

Retribution was swift. A Persian army caught the Athenians as they marched back to the coast and beat them in battle. When the twenty ships limped home and the defeated troops told their story, the Assembly voted to have nothing more to do with the Ionian rebellion. The struggle lasted for six years. Shortly before Themistocles was elected archon, the Great King's navy defeated the fleet of the Ionian rebels near an island called Lade. Themistocles was convinced that Athens' turn would be next: hence the fortification of the Piraeus.

As Themistocles prophesied, Darius did send an army and fleet to conquer Athens. That first Persian attempt ended when a violent north wind drove the Great King's triremes onto the rocky coast of Mount

Athos in the northern Aegean, where the Persians lost hundreds of triremes and thousands of men. The second Persian invasion came to grief at Marathon, in the northwestern corner of Attica. Led by the charismatic Athenian general Miltiades, Athens' phalanx of heavily armed soldiers called hoplites defeated a seaborne expeditionary force on a plain that lay just over twenty-six miles from Athens. King Darius' third attempt to conquer the Athenians was in preparation when he died, three years after Marathon. Since then, rebellions within the empire had kept the Persians at home. Themistocles looked like the boy who cried wolf in Aesop's fable. The city was still safe and free. After so many false alarms Athenians stopped believing in the Persian threat and stopped working on Themistocles' folly at the Piraeus as well.

Yet the man himself had never lost his conviction. At today's meeting he still intended to strengthen Athens' power to resist Persia, but by oblique means. The Assembly would have no patience if he predicted a Persian invasion yet again. No, Persia would not even be mentioned. There would be no direct attack on public opinion. Themistocles would use *mêtis* instead.

This distinctively Greek quality was virtually untranslatable into other languages. Indeed it ran contrary to the values of many nations, most notably the Persians. *Mêtis* embraced craft, cunning, skill, and intelligence, the power of invention and the subtlety of art. It was the weapon of the weak and the outnumbered. Athenians knew that no physical force was mightier

than the mind. In the world of myth, Mêtis was the ancient goddess from whom Athena derived her own wisdom. Not brawn but *mêtis* was the special attribute of Athena's favorite hero, Odysseus, whose stratagem of the Trojan Horse succeeded where ten years of direct assaults had failed. Every educated Athenian knew the famous lines in Homer's *Iliad* on the uses of *mêtis.*

To win the prize, keep mêtis *well in mind.*

By mêtis, *not brute force, men fell great oaks.*

By mêtis *steersmen on the wine-dark sea*

Steady their swift ships through the tearing gale.

By mêtis *charioteer beats charioteer.*

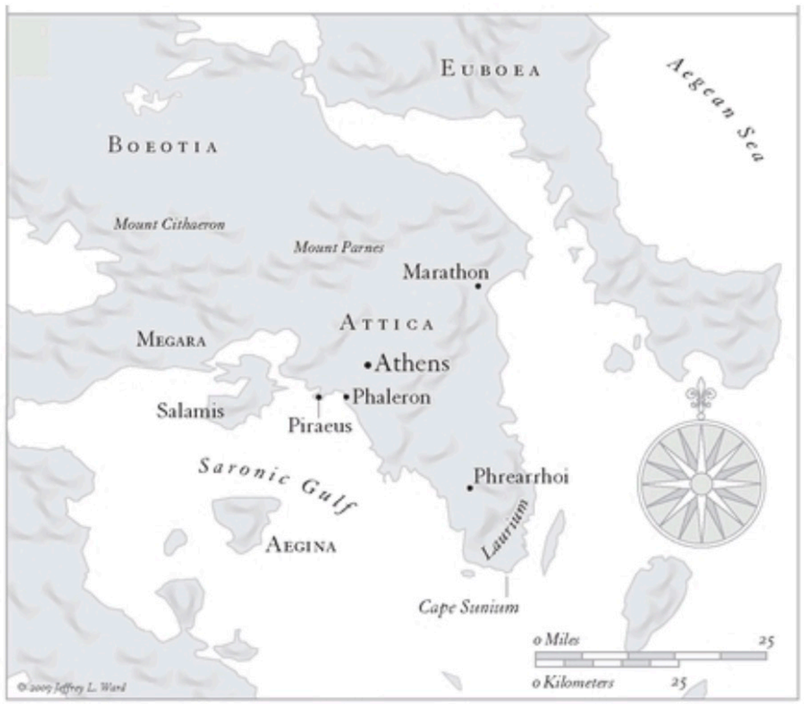
As a fervent advocate of naval power, Themistocles saw further than other Athenians of his time. There was more at stake than the Persian threat. Athens' future, he believed, lay with the sea. The projected fortification of the Piraeus had been just one step toward transforming his city into a maritime center with a commercial emporium and a strong fleet of warships. Over the past decade those hopes had been repeatedly frustrated. But when the agenda for the upcoming Assembly meeting was posted a few days earlier, listing a proposal concerning income from the Athenian silver mines at Laurium, he realized that fate or luck had finally turned in his favor.

Laurium ("Place of Silver") was a rugged knot of hills near the southern tip of Attica, about twenty-five miles

from Athens. Prospectors had been working the Laurium lode for a thousand years. They had first dug out the greenish ore from surface deposits, then followed the glittering veins deep underground. By Themistocles' time there were shafts that reached depths of three hundred feet. Miners, most of them slaves, were lowered into the shafts armed with iron picks and clay lamps that held enough oil for an eight-to-ten-hour shift. Ropes and winches lifted the ore to the surface, where it was crushed, washed, sieved, and smelted. In Athens the mint master received the silver and used his iron anvils and punches to manufacture the city's coins or "owls," stamped on one side with the helmeted head of Athena, and on the other with the goddess's owl and an olive sprig.

Other Greeks had to procure their precious metals from the Aegean islands or the mountains of the north. The Athenian people owned the Laurium mines collectively, but the actual investment and operations were privatized. Mine leases were auctioned off at the start of each year to the highest bidders, and the Athenians also collected a percentage of each mine's yield at the end of the annual lease.

ATTICA, ca. 500 B.C.



The lands of Themistocles' family lay at a township called Phrearroi ("Wells"), on the edge of the mining district. He knew that in recent years the miners had unexpectedly broken through to a zone where the ore lay in a vast subterranean reef. The annual trickle of silver from Laurium soon swelled to a mighty stream. Inspectors reported the increase in silver to the Board of Mines, which passed the news on to the councilors. The lucky strike at Laurium created a surplus big enough for a public distribution. The Council was submitting a proposal to keep half the silver in the treasury but to divide the rest in equal portions among all thirty thousand citizens. According to the draft resolution on the notice boards, ten drachmas would be the amount of the dole. Themistocles, however, had other ideas.

That morning a flag had been hoisted at daybreak to remind citizens of the Assembly meeting. Before Themistocles arrived at the Pnyx, officials had climbed to the hilltop and purified the place with prayers and sacrifices. Soon the ground in front of the speaker's platform began to fill as citizens came up from the Agora. The noise increased: an irrepressible Athenian hubbub of greetings, comments, arguments, obscenities, and jokes. At the rear of the talkative and straggling procession walked a line of slaves. They carried a rope dripping with dye and herded the slow-moving citizens toward the meeting place. Any laggard found with a red stripe on his tunic would be marked down for a fine.

The nine archons took their seats, led by the eponymous archon who gave his name to the year. Ten years ago Themistocles had held this post; now it was a man named Nicodemus. Places were also reserved for the fifty Council members whose tribe happened to be presiding that day in the annual rotation. The secretary prepared his stylus and wax tablets. At a signal from the president, the herald stepped up to the speaker's platform and spoke the invocation. There was no separation of religion and state in Athens: the government had no higher duty than propitiating the gods through almost constant rites and sacrifices. After the invocation the herald read out the first draft resolution on the Council's agenda and cried, "Who wishes to speak?" The Assembly of Athens was open for business.

The thoughts of most citizens that morning were pleasantly occupied with the question "What shall I do with ten drachmas?" The sum was enough to buy a new riding cloak, an exceptionally fine painted cup, or even an ox. It was a negligible bonus for men in the city's upper three citizen classes—the three or four hundred richest landowners, the twelve hundred horsemen, and the ten thousand hoplites who donned their bronze armor to fight in the phalanx. But for the great mass of Athens' landless workers, the citizens who were known as thetes, ten drachmas represented a major supplement to their scanty incomes.

These men of the fourth and lowest class numbered about twenty thousand. Most worked for hire in agriculture, manufacturing, or transport. Individually they lacked wealth or influence, but as a mass they were the *demos,* the "people" at the heart of Athenian democracy. Though the thetes constituted a clear majority of citizens, the city's laws still barred them from holding any elected office. This nondemocratic restriction was likewise placed on the hoplites. Unlike hoplites, however, thetes were excluded even from membership on the Council of Five Hundred. Thus the agenda for Assembly meetings rested firmly in the hands of the wealthy, and the thetes could only vote yea or nay to proposals that seemed good to members of the upper classes. At the time when Themistocles stepped forward to make his speech, Athens may have called itself a democracy, but in some ways it was a democracy in name only.

In anticipation of the Assembly's favorable vote on the silver dole, the mint had struck thousands of silver coins for distribution. One side of each coin was stamped with the head of a smiling Athena, wearing a helmet and a pearl earring, while the other displayed the goddess's owl, emblem of her wisdom. Unlike the Spartans, who claimed to scorn private wealth and did not even have a coinage or currency of their own, Athenians were hard-headed men who knew the value of a drachma. They were not likely to pass up such a windfall.

In response to the herald's cry, Themistocles came forward and mounted the speaker's platform or bema. He was a robust man of forty, with a wide challenging gaze and a neck like a bull. His hair was cropped short in the style of a workingman, not a noble. Along with an infallible memory for names and faces, he possessed one other prerequisite for a political career in Athens: a loud voice.

No one read from notes while addressing the Assembly: speeches were either memorized or extemporized. Themistocles had to keep in mind a number of rules while speaking. He must not wander from his point or address more than one topic. He was not permitted to slander a fellow citizen, step off the bema while speaking, or assault the president. Most important, he could not speak twice on the same proposal unless ordered by the Assembly to do so. Before stepping down from the platform Themistocles would have to provide every detail of his plan, explain all its benefits, and rebut in advance every possible argument

against it. It was most unwise to incur the Assembly's impatience, usually expressed with hooting, booing, and other verbal abuse. But so long as a speaker broke no rules, he could not be interrupted.

Without flamboyant gestures or theatrical tricks Themistocles faced his fellow citizens and presented his proposal. The Council had reported the surplus of silver and proposed a dole. He believed that there was a better use for the silver. Rather than break up the enormous hoard, he urged the Athenians to devote the year's mining revenue, all six hundred thousand drachmas of it, to a single project: the building of a navy. With the full amount Athens could provide itself with one hundred new warships, fast triremes designed for naval warfare. In combination with the existing fleet of about seventy and some modest annual additions, the total would quickly climb to two hundred. This was about the maximum number of ships that the city could hope to man from its own population. At a stroke, Athens would become the greatest naval power in Greece.

This was no quixotic request: the fleet would protect the Athenians from a very real and immediate threat to their security. Themistocles aimed his revolutionary proposal at an enemy visible to all. From where he stood Themistocles could point across the sea to the dark heights of Aegina, an island that dominated the southern horizon. For generations an aristocracy of merchant princes had ruled Aegina, lording it over the Athenians in both naval power and maritime trade. Athenian "owls" competed in foreign markets with