Athenian Empire
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THE NATURE OF THE EMPIRE

Some might question whether the Athenian Empire of the 5th century BCE (all dates here are BCE) should properly be labeled an “empire,” since Athens’ domination extended primarily over other Greek communities rather than “foreign” peoples, and was confined to the coasts and islands of the Aegean Sea. Burbank and Cooper (2010: 8–10) define empires as “expansionist … polities that maintain distinction and hierarchy as they incorporate new people,” the goal being “to collect resources in a regular … way … without imposing uniformity in culture or administration.” Athens meets these criteria, since it exerted political and military influence over many other independent states and exploited their economic resources, a departure from the ways Greek states previously interacted and a portent of future political formations.

SOURCES

Unfortunately, the rise and heyday of the empire falls between the accounts of the great 5th-century historians: Herodotus, who concludes with the Persian invasion of Greece in 480–479, and Thucydides, who focuses on the Peloponnesian War that erupted in 431. Thucydides includes a brief but invaluable account of the Pentekontaetia, the “50 years” between the two wars, and the evolution of Athenian power. Plutarch, although living six centuries later, wrote biographies of Athenian leaders, drawing upon sources now lost to us. Xenophon’s Hellenica begins where Thucydides breaks off, recounting the end of the war and the empire. Tragedies and comedies performed on the Athenian stage allude to relevant events and institutions. Stone inscriptions – thanks to the Athenian democracy’s habit of publicizing decisions – illuminate the workings of empire. Other sources, such as fragments of lost texts, coins, and archaeological finds, supplement our knowledge.

ORIGINS

The Athenian Empire emerged as a consequence of the Persian invasion of Greece in 480–479. While Greeks on the western coast of Anatolia were already subjects of the Achaemenid Empire, and most states in northern and central Greece surrendered as Xerxes’ huge forces drew near, a group of southern states led by Sparta chose to fight. Athens provided the most ships, and, after the city had been sacked by the enemy, its leader Themistocles engineered the Greek naval victory at nearby Salamis.

Following the defeat of Persia’s land forces at Plataea, the Hellenic League (as moderns call the alliance) went on the offensive. However, Sparta lacked commitment to this new, primarily naval, and open-ended phase of the war, and the allies resented the arrogant Spartan commander, Pausanias. Thucydides claims that the allies urged the Athenian commanders to take the lead, though other evidence suggests the Athenians covertly fomented unrest. In any case, a change of leadership made sense. Athens had the ships and experience for a naval campaign, and most...
Figure 1  The Athenian Empire on the eve of the Peloponnesian War (431 BCE).
Greek states awaiting liberation were, like the Athenians, Ionian Greeks.

In 477 representatives from states eager to prosecute the war with Persia gathered on the centrally located island of Delos to form a military confederation that we call the Delian League (referred to in ancient sources as “the Athenians and their allies”). The ceremonial sinking of ingots in the sea symbolized a permanent alliance, to continue until the ingots floated to the surface. Their purpose was a common defense, revenge on Persia, and liberation of Greek states still under Persian control. Member states sat on a council that decided League policy, while Athenians provided military leadership and superintended the treasury. Aristides, an Athenian widely respected for his integrity, assessed the resources of each member to determine its contribution in manned ships or money.

EARLY YEARS AND TRANSFORMATION

What began as a voluntary alliance of states confronting the Persian menace was gradually transformed, over the next three decades, into an Athenian empire.

Led by the Athenian admiral, Cimon, League forces aggressively pursued the war against Persia, taking strongholds, liberating Greek communities, and driving the Persian navy (primarily Phoenicians from coastal Lebanon) out of the Aegean. A major victory at the outlet of the Eurymedon River in southern Anatolia in the early 460s (there is uncertainty about precise dates for some events of the Pentekontaeitia) secured naval supremacy in the eastern Mediterranean. However, there were already signs of the differing aims and commitment of the Athenians and their allies. In 472 Carysrustus was forced to join the League; in 470 the island of Naxos tried to leave the League but was forcibly dragged back; and in 465 League forces besieged Thasos, even though the quarrel was between Thasos and Athens over control of gold mines on the adjacent Thracian mainland. Thucydides analyzed the emerging dynamic (Jowett 1900: 1.99):

The causes which led to the defections of the allies were of different kinds, the principal being their neglect to pay the tribute or to furnish ships, and, in some cases, failure of military service. For the Athenians were exacting and oppressive, using coercive measures towards men who were neither willing nor accustomed to work hard. And for various reasons they soon began to prove less agreeable leaders than at first. They no longer fought upon an equality with the rest of the confederates, and they had no difficulty in reducing them when they revolted. Now the allies brought all this upon themselves; for the majority of them disliked military service and absence from home, and so they agreed to contribute their share of the expense instead of ships. Whereby the Athenian navy was proportionally increased, while they themselves were always untrained and unprepared for war when they revolted.

While not denying that the Athenians were opportunistic and aggressive, Thucydides lays greater blame on the passivity of the allies. Perhaps the very success of the League led to their complacency and unwillingness to make further sacrifices.

THE HEIGHT OF EMPIRE

In 454 the treasury and headquarters of the League were transferred from Delos to Athens. This was probably justified as a security measure after the defeat of a force sent to help Egyptian rebels against their Persian overlords. There is no mention of meetings of the League council after this. From this point, if not earlier, one can certainly speak of an Athenian Empire. (In formal documents the Athenians continued to refer to the empire as “Athens and its allies,” but internally they
sometimes spoke of their arché, their “rule” or “empire.”"

Funds were stored in the Temple of Athena, and convention dictated that a tithe of 1/60th be set aside to thank the deity. Amounts were recorded on stone stelae, of which substantial fragments survive, allowing scholars to reconstruct the annual payments of member states from 454 on. These Athenian Tribute Lists reveal the identity of the nearly 200 states in the empire, the regions into which it was organized, and the amounts paid.

Athens probably concluded a treaty with Persia at mid-century. No surviving contemporary source mentions it, but texts from the 4th century onward refer to a “Peace of Callias,” negotiated by an Athenian ambassador of that name, in which Athens agreed to stop attacking Persian territory in return for a Persian pledge not to bring ships into the Aegean or troops closer than a day’s march from the Anatolian coast. Whether or not there was a formal treaty around 449, there was minimal friction between Athens and the Persians for the next four decades.

The cessation of hostilities with Persia may have raised questions about the ongoing need for the League. Scholars have interpreted absences from the tribute lists as evidence for a spate of rebellions in the 440s. There is controversy about the dates of inscriptions stipulating arrangements for states whose rebellions had been crushed. At issue is whether certain inscriptions should be dated in the 440s or in the 420s. Regulations imposed on Chalcis required the inhabitants to take an oath “not to revolt against the Athenian demos [the citizen body]” and “to be obedient to the Athenian demos.” It is an open question whether this reflects Athenian attitudes toward subjects at the height of empire or only the critical circumstances later created by the Peloponnesian War.

### INSTRUMENTS OF EMPIRE

The Athenian Empire was unique in the Greek world up to that time. The small city-states – with relatively simple political institutions, limited financial resources, and a citizen militia – lacked the means to control others. Wars between neighbors were common, with disputes settled by a short, sharp battle, and the victors, mostly farmers who had to get back to vital agricultural tasks, were unable to dominate the losers’ territory and population.

Enormous naval power allowed Athens to become an imperial state. Building and maintaining ships and paying their crews, while expensive, was supported by tribute. A fleet could descend on coastal communities at any time, but other than in the aftermath of a rebellion, the Athenians eschewed overt political control of their subjects (although infringing their autonomy in various ways discussed later).

Tribute (phoros, “what is brought”) was the most visible sign of Athenian domination; by mid-century only a few large islands – Lesbos, Chios, and Samos – still supplied ships to the League fleet. States sometimes disappear from the tribute lists for years, or pay varying amounts. Inscriptions contain regulations to block dodges used to escape payment. Every four years a fresh assessment of resources was made to determine each state’s fair share.

The Athenians relied on friendly elements in the cities of the empire. Athens was represented by a local called a proxenos, and regulations stipulated severe penalties for harming him. Many cities were democracies, and supporters of democracy were intrinsically friendly to Athens’ democracy. These “friends” were expected to report anti-Athenian sentiments or activities in their communities. To protect friends and harm enemies, the most serious legal cases in
subject states were tried before Athenian juries.

The Athenians sometimes interfered in the internal politics of subject states. After suppressing rebellions, they might install a democratic government, and they backed democrats engaged in civil strife with oligarchs. However, they also tolerated cooperative oligarchic governments. Inscriptions reveal garrisons, garrison commanders, and governors in cities that had rebelled. Episkopi, “inspectors,” apparently traveled around and kept an eye on local affairs.

The most extreme punishment for rebellion was to confiscate agricultural territory and award plots to Athenian klerouchoi (“lot holders”). These may have been poor Athenian citizens, simultaneously acquiring farms and serving as a military presence in sensitive places, but they may also have included wealthier absentee landlords collecting rents from former owners who continued to work the land.

One inscription, known as the Coinage Decree, required all subjects to use Athenian silver coins, weights, and measures (they could retain their own copper small change). Perhaps Athens claimed this would enhance the prosperity of all by simplifying commercial exchanges. Because of the controversy over dating inscriptions, we again don’t know whether this reflects conditions at the height of empire or was an emergency wartime measure.

Finally, Athens required the allies to send offerings – a cow and a suit of armor – to the festival of Athena, now the patron goddess of the empire.

Historians have argued about the “popularity” of the Athenian Empire with its subject peoples, a debate that often had more to do with contemporary politics than ancient history. Given that Greek city-states were jealous of their independence, collection of tribute and interference in internal political, judicial, and economic affairs was bound to breed resentment. Probably people who advocated democratic government in their home communities valued the backing of democratic Athens, while oligarchic sympathizers saw the Athenians as an obstacle.

EMPIRE, DEMOCRACY, AND THE ATHENIAN “RENAISSANCE”

Plutarch claims that Pericles, Athens’ leading statesman from 461 to 429, persuaded the citizen assembly to authorize an ambitious building program and to pay for it with League funds. The Acropolis had lain in ruins since the Persian assault three decades earlier, a reminder of the price paid for liberty. When political rivals protested using money collected for the common defense, Pericles countered that, as long as Athens provided military protection for all, it could utilize the surplus. This Periclean building program gave the city a physical grandeur commensurate with its power. Construction continued for decades and distributed tribute money to Athenian residents by providing employment. Gambling on the popularity of a program that both beautified the city and provided income to many, Pericles called for an ostracism – a referendum voted on by the citizens – that led to the exile of his leading opponent.

It is also possible that imperial funds helped subsidize democracy, since citizens were compensated for various forms of public service. (However, the state was still able to pay for these services after the loss of empire and tribute.) Moreover, Athenian power depended on lower class men who rowed the warships, the very people most likely to support democracy. In the early stages, all factions had favored the empire, but by mid-century proponents of oligarchy realized that the empire deepened the roots of democracy.
THE PELOPONNESIAN WARS

Athens’ growing power alarmed Sparta and other states. In 459 a conflict broke out – the First Peloponnesian War – between Athens and several Spartan allies. Corinth and Aegina, both important commercial powers, felt threatened by Athens’ success, as head of a naval empire, in the competition for trade. Athens initially acquired extensive territories on the mainland. When the Spartans did finally act to support their beleaguered allies in 446, stirring up revolts and invading Attica, Athens’ leadership recognized the difficulty in holding down both a naval and land empire, and wisely gave up the latter. A Thirty Years Peace was negotiated, with Sparta formally recognizing Athens’ rights over its imperial subjects.

A decade later several incidents renewed the friction, and in 431 the Great Peloponnesian War, pitting the Spartan alliance system against the Athenian Empire, broke out in earnest. The historian Thucydides, who, first as an Athenian military commander, then as an exile, saw the war from both sides, reached the following conclusion about the truest cause of the war (Jowett 1900: 1.88): “In arriving at this decision and resolving to go to war, the [Spartans] were influenced, not so much by the speeches of their allies, as by the fear of the Athenians and of their increasing power. For they saw the greater part of Hellas already subject to them.”

This was a war unlike any previous Greek war because Athens and its naval empire was unlike any other Greek state. Pericles enunciated the strategy by which a naval power could defeat a land power. The Athenians were to avoid a pitched battle with the superior infantry of the Spartans, tend to their navy, which could provision the city under siege and strike enemy coastal locations, and not risk expanding the empire while the war was in progress. Whereas Greek wars normally ended in a matter of weeks, this would be a war of attrition. It dragged on for three decades, involved a large number of communities, consumed lives and resources, and profoundly demoralized the Greek world.

DEFEAT AND THE END OF THE EMPIRE

Pericles died from an epidemic that swept through Athens early in the war. Eventually the Athenians ignored his advice and sent large forces far to the west to conquer Sicily, where they suffered a disastrous failure. The Persians then saw an opening and provided the Spartan alliance with funds to build ships and take the war into Athens’ element. Panicky decisions by the Athenian assembly and the incompetence of Athenian military commanders decided the outcome. In 404, with their fleets destroyed, under siege and starving, the Athenians agreed to terms of surrender. They had to give up their empire, tear down sections of their walls, and join the Spartan alliance.

Ironically, the Spartans took over the Athenian Empire and became the hegemonic power in the Aegean in the early 4th century, provoking the same suspicions and fears as the Athenians had. In 377 (the centennial of the founding of the Delian League) the Athenians and various island and coastal states formed a new alliance which moderns label the Second Athenian Confederacy. Safeguards in this confederacy highlight those aspects of the old empire that were still resented. There was to be no tribute, no settling of Athenians in other people’s territory, and a representative council of allies had decision-making power equal to that of the Athenians. Without the secure financial base brought by tribute, this confederacy was ineffectual; Athenian ambitions antagonized member states and the alliance soon fell apart. The failure of this second “Empire” illuminates the successes of the first.
SIGNIFICANCES OF THE ATHENIAN EMPIRE

The creation of an “empire” in the fragmented world of the Greek city-states was only possible because of Athens’ naval capabilities. The Delian League, and the Athenian Empire into which it evolved, was an early attempt to find a level of political organization and military defense beyond the capabilities of the city-state. Any evaluation of Athenian hegemony must also take into account the strong linkages between the empire, the democracy, and the literary and artistic achievements of 5th-century Athens.

Nevertheless, the empire was resented by many. The Great Peloponnesian War was fought over the empire, and the nature of that empire dictated the dynamics of the war. Athens lost the war, and with it the empire, but in the succeeding century other states (Sparta, Thebes, Macedonia) would follow Athens’ example and seek hegemony. Finally, imperial Athens held a central place in the cultural traditions of later Greeks and Romans, and continues to do so into our time.

SEE ALSO: Achaemenid Empire; Spartan Empire; Thalassocracies

REFERENCES


FURTHER READING


