Public Opinion and the Role of Sea Power in Athens, 404–322 B.C.

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The Peloponnesian War changed the attitude of the Athenian citizenry toward sea power. Although most of the citizens of fourth-century Athens looked back with wistful pride on the victories and tribute lists of the fifth-century league, they did not rebuild their naval power with an eye to recovering an Aegean empire. Instead, the fourth-century navy was intended to defend Athens in three ways: by protecting the routes along which the grain was imported, by guarding the Attic coastline, and by harassing enemy shipping in a time of open hostility.

The great Peloponnesian War of 431–404 B.C. was a watershed in many ways, not least in naval history. The outcome of the war demonstrated that a land power such as Sparta was constrained to develop a navy in order to defeat a sea power such as Athens. The final phase of the struggle proved that using warships to threaten overseas supply lines was a viable strategy even against wealthy and powerful states. The aftermath of the war left Sparta with a great fleet and Athens stripped of its ships and seemingly helpless. Within a decade, however, the tables had turned: the Spartan fleet was defeated by a Persian-financed fleet commanded by an Athenian admiral, and Athens quickly began rebuilding its navy, which by the 340s was larger than it had been before the war. To what ends, then, did the Athenians intend to use their renewed sea power? Was the fourth-century fleet to serve the same ends as the fifth-century fleet had served, or were the postwar goals of Athenian naval policy fundamentally different?

Before the Peloponnesian War the Athenian fleet had been used primarily to guarantee the maintenance of a maritime empire, composed of Aegean coastal and island states, that had been forced to pay an annual tribute to Athens. The imperial tribute was a tremendous source of state revenue for fifth-century Athens and even helped to finance the great building program of this period, including the Parthenon. Athens' navy and empire had grown apace, and Athenians were well aware of the close relationship between naval power, empire, and revenue. 1

Since naval power and the financial benefits of empire had been inextricable during the fifth century, it is tempting to assume that the growth of the Athenian navy in the fourth century implied an attempt to rebuild the lucrative maritime empire as well. 2 It also has been suggested that a primary role of the navy, both in the fifth and fourth centuries, was to protect the...
economic interests of Athenian overseas traders. It can be argued, however, that through most of the fourth century the Athenians intended to use their fleet neither as a tool of imperialism nor of commercialism. We must remember that in 404 B.C. Athens had suffered the humiliation of surrendering to hated enemies after a war that had lasted for twenty-seven years, and that the immediate cause of failure had been the decisive Spartan victory over the Athenian fleet at Aegospotami in 405. Therefore, it seems that the major roles of the fourth-century Athenian fleet were first to defend the home territory against enemy incursions; second, to safeguard the grain route from the Black Sea to Piraeus; and third, to put pressure on enemy states by attacking their shipping. In short, the primary impetus for the maintenance of Athenian sea power in the fourth century was defensive and military rather than imperialistic and commercial.

This thesis can be demonstrated by looking at the speeches touching on naval matters which were delivered in the Athenian assembly and law courts. Since the government was a direct democracy and whatever the citizens decided in assembly was immediately enacted, public opinion was a major determinant in the formation and implementation of national policy. Therefore, Athenian orators hoped to persuade citizens to vote one way or the other and thus took the prejudices of their audience into consideration when delivering their speeches. When the orators, who often disagreed violently on specific issues, agreed on a given topic, it can be assumed that they were bowing to the weight of public opinion on the matter. Hence, an analysis of surviving fourth-century orations should provide a general trend of Athenian thought on the topic of to what ends Athens' navy should be used.

There was no doubt in the minds of fourth-century Athenians that the empire of the fifth century had been a direct outgrowth of naval supremacy. The orator Andocides, for example, in his speech On the Peace with Sparta (3.38f.), explicitly stated that it was sea power that had allowed the Athenians to take control of the Aegean states. In fact, depending on context the Greek term archê tês thalattês could be used by a speaker to refer to either the control of the seas by naval force or to the empire resulting from that control. It is less clear, however, that fourth-century Athenians considered their former empire to have been a just or even a desirable possession. Isocrates, in the Panegyricus (4.72, 21), argued that the fifth-century empire had been acquired justly, and Demosthenes (3.24) claimed that the subject states had willingly obeyed Athens. In other speeches, however, Athens' former imperialistic policy was condemned in no uncertain terms. In On the Peace, Isocrates lambasted fifth-century Athenians who, during the imperial period, manned their ships with the scum of Hellas, made themselves odious to the Greeks (8.79), and thoroughly corrupted themselves in the process (8.75ff.).

Some seemingly contradictory statements on the subject of the maritime empire might be explained by the immediate circumstances of the various speeches, but in some cases the fifth-century empire was subsequently praised and berated in the same speech. Aeschines, in On the False Embassy (2.74ff.), reminded the Athenians of the great evils that followed in the wake of the imperialistic Sicilian expedition of 415, but later in the speech (2.175) he recalled the good old days when "a yearly tribute of 1200 talents came in to
us, we held the Chersonnese, Naxos, and Euboea . . . and sent out a host of colonies."

Although Isocrates (8.36, 124–25) referred to unnamed opponents who favored a return to imperialism, none of the surviving orations made an unequivocal statement to the effect that the fourth-century navy should or could be used to build or maintain an empire. As a result of their memories of the glorious Periclean age, the sufferings of the Peloponnesian War, and the experience of postwar realities, fourth-century Athenians seem to have been very ambivalent toward the general subject of the link between empire and naval power. Even those who, in the first flush of renewed strength in the 390s, might have dreamed of creating a profitable new empire soon had their hopes dashed. The system of alliances, which sometimes has been called the second Athenian empire, was never the paying proposition that the fifth-century empire had been, and maintaining naval supremacy in the Aegean cost fourth-century Athenians dearly (Isocrates 8.20ff.). Although the orators did mention the use of the fleet in order to collect contributions from their allies (Isocrates 15.121ff.), they never suggested that Athens would be enriched by these collections. Even Andocides' famous assertion (3.37) that the fifth-century arché tēs thalattēs was the "source of good things" for Athens cannot be construed as a suggestion that a new empire would be equally lucrative since later in his speech (3.40) he proposed that, if the Athenians made peace with Sparta, which entailed giving up imperial ambitions, they would regain the "good things" they had had in the past.

The control of the sea in the fourth century therefore did not bring financial benefits to Athens, and a desire for imperial revenue could hardly have been the motive for the maintenance of the navy. It appears, then, that imperialism was not an enduring goal of Athenian sea power. Athenians in the fourth century, as in the fifth, desired naval supremacy, but, unlike their ancestors, they did not associate that supremacy directly with the fruits of empire but rather with the survival of the state.

Even if fourth-century Athenians did not consider empire per se to be remunerative, it might be argued that, by protecting merchant shipping, control of the sea would enrich individual Athenians and so, at least indirectly, benefit the state. The Athenian fleet did work to suppress piracy in the Aegean, but there is little to suggest that the Athenians considered this to be its primary role. In fact, the safety of traders was apparently considered secondary to national prestige, according to a speech by Hegesippus in which he argued against a Macedonian proposal for a joint antipirate force on the grounds that to accept such a proposal would be damaging to Athens' status as a sea power (Pseudo-Demosthenes 7.14).

With the exception of Hegesippus' speech, all orators' references to actions against pirates (for example, Demosthenes 23.166ff., 58.53ff.) are casual remarks made in the course of a speech on a larger issue. Nowhere in the orations is there found a clear statement to the effect that safe sea trade would financially benefit the state. This is perhaps not surprising since most overseas merchants operating out of Athens were apparently resident aliens rather than Athenian citizens. The citizens tended to vote for measures that benefited themselves more directly. The expeditions sent against the pirates were
intended to protect the strategic grain routes from the Black Sea and Egypt, not to ensure merchants' profits. In a speech delivered in 359 or 358, Apollodorus described how he captained a trireme in the Athenian fleet, which convoyed grain ships through the northern Aegean, and claimed that this action was undertaken specifically to guarantee that there would not be a shortage of grain in the city (Pseudo-Demosthenes 50.58f.). In the fourth century, Athens imported approximately three-quarters of the grain consumed by residents of the state. Its citizens voted to send the fleet north to guard the grain ships in order to avoid starvation; their concern with the protection of shipping had little or nothing to do with motives of commercial profit.

On the other hand, the Athenian fleet was sometimes used to interfere with the trade of other states. Demosthenes (59.36) described the trials and tribulations of a prostitute in the city of Megara who had a hard time finding customers, owing to the scarcity of foreigners there during the 370s "on account of the war and because the Megarians favored the Spartan side while you [Athenians] were in control of the sea." Obviously the Athenian fleet had made it difficult for merchants to sail to hostile Megara. Elsewhere, Demosthenes (18.145f.) contended that Athens was able to cut off imports and exports from Macedonia in the years before the Battle of Chaeronea in 338. In these cases and others (Demosthenes 4.34, 18.241), interference with other states' trade was undertaken to further a specifically military strategy. The orators never suggested that the navy could be used to create a commercial monopoly for Athenian merchants. In sum, there is little to suggest that the orators, or the Athenian people, considered the relationship between sea power and commercial profit to be particularly important. They did, however, recognize the great importance of the navy as a military, and specifically defensive, force.

The navy and war were very closely associated in the Athenian mind in the fourth century. Demosthenes (8.74) mentioned that his contemporary, Timotheus, advocated war with Thebes by asking the citizens: "Will you not cover the seas with your triremes, O men of Athens? Will you not rise up at once and march down to the Piraeus and drag them down the slips?" (Demosthenes 19.291; Xenophon Hellenica 5.4.34). The defense of the state, however, was the primary military mission of the Athenian fleet, and several orators' statements attest to this fact. In his Areopagitciscus (7.1) of 357, Isocrates found it necessary to explain to his audience that he was speaking on the subject of public safety, despite the fact that Athens had more than 200 triremes and control of the sea. The implication was that the Athenians might not believe that the state could be in serious danger while holding the naval supremacy. Later, in his Panathenaeicus (12.114), Isocrates claimed that fifth-century Athenians had needed control of the sea "to fend off the plots of the Spartans and the strength of the united Peloponnesians."

Perhaps the clearest statement on the military importance of sea power came in 355 from Demosthenes' speech in Against Androtion (22.12): "I suppose that no one would deny that all that has happened to our city, in the past or the present, whether good or otherwise ... has resulted in the one case from the possession and in the other from the lack, of war-ships." According
to Demosthenes, war trophies and victories were gained by the possession of a fleet (22.13f.); disaster attended its loss (22.15). The navy made Athens powerful and allowed it to maintain that power (22.16). Finally, he proclaimed that the safety of the state was directly dependent on the triremes (22.16; Xenophon *Hellenica* 7.1.6; Pseudo-Demosthenes 17.25). Demosthenes (24.91) reiterated his view in 353 when he stated that the city owed its safety to the armed forces, both the navy (mentioned first) and the army. The Athenians realized that their state was dependent on the navy for its physical security, and the orators therefore often linked the destruction of the fleet, especially at Aegospotami, with the fall of the city. Demosthenes, for example, wrote that “though many serious disasters befell our city, she did not succumb until her fleet was destroyed” (22.15; Lysias 2.59, 26.23, 13.46; Isocrates 12.59, 18.59; Andocides 1.73, 3.21; Pseudo-Demades frag. 45).

The Athenian orators loved lists, and no orator’s list of the factors contributing to the military strength of a state was complete without a reference to the navy; indeed, triremes often headed the list. In a speech delivered in 354, Demosthenes (14.49) commented that the prerequisites for fighting a war were triremes, money, and strong positions. Thirteen years later he claimed that the modern Athenians had surpassed their ancestors in each of the various respects by which the power of states could be measured: triremes, number of men, and material (9.40).6

Judging by the orators’ speeches, the military, and specifically defensive, role of the fleet apparently concerned the Athenians far more than did the prospect of using the navy to build a new empire or to further the interests of merchants. The Peloponnesian War and its aftermath had the effect of radically reordering Athenian priorities on the subject of state defense. This is not the place in which to discuss land warfare in detail, but it is worth mentioning in passing that during the fourth century the Athenians built a major system of fortresses and watchtowers on their borders which served to guard all land routes into Athenian territory. Some of the fortresses, notably Aegosthena and Rhamnous, were built on the coasts and served as naval bases as well as road control stations. Furthermore, some of the towers on the hills near the coast (for example, the ones on Kerata, Mallia Psatha, and Stavrokoraki) have fine views out to sea.7 Perhaps the Athenians intended their fleet to complement the fortification system by guarding the sea frontier. Both the fortification program and the rebuilding of the navy can be regarded therefore as part and parcel of a comprehensive program of defense designed to protect Athenian territory and citizens from the ravages they had suffered during the Peloponnesian War. The orators’ obvious interest in the military and defensive role of the fleet is a direct reflection of the fourth-century citizens’ concern with state defense, a concern that was a major determinant of Athenian policy in the years 404–322 B.C.8

NOTES

ancient authors cited in this paper may be conveniently consulted in the Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA).


3. See, for example, R. J. Hopper, Trade and Industry in Classical Greece (London, 1979), 196-97.


6. Similar lists are in Demosthenes 4.66, 10.19, 20.162, 24.216, 18.311, 19.266; Aeschines 3.136, 3.163; Andocides 1.74; Lysias 31.26; Lycurgus Against Leocrates 150; and Dinarchus 3.9f.

7. The fortification system is described in detail in J. Ober, Fortress Attica: Defense of the Athenian Land Frontier, 494-322 B.C.; Mnemosyne, suppl. 84 (Leiden, 1984), passim.