

Ambition, Glory and Empire: The Peloponnesian War and the Collapse of Athens

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The “golden age” of Athens of the mid 5th century BCE was a high water mark for Athenian power and influence. This power and influence would be challenged in 431 BCE by Sparta and her allies in the Peloponnesian war, a war that would reshape the development of Greek civilizations and the Mediterranean world. Athenian defeat at the hands of Sparta would see their decline, albeit a temporary one, but more importantly, would lead to further decentralization of Greek civilization. The causes for the Athenian loss are as complex as Greek societies and politics were, and much can be attributed to the arrogance and expansionist views of Athenian leadership, and the problems of maintaining, then expanding, an already diverse empire. These themes can be found throughout the entire conflict, but all of these factors would be epitomized in the ill-fated Sicilian campaign.

At the outset of the war, Athenian Strategos Pericles advocated a conservative strategy to the oncoming conflict with the Peloponnesian League. In it, he planned to fight a defensive war that relied on the Athens’ “long walls” leading to Piraeus, the stored wealth and resources of Athens, and its considerable Aegean empire, and the tribute it provided them, to let them wait out the Spartans and their allies inevitable siege.<sup>1</sup> He based this strategy on his analysis that a long, drawn out war would exhaust the Spartans while the Athenians could ride out the storm in safety behind the defenses of Athens. This strategy would give way, however, when the plague of 429 struck and claimed the life of Pericles. The effect of this disaster would be twofold as it would place a tremendous drain on the resources and population of Athens and it would see a series of new leaders, the “demagogues,” take a more aggressive approach than the original strategy of Pericles, perhaps as a result of this disaster.

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<sup>1</sup> M.I. Findley, *Thucydides, History of the Peloponnesian War*. Translated by Rex. Warner (Revised, with a New Introduction and Appendices). (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1972), 132-133.

The men that would lead Athens for the next three decades would have a very different character than Pericles. They were men of ambition, more concerned with glory and personal gain than the democratic and republican character of Pericles. Men like Cleon, “remarkable among the Athenians for the violence of his character,”<sup>2</sup> who sought to use war to preserve his reputation<sup>3</sup>, and Alcibiades, who sought to build his reputation, through bold and daring acts and campaigns to bolster their own wealth and personal glory. While these more aggressive tactics started off conservatively in the first half of the war, such as the decision to use part of the Athenian navy to harass strategic Peloponnesian targets, they did increase the risks Athens would begin to undertake under the leadership of the demagogues and greek elites. Perhaps the long tradition of the “heroic ideal” and glory that was emblematic of Greek culture, fostered these increasingly aggressive tactics.<sup>4</sup> These pursuits would culminate in Athens’ Sicilian expedition, and would epitomize the bravado and arrogance of these new Athenian leaders and, perhaps, Athens herself.

No leader of Athens would better represent the opportunistic character and expansionist beliefs held by so many in Athens during the second phase of the war than Alcibiades. Nicias thought that the expedition was against the interests of Athens, and the potential dangers a two front war posed.<sup>5</sup> He was suspicious of those like Alcibiades, “who, entirely for his own selfish reasons, will urge you to make the expedition.”<sup>6</sup> In his thinly veiled critique, he delivered a

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<sup>2</sup> M.I. Finley, *Thucydides, History of the Peloponnesian War*. Translated by Rex. Warner (Revised, with a New Introduction and Appendices). (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1972), 212.

<sup>3</sup> M.I. Finley, 357.

<sup>4</sup> *The Greeks: Crucible of Civilization*. Directed by Cassian Harrison. Performed by Liam Neeson. United States: PBS, 2000. Internet Release.

<sup>5</sup> M.I. Finley, 415.

<sup>6</sup> M.I. Finley, 417.

speech where he implied that his motives are selfish in nature, more interested in glory, fame and personal gain than for the best interests of Athens. Thucydides supported this view by claiming that his extravagant lifestyle and behaviors “went beyond what his fortune could supply.”<sup>7</sup> His rapidly shifting allegiances through this phase of the war from Athens to Sparta to Persia and back to Athens only further show his opportunistic nature.

To men like Alcibiades, merely preserving the Athenian empire was unacceptable and dangerous. “It is not possible to calculate, like housekeepers, how much empire we want to have. The fact is that we have reached a stage where we are forced to plan new conquests and forced to hold on to what we have got, because there is a danger that we ourselves may fall under the power of others unless others are in our power”.<sup>8</sup> Alcibiades saw the status quo as entropy, therefore demanded opening a second front in Sicily. His great influence over Athens even overrode the pleas of Nicias against such a foolish undertaking. The hawkish Athenian politicians’ reaction to this bleak estimation of the effort and expense required for such a campaign “became more enthusiastic about it than ever,” and illustrated the overconfidence of Athens itself.<sup>9</sup> That confidence eroded as the campaign wore on and political and civil strife wracked Athens. Disunity prevailed, with revolutionaries even advocating for support from Persia at one point.<sup>10</sup> This underestimation of the effort and cost to defeat Sicily and Sparta simultaneously, and still maintain stability at home and its empire would overextend, and ultimately lead to the defeat of Athens after the destruction of their fleet at Aegospotami at the hands of Lysander.

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<sup>7</sup> M.I. Finley, 418.

<sup>8</sup> M.I. Finley, 421.

<sup>9</sup> M.I. Finley, 425.

<sup>10</sup> Robin W. Winks, and Susan P. Mattern-Parkes. *The Ancient Mediterranean World: From the Stone Age to A.D. 600*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2004, 89.

Maintaining Athens' expansive empire from internal and external threats would, indeed, prove problematic. Even Pericles' conservative strategy recognized the necessity of the Athenian colonies and their significance to Athenian power. Sparta, a land based war machine, pursued a strategy of laying waste to the farms and countryside of Athens and her allies. These Spartan attacks threatened the resources of Athens and thus, required an expensive undertaking in both land and naval forces, when even Athenian victories seemed to barely maintain the status quo or provide marginal gains. Athens struggled to hold its empire together against the forces of the Peloponnese, Boeotian and Macedonian invaders, suffering significant losses in Plataea and Delium. No loss was greater to Athens than the loss of control of silver mined at Amphipolis to Brasidas and Cleon's subsequent defeat in the battle to try and reclaim her.

In addition to defending an expansive empire against Sparta and her allies and conducting strategic offensive on the Peloponnese, Athenian strategic and battlefield failures and the strains of the war exacerbated cracks between Athens and some of her more tenuous colonial holdings. As the war dragged on, strife within their colonies grew. The factor that started the war, "the growth of Athenian power and the fear which this caused in Sparta," existed in factions of the populations of some of her allies, many of which were powerful members of their societies' social strata.<sup>11</sup> The rebellion for independence in Lesbos and Mytilene, while quashed, led the Athenians to take a harder stance on potential trouble spots. Rebellion and revolt, such as this one in Ionia, could prove troublesome, expensive in both treasure and propaganda, and ill-afforded at this point in the war. It needed to be clear that this sort of uprising would not be tolerated. The debate regarding the fates of the rebels, while mitigated from the original motion, was still a harsh one. The new decree executed 1000 Mytilenian conspirators, dismantled the

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<sup>11</sup> M.I. Finley, 49.

defenses of Mytilene, and seized their navy and farmland, in effect, making them Athens'.<sup>12</sup> The effect of this treatment of Lesbos on others colonials is uncertain, but it certainly could have added to the suspicion of discontents of Athenian imperialism across the Aegean, fomenting rebellion elsewhere, especially after the campaign in Sicily had begun. Ionia would not forget their punishment any time soon, either. Lesbos, in 412, was "among the first to rise up against her [Athens] faltering hegemon,"<sup>13</sup> followed by Chios and Erythrae<sup>14</sup>. These secessions from the Delian League showed the tremendous difficulty and expense of maintaining an empire from both internal and external threats.

In the end, the Athenian defeat in the Peloponnesian War would have a long lasting impact on the Greek culture on the Aegean peninsula and the Mediterranean world. First, it allowed the Persian Empire in the East to reassert their influence in parts of Ionia that had been lost in the Persian Wars. More importantly, however, was that Athens' defeat led to a further politically decentralized Aegean peninsula. While it is true that Athens recovered substantially over the next 10 years, they and the Peloponnesian States were far too weak and divided to resist the growing threat from the North, the Macedonian Empire of Philip II.<sup>15</sup> Had they won the war with Sparta, their hegemony in the region may have provided a significant defense from Macedon. This was not to be, however, and a mere 60 years from the conclusion of the Peloponnesian War, the Greek empires of Athens and Sparta, too weakened from their 30 year war, would be unable to mount an effective defense against Philip II's invasions. This sea

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<sup>12</sup> M.I. Finley, 223.

<sup>13</sup> Ronald P. Legon. "Megara and Mytilene." *Phoenix* 22, no. 3 (1968): 211.

<sup>14</sup> M.I. Finley, 541.

<sup>15</sup> Robin W. Winks, and Susan P. Mattern-Parkes. *The Ancient Mediterranean World: From the Stone Age to A.D. 600*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2004, 102.

change would usher in a new age for Greek culture and civilization: The Hellenistic Age of Alexander the Great of Macedon.

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