

The Logical Place

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Ancient Athens, the Delian League and Corruption

After the final defeat of the Persians in the mid-fifth century BCE, the Delian League was gradually transformed into an Athenian empire. The transformation was accompanied by an accumulation of power over other city states by Athens; associated with certain claims of political corruption. This essay describes the transformation process, how Athenians justified it, and how they responded to the claims of corruption. It also examines the claims in terms of the different ancient and modern perspectives of corruption.

Formation of the Delian League

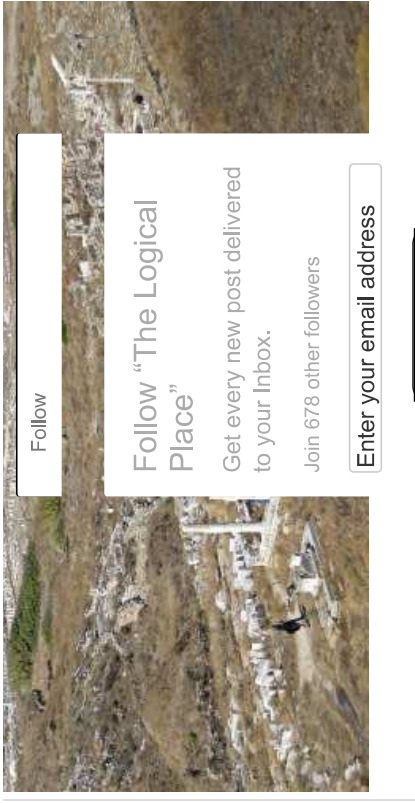
A coalition of Greek city states defeated the Persians at Salamis in 480BCE and at Plataea in 479 BCE, led by Athens and Sparta respectively (Martin 2000, 104). Following these victories, there was a brief attempt to continue a broad coalition, including both Athens and Sparta, as a naval operation to drive out Persian outposts in far northern Greece and Ionia. However, there was strong criticism of the arrogant behaviour of the Spartan commander, Pausanias, and in 477 BCE he was replaced by an Athenian commander, Aristides (Martin 2000, 106; Roberts 2005, 207; Hornblower 2002, 10). According to Thucydides, the Spartans wanted to be rid of the war against the Persians, and they were satisfied of the competency and friendship of the Athenians (Thucydides 1.96).

Thucydides then describes how Athens formed a new anti-Persian alliance (known as the 'Delian League' in modern descriptions):

"The Athenians having thus succeeded to the supremacy by the voluntary act of the allies through their hatred of Pausanias, determined which cities were to contribute money against the barbarian, and which ships;...Now was the time that the office of 'Treasurers for Hellas' was first instituted by the Athenians. These officers received the tribute, as the money contributed was called. The tribute was first fixed at four hundred and sixty talents. The common treasury was at Delos, and the congresses were held in the temple."

The Aegean island of Delos was chosen because it was an ancient religious meeting place, it was centrally located, easy to defend and too small to pose a threat in itself (Bowra 1971, 26). The member states of the Delian League were predominately those most exposed to Persian attack, located in northern Greece, Ionia and the islands of the Aegean Sea (Martin 2000, 106; Hammond 1967, 256; Bury 1963, 328; Waterfield 2004, 89). They swore a solemn oath never to desert the alliance (Martin 2000, 106); and to have the same friends and enemies (Aristotle 23, 4-5). However, League policy was executed by an Athenian high command that also controlled the Treasury, thus concentrating power in Athenian hands from the outset (Pomeroy et al 1999, 205).



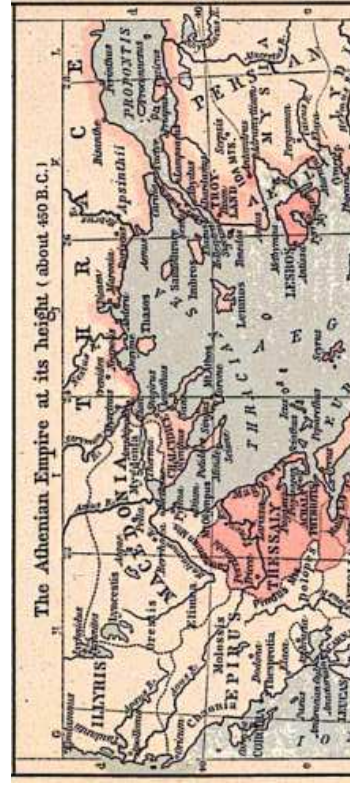


Transformation to Athenian Empire

There was a gradual process of transformation from a loose confederation of states into an Athenian empire. Although each member state in theory had only one vote, in practice Athens exerted the major influence in the League (Roberts 2005, 207–208; Hammond 1967, 257). An Athenian general commanded every military expedition (Roberts 1998, 88). Over time, more and more member states contributed money rather than warships. Athens had superior shipyards and skilled workers to build triremes in large numbers, as well as a large population of thetes willing to serve as rowers. However, this also meant that rebellious member states such as Thasos, Naxos and Mytilene were unable to defend themselves against naval attack by Athens (Martin 2000, 107). There is no evidence that Athens consulted other members of the League in suppressing rebellions (Waterfield 2004; 90).

The Battle of Eurymedon in either 469 or 466 BCE was an important final victory for the Delian League over the Persians; and which left Athens free to build its empire (Bury 1963, 338; Bury and Meiggs 1975, 210; Finley 1981, 43). To keep Athens' other enemies out of the field during the dangerous process of establishing the empire, cleruchies (external Athenian colonies) were established (Hammond 1967, 306; Lendering undated).

In 454 BCE the League's treasury was relocated from Delos to Athens. Ostensibly, this was for security from Persians and pirates; but Delos was probably at no more at risk than previously. This event marks a turning point at which many historians stop referring to the Delian League (Pomeroy et al 1999, 214). Athenians themselves began using the phrase 'the cities which the Athenians rule' in their inscriptions (Hornblower 2002, 17). After the Kallias Peace Treaty with Persia in 450 BCE, the removal of the original justification for the League completed this transformation process (Roberts 2005, 208). Yet the allied tributes continued to be ruthlessly extorted by Athenian warships (Wartenberg 1995, 19; de Bois and van der Spek 2008, 93). Athens was also motivated by the necessity of securing a reliable source of grain from the Black Sea area (Waterfield 2004, 92). The Athenian Empire at this stage included most of the islands of the Aegean (except for Crete, Melos and Thera), plus of the cities on or near the coast of mainland Greece (Bury and Meiggs 1975, 211). The League's territory had become Athenian territory. Athenian colonies had become military bases (de Blois and van der Spek 2008, 93).





Between 450 and 447, Athens made the use of Athenian silver coins and weights mandatory (Meiggs and Lewis 1969, 45; Bury 1963, 366) which further infringed the autonomy of the allies (Hammond 1967, 306). The single currency made commercial transaction easier, especially for Athens, and reinforced perceptions of Athenian dominance over a uniform culture (Wartenberg 1995, 27; Waterfield 2004, 93). Athenians may also have hoped make money from fees charged for reminting non-Athenian coins (Wartenberg 1995, 27). Athens also controlled shipments of corn, ostensibly to prevent it from being supplied to the Peloponnese (Finley 1981, 57; Hornblower 2002, 16). These assertions of Athenian power had to be held in Athens (Lendering undated); and foreign defendants in law cases were obliged to come to Athens (Hornblower 2002, 16). These assertions of Athenian power over her allies, coupled with her interference in their affairs, constitute clear evidence of her imperialism (French 1971, 99); although imperialism does not in itself constitute corruption, as will be discussed later.

In the winter of 446-445, the Athenian leader Perikles engineered the 'Thirty Years Peace' treaty with Sparta, which although it lasted only until 432, did bring peace between Athens and Sparta, and preserved Athenian dominance of its empire (Martin 2000, 115). Meetings of the Delian League ceased around 435, by which time they had become nonsensical (Waterfield 2004, 92).

Athenian justification for empire

The whole idea of domination and empire ran counter to the ingrained Greek ideals of autonomy and self-sufficiency; and also to the Olympic ideal of the equality of city states (Waterfield 2004, 90). Athenian domination aroused great resentment in other Greek city states, including Sparta (Lendering undated).

On the other hand, the Athenian Empire did bring benefits to some of the poorer states. There was security from further Persian attack; and piracy was suppressed to the great advantage of trade (Hornblower 2002, 17). The Ionians recognised Athens as their metropolis or colonial mother-city (Hornblower 2002, 13). The Athenian navy provided well-paid employment opportunities to the islander population (Roberts 2005, 208). The cessation of war against Persia would otherwise have confronted Athens with a considerable problem of unemployment (Burn 1948, 98).

Expenditure was incurred by Athens as head of the empire in building and maintaining ships and fortifications, paying military wages and supporting war-orphanes. During peacetime, there was a large excess of imperial income over expenditure, but in wartime the balance was reversed (Hammond 1967, 326). There were also efficiency gains from economies of scale: the maintenance of a permanent navy would have been too costly for Athens alone (Roberts 1998, 95); and Athens demanded less money that the city states would have spent on their own defence (Lendering undated).

The presence in Athens of large numbers of slaves was a constant reminder that only Athenian naval and military power stood between its citizens and a similar fate. The chasm between slave-owners and slaves was so wide as to explain the attitudes of Athenians towards their subject allies (Roberts 1998, 39). Athenians maximised their own freedom by restricting the freedom of other Greeks (Roberts 1998, 85).

In his Last Speech (Thucydides 2.63-1), Perikles warned Athenians against giving up its empire:

"Again, your country has a right to your services in sustaining the glories of her position. These are a common source of pride to you all, and you cannot decline the burdens of empire and still expect to share its honours. You should remember that what you are fighting against is not mere slavery as an exchange for independence, but also the loss of empire and danger from the animosities incurred in its exercise."

In Greek thought, power was one of the prime sources of glory (Roberts 1998, 85). According to Thucydides, (Thucydides 2.64.3) Perikles said:

"...even if now, in obedience to the general law of decay, we should ever be forced to yield, still it will be remembered that we held rule over more Hellenes than any other Hellenic state, that we sustained the greatest wars against their united or separate powers, and inhabited a city unrivalled by any other in resources or magnitude."

Corruption

Lord Acton's famous quotation 'Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely' (Dalberg-Acton 1907) is obviously referring to political corruption. Most modern definitions of political corruption tend to emphasise the subversion of the public good by private interest (Bratsis 2003, 8-9). Imperialism in itself is generally seen as an act of state rather than as political corruption. We also need to consider the temporal context: that which may be considered corruption today may not have been regarded as corruption in ancient times.

The initial financial arrangements of the Delian League were equitably worked out by Aristedes and incorporated in a formal agreement to avoid disputes later (French 1971, 79). There was also a general move towards financial accountability in Athenian affairs by better record keeping (Thomas 1994, 48-49).

During wartime, allied tributes were primarily spent on shipbuilding and other military purposes (Hammond 1967, 326). However, during the peacetime surpluses of League revenue over expenditure, Athens tended to use allied tributes for its own purposes. Perikles built popular support for this by practical measures such as the rebuilding of the Akropolis, the improvement of state festivals, the payment of trireme crews for eight months of the year, the establishment of cleruchies and colonies (Hammond 1967, 312) and the payment of jurors (Aristotle, 27).

From a reading of the literature related to the fifth century Athenian empire, there appear to be two main claims of possible corruption:

1. the use of League tributes funds for solely Athenian purposes, for example the rebuilding of the Akropolis; and
2. the acquisition of confiscated land and property by private Athenian citizens.

Neither of these activities would be possible without the power accumulated by Athens in converting the Delian League into its own empire. So there is an implied connection here between power and corruption. I will now examine these two claims of corruption in more detail.

Firstly, the conservative aristocratic politician Thucydides, son of Melesias (not Thucydides the historian) censured the transfer of the allied treasury to Athens and the use of the money to extravagantly adorn the city of Athens (Hammond 1967, 312). According to Plutarch, the people in the assemblies cried out:

"The people has lost its fair fame and is in ill repute because it has removed the public moneys of the Hellenes from Delos into its own keeping, and that seemliest of all excuses which it had to urge against its accusers, to wit, that out of fear of the Barbarians it took the public funds from that sacred isle and was now guarding them in a stronghold, of this Pericles has robbed it. And surely Hellas is insulted with a dire insult and manifestly subjected to tyranny when she sees that, with her own enforced contributions the war, we are gilding and bedizening our city, which, for all the world like a wanton woman, adds to her wardrobe precious stones and costly statues and temples worth their millions."

Although the tribute money was used for public rather than private purposes, such trenchant criticism can be interpreted as implying a form of corruption, in the sense of misuse of the money for purposes other than originally intended.

According to Plutarch, Perikles responded to this criticism by proposing to reimburse the city for all the expenses from his private property, under the term that he would make the inscriptions of dedication in his own name (Plutarch 14). Perikles also defended the use of the tribute money by Athens (Plutarch 12.3) as a 'fee for service':

"For his part, Pericles would instruct the people that it owed no account of their moneys to the allies provided it carried on the war for them and kept off the Barbarians; 'not a horse do they furnish,' said he, 'not a ship, not a hoplite, but money simply, and this belongs, not to those who give it, but to those who take it; if only they furnish that for which they take it in pay. And it is but meet that the city, when once she is sufficiently equipped with all that is necessary for prosecuting the war, should apply her abundance to such works as, by their completion, will bring her everlasting glory..."

So according to the standards of the time, it was debatable whether Athenian use of allied tribute funds constituted corruption. There were arguments for and against, as illustrated by those of Thucydides, son of Melesias, and Pericles. But in modern times, if for example Belgium started using NATO contributions for public buildings in Brussels, that would almost certainly be viewed as corruption.

Secondly, land and property confiscated after the defeat of rebel states were often allocated to landless Athenian citizens as colonists in the defeated territory. Finley estimates that around 10,000 Athenian citizens may have benefited from this practice (Finley 1981, 51). Finley appears to regard these private allocations of property as a form of corruption (Finley 1981, 53). Whilst this would probably be regarded as corruption in modern times, it is doubtful whether it would have been regarded as corruption in ancient times, given the common practice after a battle victory against a city of killing the men, consigning the women and children to slavery and confiscating land and property. These would have been viewed as legitimate acts of the victor rather than as corruption.

In conclusion, although the use of allied funds and confiscated property for Athenian purposes may be viewed as corruption by modern day standards, it was not necessarily seen as corruption by the standards of the time.

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