

Another view of the Peloponnesian War

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protevi@lsu.edu / http://www.protevi.com/john/FH/PDF/Another_View_Peloponnesian_War.pdf

In these brief comments I rely on the analyses of GEM de Ste. Croix, *The Origins of the Peloponnesian War* (Cornell, 1972) and *The Class Struggle in the Ancient Greek World* (Cornell, 1981).

Too many contemporary historians have a hidden anti-democratic bias when it comes to discussing the Athenian "empire" of the 5th-century and the subsequent Peloponnesian War. Yes, Athens dominated the cities of the Aegean sea, but we must remember class differences both within Athens and within the Aegean *poleis* in our analyses. To an unprecedented degree the Athenian empire rested on the support of the **lower** classes in the dominated cities, as opposed to the strategy of almost all other empires, who attempt to consolidate their power with the support of the **upper** classes of the dominated areas.

The logic of the democrats of the Aegean cities was usually something like the following: Exploitation and dominance of the weak by the strong is the nature of things. Why should we accept a homegrown aristocracy with no checks on its exploitation (or perhaps worse, one who owes its power to an alliance with Sparta or Persia) when we can accept the modified and most likely lighter and more predictable exploitation of Athens? At least the Athenians will reward us with the chance to establish a democracy and so enable us to protect ourselves from our rapacious local elites! In other words, why not trade subservience in foreign affairs and the imposition of a tribute to Athens for the unlimited exploitation and total exclusion from politics we've always received at the hands of the local aristocrats?

Thus we have to see the struggle between Athens and Sparta for Greek hegemony as the struggle between the democrats of Athens and the Aegean against the oligarchs of Sparta and their allies, the oligarchs of Athens and the Aegean. This shift of perspective allows us to understand the oligarchic revolutions within Athens of 411 and 404. The first was established on the basis of a fraudulent vote with the understanding that the Persians would be willing to aid an oligarchic but not democratic regime in Athens against Sparta, while the second was established by the victorious Spartans themselves. Here we clearly see that the Athenian oligarchs were not loyal to Athens versus Sparta in any abstract patriotic sense, but were instead so anti-democratic that they welcomed the Spartans as their chance to impose an oligarchic government.

Evidence of this anti-democratic drive on the part of the Athenian oligarchs was their constant desire to tear down the Long Walls, which, in linking Athens to the Piraeus, fed back into the naval power - foreign grain - democracy - Aegean imperialism system. The democratic revolution of 403 overthrew the hated "Thirty" but in order to begin the rehabilitation of the Athenian *polis* established an amnesty for supporters of the "Thirty." High on their list of things to do was to rebuild the walls.