How the Athenians Financed Military Expeditions

Between 508-322 B.C.E., ancient Athens was governed by a democratic regime. While the words “classical Athens” usually conjure thoughts and images about democracy, drama, and philosophy, the Athenians expended a tremendous amount of their energy and resources waging war. Although political theorists tend to regard state-building for the purpose of enhancing war capacity as detrimental to democracy, the Athenians seem to have balanced their national security activities with a fully operational democratic system. Pseudo-Xenophon, who has a hostile view of democracy, begrudgingly admits that whatever other failings it may have, the Athenian democracy and the poor citizens whom he considered to be the system’s primary beneficiaries were very effective at maintaining their political prerogatives.¹ Unlike in modern politics, accountability was direct, immediate, multifaceted, and often entailed harsh penalties. Despite the sovereignty of the demos, which was numerically dominated by non-elite men, Athens remained an unequal society in both formal and informal ways. In Athens during the classical period (and quite possibly prior to the Cleisthenic reforms), there was a link between a man’s place in the Solonian census classes and his political status, with one’s eligibility for office being dependent on one’s wealth.² Further, aristocratic values and pretensions seem to have only rarely proven problematic and were largely accepted even by non-elite citizens, who seem to have been perfectly willing to defer to wealthy, ambitious men seeking institutionalized power. Far from being at odds with the democratic system, elite ambition was actually an indispensable component of Athenian democracy, as there could be no elections without

² Van Wees 2004, 45, 55-56; Schwartz, 141. Van Wees and most scholars see military functionality as inseparable from political status, whereas Schwartz points out that there is little actual evidence of one’s military role being an essential part of one’s census status.
candidates and no accountability without volunteer prosecutors. While many modern accounts of Athenian politics and military affairs have either tried to provide an impersonal, institutional explanation for how the system worked and others have either followed Josiah Ober’s lead in focusing on the regulatory power over discourse wielded by the demos or that everything was controlled by close-knit coteries and exceptional individuals as in Rome, I shall argue here that Athenian affairs were driven by a combination of institutional rules and norms, elite leadership with some distinctly aristocratic resonances, and an accountability system which combined intra-elite competition and popular oversight. One of the best case studies for this governance at work is how the Athenians financed their military expeditions.

Athens was the first Greek polis which had the fortifications and financial wherewithal to wage a protracted war while being deprived of produce and profit of their annual harvest.\(^3\) In fact, at least one modern scholar has proposed that Pericles’ strategy not only relied on Athenian financial might, but that Pericles thought that Athenian wealth would intimidate Sparta and show the futility of fighting Athens.\(^4\) The polis generated considerable income from its 1% harbor tax at Piraeus, which was the busiest port in the region.\(^5\) In the wake of the Persian War, Athens established the Delian League, which quickly morphed into an empire led by and for the benefit of Athens. While much of the monetary tribute from the empire paid for the grand architecture on the Acropolis, a good deal was also expended on building new ships.\(^6\) Xenophon estimated that Athens was bringing in about 1,000 talents a year at the start of the Peloponnesian War when the harbor tax and the tribute were combined with other revenue sources such as court fines,

\(^{3}\) Anderson, 2.
\(^{4}\) Kagan, 33.
\(^{5}\) Xenophon, *Constitution of the Athenians*, I.17.
\(^{6}\) Thucydides, I.99.3
market taxes, and mining concessions.\textsuperscript{7} During the Peloponnesian War and in the fourth-century, wealthy citizens often had to step forward and perform liturgies to keep Athens operational. Some liturgies, such as sponsoring a chorus, cost about 300 drachmas or so. However, the biggest liturgy was the trierarchy, when an elite citizen or group of 2-3 wealthy people working together would fund a trireme and this expense would have totaled about a talent per year.\textsuperscript{8} Based on the size of the fleet, which was usually at around 300 triremes during the classical period, it appears that there were only about 300 or so men at any given time who were wealthy enough to be on the hook for all of the potential liturgies.\textsuperscript{9} Even with all of its income, Athens had to foot a daunting bill every time it went to war. By the Peloponnesian War, all of Athens’ citizen, resident alien, slave, and mercenary soldiers received wages, which was an expense not fully shared by Sparta and its allies. Whatever these annual burdens, Athens had managed to accumulate a surplus of 10,000 talents by the outbreak of the Peloponnesian War and set aside a specially guarded fund of 1,000 talents along with 100 ships in the event that Athens were to be attacked by a hostile fleet.\textsuperscript{10}

Decisions of war and peace were made in the Athenian Assembly. The Athenian Assembly was open to any adult male citizen who wanted to speak, in theory. This has led a few scholars astray, such as Philip Matyszak, who suggests that officials were present at the Assembly mostly to keep the time and played no role in making policy.\textsuperscript{11} For starters, even though Aristotle’s Constitution of the Athenians says that the authority to call Assembly meetings was limited to the prytaneis, there are two instances in Thucydides which suggest that

\textsuperscript{7} Xenophon, Anabasis VII.1.27; Meiggs, 258-259.
\textsuperscript{8} Worley, 72.
\textsuperscript{9} Davies, 27.
\textsuperscript{10} Thucydides II.23
\textsuperscript{11} Matyszak, 8.
strategoi could also call meetings. While the multiplicity of names on Assembly decrees attests to the fact that many different citizens spoke, we also know that prominent orators and strategoi usually advised the demos on both the decision to go to war and the particulars of how to approach the conflict. Our information on who spoke on what occasion is admittedly limited, but the evidence does suggest that strategoi past, present, and future often spoke about campaigns and that strategoi would sometimes speak in order to put themselves forth as candidates for a particular command. The best example of strategoi engaging in debate over military affairs is the Sicily debate between Nicias and Alcibiades in 415 BCE recorded by Thucydides in Book 6. During this debate, the two rivals debate over the strategic goals of such an expedition, their prospects for success, the nature of their allies and enemies in Sicily, and the number of men and warships that would be needed to carry out the campaign. The amount of funding required for any campaign would of course be dictated by the size and composition of the expedition and this sum would have to be approved by the Assembly.

In democratic Athens, it was normal practice for an Athenian qualifying for hoplite census status to provide his own arms and armor. It is not entirely clear how much of a burden the acquisition and maintenance of this equipment was, but it is clear that there were many Athenian citizens who were not wealthy enough to outfit themselves as hoplites. It appears that at its population pinnacle, Athens had about 20,000 farmers and artisans with sufficient means to serve as hoplites at a time when Athens had 30,000 adult male citizens. Anecdotal evidence of Nicias’ shield factory and soldiers who tossed their shields aside to flee during battlefield defeats

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12 Hamel 1998, 6-7; Thuc. 2.59.3;4.118.14; Aristotle Ath. Pol. 43.3.
14 Thucydides, 6.9-25.
15 Lendon, 16; Van Wees 2004, 52.
16 Hanson, 260.
shows that while hoplite equipment may not have been cheap, it was certainly not prohibitively expensive. Athenians of the liturgical class and the next rung down were expected to outfit themselves for cavalry service. While the origins and evolution of the cavalry corps is unclear, it does seem likely that the full establishment of 1,000 traditional cavalrymen and 200 mounted archers was in place by the start of the Peloponnesian War, having been inspired by the failure of the Athenians to conquer Boeotia in its overland campaigns of the 450’s. Cavalry forces in Greece tended to be small due to the unfavorable, rocky terrain and the scarcity of fodder south of Thessaly. To help fund this novel force in rocky Attica and offset the unpopularity that it may have incurred among those forced to maintain horses, Athens established a loan called the _katastasis_, which was the approximate equivalent of about four years’ salary for a skilled worker and was expected to be repaid upon a cavalryman’s retirement. PELTASTS. The maintenance of the Athenian fleet with its various financial exactions required or at least heavily encouraged aggressive action in order keep the institution afloat. As Kurt Raaflaub put it, the naval developments of the 5th Century made war “permanent, professional and total”. In accordance with elite cultural values, the Athenians kept much more thorough registries on hoplites and cavalry than on the men who served as light troops and as rowers in the fleet.

While current scholarship based on the archaeological surveys of Attica and the Black Sea grain route suggest Athens’ dependence on grain imports has been greatly exaggerated, it remains true that Athens still had a need for imports and could potentially starve if its sea access to grain-growing regions were to be severed. The only way to ensure the constant availability

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17 Bugh, 53-54.
18 Ferrill, 97-98.
19 Bugh, 56-57.
20 Raaflaub, 132.
21 Tsetskhladze, 47-52.
of this food source was to maintain a standing fleet every year, which was a very expensive endeavor. Even in years when Athens was engaged in no formal conflict, 60 ships were kept at sea for eight months of the year at the cost of 480 talents.\textsuperscript{22} The primary missions of the standing fleet were to contain piracy, protect Athens’ access to grain routes, sail around to collect tribute payments from its subjects, and keep the crews in good practice.

Athens elected 10 \textit{strategoi} each year and each of the 10 tribes elected phylarchs for their cavalry contingent and taxiarchs for their hoplite contingent in the overall Athenian force. Together, these elected officers had to fulfill a large variety of tasks. For starters, officers had to recruit, organize, train, lead, distribute or spend captured booty, allot rewards for bravery, enforce discipline, and pay their troops. Athenian soldiers generally were expected to bring along their own provisions and buy more as needed, which meant that \textit{strategoi} had to plan their campaigns to some extent based on the availability of fresh water and open markets. Soldiers in the field, by modern estimates, consume about 3,600 calories per day.\textsuperscript{23} Although it is not completely clear how much authority and influence \textit{strategoi} had during negotiations with foreign powers, they generally did lay the groundwork for surrenders and other important agreements.\textsuperscript{24} Just as the candidates for elected military office had to provide their own wealth to meet the census requirement, these candidates also to provide their own training and experience. Many of the men who became \textit{strategoi}, phylarchs, and taxiarchs had connections in Thrace, which gave them opportunities to gain power, prestige, and experience while not being beholden to the societal constraints placed upon them by life at Athens.\textsuperscript{25}

\textsuperscript{22} Hale, 127.
\textsuperscript{23} Engles, 123.
\textsuperscript{24} Hamel 1998, 40-41.
\textsuperscript{25} Sears, 3-5.
One old but not quite defunct trend in scholarship is to see the fourth-century as a time of greater codification and procedural regularity, but *strategoi* at this time were operating on their own and relying fairly heavily on their personal prestige and connections to a greater extent than their fifth-century predecessors. In the fourth century, when Athens had been deprived of its empire and was relatively weaker in relation to its rivals than it had been in the previous century, financial constraints had a marked impact on Athenian strategy. As Josiah Ober notes, the general tenor of Athenian policy in the time of Philip was essentially defensive, as we can glean from the generally cautious approach that the Athenians took and the moralizing, nostalgic tone of more offensive-minded orators like Demosthenes.\footnote{Ober, 2.} Much of the onus for funding campaigns fell on the *strategoi* themselves. One common method was for a *strategos* to rely on booty gathered in the course of the campaign to keep his expedition going.\footnote{Hamel 1998, 46.} In other cases, an Athenian *strategos* could rely on his own prestige, as when Timotheus persuaded merchants to sell goods to his troops by putting his personal seal on the receipt.\footnote{Polyaenus, 3.10.1.} When they were not commanding forces on behalf of Athens, Athenian commanders of the fourth century were often employed by foreign rulers ranging from Egyptian pretenders to Thracian dynasts.

The Athenian demos utilized methods of accountability which would hopefully deter ambitious elites from abusing the considerable power of the *strategia*. Arraignments were brought about on the grounds of policy disagreement, unsatisfactory performance, or simple partisanship.\footnote{Roberts, 107.} Before even taking office, an Athenian, whether elected or chosen by lot, had to face a *dokimasia* to confirm his birth and citizenship.\footnote{Elster, 254.} After the expiration of an annual term in
office face a *euthynai* to check for financial mismanagement and bribery. The *euthynai* procedure had three steps involving a board of auditors, a court phase for auditors to present their case (if they had one), and an open hearing where any citizen could come forward and present charges. A conviction at the *euthynai* could result in being ordered to repay ten times the amount of money stolen if the amount of money involved was large. The procedure had three steps involving a board of auditors, a court phase for auditors to present their case (if they had one), and an open hearing where any citizen could come forward and present charges. A conviction at the *euthynai* could result in being ordered to repay ten times the amount of money stolen if the amount of money involved was large. Accountability extended beyond sitting magistrates as the *graphe paranomon* procedure was designed specifically to punish citizens for making unconstitutional proposals to the *demos* in the Assembly. Each month, any citizen could propose a vote of no-confidence in any official and remove that person from office before his term had expired. The most serious procedure that a prosecutor could bring against an opponent is the *eisangelia*, which is essentially treason, but specifically against the democracy and in typical Greek fashion, it is primarily directed against officials thought to have sold out to a foreign power. Since citizens were responsible for bringing charges and for judging court cases, an additional and subtle check on officials, especially strategoi, is the fact that many of their soldiers, sailors, and subordinate officers could prosecute, testify, or vote against them in the future for their actions in the present. The fact that democratic Athens consistently maintained a strong international standing while never being overcome by a disgruntled elite general with a rogue army indicates that this system of accountability did its job remarkably well.

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31 Elster, 268.
32 Elster, 261-264. This was designed, in Elster’s view, to deal with orators who would otherwise escape unharmed by dint of being uninvolved in the execution of their bad policy proposal.
33 Hamel 2015, 64.
34 Hyperides 4.7-9. Hyperides cites the law on *eisangelia* in his speech defending Euxennipus.
35 Hamel 2015, 64.
Bibliography


