

Political Legitimacy in Classical Thessaly

Extant literary sources in the Classical period are largely unconcerned with internal Thessalian politics; when the people of Thessaly appear, they are largely an aside or afterthought – bit players in a larger political drama. However, the disparate pieces of information make clear that Thessaly entered a period of political strife and turmoil at the end of the Archaic period which undermined the ruling mandate of Thessaly's elite. The cause of this breakdown in political consensus were a series of dramatic and psychologically devastating military defeats at the hands of the nascent Phocian *ethnos*, which Herodotus describes as happening only a few years prior to Xerxes' invasion of Greece. Besieging the Phocian army on Mount Parnassos, Thessalian infantry were massacred during a risky but highly effective night attack. A relieving column of Thessalian cavalry was subsequently ambushed and routed on the border between Phocis and Thessaly. The Phocians triumphantly dedicated the shields of fallen Thessalian warriors to Apollo at the sanctuaries of Delphi and Abae, just outside the Phocian *polis* of Hyampolis.

As a result of these setbacks Thessalian political consensus fractured: during the second Persian invasion the dominant Aleuad clan of Larisa Medized while a dissident faction of Thessalians worked to align themselves with the southern Greek alliance. Abandoned by the southern Greeks after an aborted attempt to repel the Persians at the Vale of Tempe and seeking to reestablish political dominance, Thessalian guides led the Persian army through the Cephissus River valley. Herodotus noted that the Thessalians ensured that Hyampolis and the temple at Abae were both looted and burned. By taking hostile military action against the Phocians, specifically targeting the site of both the Thessalian defeat and the Phocian celebration of

victory, the Aleuad clan was repudiating earlier Thessalian losses and fortifying crumbling confidence in their leadership.

A century later the Peraean tyrant Jason of Pherae sought to establish his legitimacy as the ruler of Thessaly beyond simple military might. Returning from acting as peacemaker at the Battle of Leuctra Jason led a raid on Hyampolis, devastating the suburbs of that *polis*. Xenophon recorded that this was Jason's only target in Phocis; the rest of the region was left untouched. Deliberate military domination of the site of the Thessalian loss in the late Archaic period – and likely also the temple of Abae, less than three miles away from Hyampolis – cemented Jason's *bona fides* as a legitimate political leader, not just a Pheraeon warlord.

During the Third Sacred War Argead King Philip II followed Jason of Pherae's model and was similarly able to bring the Thessalians into his sphere of influence thanks to his military campaigns against the Pheraeon tyrant Lycophron, who had allied himself with Onomarchus and the Phocians. Diodorus Siculus noted that Philip was able to organize the Thessalians under his command specifically due to an alliance between Pherae and Phocis; Philip portrayed himself not just as a defender of Delphi or Thessaly but as a leader willing to prosecute war against the Phocians on behalf of the Thessalians. The postwar decision to eject the Phocians from the Delphic Amphictyony – which administered the other sanctuary where the Phocians celebrated their victory over Thessaly – further cemented the Macedonian-Thessalian alliance.

While information on Thessaly is sparse these three events point to a common through-line in Thessalian politics in the fifth and fourth centuries: in order to establish legitimacy for rule in Thessaly, Thessalian military failures of the late Archaic period needed to be repudiated and the Phocians themselves militarily punished. Understanding the motivations of peripheral

players in the Classical period adds greater nuance to the power politics of the Classical period and adds further complexity to a rich, dynamic history.