

## Combating Piracy during the Peloponnesian War and in Somalia

The hijacking of the VLCC *Sirius Star* off the coast of Somalia in November 2008 and the more recent assault on the U.S. flagged *Maersk Alabama* in April 2009 have thrust the grave danger of modern piracy into the international spotlight. These attacks have brought the issue to the forefront of American and international political discourse, yet opinion about how to combat the threat remains split. A multinational fleet already has been deployed to the region, but some advocate further suppressive tactics, including direct assaults on pirate strongholds or the private arming of merchant marines.

Contemporary discourse about combating Somali piracy opens a new comparative perspective on Athenian attempts to suppress piracy during the Peloponnesian War, an aspect of their strategy given only cursory treatment by Thucydides and subsequent modern analyses. Athens' empire of the fifth century operated in some similar ways to the modern globalized economy. Ninety-five percent of modern global trade takes place by sea, including transport of the world's most valuable commodity, oil. Piracy in the most heavily trafficked areas, such as the Gulf of Aden and the Malacca Straits, threatens to drive up insurance costs exponentially and create crippling economic instability. Comparatively, Athenian wellbeing and military strategy depended on the protection of her Aegean shipping lanes. Without imported grain, timber, and tribute money, the Periclean strategy and Athens' war effort were doomed. Thucydides laid out his understanding of this theoretical relationship between piracy and state stability in the *Archaeology*: the security of a state's resources depended directly on its ability to build up a navy for the purpose of suppressing piracy.

My paper first compares the multinational fleet sentinelling the Gulf of Aden against the Athenian counter-piracy fortifications established on *Atalanta* at the outbreak of the war in 431 (Thucy. 2.32). This previously uninhabited island base provided protection for ships sailing through Euboea against pirates launching from *Opus*. While modern naval ships have more mobility than an island fortification, neither has the ability to respond quickly to individual pirate attacks in such large areas of operation. Both tactically could not prevent an attack from occurring, but instead provide a visual signal to pirates that their mother states are concerned with what transpires in the area and have the power to provide reactionary support or retaliation, if necessary.

The next section assesses proposals to launch an outright assault on Somali pirate strongholds by examining the Athenian operation in 430 against an Asian coastal pirate base (Thucy. 2.69). The Athenians commissioned the general *Melesander* to take six triremes to collect tribute from the areas of *Caria* and *Lycia* and to prevent pirates from disrupting trading vessels sailing from *Phaselis* and *Phoenicia*. When *Lysander* arrived, he decided to launch an assault to take out the pirate base once and for all. He and many of his men died, however, and the disastrous operation only demonstrated military weakness before tribute-paying allies in *Asia Minor*. While America has little fear of tactical failure in a land assault against Somali pirate bases, the political blowback and potential for loss of life pose similar problems.

My paper finally contrasts the private arming of modern crews against evidence that the Athenians incentivized private citizens to hunt pirates on behalf of the state. The inscription *IG I<sup>2</sup> 42* reveals that individuals who captured pirates might receive a special tax exemption from the *εἰσφορά*. The lack of any further evidence about *IG I<sup>2</sup> 42* makes it

difficult to assess the success of the tactic, and the technology gap between ancient and modern weaponry alters the dynamic of this comparison. Although λῆστής additionally could refer to both a land bandit and a sea pirate, nautical piracy posed the greater strategic threat and now it seems the assembly turned to citizens in private vessels as a potential solution.

The outbreak of piracy in Somalia has created a situation where classical history can provide a relevant comparative perspective for contemporary political discourse, as well as a new impetus to examine an often-overlooked aspect of the Peloponnesian War. Both the United States and Athens face the problem of fighting a protracted war and combating piracy simultaneously; in the case of the Athenians, it ultimately determined how they conducted the war and perhaps even their later decision to turn towards a strategy of offensive bandit raiding from Delium and Pylos.

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