

The Rise of the Warlord: Crisis in Hellenic Hegemony

The war-torn years of the middle 4th century BCE in Greece appear, at a glance, to be a mere chaotic interlude between the dominance of the old city-states and the rise of Macedonia. This paper argues that political developments in Central Greece generated a new model of state organization, personified in the figure of the warlord. The tyrants of Pherae and the *stratego*i of the Phocian League emerged from historical obscurity in command of vast, and novel, military resources. Thessaly and Phocis were, heretofore, more a stage upon which the rivalries of powers like Thebes and Sparta were pursued than independent actors in their own right. Above all, their newfound power drew upon a newly massive pool of mercenary professionals – wedded not to a *polis* or a league, but to the man who commanded, paid, and led them. These warlords were most potent not in the internal context of well-organized city states, but rather in systems where the power of the local *polis* or league was weak or nonexistent.

This trend is exemplified by the careers of Jason of Pherae (370s BCE), Onomarchus of Phocis (354-352BCE), and their successors. While contemporaries noted the unusual power and competence of Jason in particular (Xenophon, *Hellenica*, 6.1.5), the precise manner in which his seizure and use of political power was emulated by later figures has attracted less comment. Past models of Greek warlordism focused on figures like Iphicrates of Athens, with the 4th century general of this type bound up in webs of mutual obligation and dependence with the state he ostensibly served. (Low, 2017) Yet there is a difference of kind, not just of degree, between the semi-independent *condottieri* of the city-states and men like Jason of Pherae. The central Greek warlord was not bound by the constraints of a robust city-state like Athens, but rather sought to overwhelm the traditional political arrangements of his region with monetary and military might.

Once this was achieved, and the warlord held executive power over a coherent state, he would then seek to use his professional mercenaries to challenge the older hegemonic powers of Greece. States like Athens and Thebes, struggling to meet the demands of their altered international environment, were vulnerable to a challenge of this sort. (Buckler 2008) The mercenary professionals that served as the bedrock of a warlord's power were capable of besting even the best armies of the south, and evinced a newfound skill in combined arms warfare that traditional hoplite-based forces struggled to match at scale. The personalist autocracy of the warlord regime posed a novel political and military threat alike to older forms of city-state organization. Philip of Macedon, who ultimately put an end to the hegemony of the southern Greek states, was less an unprecedented, *sui generis* figure than the latest in a succession of warlords who wielded power in similar ways. A new model for this phenomenon is needed.

Bibliography

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