

Oligarchy, My Dear Mytilene: A Reexamination of a *Polis*' Constitution in the Early Fourth
Century BCE

Mytilene, an archaic naval power and oligarchy on Lesbos, lost control of its self-determination intermittently between 428 and 349 BCE because Athens, Sparta, and Persia all jockeyed for supremacy among the Aegean islands. First, Athens removed the Mytilenian oligarchy after the latter's failed revolution in 428 BCE. Sparta, upon defeating Athens in the Peloponnesian War in 405 BCE, instituted a *decarchy* in Mytilene to replace the Athenian-created democracy; moreover, Persian satraps encouraged oligarchy and tyranny among the Ionian cities nearby. Scholastic opinion maintains the oversimplified assumption that major city-states overthrew minor city-states' governments consistently whenever a powerful *polis* arrived, which, in turn, has led to the thesis that Mytilene received and maintained their democracy from 390 to 349 BCE, when Persia instituted a tyranny. (Gehrke, 1985; Hansen and Nielsen, 2005; Robinson, 2011; Ste. Croix, 1954) However, an examination of the ancient historians' accounts concerning Mytilene reveals that the evidence for a democracy's creation in 390 BCE disappears and, in fact, supports the notion of Athens empowering a Mytilenian oligarchy.

This study begins with a detailed analysis of the Xenophon's *Hellenica* 4.8.28 within the context of contemporaneous historical events. Xenophon records that Thrasybulus, the Athenian admiral who conquered Lesbos in 390 BCE, gathered the ἐρρωμενεστάτους, or "strongest men," in Mytilene, and while scholars have compared Thrasybulus' actions in Lesbos with those in Byzantium, they ignore this modifier, which, as this study demonstrates, implies that these men are actually the oligarchs. Moreover, in the same passage, Thrasybulus promises to make these Mytilenians the προστάται, or "leaders," of Lesbos, which was a pre-Peloponnesian aim of the

Mytilenian oligarchy. Xenophon's use of *προστάται* has been incorrectly attributed to having democratic overtones, a connotation which Thucydides uses in his work but not Xenophon.

There are three reasons to believe that Mytilene had an oligarchy after Thrasybulus' departure. First, Xenophon never states that Thrasybulus democratized the Mytilenian oligarchy like he did in Byzantium. Second, he describes the Mytilenians recruited for the battle as being the most influential and thereby would likely be the oligarchs who were in power, and finally, he records that Thrasybulus left Lesbos *immediately* after defeating the Spartans, without arranging the affairs as he had done at Byzantium. Mytilene, therefore, remained an oligarchy, free from Spartan influence and in control of the other *poleis* on Lesbos in 390 BCE, after Thrasybulus departs, and this government endures until the Second Athenian League treaty of 378 BCE, if not longer.

If scholarship maintains incorrectly that Mytilene was an Athenian puppet democracy, then how many other smaller city-states were in fact free from direct, or even monitored, Athenian, Spartan, or Persian control? How does this affect our picture about the power relationships between the core city-states like Athens and the peripheries such as Mytilene? The relationship between larger and smaller cities, specifically how much autonomy smaller cities retained after conquest, still needs to be problematized to understand better how power networks and interstate relations operated during the chaotic time of the early fourth century BCE. The belief in a Mytilenian democracy leads scholars to overestimate Athens' dominion and influence during this period, so that we have either a murky picture or, at worst, a false image of which city-states had power and to what degree during the rise of Macedonia and Alexander the Great. The recognition of a continued Mytilenian oligarchy begins to rectify the current misconception

of what the interstate relationship was between major and minor *poleis* during the early fourth century BCE.

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