

Defining the Athenian *Arche*

Thucydides uses *arche* in his History nearly one thousand times. The meanings are multiple and varied; they range from *beginning*, *command*, *dominion*, *rule*, and *empire*, for example. My presentation will focus on when Thucydides uses *arche* to mean *empire* and the various ways in which Thucydides' use of the term helps to elucidate his characterization of the Athenian Empire. Three manifestations of *arche* will be addressed: Athens' economic *arche*, Pericles' vision of the Athenian *arche*, and Cleon's vision of the Athenian *arche*.

In the *Archaeology*, Thucydides recalls great empires and the resources they possessed—resources that the reader may see as indicative of power. Thucydides is quick to assert that true power does not reside in the intangibles of material wealth and possessions. He argues that later generations would misjudge Athenian and Spartan power based on the physical evidence that remains of their culture. However at 1.75, the Athenians affirm their *arche* as the aggregation of land and material that they have acquired after the continued prosecution of the Persian Wars. This *arche* is economic because it is quantifiably measurable. Thucydides intends that the origin of the Athenian Empire does indeed lie in its physical resources, but those resources do not adequately or wholly define Athenian *arche*.

Pericles' vision of Athenian *arche* is intrinsically related to her economic superiority but which takes on political significance during the Peloponnesian War. Pericles never doubts Athenian superiority or the survival of the city; his means to achieve that end lay in a programmatic strategy of economic conservatism and rhetorically unifying language. In the Funeral Oration at 2.36.2, Pericles symbolically

connects their collective *arche* to an inheritance passed down by their ancestors. This example shows how Pericles' *arche* is an intangible, unifying innovation behind which the Athenian people can draw strength. His vision seeks to bind the Athenians in a shared identity on an internal level. Thucydides presents Pericles as an intriguing and brilliant figure, but do the Athenians rally around the concept of an Athenian Empire or the man who sought to create that identity?

Cleon's vision of *arche* is much less complete than Pericles'. Cleon overestimates Athenian hegemony on the basis of its material wealth and military successes. He fails to recognize that the will of the people plays a part in Athenian *arche*. This is reflected in the Mytilenean Debate in which he advocates for the massacre of the Mytilenean male population. Upon further reflection, the Athenians are unwilling to commit themselves to such a course of action. Cleon, who arguably succeeded Pericles as one of Athens' leading citizens, is unable to convince the citizenry with his argument. At 3.37.1, Cleon upbraids Athenian inconstancy having become convinced, "that a democracy is incapable of empire." This is due to his inability to conceive of the Athenian *arche* as anything other than an expression of its power or force rather than a shared political identity.

This project traces a chronological development of Athenian *arche*. In the larger scheme of Thucydides' narrative, the policies of both Pericles and Cleon help shape and re-shape the Athenian conception of state identity. While modern scholarship often refers to Athenian hegemony as an empire, this identity never becomes fully realized as it morphs with every new political leader. The lack of a unifying vision of political identity for the Athenian Empire ultimately leads to the decline of Athens' power and influence.

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