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The relationship between naval development and civic politics in Athens: the Battle of Salamis as a case study

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Abstract. In the early fifth century BCE, Athens gradually strengthened its naval capabilities, and the victory at the Battle of Salamis further highlighted the importance of naval power in the military affairs and external relations of the city-state. Naval warfare required the participation of large numbers of personnel, making the relationship between citizens' military contributions and their political status an important point of entry for the study of Athenian democracy. However, military participation did not necessarily lead to a direct increase in political power, and changes in the influence of the Areopagus after the Battle of Salamis also reflected the complex political consequences of military victory. Drawing on relevant accounts by Herodotus, Thucydides, and the Constitution of the Athenians, this paper examines the background to Athenian naval development, the relationship between naval expansion and citizens' military participation, and the political changes that followed the Persian Wars. It argues that naval development offers an important perspective for understanding the evolution of Athenian democracy, but should not be regarded as the sole determining factor in the development of democratic institutions.

Keywords: Athenian navy, Battle of Salamis, Athenian democracy

1. Introduction

The formation and development of Athenian democracy constitute a major topic in the study of ancient Greek history. Traditional scholarship has generally focused on changes in political institutions, such as the reforms of Solon, Cleisthenes, and Ephialtes. However, the development of Athenian politics did not take place solely within the institutional sphere. The military organization, social structure, and external relations of the city-state also provide an important context for understanding Athenian democracy [1].

In the early fifth century BCE, Athens gradually strengthened its naval capabilities. The Battle of Salamis in 480 BCE was a major event in Athenian military history. In its aftermath, Athens became increasingly involved in maritime affairs across the Greek world and gradually assumed a leading position in the Delian League. At the same time, naval warfare required the participation of large numbers of personnel, making the role of citizens in military activities and its relationship to their political status questions worthy of further investigation. One common interpretation of the relationship between naval power and democracy holds that the development of the Athenian navy increased the importance of poorer citizens and thereby promoted the development of democratic politics. This interpretation has some merit. However, equating military

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participation directly with an increase in political power risks overlooking the complexity of the political system itself. Ancient historical sources record not only the growth of Athenian naval power but also changes in the relative influence of different political institutions after the Persian Wars. Accordingly, this paper addresses three main questions: Against what background did Athenian naval development take place? How was naval expansion related to the military participation of different groups of citizens? And to what extent can the Battle of Salamis and its subsequent consequences explain the development of Athenian democracy?

This paper argues that the development of the Athenian navy transformed the city-state's military organization and increased the importance of broad-based manpower mobilization, thereby providing an important perspective for understanding the relationship between military participation and civic politics. However, the growth of naval power did not automatically translate into an expansion of democratic institutions. Its political implications must instead be examined through specific political activities and institutional changes.

2. The development of the Athenian navy before the Battle of Salamis

From the late sixth century to the early fifth century BCE, the Persian Empire continued to expand its influence in the Aegean region, and the Greek city-states faced increasingly serious external security challenges. For Athens, the development of naval power gradually became an important option for responding to military threats.

In *Book VII, Chapter 144* of his *Histories*, Herodotus records that the revenue from the Laurion silver mines in Athens prompted a debate over the allocation of public funds. Themistocles advocated using the revenue to build warships rather than distributing it directly among the citizens. Herodotus links this decision to Athens' subsequent emergence as a major naval power. He also notes that these ships had originally been intended for the war against Aegina but were later put to use in the Greco-Persian Wars [2]. This account indicates that the development of the Athenian navy was not prompted solely by the sudden outbreak of the Persian invasion. Before the Greco-Persian Wars escalated into a full-scale conflict, Athens was already facing competition from other Greek city-states and gradually recognizing the importance of maritime power. Investment in the fleet represented not only an adjustment in military strategy but also a political choice concerning the allocation of the city-state's financial resources. The significance of Themistocles' advocacy of naval expansion lay in directing public revenue that could otherwise have been distributed among the citizens toward long-term military development. Compared with the simple distribution of wealth, building a fleet could provide the city-state with sustained military capabilities, but it also required Athens to bear the costs of shipbuilding, personnel organization, and subsequent maintenance. In 480 BCE, the Persian king Xerxes invaded Greece with his army. The Athenian navy participated in the Greek coalition's resistance and played an important role in the Battle of Salamis. Book VIII of Herodotus' Histories recounts the military decisions made before the battle, the disputes within the Greek coalition, and the course of the naval engagement [2]. The Greek victory at Salamis provided significant military validation of Athens' earlier strategic investment in naval development. Naval power was not only essential to the security of the city-state itself but also became an important instrument through which Athens subsequently participated in the affairs of the Greek world.

Nevertheless, the Battle of Salamis should not therefore be regarded as the direct starting point of the development of Athenian democracy. Before the battle, Athens had already undergone the reforms of Cleisthenes, and its civic political institutions had acquired a certain foundation. The historical significance of the battle must be understood in conjunction with Athens' prior institutional evolution and the political changes that followed the war.

3. Naval development and the military participation of Athenian citizens

The development of the Athenian navy not only transformed the military capabilities of the city-state but also made the roles of different social groups in military activities a subject worthy of investigation.

In ancient Greek city-states, hoplites typically had to bear certain equipment costs, whereas warfare conducted by triremes depended on large numbers of personnel working together to row, steer the vessels, and perform other duties aboard ship [3]. Naval operations therefore required not only the construction of warships but also the organization, training, and mobilization of personnel. As a result, the development of the Athenian navy increased the city-state's need for sustained manpower mobilization. Poorer citizens could participate in naval activities by serving as rowers and performing other duties, thereby contributing to the city-state's military operations. This meant that military participation was no longer entirely dependent on the economic resources required of hoplites. It also enabled researchers to examine the roles of different groups of citizens in the life of the city-state through changes in military organization. In *Chapter 1, Section 2* of the *Constitution of the Athenians*, Pseudo-Xenophon explicitly connects Athenian naval power with democratic politics. The author argues that Athens' maritime superiority depended on the participation of ordinary people in operating its fleet and that the democratic system therefore served, to some extent, Athens' military and political interests [4]. However, the *Constitution of the Athenians*, commonly known as *The Old Oligarch*, was written by an author who was clearly critical of Athenian democracy. The text helps us understand how people in antiquity discussed the relationship between naval power and democratic politics, but it cannot be treated as an entirely neutral report on Athenian society. The author's discussion of the role of ordinary people reflects certain realities of Athenian naval organization while also serving his own political argument. Modern scholars have likewise offered different interpretations of the relationship between naval power and democratic politics. Although naval warfare required large numbers of people to fight together, this did not mean that every member of the fleet possessed equal power. The significance of Athenian naval development, therefore, cannot be reduced to the claim that poorer citizens gained greater political rights as a result of their participation in military activities. More importantly, the navy made the city-state's military capabilities increasingly dependent on broad-based manpower mobilization, thereby bringing the relationship between citizens' military contributions, the security of the city-state, the public interest, and political status into sharper focus.

Nevertheless, military contributions and political rights remained distinct. Whether citizens were entitled to participate in political decision-making depended on the city-state's existing institutional arrangements and their subsequent development. Naval expansion could reshape the social context of political debate, but it could not, on its own, determine the precise scope of citizens' rights.

4. Political changes in Athens after the Battle of Salamis

After the Battle of Salamis, Athens gradually strengthened its position in the Greek world. As the later phases of the Greco-Persian Wars unfolded, Athens actively participated in military operations against Persia and gradually assumed a leading position in the Delian League.

Chapters 89–96 of Book I of *Thucydides' History of the Peloponnesian War* discuss the growth of Athenian power after the Persian Wars, the construction of city fortifications, and the formation of the Delian League [5]. These accounts help explain how the Athenian navy evolved from a military force designed to resist external invasion into an important instrument for maintaining Athens' influence abroad. As the importance of the Athenian navy increased, the connections between military organization and the political life of the city-state also became closer. The fleet required sustained personnel mobilization, financial investment, and

political decision-making. The navy therefore constituted not only a military institution but also an important point of entry for understanding Athenian public life and foreign relations. However, the political consequences of the Battle of Salamis were not unidirectional. *Chapter 23* of the *Constitution of the Athenians* records that the influence of the *Council of the Areopagus* increased for a time after the Persian Wars. According to the account, during the crisis, the *Council of the Areopagus* provided funds for the fleet's personnel and helped organize the embarkation of the crews for battle, thereby gaining political prestige [6]. This account is particularly noteworthy. It demonstrates that military victory did not necessarily lead to the immediate expansion of democratic institutions. Under particular historical circumstances, political institutions capable of organizing the city-state's defense, mobilizing resources, and facilitating military operations could also gain greater public recognition as a result of their contributions. Of course, the *Constitution of the Athenians* was composed long after the Battle of Salamis, and its account of early political developments must be assessed in conjunction with other historical sources. It cannot conclude solely on the basis of this passage that the process by which the *Council of the Areopagus* increased its power unfolded exactly as described. Nevertheless, it is clear that ancient political accounts did not portray the impact of the Battle of Salamis simply as a direct expansion of democratic institutions. Athenian political power continued to evolve in the following years. In the mid-fifth century BCE, Ephialtes' efforts to curtail some of the powers of the *Council of the Areopagus* became a major event in the development of Athenian democracy. *Chapter 25* of the *Constitution of the Athenians* records these reforms [6]. This demonstrates that the relationship between naval development and democratic politics must be understood through specific political processes. The growing importance of naval power may have changed the significance of citizens' military participation and altered the conditions under which different political forces operated. However, the redistribution of political power continued to depend on institutional reforms, political competition, and power relations within the city-state.

Therefore, rather than regarding the Battle of Salamis as the direct cause of the further development of Athenian democracy, it is more appropriate to view it as a major turning point in the transformation of Athens' military structure. The battle highlighted the importance of the Athenian navy and laid the foundations for the subsequent expansion of Athenian maritime power. How these changes affected the political system, however, must be examined in light of the specific historical developments that followed.

5. The limitations of the relationship between the Athenian navy and democracy

The development of the Athenian navy provides an important context for understanding civic politics through changes in military organization. However, the relationship between the two had certain limitations.

First, the development of Athenian democracy predated the Battle of Salamis. The reforms of Cleisthenes had already exerted a significant influence on Athenian political organization [1]. Therefore, naval development cannot be regarded as the sole cause of the formation of Athenian democracy, nor should the institutional reforms that preceded it be overlooked. Second, participation in naval warfare did not equate to equal political power. Differences in economic resources, social prestige, and political capital persisted among Athenian citizens. Even when different citizens contributed to the city-state's military strength, their actual influence in political life was not necessarily equal. Third, naval development was closely connected to Athens' external relations. After the Battle of Salamis, Athens gradually established its maritime leadership and expanded its influence through the development of the Delian League. Naval power was relevant not only to military mobilization within the city-state but also to power relations between Athens and other Greek city-

states. Consequently, the full historical significance of naval development cannot be explained solely in terms of political changes among citizens within Athens. Finally, ancient historical sources reflect different narrative perspectives. Herodotus focuses on warfare and its historical course, Thucydides emphasizes the relationships among war, power, and city-states, while the *Constitution of the Athenians* traces historical changes in Athens from the perspective of political institutions. These sources complement one another, but they cannot simply be combined into a single, undisputed chain of causation.

Taken together, the relationship between the development of the Athenian navy and democracy was not one of straightforward determination. The expansion of naval power increased the importance of broad-based manpower mobilization, making the relationship between military contributions and civic status more worthy of attention. At the same time, changes in political institutions were influenced by multiple factors, including existing institutional arrangements, political competition, and the external environment.

6. Conclusion

The Battle of Salamis was a major event in the history of Athenian naval development and provides an important case study for examining the relationship between military power and civic politics. The construction of the fleet before the battle strengthened Athens' ability to respond to external threats, while the victory further highlighted the importance of naval power to the security of the city-state and its external activities. As the navy assumed a more prominent position within Athens' military system, the significance of citizens' participation in military activities also became increasingly worthy of attention. Nevertheless, naval development did not necessarily lead to immediate progress in democratic politics. The account in the *Constitution of the Athenians* of the increased influence of the *Council of the Areopagus* after the Battle of Salamis reminds us that military victories could have complex political consequences. Subsequent institutional changes in Athens likewise cannot be explained without reference to specific instances of political competition and reform.

Therefore, the relationship between Athenian naval development and democracy is better understood as an interactive process between changes in military organization and the evolution of political institutions. The navy provided an important social and military context for the development of Athenian civic politics, but its political implications must be examined through specific historical developments. The historical significance of the Battle of Salamis lies not only in its impact on the course of the Greco-Persian Wars but also in the opportunity it provides to deepen our understanding of the complex relationships among military organization, social participation, and political power in ancient city-states.

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