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Interpretations of Athen's defeat in the Peloponnesian war

Edith Foster

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Interprétations de la défaite d'Athènes dans la guerre du Péloponnèse



Interpretations of Athen's defeat in the Peloponnesian war

The defeat of Athens in the Peloponnesian War was a central focus of contemporary historians. Thucydides' *History* and the first two books of Xenophon's *Hellenica* offered detailed accounts of the dramatic events: where the former offered an extensive description of the agonies of Athens' Sicilian expedition and of the rebellions and warfare that followed, the latter showed Athens' progress toward final defeat, the slow starvation of the city before capitulation, the ensuing tyranny and civil war. Historiography was newly invented in the period before the Peloponnesian War began, so that the unprecedented availability of detailed descriptions of Athens' defeat comprises an historical event in its own right.

The story of this defeat therefore shares from its inception in a complex and continuously developing intellectual tradition, certain important aspects of which are examined in the papers collected for this issue of *Ktèma*. Edmond Lévy begins the papers with an analysis of Thucydides' representation of Athens' unexpected disaster, explaining how this representation depended on a specific conception of the war and of its chronology. Cinzia Bearzot sheds the light of contrast on historiography's lengthy defeat narratives, showing that the orators contemporary with the historians mentioned Athens' decisive defeat at Aegospotamoi only when necessary, and that they did not describe or analyze the event.

While Bearzot's paper illustrates how the orators avoided reminding their audience of Athenian military defeats, two further papers address ancient receptions that willingly remembered and deployed stories of defeat. Tim Rood's essay on the reception of Thucydides' narrative of Athens' defeat at Syracuse shows, among many other things, how it came to affect subsequent descriptions of the Persian Wars in authors as diverse as Lysias and Plutarch. Thucydides' account of Athens' defeat in Sicily thus exerted a retroactive influence, affecting post-Peloponnesian War conceptions of the earlier war. Michel Humm delineates the opposite development, showing how the narrative of Persian Wars events could cast a silhouette forward and beyond the Peloponnesian War into Roman times. Examining the most famous defeat of Athens before her Peloponnesian War disaster, namely King Xerxes' burning and sacking of Athens in 480, he shows how republican Roman writers were motivated to demonstrate Rome's Hellenicity by connecting this event with their accounts of the Gallic sack of Rome in 390.

Athens' defeats could even be remembered as victories. As Tim Rood also shows, an outright Athenian victory in Sicily could be imagined, even dramatized, as when Athens finally prevails over Syracuse in a mock sea battle in the Roman arena in AD 80. In close harmony with this argument, Estelle Oudot's paper shows how Aelius Aristides construed the final defeat at Aegospotamoi as a victory in Sicily for Athenian courage, which was quickly vindicated in the civil war that followed Athens' capitulation. Here, Aelius shows, the Athenian democrats defeated their oligarchical opponents together with their Spartan supporters: with this victory, Athens in fact prevailed over Sparta.

Finally, ancient writers could use the story of Athens' defeat to demonstrate their superiority to Athens. As David Levene shows, Livy suggested that the Romans succeeded in Sicily where the Athenians failed and also that the Romans inflicted on Sparta what the Spartans had inflicted on Athens. Livy therefore used both the story of Athens' defeat and also the story of Sparta's victory as foils for Rome's proportionately greater successes.

To turn to the modern reception, seven of the papers in this series focus on influential intellectuals of the early modern and modern periods. The papers of Christian Wendt and Oliver Schelske, for example, examine responses to Athens' defeat among German intellectuals of the post-First World War period. Their essays show how the ancient city and its story could be claimed by those who hoped to overcome defeat: the cultural legacy of Athens could be construed as a permanent, quasi-indestructible victory that in some ways annulled Athens' defeat. Moreover, this legacy could be used to demonstrate that defeated nations remained culturally significant, or even central, to cultural progress; even further, Athens' 4th century recovery from her defeat could be cast as an heroic achievement, suitable for emulation.

The opposing attitude—that the defeat of Athens entailed irreparable destruction—is however also fundamental for important modern interpretations: Tobias Joho shows that Jacob Burckhardt analyzed the systemic causes of Athens' catastrophic defeat, which in Burckhardt's view ended the classical period of ancient Greek civilization. Hans Kopp shows how the American founders were determined to avoid the direct form of democracy that had led, as they understood the ancients, to the downfall of both Athens and her empire. Neville Morley likewise begins from a view of the defeat of Athens that does not flinch from seeing it as an example of failure and trauma, in order to ask how the Thucydidean account might serve as a model for historians of trauma, and how it might affect our view of Thucydides to see him as a traumatized historian.

Two further papers confirm the powerful patterns established by the story of Athens' catastrophe: Dominique Lenfant and Maciej Junkiert examine instances in which the story of Athens' defeat stands in for a modern situation. As they show, a speaker or writer could discuss Athens' defeat in such a way that listeners and readers would understand that he was referencing, for instance, the defeat of Poland in 1795 or France in 1940. The fame of the defeat of the most famous ancient democracy was sufficient, it seems, to signal and represent the loss of modern democratic freedoms.

The papers collected here exhibit the astonishing diversity of ancient and modern responses both to Athens' defeat and also to the historiographical narratives of Athens' defeat. On the other hand, the topic is nearly unexamined in previous scholarship, and readers will necessarily find significant lacunae. However, we hope that this collection offers a substantial foundation for further study. It arises from a conference held on May 13-14, 2016, at the University of Strasbourg, under the auspices of the University of Strasbourg Institute for Advanced Studies (USIAS). The title of the conference—*Defeat and the West: Interpretations of the Defeat of Athens in 404 BCE / La défaite et l'Occident: les interprétations de la défaite d'Athènes en 404 / Niederlage und das Abendland: Interpretationen der Niederlage Athens in 404*—alluded to the longstanding and widespread fame of this defeat, to which the papers offered here amply testify. I take this opportunity to thank all conference participants for their thought provoking contributions, as well as to thank USIAS, and in particular the managing director of USIAS, Rifka Weehuizen, for their support, without which this conference could not have taken place and these papers could not have been written, and finally to make particular mention of the contributions of Dominique Lenfant and Christian Wendt, who both edited the French and German papers for this collection and were also instrumental for administrating the conference and this publication.

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