

Athens' Egyptian Expedition of 460 BCE

Matthew Sickinger

CLA 480

Dr. Peter Krentz

Introduction & Historical Context

Thucydides, in the first book of his *History of the Peloponnesian War*, briefly describes an expedition of 200 ships from Athens to assist Egyptian rebels fighting against the Persia.¹ He later notes that several years later, Persians destroy the expedition, leading to the loss of all ships, including an additional 50 as later reinforcements. Other ancient historians, namely Ctesias and Diodorus Siculus, disagree considerably with Thucydides' in the events and scale of the expedition.

Thucydides' uncharacteristic brevity on the campaign, as well as the number of casualties has a loss of 250 ships would imply, has led scholars to question Thucydides' accuracy in this episode. Because scholarly debate over the last 50 years on the relative accuracy of the sources, I will instead focus on the purpose of the Athenian expedition. The reward for victory would have meant the loss of Egypt for the Persian Empire and would have greatly decreased a future naval threat to Greece. Egypt was a crucial, if rebellious, province to the Persian Empire, which contributed large numbers of ships to the Persian fleet. An examination of Athenian – and Persian – motives provides a valuable tool for understanding the massive scale and disastrous outcome of the campaign. I argue that Athens' main goal across the Eastern Mediterranean was to prevent a future invasion of Greece by denying Persia access to naval forces, and to take advantage of Egypt's great agricultural wealth.

For some broader historical context, the expedition took place in the decades following the Xerxes' invasion of Greece. Herodotus and Thucydides give a background for the immediate aftermath of Salamis. While the land army fought at Plataea in 479, the navy attacked the Persian fleet and destroyed it at Mycale, thus ending the immediate Persian threat to Greece. The Greek alliance then attacked various Persian forces in the Eastern Aegean, including Byzantium and Sestus. After

¹ Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*. trans. Robert Strassler. (New York: Free Press, 1996), 1.89-1.117. All dates are BCE. For the purposes of this work, I will Latinize and translate Greek terms

taking Byzantium, the Spartans went home, and the Athenians took over this alliance, which becomes the Delian League. Following several years of intermittent campaigning, the Athenian commander Cimon crushingly defeats a Persian fleet at the Eurymedon river in Anatolia. After this, the Athenians no longer had to fear a Persian attack on Greece and were now free to operate freely in the Eastern Mediterranean including Cyprus and, as this paper will focus on, Egypt.²

Sources for the Expedition

Thucydides, a late fifth-century Athenian historian, gives the first account of the campaign in the first book of his *History of the Peloponnesian War*. Ctesias was an early fourth-century physician in the court of Artaxerxes II. He gives his account as part of his *Persica*, a description of the history and society of the Persian Empire. Diodorus Siculus was a first-century Greek historian who wrote a narrative history, the *Library of History*, from mythological times to his own day. The three sources disagree on several matters, so I will summarize each.

Thucydides wrote his *History of the Peloponnesian War* almost two generations after the expedition, which he includes in his summary of the events that happened between the end of Herodotus' *Histories* in 478, and the beginning of the Peloponnesian War in 431.³ Because this section is not Thucydides' main focus, he gives an uncharacteristically brief discussion of the Egyptian Expedition. A few years after Athens' crushing naval victory against Persia at the Eurymedon river in Anatolia, Inarus son of Psammetichus, a "Libyan king of the Libyans on the Egyptian border" revolted against the Persian King and invited the Athenians to assist him.⁴ The Athenians happened to be campaigning in Cyprus at the same time with 200 of their own and allied

² Russell Meiggs, *Athenian Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972), 86. Russell Meiggs provides a detailed overview of the time period immediately following the Persian Wars in the first few chapters of his monograph. See also Herodotus *Histories* (9.114-9.122) and Thucydides *History of the Peloponnesian War* (1.89-1.117).

³ Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, 1.89-1.117.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 1.104-105.

ships. Promptly departing from Cyprus, they sailed to Egypt and quickly took control of the Nile river and besieged the remaining Persians, Medes, and loyalist Egyptians in the fortified citadel of Memphis. Thucydides then turns his attention elsewhere, but he notes that there were significant Athenian naval forces in Greece while the Egyptian expedition was still underway.⁵ These forces were sufficient to defeat Corinth in a large naval battle.

Thucydides returns his attention to Egypt when he notes that the Persian King, in an attempt to draw the Athenians from Egypt, sent an emissary to Sparta to bribe the Spartans into invading Attica. Being rebuffed, he sent Megabyzus with an army by land to Egypt. Defeating the “Egyptians and their allies” in battle, he drove the Greeks to an island in the Nile called Prosopitis and besieged them. After a siege of a year and a half, the Persian army drained the channels in the Nile and defeated the Greeks on land. Inarus, the Egyptian rebel leader, was crucified, and the Egyptians were re-subjugated, except for a few holding out in the marshes. Thucydides tells us that most of the Athenians and their allies perished, except for “a few traveling through Libya” who reached Cyrene, a Greek colony in Libya near modern Benghazi. To compound this disaster, 50 ships, unaware of what happened, arrive as relief forces, only to get ambushed and defeated. Thucydides therefore implies that the expedition was a complete disaster, with about 250 ships lost in Egypt. Because this period is not his focus, however, he leaves several details unclear. He never specifies what, exactly, the 200 ships did in Egypt for 5 years. He does not describe any sort of rebuilding effort to restore the Athenian fleet after the disaster, and before long they send another fleet of 200 ships on another expedition under Cimon to remove Cyprus from Persian control. As a result, his account alone is not enough to fully explain the expedition.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 1.109-110

Before coming to other accounts, we must first discuss some aspects of Thucydides' language. The first instance of note is his description of the 50 additional ships that reinforce the expedition. Thucydides describes them as *diadochoi*, which the *Liddell & Scott* translates as "successor(s)".⁶ This translation helps explain what the purpose of these ships was. A translation of "successors" suggests that these ships were there to replace the ships already in Egypt, which would then presumably return home. An alternative translation could be "reinforcements", which would imply that the 50 ships were simply reinforcements. The dictionary is quite clear, however, that *diadochoi* means successors or a close variant thereof. Another noteworthy aspect of Thucydides' language is the similarity in describing the Athenian expedition to Egypt and their disastrous expedition to Sicily.⁷ He uses a parallel construction where "out of many ... few returned" when describing the outcomes of both expeditions. Although we should be cautious about excessive comparison, Thucydides appears to be making an implicit comparison of the two expeditions. In particular, it appears that he is comparing the results of the two expeditions. The parallelism convincingly demonstrates that Thucydides thought of the expedition as a disaster.

Ctesias of Cnidus, a Greek physician at the court of Artaxerxes II a generation after Thucydides, gives a drastically different account of the expedition as part of the *Persica*, his version of Persian history. It should be noted that this source exists only in fragments.⁸ Around the same time as the conclusion of a Bactrian revolt, Inarus, a "Libyan man", revolted against Persia along with "another Egyptian."⁹ At their request, the Athenians send 40 ships to support the uprising. To counter this revolt, Achaemenides, brother of king Artaxerxes, leads 400,000 infantry and 80 ships. Inarus utterly

⁶ "Διάδοχος," in *Liddell & Scott*, Logeion.

⁷ Simon Hornblower, *A Commentary on Thucydides*, vol. 1 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), 176. Thucydides *History of the Peloponnesian War*, Books 6-7 describe the Sicilian expedition in detail.

⁸ Ctesias, *History of Persia*. trans. Lloyd Llewellyn-Jones and James Robson. (Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon ; Routledge, 2010). For the purposes of this paper, I will use Llewellyn-Jones' and Robson's compilation of Ctesias. This fragment of Ctesias was preserved in the works of the Byzantine writer Photius.

⁹ Ctesias, *Persica*, 16.36.

defeats and kills Achaemenides and sends his severed head back to Artaxerxes. The king then sends Megabyzus with 200,000 men and 300 ships who defeat the rebels and their Greek allies in battle. Megabyzus besieges the survivors in a fortified town somewhere in Egypt named Byblus. Because the town is well-fortified, they negotiated a surrender where the Greeks are permitted to leave Egypt in some peace. Ctesias claims that the Persian queen mother later broke this truce against Megabyzus' will and has Inarus and many of the Greeks executed in revenge for their slaying of Achaemenides. Ctesias' account nonetheless claims that the expedition was small in scale and was less of a disaster for Athens, as a great part of their fleet managed to escape.

Ctesias' account of the expedition is therefore quite different from Thucydides' in that he gives a much smaller number of total Athenian ships than Thucydides does. This conservative estimate for Athenian naval numbers is contrasted with the extremely high numbers he gives for the total number of Persian soldiers. Ctesias also seems to focus on the theme of revenge. In particular, the fact that Inarus sent Achaemenides' head to the Persian royal family presented a grave insult and offense to them. The punishment for this offense was the betrayal of Inarus and several Athenians after they had already surrendered to Megabyzus. Ctesias therefore may be framing the story of the revolt to fit into his theme of revenge. Due to a reputation for inaccuracy, Ctesias has been held in extremely low regard both by modern-day and ancient historians.¹⁰ Ctesias should not be ignored, however, because as personal physician to a later king he may have had an inside account of the Persian court and may be a valuable insight to the Persian perspective on the revolt.

Diodorus Siculus gives a third account, which is closer to Thucydides' than to Ctesias', and is the most detailed of the three. Diodorus was a historian who lived in Sicily in the first century. He

¹⁰ Pierre Briant, *From Cyrus to Alexander: A History of the Persian Empire* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2002), 575; see also Joan Mary Bigwood, "Ctesias' Account of the Revolt of Inarus," *Phoenix* 30 (1976): 21. Briant and Bigwood criticize the reputation of Ctesias as a historian generally, and cite this episode as an especially problematic narrative.

writes a grand history that stretches from mythological times until his own day. Although he is a much later source, he has access to historians now lost to us, and presents a valuable perspective on the expedition.¹¹ He writes in a strict chronological method, chronicling simultaneous events in Greece and Rome. The expedition therefore appears in three sections of his eleventh book. He begins by narrating how Inarus revolts, and having established himself, sends messengers to the Athenians to ask for aid.¹² The Athenians send 300 ships to aid Inarus. In response to this, Artaxerxes sends Achaemenes to crush the Egyptian rebellion with 300,000 troops. However, the Athenians, now with only 200 ships, finally reach Egypt and help crush the Persians, who then take refuge in the White Fort of Memphis. After the Spartans rebuffed his request for aid, Artaxerxes sends Megabyzus, who gathers 300 triremes and 300,000 land troops in Cilicia to crush the Egyptian rebellion.¹³ After arriving in Egypt, they break the siege of the White Fort. Following some inconclusive engagements, the Persians trap the Athenians and the Egyptians on the island of Prosopitis in the Nile river by digging canals through the different branches and trapping the ships that are beached on the island. After this, the Egyptians defect to the Persians, leaving the Greeks alone on the island. They fight with a “spirit surpassing in valiance those who died for Greece at Thermopylae” when defending their island. This convinces the Persian general Megabyzus to negotiate a treaty with the Athenians, allowing them to depart Egypt for Athens in safety by travelling through Cyrene.

Diodorus offers a third account of the expedition that seems to be a bit more complete than Thucydides’. However, it should be noted that he is writing in the first century, almost four hundred years after the events that he described. He is also writing a universal history, so one should be cautious of certain themes that he is trying to project onto his narrative. The depiction of the

¹¹ Diodorus Siculus, *Library of History*, trans. Peter Green. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2006), 27. Diodorus used the work of the historian Ephorus as a source. However, the works of Ephorus are now lost.

¹² Diodorus Siculus *Library of History*, 11.71.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 11.74

Athenians fighting with valor exceeding that of the Spartans at Thermopylae is particularly suspect.¹⁴ This depiction may be to contrast the Athenians with the Egyptians who cravenly defect to the Persian side. That does not, however, mean that we should dismiss his account as ahistorical or made-up. The fact that he embellishes certain rhetorical points does not mean that he is unable to make objective claims about history.¹⁵ We should, however, be suspicious about certain details, particularly if they align heavily with Diodorus' moral judgements about Greek history. The same should be said for Ctesias (and Thucydides for that matter). Despite the non-objectivity of certain sources, we should not simply dismiss them outright.

Other sources for the expedition are two inscriptions that reference the Egyptian Expedition. An inscription from Samos honoring the Samians who fought the Persian fleet in Egypt, and a casualty list for the Erechtheid tribe of Athens lists the casualties from one of Athens' ten tribes in a given year.¹⁶ Osborne and Rhodes estimate that year is 459, after the first year of the expedition. Above the three columns listing the names of the deceased, there is a paragraph describing where they died. It lists "in Cyprus, in Egypt, in Phoenicia, in Haleis, in Aegina, [in] Megara" as the locations. Although the inscription contains little else, it is clear that the Athenians simultaneously engaged in engagements in both Greece (Haleis, Aegina, Megara) and the Eastern Mediterranean (Cyprus, Egypt, and Phoenicia). Because Aegina is an island, it is also clear that Athenian naval forces would still have been in Greece when the Egyptian Expedition was underway. A second inscription is an honorific inscription for Samians who captured 15 Persian ships in a naval battle in Egypt.¹⁷ Besides

¹⁴ Jan M. Libourel, "The Athenian Disaster in Egypt," *American Journal of Philology* 92, (1971): 609–10.

¹⁵ Green, Peter, *Diodorus Siculus, Books 11-12.37.1: Greek History 480-431 B.C., the Alternative Version*, 1st ed. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2006). This comes from Green's introduction to his translation.

¹⁶ IG i³ 1147, trans. in Robin Osborne and P. J. Rhodes, *Greek Historical Inscriptions, 478-404 BC* (Oxford: University Press, 2017).

¹⁷ IG XII. vi. I 279*, trans. in Osborne and Rhodes, *Greek Historical Inscriptions, 478-404 BC* (Oxford: University Press, 2017), number 110.

the presence of a battle, however, little can be discerned from this inscription. The surviving portions of the inscription does not make it clear who actually captured the 15 Persian ships. Rhodes & Osborne restore it as the “Samians”.¹⁸ It is therefore clear that there was a significant engagement between Greek and Egyptian fleets on the Nile in Egypt. The reverse of this inscription says that “Inarus... king of [Egypt] (restored) dedicated this to Leocritus ... [commander of] the sailors of the allies”.¹⁹ This inscription therefore provides a contemporary attestation of Inarus, and specifically describes him as king of Egypt. It also provides a direct attestation of non-Athenian allied Greek sailors in Egypt. This inscription therefore provides a contemporary attestation of the expedition.

Scale of the Expedition and Extent of the Disaster

Scholars have debated the nature of the Athenian expedition to Egypt for roughly the past century. Prior to the 20th century, Thucydides’ account was held in the highest regard and accepted with little criticism. In 1913 article, however, Caspari argues that “the Egyptian Expedition was a less gigantic undertaking than has commonly been supposed, and that considerably fewer than 200 triremes were involved in the final disaster”.²⁰ He argues that Ctesias, despite his limitations as a source, gives a valuable account of the expedition that is more accurate. This anti-Thucydidean perspective gained a few supporters throughout the first half of the 20th century. The primary area of criticism was the extreme impracticality of the losses that Thucydides claims the Athenians suffered in Egypt.²¹ Thucydides was not without his defenders, however. Russell Meiggs first defends

¹⁸ The restoration they cite is entirely lost, meaning no part of the words “Samians” survives. However, the restoration does fit grammatically, which may suggest its accuracy. That it was dedicated on Samos presumably means that it was to Samians.

¹⁹ IG XII. vi. I 279*, trans. in Osborne and Rhodes, *Greek Historical Inscriptions, 478-404 BC* (Oxford: University Press, 2017), number 110.

²⁰ M. O. B. Caspari, “On the Egyptian Expedition of 459-4 BC,” *Classical Quarterly* 7 (1913): 202.

²¹ e.g. William Wallace, “The Egyptian Expedition and the Chronology of the Decade 460-450 Bc,” in *Transactions and Proceedings of the American Philological Association* (JSTOR, 1936), 252–260; H. D. Westlake, “Thucydides and the Athenian Disaster in Egypt,” *Classical Philology* 45, no. 4 (1950): 209–216. Both point out the demographic impossibility that would occur if the Athenians actually did lose 50,000 men in Egypt.

Thucydides' reputation in his 1943 article, and again in his 1971 book *The Athenian Empire*.²² Similarly, A.W. Gomme also accepts Thucydides' version in his commentary on the historian,²³ as does Jan Libourel in his 1971 article.²⁴

The debate largely comes down to whether one should believe more the relative authority of Thucydides despite his implausible numbers of losses, or the plausible numbers given by Ctesias despite his reputation for inaccuracy and unreliability. This makes a third approach appealing. In 1989, A.J. Holladay argues that Thucydides' account, although essentially accurate, is incomplete. Specifically, he translates Thucydides' word for the 50 ships that arrived after the end of the battle, *diadochoi*, as "replacements".²⁵ In this way, he argues that the Athenians rotated cycles of 50 ships at a time in Egypt. This argument of rotation is convincing. He notes that even if the Athenians lost only 100 ships rather than 250, the disaster would have still been fairly severe, and would have resulted in the loss of almost 20,000 men.²⁶ Such a loss would still be disastrous for the Athenians, but a much more feasible one than losing 250 ships and 50,000 men. This view, that the Athenians withdrew some of their forces early on, has caught wind in recent years. In his 1999 paper, Eric Robinson argues that the nature of sieges and the geography of the area makes it infeasible for a fleet on the scale of 200 ships to stay for six years in Egypt.²⁷ He emphasizes that there would have been little for such a large fleet to do for such a long time, and that 50,000 men would not have been able to live off

²² Russell Meiggs, "The Growth of Athenian Imperialism," *Journal of Hellenic Studies* 63 (1943): 21–34; Meiggs, *Athenian Empire*.

²³ A. W. Gomme, *A Historical Commentary on Thucydides*, vol. 1 (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1945).

²⁴ Libourel, "The Athenian Disaster in Egypt."

²⁵ A. J. Holladay, "The Hellenic Disaster in Egypt," *The Journal of Hellenic Studies* 109 (1989): 179.

²⁶ It should be noted that not all of these men would have been Athenians. Some were likely allies: see David Blackman, "The Athenian Navy and Allied Naval Contributions in the Pentecontaetia," *Greek, Roman and Byzantine Studies; Cambridge, Mass., Etc.* 10, no. 3 (Fall 1969): 179–216. Blackman estimates that about one-third of the Athenian fleet would have been made up of allied ships at this time.

²⁷ Eric W. Robinson, "Thucydidean Sieges, Prosopitis, and the Hellenic Disaster in Egypt," *Classical Antiquity* (1999): 132–152.

the land for such a long time without receiving regular resupplies. The island of Prosopitis was simply too small to support such a large force.

The majority opinion among modern academics, therefore, is that the Athenians launched an expedition to Egypt in 460,²⁸ in an effort to support the revolt of Inarus. After helping the Egyptians score a victory against the Persians, and taking control of the Nile, the Egyptians (with Athenian support) besieged the remaining Persian forces in Egypt. After this, the Athenians withdrew 150 of their ships, and kept 50 ships in Egypt at a time, which they rotated in and out of Egypt each year. However, the Persian general Megabyzus prepared and launched a massive counterattack, which ultimately drove the Athenians back from Memphis, and trapped them on the island of Prosopitis.²⁹ There, after some amount of fighting, the remaining Athenians surrendered, and returned to Athens. However, the group of 50 ships that was meant to relieve the previous ill-fated group, is attacked by a Persian fleet while entering the Nile. The majority of the fleet is defeated, and the few survivors flee back to the Aegean. In the end, Athenians end up losing nearly 100 ships (50 original ships plus most of the 50 successors), and the majority of the 20,000 crewmen on board those ships (it is hard to believe that too many would have survived the trek across the desert to Cyrene). This explains why Thucydides describes the expedition as such a disaster, but without being a demographic impossibility the way a loss of 50,000 would be.

²⁸ This is the standard dating. For alternative dates for the expedition, see Diodorus, *Diodorus Siculus, Books 11-12.37.1*; Dan’el Kahn, “Inaros’ Rebellion against Artaxerxes I and the Athenian Disaster in Egypt,” *Classical Quarterly* 58, no. 2 (2008): 424–440. For the purposes of this paper, the standard dating is adequate. Green bases his dates on the authenticity of Diodorus, and Kahn bases his dates on the assumption that Inarus controlled the Upper Egypt above Memphis, which is unlikely. See Briant, *A History of the Persian Empire*, 575.

²⁹ Although Ctesias describes the place as Byblus, Meyer convincingly argues that this can simply be a location on the larger island of Prosopitis. Eyal Meyer, “The Athenian Expedition to Egypt and the Value of Ctesias,” *Phoenix* 72 (2018): 56.



A.J. Holladay, "Hellenic Disaster in Egypt", 180.

Although Holladay primarily relied on Thucydides' account for his narrative of the expedition, the accounts of Diodorus and Ctesias can bolster his argument considerably. For example, one question that arises is how the Athenian fleet became trapped on the island of Prosopitis in the first place. In Diodorus' version, the Persians re-route the Nile, which prevents the Athenian ships that were beached on the shore from being able to sail away. In response to this, the Athenians burn the ships to prevent their capture. This is different from Thucydides' version, in which the Persians first

besiege the Athenians on the island, and then re-route the river in order to attack the Athenians by land. Although this is a minor detail, Diodorus' version helps explain how the Persians were able to prevent the Athenian ships from simply sailing away from the island. Therefore, Holladay's explanation of the expedition, where the Athenians cycled through the ships in groups of 50, remains the most convincing explanation, and is further bolstered by the account of Diodorus. With this in mind, we move on to why the Athenians sailed to Egypt in the first place.

Purpose of the Expedition

Before we can discuss the purpose of the Athenian expedition at much length, we must first discuss the importance of Egypt. Egypt became a Persian province after its conquest by the Persian King Cambyses (successor of Cyrus, predecessor of Darius) in the year 525. Before that, Egypt had a long history as an independent state. Herodotus in his *Histories* describes a long and drawn-out conquest, with the Persians inflicting offenses against Egyptian religious practices.³⁰ Even if these sacrileges are exaggerated, a conquest of the previously independent state likely left Egypt resentful of the Persian occupation. Despite this conquest, however, many Egyptian local dynasts remained in place, such as Inarus, the leader of the revolt.³¹ These dynasts served as leaders of the *Machimoi*, professional soldiers of Libyan origin who inhabited the Nile delta and served as soldiers in the Egyptian army prior to the Persian conquest.

This explains Thucydides' description of Inarus as a "Libyan".³² Despite the relative independence that was afforded to these *Machimoi*, there were several failed revolts against Persia prior to the Revolt of Inarus in 460. Both of these occurred during periods of relative Persian

³⁰ Herodotus, *Histories*, trans. Andrea Purvis (New York: Pantheon Books, 2007).

³¹ Stephen Ruzicka, *Trouble in the West: Egypt and the Persian Empire, 525-332 BC* (Oxford University Press, USA, 2012), 30. Ruzicka discusses these *Machimoi* in extensive detail in his first two chapters of the book.

³² Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War* 1.104.

weakness, occurring at the beginning and end of Darius' reign.³³ It should come as no surprise, therefore, that Inarus led Egypt in another revolt against Persia upon Xerxes' death and the accession of his son Artaxerxes. A further testament to Egypt's rebelliousness comes later in the fifth century, well after the revolt of Inarus. After a successful rebellion in 400, Egypt was free from Persian rule until the 340's,³⁴ barely 15 years before the conquests of Alexander. The expulsion of Persian rule obviously came almost 50 years after the revolt of Inarus, but it serves as evidence of the problems that Persia had in controlling Egypt.

Despite its rebelliousness, Egypt was a vital province to the Persian empire. Herodotus, in his second book, talks extensively about the extreme wealth that Egypt held. He notes that the Egyptians "could do anything but go hungry" because of the fertility of their land which made the possession of Egypt was extremely valuable to the Persian king because of the country's vast agricultural wealth.³⁵ Stephen Ruzicka premises his book on the fact that Egypt was of vital importance to the Persian Empire, and that this importance was a legacy of the centuries of rivalry between Egypt and the Mesopotamian states, whose worldview Persia subsumed. It follows then, that almost the entirety of Persian policy in the Eastern Mediterranean, including the invasions of Greece, should be seen in the context of Persian policy towards Egypt. Keeping the province of Egypt was certainly more important to the Persians than any attempt at conquering Greece.³⁶

Not only was Egypt an extremely wealthy province, it was also one of the few countries the Persian king could use to furnish his fleet. At the battle of Salamis in 480, during Xerxes' invasion of Greece, Herodotus tells us that out of the total Persian fleet of 1207 ships, the Egyptians contributed

³³ Ruzicka, *Trouble in the West*, 26–28.

³⁴ Ruzicka, *Trouble in The West*, 40, 177.

³⁵ Herodotus, *Histories* 2.14

³⁶ George Cawkwell, *Greek Wars, The Failure of Persia* (Oxford: University Press, 2005), 2–3. George Cawkwell emphasizes that Greece was a fairly minor concern to the Persian Empire in the big picture.

about 200 ships.³⁷ Although Herodotus' numbers should be taken with some hesitation, it is fair and reasonable to assume that he at least gets the rough proportion of the contingents correct, meaning that the Egyptians brought about a sixth of the Persian fleet at Salamis. However, the importance of the Egyptian fleet only grew following Xerxes' failed invasion. The main naval contributors at the Battle of Salamis were the Egyptians, the Phoenicians, Cyprus, and the Greeks of Asia Minor. Due to Athenian efforts in the 470's and 460's, the Ionian Greeks were freed from Persian control, and went on to join the Delian League. Meanwhile the Athenians were constantly campaigning in Cyprus to wrest it from Persian control.³⁸ If Egypt was liberated from Persian control, then Persia could be left with only Phoenicia and Cyprus to contribute ships to a navy. Because Cyprus was also in contention, a loss of Egypt could potentially have led to a collapse of Persian naval power in the eastern Mediterranean. As a result, it would have been of paramount importance for the Persians to fight back against this expedition to Egypt, in order to maintain their power in the region.

It was for this reason, in particular, that Egypt was not only important to Persia but also to Athens. If Egypt were to get independence, Persia would potentially be deprived of a large source of naval strength, which it would need for a future invasion of Greece. This was likely of vital importance to the Athenians at this point. The Athenians and all the Greeks still faced the possibility of a future invasion by Persia. Despite the crushing victory at the Eurymedon river, the Ionians on the mainland of Asia were still at risk from a potential Persian attack. Therefore, the prevention of a future naval attack on Greece was likely a significant Athenian foreign policy goal in this period. The fact that Thucydides describes major expeditions to Cyprus and Egypt, two of the remaining Persian naval subjects, attests to this importance. The question remains, however, why Athens chose to re-route the ships to Egypt. A possibility would be the economic rewards that Egypt was able to provide

³⁷ Herodotus, *Histories*, 7.89.

³⁸ Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, 1.12.

to the Athenians. Egypt, being much larger than Cyprus, and having its great agricultural wealth, would simply have been a more attractive target. Athens, being heavily dependent on imported grain, certainly could have taken advantage of this opportunity. By this point, Athens is quite dependent on foreign grain imports.³⁹ The most prominent source of the grain imports was the Bosporan Kingdom, in modern-day Ukraine, a route which came through the narrow Bosphorus and Hellespont. A source from Egypt, through some sort of trade agreement with an independent Inarus, would be more reliable as it would have gone through a much less narrow path. As a result, Egypt's wealth that attracted Athens away from Cyprus.

A possible question is what Athens' end-goal was. Were they trying to conquer the entirety of Egypt? There is no actual evidence for this conclusion. Although Thucydides' parallels with the Sicilian expedition make this a tempting thought, the parallels in Thucydides' language are meant to mirror the outcome of the expedition more so than the expedition itself. The purported goal of the Sicilian Expedition was not outright conquest, but to assist the city of Egesta against the Syracusan threat.⁴⁰ While it is true that Ctesias claims that Inarus promised the Athenians a "share" in his kingdom, and that Diodorus also claims that Inarus promised the Athenians rewards "far greater than their service to him", it is not immediately clear what these "shares" or "rewards" would have been.⁴¹ There is never any direct claim these would have been territorial concessions. The Greeks did, however, have a fairly substantial trading colony at Naucratis on the Nile river, and there were many Greeks employed as mercenaries under the Egyptian Kingdom before its conquest by Persia.⁴² This

³⁹ Peter Garnsey, "Grain for Athens," *History of Political Thought* 6, no. 1/2 (1985): 62-63. Peter Garnsey argues that Athens was not as dependent on foreign grain imports as has been claimed. However, he acknowledges the large magnitude of the imports.

⁴⁰ Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War* 6.6.

⁴¹ Ctesias, *Persica* 16.36. Diodorus, *Library of History* 11.71.

⁴² Ruzicka, *Trouble in the West*, 10-11.

would suggest that the Athenians were hoping to take advantage of expanding the commercial opportunities that an independent Egypt would provide for them.

Another aspect of the expedition that may go unnoticed is the Egyptians' role in their own revolt. All the sources we have approach are written by Greeks and are from the Greek perspective. Thucydides focuses his work on the Peloponnesian War, so the focus of his work was on Greeks fighting Greeks. Similarly, Diodorus focused largely on the heroism of individual Greeks and Romans throughout his histories, and therefore de-emphasized the contribution of the Egyptians to their own revolt.⁴³ However, Ctesias provides a more nuanced view of the contributions of Egyptians to the revolt. When he opens up his episode on the revolt, he mentions the fact that Inarus launched the revolt. He implies that only once the revolt was underway did the Athenians send any help. Although Ctesias' account alone is weak evidence for the overall contribution of Egyptian forces to the revolt, it does however suggest that there may be more contributions to the Egyptian revolt by Egyptians that have not made it into the surviving histories because the literary sources that we have are primarily focused on the Greeks. The presence of Inarus' name on the Samian inscription also attests to the important role Egyptians played. The fact that Inarus himself dedicated the inscription suggests that he was in a position to dedicate an inscription. That he is described as the "king of Egypt" suggests that he was powerful himself, and not simply an Athenian puppet.⁴⁴ This perspective suggests that the Athenians may have largely played an auxiliary role to the Egyptian rebels, and primarily focused on securing the Nile river, while the Egyptians kept the Persians besieged in Memphis.

On the same note, although the expedition to Egypt was of great importance to the Athenians, it was not the only focus of their efforts. For example, the Athenians fought a significant battle off the

⁴³ Herodotus, *Histories* 2.14

⁴⁴ IG XII. vi. I 279*, trans. Osborne and Rhodes, *Greek Historical Inscriptions, 478-404 BC* (Oxford: University Press, 2017), number 110.

coast of Aegina while the expedition to Egypt was still underway.⁴⁵ The Athenians probably had enough ships to fight in Greece with the 200 ships in Egypt.⁴⁶ Russell Meiggs estimates that the Athenians had roughly 200 ships at this time, and that their own citizens would have made up only about half of the crews.⁴⁷ Holladay estimates that the remaining allies in the Delian League would have had about 100 ships in total at this time, and that an expedition such as this would operate with about a 2:1 ratio of Athenian ships to allied ships.⁴⁸ As a result, Athens would have had considerable power at this time. However, we should also acknowledge the sheer scale of an expedition of 200 ships. On average, each ship would have 200 rowers and marines.⁴⁹ If 200 ships were deployed to Egypt for the entire duration, six years, then that would mean that 40,000 men would be in Egypt for a total of six years. Even with Athens' large capabilities at this time, it would have been impractical for the Athenians to send so many men so far away for such a long time. The fact that Athens fought against other Greek states at the same time as the expedition to Egypt was deployed therefore suggests that the expedition was not the sole focus of the Athenian state at this time.

This fact supports the notion that a significant amount of the force was withdrawn from Egypt upon the successful defeat of the initial Persian troops in Egypt. This is because the Athenians were involved by matters that were closer to home for them, namely the increasing wars against other Greek states in the so-called "First Peloponnesian War". The war presented a major challenge to Athens and was much closer to home than Egypt. Thucydides tells us that while the expedition was still in Egypt, in addition to a naval battle against Corinth Thucydides, the Athenians also fought land battles in Boeotia at Tanagra and Oenophyta.⁵⁰ Although the Athenian army was not involved in

⁴⁵ Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, 1.105

⁴⁶ Libourel, "The Athenian Disaster in Egypt," 608.

⁴⁷ Meiggs, *Athenian Empire*, 93; 439-441.

⁴⁸ Holladay, "Hellenic Disaster in Egypt", 178.

⁴⁹ Nicolle Hirschfeld, Appendix to *The Landmark Herodotus: The Histories*, 1st ed., Landmark Series (New York: Pantheon Books, 2007), 826.

⁵⁰ Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, 1.105, 1.108.

Egypt, the fact that there was significant fighting so close to home for Athens suggests that the Egyptian expedition was not the sole focus of the state and may explain why not all 200 ships remained in Egypt for all six years.

One reason why any ships remained at all may have been Egypt's agricultural wealth.⁵¹ The fighting in Boeotia may have threatened Athens' agricultural production. The Athenians may have wanted to keep 50 ships in Egypt as a way to curry some favor with Inarus, in the hope of future rewards in the form of grain shipments. Nevertheless, the outbreak of the First Peloponnesian War caused Athens' priorities to shift. The fact that there was fighting close to home meant that the two major goals of the expedition, economic gains and the prevention of a future Persian naval attack, became relatively less important to the Athenian state. This cause helps to further explain Holladay's assertion that the Athenians withdrew a large part of their forces after the first year of the expedition.

Conclusion

What this suggests is that the Athenians chose to support the Egyptian rebels not in an effort to conquer them, but instead in order to weaken Persia and to reap the economic benefits of an independent Egypt. This would also have prevented a future Persian naval threat. Since Egypt was essential to Persia, the presence of even a moderate number of Athenian forces would have forced the Persians to attack Egypt and would have prevented an immediate attack on Greece. The presence of increased threats in Greece meant that Athens was not able to maintain its initial force of 200 ships in Egypt and was therefore forced to withdraw a large number of them. This study thus supports A.J. Holladay's theory that Athens withdrew a large number of ships before the final disaster because it explains why some ships would have withdrawn. As a result, this examination of Athenian goals and motives behind the Egyptian expedition helps to gain a further understanding of the expedition itself.

⁵¹ Garnsey, "Grain for Athens", 74. Garnsey notes how the Peloponnesian war reduced Attica's agricultural capacity due to the presence of the Spartan army.

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