428 BCE

Motivations for the Mytilenean revolt

Mytilene was a polis on the island of Lesbos (Hansen, Spencer and Williams 2004:1018). There is some debate about the number of poleis on Lesbos, but it is generally agreed that by the Classical period there were five settlements – Methymna, Antissa, Eresos, Pyrrha and Mytilene (Hornblower 1997:382) – that fit the definition of polis (Hansen, Spencer and Williams 2004:1018).

Lesbos was settled during the early Bronze and late Iron age (Hansen, Spencer and Williams 2004:1018). The poleis of Lesbos participated in the Ionian revolt against the Persians but faced enslavement after their defeat (Hansen, Spencer and Williams 2004:1019). After joining the Greeks, the Lesbians were among the founding members of the Delian league and ship-contributing members (Hansen, Spencer and Williams 2004:1019; Thuc.1.117.2).

Sometime before the start of the Second Peloponnesian War, Mytilene planned a revolt against Athens, which they enacted after an invasion of Attica by the Lacedaemonians (Thuc.3.2). All the Lesbian poleis were involved, excluding Methymna.

Their motivation, according to Thucydides, was the synoikmos of Lesbos under Mytilenean rule (Thuc.3.2). Thucydides does not clearly say what the Mytileneans hoped to achieve from the synoikmos, however, in later speech when requesting aid from the Lacedaemonians, the Mytileneans claimed that the Athenians had begun enslaving their allies after the end of the Persian war (Thuc.3.10.2-6) and that the Mytileneans were revolting before the same could be done to them (Thuc.3.12).

This evidence, however, is suspect. As Quinn (1981:25-6) notes, there was no way for Thucydides to have been present during the speech. As well, the purpose of the speech was to persuade the Lacedaemonians to ally with Mytilene against Athens so the Mytileneans would have been trying to cast themselves in a more positive light (Quinn 1981:26). Further, the Athenians' reactions to learning of Mytilene's betrayal was shock rather than someone who was seizing a long-awaited opportunity (Quinn 1981:27).

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