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The Athenian Empire and Control of the Saronic Gulf: Expansion Courtesy of the Gods

By Carly Sokach

As a stalwart of democracy, classical Athens refused to limit its power and influence to Attica. Throughout the 6th and 5th centuries BCE, Athens sought to extend her power throughout the rest of mainland Greece. The focus of this expansion initially centered around the Saronic Gulf, part of the Aegean Sea on the Eastern side of the Isthmus of Corinth. Athens’ new imperial mentality could have easily conflicted with the popular Athenian title: most pious of the Greeks. However, through a variety of hero cults, the Athenians spun their devout religious practices to support their expansion and control throughout Greece. This process is remarkably illustrated by the cults of Theseus and Asklepios. Both are considered heroes—mortal men who became worshipped divinities after their deaths. The creation of cult practices for Theseus and the importation of the cult of Asklepios from Epidauros to Athens demonstrate Athenian control and influence around the Saronic Gulf.

Theseus represents the token Athenian hero in many ways. As a young adult, he gains his fame by traveling to Athens to throw off the yoke of the Cretan King Minos. Minos demanded yearly tribute from the Athenians to be given to the Minotaur. Theseus ended this grisly custom by traveling to Crete as tribute and slaying the Minotaur. Before he became an Athenian tribute, however, Theseus embarked upon a variety of quests throughout Attica and along the coast of the Saronic Gulf, eventually ending in Athens. During this
time period, he defeated a variety of notable bandits and thieves. Although Theseus upholds Athenian valor, piety, and honor, it is notable that he travels to Athens from his birthplace in Troezen on the Peloponnese.  

The Peloponnese is traditionally viewed as Spartan territory while the mainland portion of Attica is viewed as Athenian. Theseus travels from his birthplace of Troezen, within the sphere of influence of Sparta, to dedicate his life to fighting for Athens. The route that he takes involves land travel over the Isthmus of Corinth (Northern/Northwestern portion of the Saronic Gulf—see Figure 1). The appeal of Athenian democracy and values must have been so strong and the situation in Sparta so displeasing that a young man would be willing to travel to Athens to devote his life to the security of that city. Theseus also takes on the task of affirming Athenian control. His five labors took place “along the Saronic Gulf begin[ning] at the Isthmus with Sinis, continu[ing] along the coast through Megara and Eleusis, and com[ing] to an end on the Cephisus with Procrustes.” Sinis catapulted passing travelers to death on giant pine trees. Sciron (Megara) would ask for his feet to be washed and then push the travelers off of a cliff into the jaws of a man-eating tortoise. Cercyon (Eleusis) challenged those passing by to lethal wrestling matches. Finally, Procrustes mutilated the travelers sleeping in his bed. All of these locations are places “where, at least according to ancient tradition, Athens had vied for territorial control and won it under Theseus.”

27 Mills, Theseus, Tragedy, and the Athenian Empire, p. 21-2.
By reaffirming the power of Athens in these areas around the Saronic Gulf, Theseus proves that the Isthmus is under Athenian control. The labors therefore have an innate “tradition of Attic synoecism and hope for further expansion.”

Theseus’ popularity as a hero deserving of tribute and dedications arises with the increased popularity and influx of donations in the mid 6th century BCE (540-530 BCE). Cult practices arise closer to 510 or 520 BCE, “coincide[ing] almost exactly with the promotion of a cult in honour of Harmodios and Aristogeiton, who had unsuccessfully attempted to overthrow the Peisistratid tyranny in 514.” Harmodios and Aristogeiton were both young, ambitious men like Theseus and were later viewed as heroes for their efforts. The political uprising to decisively eliminate tyranny in Athens was a clear expression of the Athenian devotion and commitment to democracy. This distinct political system set Athens apart from the rest of Greece, especially her rival Sparta. The cult to Harmodios and Aristogeiton provides the Athenians “with a most serviceable instrument with which to primp themselves upon their indomitable self-reliance and indissoluble attachment to democracy.” This cult intrinsically pits Athenian democracy against Sparta’s centralized government, paralleling the anti-Spartan attitude expressed by the cult of Theseus. Therefore, the labors of Theseus do not just reaffirm Athenian dominance in the areas of the Isthmus; they claim those controversial areas for Athens instead of Sparta.

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The rise of the cult of Theseus marks an increase in imperial aspirations in the minds of the Athenians. He represents certainty over “what Athens already controlled, namely Eleusis, and provide[s] mythic validation for its claims to further territory.”\(^{33}\) These desires to expand are executed over the course of the 5th century with the Peloponnesian Wars. Here, Athens actively—and successfully—tries to conquer lands owned by other city-states. A majority of these territories are on the Peloponnese and controlled by Sparta, emphasizing the distinction between the two main powers in Greece. Theseus ties into the story by validating these imperial efforts. He left Sparta to claim the lands of the Isthmus for the Athenians, making it acceptable for Athens to attempt an expansion. Theseus provides divine approval for the creation of the Athenian empire. His cult reaffirms the fact that “it is necessary that the gods should have sanctioned all Athenian action, especially the establishment of the Athenian empire.”\(^{34}\)

As the Peloponnesian War raged, a new god joined the Athenian pantheon to continue the tradition of Athenian conquest approved by the gods. Asklepios was the “son of Apollo, a deity who is also closely associated with healing, and a mortal woman named Koronis.”\(^{35}\) As Asklepios grew older, he realized his aptitude for healing but was “eventually struck by Zeus’ thunderbolt for having accepted a fee to resurrect one of his patients from the dead.”\(^{36}\) Asklepios was human and became a hero and a healing god after his death. The cult of Asklepios originated before the Peloponnesian War and was focused almost exclusively in the northeast


\(^{34}\) Mills, *Theseus, Tragedy, and the Athenian Empire*, p 75.


Peloponnese with the main sanctuary located at Epidauros.\textsuperscript{37} Epidauros was the birthplace of Asklepios, housed the major Asklepiion of the Greek world and conveniently laid “in the direct line of fire between Sparta and Athens at a period of protracted hostilities.”\textsuperscript{38}

Athens, however, was never able to conquer the city of Epidauros. After all of their efforts had failed, the Athenians took an incredibly curious measure and effectively made a treaty with the city by arranging a transfer of the god Asklepios to Athens. Asklepios did not make the journey to Athens until after the Peace of Nikias ended the First Peloponnesian War. Before this truce, “conditions of war are likely to have prevented the journey to the Epidaurian sanctuary to fetch Asklepios.”\textsuperscript{39} The man who undertook these efforts to transport Asklepios (in the form of his sacred snake) to Athens, between 421 and 419 BCE, was Telemachos. He erected a monument commemorating the journey and detailing its events at Asklepios’ final resting place on the Acropolis.

Asklepios traveled by ship from his birthplace and home of his largest sanctuary, Epidauros, to Attica, docking in the Zea port of Piraeus, a few miles from the city of Athens. His daughter Hygieia, “the personification of health,”\textsuperscript{40} accompanied him. On his journey from the Piraeus to the city of Athens, Asklepios was welcomed and assisted by “the Two Goddesses” (Demeter and Persephone). He was even allowed temporary housing “in the City Eleusinion alongside the Panathenaic Way, a short distance northwest of the Acropolis.”\textsuperscript{41}

\textsuperscript{40} Garland, \textit{Introducing New Gods}, p. 120.
The motives behind Asklepios’ journey to Athens are often attributed to the plague that broke out in Athens from 430 to 426 BCE and the association that Telemachos seemed to have with the god in a private cult manner. On the surface, these explanations are reasonable: it makes sense to bring a healing god into the city to cure the plague. A person able to shoulder such a burden and build an extravagant and expensive sanctuary for the god must be incredibly wealthy and personally driven with religious zeal for the cult. Yet recent scholarship has disproven portions of these theories and cast light on a more expansionist outlook towards the inclusion of Asklepios in the divine pantheon.

The plague was supposed to have ravaged Athens throughout the early 420’s BCE. Piraeus was reported as “the first region in Attica to fall victim to the epidemic,” possibly explaining Asklepios’ entry to Athens via this point. Thucydides’ account, however, is the only true primary source that attests that the plague occurred at this time. While there very well may have been an outbreak, it could have served Thucydides’ writing to exaggerate the conditions in Athens. He was able to emphasize the Greek concept of hubris through Athens being stricken with the plague during the Peloponnesian War. Also, Asklepios “is not generally known to have treated individuals suffering from plague.” He deals mainly with smaller personal injuries or persistent problems such as infertility, blindness, and deafness as shown by the votive dedications found at his temples.

This calls into question Telemachos’ choice to transport the god to Athens. If Telemachos personally wanted

44 Wickkaser, *Asklepios, Medicine, and the Politics of Healing in Fifth-Century Greece*, p. 64.
to spend his money to make a significant enough donation to Epidauros to facilitate Asklepios moving to Athens, then the cult of the god would most likely have been installed in a private cult setting in a family estate or small village rather than on the Acropolis. Telemachos’ action of “bringing a new god into Athens in the late fifth century would have required approval of the demos….[and] authorization from the state to found the Acropolis sanctuary.” These two major problems add to the troublesome fact that Asklepios was imported from enemy territory—dangerous land controlled by Sparta. All of these issues could have been avoided had Athens chosen to import Asklepios from another sanctuary. While Epidauros was home to the largest Asklepiion, major and very legitimate cults of the god existed in Aegina and Trikka in Thessaly. Thessaly, in particular, “was an ally of Athens throughout much of the war and, unlike Epidauros, would not have posed the difficulties incurred in importing a god from enemy territory.” The rationale that can effectively explain the steps the city of Athens took to import Asklepios shares many ideals with the cult of Theseus and relates back to the Athenian emphasis on empire.

Athens began its attack of the Peloponnese in the First Peloponnesian War by taking Halieis in the Southern Akte peninsula. Then, in the Second Peloponnesian War, they succeeded in taking Methana. At that point in time, Athens held significant footholds in the areas of the Peloponnese south of Epidauros (see Figure 1). Epidauros would have been an incredibly valuable addition to Athens because “it was the port of entry into the Peloponnese closest to Athens…[and] was the city on the Akte peninsula nearest the Isthmus

45 Wickkaser, Asklepios, Medicine, and the Politics of Healing in Fifth-Century Greece, p. 72.

46 Wickkaser, Asklepios, Medicine, and the Politics of Healing in Fifth-Century Greece, p. 64.
of Corinth—the only land route into and out of the Peloponnese.” Athens had established firm control over the areas of the Isthmus, ensuring safe passage of the land army into the northern-most part of the Peloponnese. Controlling Epidauros, the city closest to the Isthmus, would confirm that the Athenian hoplites would make it safely into enemy territory. The failure of the Athenian army to capture Epidauros forced the Athenian government to consider a more creative approach. Forming a pact through the god Asklepios would allow the Athenian soldiers some sort of protection sanctioned by the religious power at Epidauros to ensure safe passage.

The choice to import the Asklepios of Epidauros instead of Thessaly or Aegina was a simple political move by the Athenians. Aside from the geographical advantage of having allies on the Peloponnese, moving Asklepios from Epidauros to Athens showed the appeal of the city of Athens. It should be noted that Asklepios arriving in Athens did not mean that the god had abandoned Epidauros. In Greek religion, it was believed that a single god could be in many places at one time. Nevertheless, Asklepios’ journey to Athens from the Spartan-dominated Peloponnese showed a distinct anti-Spartan move by the god and his priests. They were willing to share the cult with the enemy, bolstering Athenian feelings of supremacy. In the same way that Theseus’ departure from Spartan Troezen shows support of Athens, Asklepios’ departure from Spartan Epidauros supports Athens’ new imperial ambitions.

Once the Athenian government made a strategic move to import a religious cult, they had to ensure that the general public would accept the cult. The Athenians are known as “the most pious of the Greeks” and are very particular about

47 Wickkaser, Asklepios, Medicine, and the Politics of Healing in Fifth-Century Greece, p. 92.
their religious practices. Aside from the worship of Athena taking place on the Acropolis, the most significant state-sponsored cult was that of the Two Goddesses—Demeter and Persephone—at Eleusis. The Mysteries at Eleusis “enjoyed strong support from the Athenian state,” second only to the Panathenaia. It is no coincidence that both Theseus and Asklepios have ties to Eleusis. Theseus performed one of his labors in Eleusis while “a priestess of Eleusinian Demeter” met Asklepios “and escorted him to the Eleusinion.” Thus, both newly introduced cults needed to gain the support of the major cult in Athens. Asklepios even arrived in Athens during the Mysteries at Eleusis, binding him “solidly into the fabric of the Eleusinian cult.” Gaining the approval of the Two Goddesses would have induced the approval of the polis as a whole, creating a unified front behind the expansionist ideals of the Athenian state.

Epidauros represents an area on the coast of the Saronic Gulf not yet under Athenian control. In the 5th century, the area extending from north of Epidauros to the Isthmus was relatively rural with Epidauros as the center of control. Building a relationship with Epidauros completes an Athenian sphere of influence that stretches along the Western coast of the Saronic Gulf to meet the area of control created by Theseus to the north along the Isthmus and the area gained during the Peloponnesian Wars (as well as Theseus’ birthplace of Troezen) to the south. These acquired areas on the Peloponnese connect with the poleis of Attica, encompassing the Saronic Gulf (see Figure 1) and dramatically extending the Athenian sphere of influence. The cults of Theseus and

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48 Wickkaser, Asklepios, Medicine, and the Politics of Healing in Fifth-Century Greece, p. 72.
49 Wickkaser, Asklepios, Medicine, and the Politics of Healing in Fifth-Century Greece, p. 73-4.
50 Wickkaser, Asklepios, Medicine, and the Politics of Healing in Fifth-Century Greece, p.73-4.
Asklepios played integral roles both in creating these ties and extending Athenian influence throughout the Gulf. Both cults were publicly supported, distinctively anti-Spartan, and advantageously located. They supported the Athenian aspiration of empire while providing divine approval for Athens’ expansionist actions.

Figure 1: Background map from Google Maps accessed 23 November 2013. Annotated by Carly Sokach.
References


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