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SCANDAL AT SKYROS: THE DELIAN LEAGUE, PLUTARCH, AND THE MALIGNING OF THE DOLOPIANS

CHRISTOPHER J. DAWE

In 475 b.c.e. Kimon, the *strategos* of the Athenian led Delian League, took control of the small island of Skyros. Ostensibly, this was done under the jurisdiction of the Delian League and, as the widely accepted story goes, the action was to rid the island of an infestation of pirates. While a number of surviving ancient sources detail Kimon's conquest of the island, only Plutarch, writing more than half a millennium after the event, mentions piracy. Though modern scholarship has largely taken Plutarch at face value,¹ the lack of agreement of the sources ought to raise an eyebrow. As will be shown, Plutarch is the only reason that modern scholarship sees Skyros as a bastion of piracy.

Plutarch's *Life of Kimon*

Though not the earliest mention of Kimon's conquest of Skyros, Plutarch's *Lives* does provide the most detailed extant account. As it is relatively brief, it is worth quoting in its entirety.

They settled Scyros too, which Cimon seized for the following reason. Dolopians were living on the island, but they were poor tillers of the soil. So they practiced piracy on the high sea from of old, and finally did not withhold their hands even from those who put into their ports and had dealings with them, but robbed some Thessalian merchants who had cast anchor at Ctesium, and threw them into prison. When these men had escaped from bondage and won their suit against the city at the Amphictyonic assembly, the people of Scyros were not willing to make restitution, but called on those who actually held the plunder to give it back. The robbers, in terror, sent a letter to Cimon, urging him to come with his fleet to seize the city, and they

1. Michael Grant, for instance, claims that Skyros was "notorious for its pirates" until "Cimon conquered and enslaved its inhabitants" (*A Guide to the Ancient World: A Dictionary of Classical Place Names* [New York: Barnes and Noble Books, 1997], 569). Russell Meiggs agrees, writing, "The Athenians drove out the pirates" (*The Athenian Empire* [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972], 69).

would give it up to him. In this manner Cimon got possession of the island, drove out the Dolopians and made the Aegean a free sea. On learning that the ancient Theseus, son of Aegeus, had fled in exile from Athens to Skyros, but had been treacherously put to death there, through fear, by Lycomedes the king, Cimon eagerly sought to discover his grave. For the Athenians had once received an oracle bidding them bring back the bones of Theseus to the city and honor him as became a hero,² but they knew not where he lay buried, since the Scyrians would not admit the truth of the story, nor permit any search to be made. Now, however, Cimon set to work with great ardour, discovered at last the hallowed spot, had the bones bestowed in his own trireme, and with general pomp and show brought them back to the hero's own country after an absence of about four hundred years. This was the chief reason why the people took kindly to him.³

Three other sources (listed in chronological order), Thucydides, Diodorus, and Pausanias, cover the Skyrian invasion. Not one mentions piracy. In fact, there is not a single source before Plutarch that links the Dolopians with piracy. Thucydides account is telling in its brevity; "Next they [the Athenians] enslaved Skyros the island in the Aegean, containing a Dolopian population, and colonized it themselves."⁴

As Thucydides was, to some extent, a contemporary of Kimon,⁵ and Plutarch lived centuries later, this casts some question on the idea of Dolopian pillagers. If the Dolopians were as "notorious" as now believed, it is quite odd that Thucydides left out any reference to it. Unfortunately, Thucydides does not provide an alternative reason for Kimon's rationale for seizing the island. This, however, is quite possibly because the ancient historian expected the location of his passage on Skyros to speak for itself.

Thucydides situates the conquest of Skyros within a larger narrative describing the aggressive nature of Athens' and the Delian League. Thucydides records the following:

Following the destruction of Skyros, Kimon moved onto Naxos and, waged war upon the Naxians, who had revolted, and reduced them by siege. And this was the first allied city to be enslaved in violation of the established rule; but afterwards the others also were enslaved as it happened in each case.⁶

2. More time will be spent on the odd story of the "bones of Theseus." The story is attested to in a number of accounts but modern scholars have seen it as problematic due to its mythological nature and its similarities to a story in Herodotus in which the Spartans are commanded by the Oracle at Delphi to locate and recover the bones of Orestes (A. J. Podlecki, "Cimon, Skyros and Theseus' Bones," *Journal of Hellenic Studies* 91 [1971]: 141–43).

3. Plutarch, *Life of Cimon* 8.3–7.

4. Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War* 1.98.2.

5. Kimon lived from 510–450 b.c.e. and the historian lived from 460–395 b.c.e.

6. Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War* 1.98.4.

As Thucydides continues, it is obvious that the Naxians were not the only people to fall victim to an increasingly militant Athens. In describing the Athenian reaction to dissent, the historian wrote:

Now while there were other causes of revolts, the principal ones were the failures in bringing in the tribute or the quota of ships and in some cases, refusal of military service; for the Athenians exacted the tribute strictly and gave offense by applying coercive measures to any who were unaccustomed or unwilling to bear the hardships of service. And in some other respects the Athenians were no longer equally agreeable as leaders; they would not take part in expeditions on terms of equality, and they found it easy to reduce those who revolted.⁷

Diodorus, likewise, makes no reference to piracy, stating that Kimon “captured by siege Scyros, which was inhabited by . . . Dolopes; and setting up an Athenian as the founder of a colony he portioned out the land in allotments.”⁸ Once again, it is the Athenians who can be seen in a piratical nature—their conquests are being portrayed as militant expansion, seizure of land, and colonization, not of League members, but of Athenians. These actions were backed by fearful allies. Meiggs’s contention that the allies “are not likely to have protested, for the suppression of piracy would have been popular in the Aegean”⁹ does not take into account what happened to allies who did protest or resist: loss of autonomy, lands, and for some, freedom.

The final source detailing the Skyrian expedition was Pausanias, who also makes no reference to piracy. The focus of the invasion, in his account, was the recovery of Theseus: “Cimon, son of Miltiades, ravaged Scyros, thus avenging Theseus’ death, and carried his bones to Athens.”¹⁰

If the Dolopians were not practicing piracy, and aside from Plutarch, there is no evidence that they were, two questions arise. First, why did Kimon seize Scyros? Second, why did Plutarch describe the Dolopians as pirates?

The first question is readily answered. By conquering Scyros, Kimon accomplished three objectives. First, he decreased Persian influence by removing a Medizing people from the Aegean.¹¹ Second, he helped to expand the influence of Athens. Third, he added to his own political capital by fulfilling the edict of the Delphian oracle and returning the lost “bones of Theseus” to Athens. To discuss the first and second points, a brief description of the Athenian-dominated Delian League is necessary.

7. Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War* 1.99.1.

8. Diodorus, *Historical Library* 11.60.2.

9. Meiggs, *Athenian Empire*, 69.

10. Pausanias, *Description of Greece* 1.17.6.

11. According to Herodotus, the Dolopians, amongst others, “paid tribute” to Xerxes. Against those favorably disposed to Persia, the Greeks, “entered into a sworn agreement, which was this: that if they should be victorious they would dedicate to the god of Delphi a tithe of the possessions of all Greeks who had of free will surrendered themselves to the Persians” (Herodotus, *Histories* 7.132.2–4).

The Persian Dispersion and Subsequent Delian League

Following the failed Persian invasion of Xerxes 1 in 488 b.c.e. Greek troops, under the command of the Spartan Pausanias crossed the Hellespont with the goal of liberating Ionian *poleis* in Asia Minor.¹² Two victories, one at Mycale and the other at Plataea, assured a complete Greek victory, and the question of how to proceed was discussed.¹³ The Spartans proposed to evacuate the entire Greek population from Asia Minor back to the Greek mainland. Athens staunchly maintained the need for these colonies. The end result involved the colonies staying put, the Spartans returning to their city and the formation of the Delian League—a collection of *poleis* in or around the Aegean.¹⁴

The initial actions of the League (largely what may be termed “police actions”¹⁵ and attacks against Persia) were considered beneficial for all members. Athens, however, was slowly turning the League, created solely for defense against the Persians, into a militant arm of Athenian expansion. In beginning the section of his history that discusses Skyros, Thucydides describes how Athens wielded the military arm of the Delian League:

Exercising then what was at first a leadership over allies, . . . the Athenians, in the interval between this war and the Persian, undertook, both in war and in the administration of public affairs, the enterprise now to be related which were directed against the Barbarian, against their own allies when they attempted revolution, and as such of the Peloponnesians as from time to time came into conflict with them in the course of each attempt.¹⁶

Kimón and the Beginning of Empire

Kimón was given command of the Delian fleet and launched a campaign to remove all Persian influence in the Aegean. His fleet’s first stop was Eion, occupied by the Persians. According to Plutarch:

Cimon, now that the allies had attached themselves to him, took command of them and sailed to Thrace, for he heard that men of rank among the Persians and kinsmen of the King held possession of Eion, a city on the banks of the Strymon, and were harassing the Hellenes in that vicinity. First he defeated the Persians themselves in battle and shut them up in the city; then he expelled from their homes above the Strymon the Thracians from whom the Persians had been getting provisions, put the whole country

12. This being Pausanias the general as opposed to the earlier quoted Pausanias the geographer (William Watkiss Lloyd, *The Age of Pericles: A History of the Politics and Arts of Greece from the Persian to the Peloponnesian War* (London: Macmillan and Co., 1875), 100).

13. Meiggs, *The Athenian Empire*, 41.

14. John B. Bury, et al., ed., *The Cambridge Ancient History: The Fifth Century B.C.* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 34.

15. Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War* 1.97.1–2.

16. Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War* 1.96.1–2.

under guard, and brought the besieged to such straits that Butes, the King's general, gave up the struggle.¹⁷

After eliminating the population, Kimon then initiated a drastically new policy—Athenian colonization.

And so it was that though Cimon took the city, he gained no other memorable advantage thereby,¹⁸ since most of its treasures had been burned up with the Barbarians; but the surrounding territory was very fertile and fair, and this he turned over to the Athenians for occupation.¹⁹

Two important points must be noted. The Delian League was actively conquering foreign holdings and the subjugated territory was not being handed over to the League—it was going straight to Athens. A. French notes that this was part of an overall Athenian strategy aimed not so much at restricting the Persians to the north of the Hellespont as financial gain.²⁰

Athens was not alone in benefiting from Kimon's militancy—his military offensive was the beginning of his rise to the summit of Athenian politics.²¹ The conquest of Skyros would add significantly to Kimon's résumé. It was at Skyros that Kimon located the bones of the legendary Theseus and “made political capital out of bringing back his bones from Scyros, burying them in the heart of the city [Athens] and formally establishing his cult.”²²

The Bones of Theseus

Theseus, son of Poseidon²³ (or possibly Aegeus, king of Athens),²⁴ was credited by ancient authors with the unification of various Attic tribes into Athens. After falling from favor with Athens, Theseus fled to Skyros, where he was

17. Plutarch, *Life of Cimon* 7.1–2.

18. Butes, the Persian general in charge of Eion, burned the city, destroyed the treasury and committed suicide before Kimon could take the city (Plutarch, *Life of Cimon* 7.2).

19. Plutarch, *Life of Cimon* 7.3.

20. Desirable objectives were to protect and divert supplies, to commandeer money and treasure, and to seize land for colonists. The leadership of the alliance was of immediate value because it apparently enabled the Athenians practically to decide where and how the allied fleet would be deployed, and how the spoils were to be divided. Athens' losses in the war had been severe, but her post-war economic recovery was startling: it was her use of the allied fleet which enabled her to recoup what she had lost (A. French, “Athenian Ambitions and the Delian Alliance,” *Phoenix* 33.2 [Summer 1979]: 140).

21. N. G. L. Hammond, “Strategia and Hegemonia in Fifth-Century Athens,” *Classical Quarterly*, New Series 19.1 (May 1969): 111–44.

22. Walter R. Agard, “Theseus: A National Hero,” *Classical Journal* 24.2 (November 1928): 6.

23. Sophie Mills, *Theseus, Tragedy, and the Athenian Empire* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), 163.

24. Mills, *Theseus, Tragedy, and the Athenian Empire*, 5.

betrayed by Lycomedes and unceremoniously pushed off a cliff. Later we read: [While] the Athenians were consulting the oracle at Delphi, they were told by the Pythian priestess to take up the bones of Theseus, give them honourable burial at Athens, and guard them there. But it was difficult to find the grave and take up the bones, because of the inhospitable and savage nature of the Dolopians,²⁵ who then inhabited the island. However, Cimon took the island, as I have related in his *Life* and being ambitious to discover the grave of Theseus, saw an eagle in a place where there was the semblance of a mound, pecking, as he says, and tearing up the ground with his talons. By some divine ordering he comprehended the meaning of this and dug there, and there was found a coffin of a man of extraordinary size, a bronze spear lying by its side, and a sword. When these relics were brought home on his trireme by Cimon, the Athenians were delighted, and received them with splendid processions and sacrifices, as though Theseus himself were returning to his city. And now he lies buried in the heart of the city, near the present gymnasium, and his tomb is a sanctuary and place of refuge for runaway slaves and all men of low estate who are afraid of men in power, since Theseus was a champion and helper of such during his life, and graciously received the supplications of the poor and needy.²⁶

Kimón fulfilled the edict of the Pythian priestess and “ravaged Scyros, thus avenging Theseus’ death.”²⁷ Plutarch adds, “This was the chief reason why the people took kindly to him.”²⁸

Plutarch

Now to address the second, and more difficult, question, “why did Plutarch describe the Dolopians as pirates?” There are a number of possibilities: (1) Plutarch was basing his claim of Dolopian piracy on a now-lost tradition, either oral or written, (2) Plutarch made a simple, if long-lasting, mistake, or (3) Plutarch intentionally inserted a reference to piracy into an otherwise accurate account.

There is no way to prove a negative—this paper cannot show that a record never existed accusing the Dolopians of piracy. That being said, no extant pre-Plutarch record shows the Dolopians engaged in anything that resembles piracy. As there are numerous references to the Dolopians²⁹ without any mention of piracy, it would appear that the modern perception of the Dolopians as notorious pirates goes back to Plutarch.

25. Plutarch provides the fullest account of the exhuming of Theseus and his subsequent transference, thus his account has been included here. It is important, however, to note that Plutarch is once again using less-than-favorable language to describe the Dolopians. It might be expected that a conquered people would be “inhospitable” to their subjugators.

26. Plutarch, *Life of Theseus* 36.1–3.

27. Pausanias, *Description of Greece* 1.17.6.

28. Plutarch, *Life of Cimon* 8.7.

29. Including Thucydides, who predates Plutarch by centuries.

This brings up a very thorny problem—what to do with Plutarch? Dismissing him is risky business. If nothing else, the modern Classicist owes the biographer a monumental debt for providing reams of secondary source material. Further, it is never wise to just discount an ancient source. Unfortunately, that seems to be the only way to proceed, given the evidence.

Plutarch, by his own account in his oft-quoted introduction, wrote “It must be borne in mind that my design is not to write histories, but lives.”³⁰ These lives were always a couplet—one Greek and one Roman. The Roman counterpart to Kimon is Lucius Licinius Lucullus (ca. 115–86 b.c.e.). One of Lucullus’ most significant actions was his prosecution of the Third Mithridatic War (75–65 b.c.e.). Mithridates, “King” of Pontus, openly allied himself with pirates going so far as to appoint Cleochares, a known *laestes*, in a triumvirate rule of the island of Sinope.³¹ Lucullus eventually took this island, spelling the end of Cleochares.³²

It is quite possible that Plutarch, either intentionally or anachronistically, included the description of Skyros as a “parallel” for Lucullus’ actions on Sinope. One later commentator has noted that “the bases for the comparisons [given by Plutarch] are very inadequate,”³³ and this may be another example. This is, of course, as equally impossible to prove as the assumption that there were never pre-Plutarch records of Dolopian piracy.

Dolopians Reconsidered?

Aside from a few scholars who suggest that Plutarch’s account be taken with a grain of salt,³⁴ the Dolopians are almost universally seen as dangerous pirates. At least for modern authors, this view starts and ends with Plutarch’s *Life of Kimon*. As has been shown, this paradigm ought to be reconsidered. Far from piracy, all other sources describe the motivations of the Skyrian invasion as colonial expansion and political capital for the strategos. As all other sources describe the motivations of the Skyrian invasion as colonial expansion and political capital for Kimon, Skyrian piracy simply cannot be accepted lock, stock, and barrel.

30. Plutarch, *Fall of the Roman Republic*, trans. Rex Warner (New York: Penguin Books, 1972), 1.

31. Peter Green has noted that at this time, “Piracy ruled the seas from Sicily to Crete, from Crete to the Cilician coast. The straits between Crete and the southern Peloponnese yielded such booty that the pirates referred to this stretch of water as the Golden Sea” (Peter Green, *Alexander to Actium: The Historical Evolution of the Hellenistic Age* [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990], 655).

32. Memnon, *History of Heraclea* 37.

33. Plutarch, *Fall of the Roman Republic*, 8.

34. Podlecki is one who views Dolopian piracy as a possible “post factum justification by the Amphictyons, glad to be rid of a troublesome branch of their own kinsmen” (Podlecki, “Cimon, Skyros and Theseus’ Bones,” 142).