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Keith Fairbank

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THE STRENGTH OF RHODES AND THE CILICIAN PIRATE CRISIS

KEITH FAIRBANK

In the years following the Third Mithridatic War, the Roman Republic faced an alarming number of pirates. The impact these pirates had on shipping became severe enough to result in almost unprecedented powers being voted to Pompey in 67 b.c.e. His brilliant and successful campaign in the Mediterranean wiped out the pirate forces that had impeded Rome's precious grain supply and had been a thorn in the side since at least 102 b.c.e.¹ Until Pompey's success, however, the pirates had almost free reign in the regions around Cilicia. Several other commanders had been thrown at them with special powers from the Senate, but with little success. For 35 years the western seas were crawling with pirates.

Piracy in the ancient world has long been associated closely with Rhodes, the pirate police of the Mediterranean. The island republic, though not very large, managed to maintain a great deal of political independence for a great many years, even when surrounded by large, competing powers. Its campaigns against piracy can be attributed to its dependence on the sea. Tarn wrote, "It was only states like Rhodes, subsisting entirely on sea-borne commerce, or Athens, dependent on sea-borne corn, that felt any real interest in clearing the seas."² Indeed, Rhodian forces had for so long patrolled the Mediterranean that the pirate crisis of the late republic is often blamed on the downfall of Rhodes.

Rhodes managed to stay out of Rome's way and provide suitable assistance until an unfortunate turn of events in the early second century b.c.e. As a result of some poor political maneuvering by Rhodes and aggressive tactics by Rome actions were taken against the island in 167 and 166 b.c.e. First, the regions of Lycia and Caria, formerly gifted to Rhodes in the treaty of Apamea in 189 b.c.e., were revoked. Then, in a decree in 167 b.c.e., the Senate declared the island of Delos a free port. Lycia and Caria had been sources of significant income for Rhodes in

1. Henry A. Ormerod, *Piracy in the Ancient World* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), 192.

2. William Woodthorpe Tarn, *Antigonos Gonatas* (Chicago: Argonaut, 1964), 88.

a period when it stood at the “peak of its power.”³ Delos, the slave center of the ancient world, benefited enormously from its new tax-free status, and Rhodes lost a great deal of business.

These strokes against the Rhodian economy, the financial means of that state which had, for so many years, held pirates in check, has long been seen as one of, if not the, principal cause behind the pirate crisis 100 years later. Ormerod wrote in 1924, “With the rapid decline that followed the withdrawal of Roman favour after the third Macedonian war, it became obvious that the Rhodians were no longer equal to the task.”⁴ Much evidence has come to light since Ormerod’s *Piracy in the Ancient World*, which certainly would have changed some of his conclusions. Even recent books, however, have continued this opinion. Starr wrote in 1989, “instead it [the Senate] struck at the heart of Rhodian strength. . . . Thereafter Rhodes did not have the financial power to keep up its navy, though it continued to have some warships down to 42 b.c.e.”⁵ A 2003 textbook stated the following: “The loss of revenue from her Asiatic possessions and from harbor dues and banking so crippled the finances of Rhodes that she was compelled to reduce her navy and was no longer able to keep piracy in check in the eastern seas.”⁶ Further, “Ever since the destruction of Rhodes as a naval power, the pirates and slave traders of Cilicia and Crete had enjoyed unrestricted freedom of the seas.”⁷

Interest in Hellenistic Rhodes has yielded a great deal of new information from which fresh conclusions may be drawn concerning the role of Rhodes in the pirate crisis of the late republic.

A focus on the culture and economy of Rhodes has uncovered the means by which its economy might have weathered Roman actions against it. New archaeological evidence, especially ceramic evidence, has pointed to the long stability of Rhodes, followed by gradual decline, as opposed to a previously supposed steep and permanent one. Further study into the practicality of naval warfare against the Cilician pirates further minimizes the involvement of the island republic. In short, it appears that the fall of Rhodes had little to do with the pirate crisis of the early first century b.c.e. In fact, it appears that there was hardly any “fall of Rhodes” at all.

Let us first examine the Rhodian economy, the nature of its wealth, and the means by which it funded its naval campaigns. Then, let us review the problematic ceramic evidence in order to examine the wellbeing of the Rhodian economy in the years following 167 b.c.e. Then let us briefly study the force necessary to push out the pirate lords of Cilicia. Let us in conclusion see to the

3. Richard M. Berthold, *Rhodes in the Hellenistic Age* (London: Cornell University Press, 1984), 165.

4. Ormerod, *Piracy in the Ancient World*, 189.

5. Chester G. Starr, *The Influence of Sea Power on Ancient History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 60.

6. Allen M. Ward, Fritz M. Heichelheim, and Cedric A. Yeo, *A History of the Roman People*, 4th ed. (Upper Saddle River, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 2003), 123.

7. Ward, Heichelheim, and Yeo, *A History of the Roman People*, 171.

influence which Rhodes may or may not have had in the crisis and the implications of our hypotheses.

In considering the effects of the Senate's decree in 167 b.c.e., it is interesting to note that Polybius writes of a Rhodian envoy's complaints concerning a drop in revenue after that decree. Speaking to the Senate in 165 or 164 b.c.e., the envoy claimed that the country's harbor income had dropped from 1 million drachmas to 150,000 per year.⁸ This is a very large sum, "yet either figure (one million or 150,000 drachmas) represents merely a fraction of the wealth flowing into Rhodes, the total of which we are unable to estimate."⁹ As Gabrielsen points out, the sum probably referred to a 2 percent harbor tax, which would have been directly influenced by the new position of Delos as a duty-free port.¹⁰ A much more significant blow to the economy would have been the loss of Lycia and Caria and the respective incomes they provided the state. But all things considered, "The sanctions imposed on the Rhodians by the Senate were a heavy but far from mortal blow to the economy."¹¹ The very nature of that economy dictated that it would remain stable for a great many years.

The Rhodian economy was most famously associated with the Egyptian grain trade.¹² The island's proximity to both the great grain centers of the world, and their principal customers gave it a unique position in that market.¹³ Gabrielsen argued that there were strong political ties between Egypt and Rhodes which went back several centuries before any of the events mentioned here. Certainly a country producing grain in such volume depended very heavily on the safe shipment, storage (and the subsequent freeing of filled Egyptian silos), and sale of grain, all services which Rhodian merchants provided.¹⁴ Famously the Egyptians underscored this dependence on Rhodes when they, admittedly among others, provided immense aid to the island after the tragic earthquake in 224 b.c.e.¹⁵ In short, the grain trade and, more important, the economic relationship Rhodes shared with Egypt as a result of that particular grain trade, was very firmly entrenched and was not likely to be uprooted by a decree concerning Delos.

Not only was the grain trade a strong source of ongoing stability, but "the Rhodian part in the grain trade was entirely in the hands of private entrepreneurs."¹⁶ Thus not only was the island a partner with Egypt in a very profitable enterprise, this business was also carried out in the private sector, where it was even more insulated from actions against the state. For

8. Polybius, *Histories* 30.31.

9. Vincent Gabrielsen, *The Naval Aristocracy of Hellenistic Rhodes* (Aarhus, DK: Aarhus University Press, 1997), 64.

10. Gabrielsen, *Naval Aristocracy of Hellenistic Rhodes*, 64.

11. Berthold, *Rhodes in the Hellenistic Age*, 205.

12. Berthold, *Rhodes in the Hellenistic Age*, 51.

13. Gabrielsen, *Naval Aristocracy of Hellenistic Rhodes*, 71–72.

14. Gabrielsen, *Naval Aristocracy of Hellenistic Rhodes*, 71–74.

15. Polybius, *Histories* 5.88–90.

16. Gabrielsen, *Naval Aristocracy of Hellenistic Rhodes*, 80.

instance, Berthold wrote, “The island republic still possessed perhaps the largest merchant marine in the east, and whether or not these vessels employed the island’s harbors in the shipment of their cargoes, it was still Rhodian merchants that were carrying the goods and taking the profits.”¹⁷ Thus even if merchants bypassed Rhodian harbors for the untaxed ones at Delos (although unlikely due to Delos’s inability to accommodate grain ships¹⁸) the profits of the ventures would still be Rhodian. For all these reasons, the senatorial decree may have set back the Rhodian economy but certainly not crippled it.

There were many wealthy citizens in Rhodes, and the aristocracy they formed centered on naval service. As a solid military career was a prerequisite for success in Roman politics, so a naval career was the launching pad for the youth of hellenistic Rhodes. Gabrielsen wrote, “Naval service constituted a paramount element in their self-perception.”¹⁹ This naval service more often than not concerned the pirates of whom Rhodes was the sworn enemy. And, as Gabrielsen went to great lengths to show, “A good part of the Rhodian fleet probably consisted of ships owned by private individuals, who put them in the service of the state.”²⁰ If indeed private entrepreneurs were the driving force behind the Egyptian grain trade, it would only make sense that they would be highly invested in the safety of the seas. Even neglecting the strong ancient tradition of the wealthy providing lavish gifts to the state, which in the case of Rhodes would very fittingly be the supporting of warships, this would strongly suggest that merchants and nobility kept their own fleets. This privately funded pirate-fighting force would be relatively unaffected by the events of 167–166 b.c.e.

While it is fine to talk about the potential stability of the Rhodian economy after 166 b.c.e. and its subsequent ability to launch warships, evidence is hard to come by. One of the few remaining indicators of economic health available to the historian is the often problematic, however incredibly abundant, ceramic evidence. Stamped amphora handles have been used in a variety of studies for measuring the well-being of the Rhodian economy. It is a delicate science, to be sure, and one must first get past the sheer number of handles to be found. As Berthold wrote, “It is no exaggeration to say that there is hardly a site in the Mediterranean where Rhodian handles have not appeared.”²¹ However, if one assumes, as most scholars have, that the fluctuation in numbers of handles does indeed indicate proportionate economic growth and decline, it can suggest what happened to the Rhodian pirate fighting strength in the second century.

Many analyses of the distribution of Rhodian amphorae rely on political events to explain significant statistical changes. The definite peak in numbers

17. Berthold, *Rhodes in the Hellenistic Age*, 207.

18. Berthold, *Rhodes in the Hellenistic Age*, 207.

19. Gabrielsen, *Naval Aristocracy of Hellenistic Rhodes*, 17.

20. Gabrielsen, *Naval Aristocracy of Hellenistic Rhodes*, 101.

21. Berthold, *Rhodes in the Hellenistic Age*, 50.

is associated with the unprecedented prosperity Rhodes enjoyed in the early second century. The decline in distribution is explained by the aftermath of the Roman actions in 167 and 166 b.c.e. This view makes it significantly easier to explain the fluctuations but can be problematic. Vincent Gabrielsen explains:

In quantitative terms, the “peak” remains incontrovertible. . . . Yet, according to the accepted chronology, its terminal year—after which the precipitous “drop” occurs—is 175 b.c.e. Even more disturbing for the prevalent historical explanation is a new and very plausible calculation . . . which dates the termination of the “peak” to 180 b.c.e. Whichever of the two years one chooses (175 or 180 b.c.e.), they both fall within the period that definitely distinguishes the apogee of Rhodes’ political power—while the grant of *ateleia* to Delos is still nine or fourteen years ahead.²²

Such a dating of the drop nullifies the historical explanation, and thus some reports find elaborate means of forcing the dates to coincide.²³ However, by far the simplest solution would be to accept that the decrees of 167 and 166 b.c.e. and their aftermath did not spell the end of Rhodian trade.

A new study by Lund found the following:

The combined evidence from Rhodes suggests that the number of stamped amphora handles found in the island culminated between 200 and 180 b.c.e. A decline set in over the next decade, but the situation stabilized itself at a relatively high level after about 170 b.c.e. and throughout the rest of the century.²⁴

This study shows that the Rhodian economy did not suffer a drastic blow but was in decline years before 167 b.c.e. Further, it claims that the economy remained stable thereafter. It is most noteworthy that the stable level which it stayed through the end of the second century was much higher than the level it had held before the “peak.”²⁵

Gabrielsen, drawing on the studies of Lund and others, wrote that had it not been for the unexplained peak, “we would have been perfectly entitled to speak of a relative stability, and in certain places even growth, in the number of handles, at least until 146 or perhaps 120 b.c.e.”²⁶ If one accepts that Rhodes was privileged with significant economic growth around 200 b.c.e., followed by the fortunate acquisition of very profitable territories, Lycia and Caria, it makes sense that the island would experience unprecedented growth. It further stands

22. Gabrielsen, *Naval Aristocracy of Hellenistic Rhodes*, 67.

23. Gabrielsen, *Naval Aristocracy of Hellenistic Rhodes*, 67–71.

24. John Lund, “Rhodian Amphorae in Rhodes and Alexandria as Evidence of Trade,” in *Hellenistic Rhodes: Politics, Culture, and Society*, ed. Vincent Gabrielsen, et al. (Aarhus, DK: Aarhus University Press, 1999), 202.

25. Lund, “Rhodian Amphorae in Rhodes,” figs. 1–14.

26. Gabrielsen, *The Naval Aristocracy of Hellenistic Rhodes*, 70.

to reason that having lost Lycia and Caria and having suffered a minor blow in the establishment of Delos as a free port, the Rhodian economy would sink back to its original prosperity and continue on the course it followed before stumbling across all this circumstantial wealth. As a logical extension, Rhodian naval power should remain at that level at which it became famous for its prowess in policing the seas. In other words, the actions of the Roman Senate should not have hurt the Rhodian military significantly and brought about the pirate crisis of later years.

Now, while it should be clear that Rhodes did not die a sudden death when it fell under the disfavor of Rome, it would be irresponsible to suggest that the island's economy continued unimpeded forever. In truth, the same archaeological studies which show the stability of Rhodes before and after the "peak" show that the island's economic output declined greatly around the beginning of the first century b.c.e.²⁷ Berthold calls this period the "Long Twilight" and states that Rhodes sank into the background of a Roman world like many other Greek states.²⁸ This decline of Rhodian power is not, he suggests, due to severe blows to its economy but rather to the loss of freedom it suffered after the Third Mithridatic War. Concerning the Rhodian alliance with Rome in 164 b.c.e., he wrote:

The conclusion of the alliance with Rome brought Rhodes relief from the anxieties and insecurities stemming from Roman disfavor, but it also marked the formal end of Rhodes' independence and the final exhaustion of the policy that had for over a century and a half maintained that independence in the face of powerful neighbors.²⁹

This foreign policy—"the avoidance of entangling alliances and the concern for the power balance among the great states"³⁰—had been the brilliant key to the survival of Rhodes. In the aftermath of its alliance it certainly lost some of its influence in the sea, but not to such a drastic extent as to render it incapable of policing for pirates. However, the great pirate crisis of the late republic was alarming to say the least, and certainly called for more than policing. Ormerod described it, writing, "Four hundred cities are said to have been sacked . . . so great was the impunity of the pirate, who, without fear of molestation, caroused on every shore and carried his raids inland, till all the coastal districts were uncultivated, and the Romans themselves were deprived of the use of the Appian Way."³¹

The menace was so great that it warranted the dangerous powers voted to Pompey in 67 b.c.e. Rome must have been truly desperate to entrust so much authority to one man. He eliminated the problem in short order.

27. Lund, "Rhodian Amphorae in Rhodes," figs. 1–14.

28. Berthold, *Rhodes in the Hellenistic Age*, 213.

29. Berthold, *Rhodes in the Hellenistic Age*, 212.

30. Berthold, *Rhodes in the Hellenistic Age*, 213.

31. Ormerod, *Piracy in the Ancient World*, 227–28.

The sheer force Pompey brought to bear against the pirates of Cilicia is indicative of their sheer numbers and strength. Ormerod describes a force of 120,000 men, 6,000 cavalry, and 270 ships.³² After sweeping the sea of pirates, Pompey focused on their strongholds in Cilicia and, perhaps through sheer intimidation, eliminated the threat decisively. The great many pirates who surrendered were relocated, and Pompey went on to greatness.³³

The vast and devastating strokes with which Pompey cleared the Mediterranean contained one important element unavailable to Rhodes: a sizeable land force. The Cilician pirates were firmly entrenched. The term “pirate strongholds” certainly does not describe lightly defended bases waiting to be sacked. The force Pompey brought to bear against them proved sufficient, but it was a force far beyond any Rhodes could ever have raised. Indeed, Berthold wrote, “Even in its heyday the Rhodian navy could not have dealt adequately with a menace of this magnitude, since the problem called for land forces and a large rather than an especially skilled navy.”³⁴ In truth, had the pirate crisis come about in 180 b.c.e., when Rhodes stood at the height of its power, its extremely skilled navy and superior ships could not have begun to deal with the problem. Without naval bases and a vast land force in the region, Rhodian forces could only have picked away at the vastly superior numbers of the Cilician rebels.

In conclusion, the “fall of Rhodes” did not bring about the Cilician pirate crisis of the first century b.c.e. In fact, there was no decisive “fall of Rhodes.” The Senatorial decrees of 167 and 166 b.c.e. did not cripple the Rhodian economy and its ability to continue its longstanding tradition of fighting pirates. The Rhodian grain trade with Egypt and the private nature of its commerce ensured its economic longevity. Similarly, the often private nature of the Rhodian fleet guaranteed that actions against the state would not necessarily reduce its naval capabilities. The island republic’s ability to launch warships continued steadily throughout the second century b.c.e.

In truth, the Cilician pirate crisis was so large that Rhodes could never have dealt with it. To say that a few actions of Rome crippled so great a state is to cheapen the achievements of a truly fascinating entity in the ancient world. Furthermore, to assert that Rhodes was responsible for the growth of such a threat in the Mediterranean is to misunderstand the abilities and contributions of the island republic.

32. Ormerod, *Piracy in the Ancient World*, 234.

33. Ormerod, *Piracy in the Ancient World*, 234–41.

34. Berthold, *Rhodes in the Hellenistic Age*, 228.