

Charles Zhang

Liam Albrittain

November 22, 2021

Prompt 7

I have read and understood the relevant sections concerning plagiarism in the UCLA Student Code of Conduct handbook. This paper is my own work and has in no way violated UCLA's Code of Conduct.

A handwritten signature in black ink, consisting of stylized, overlapping loops and a long horizontal stroke extending to the right.

The Lenormant Trireme Relief



Pictured above is the Lenormant Trireme Relief, discovered in the 18th century near the Erechtheion. On it is a depiction of an Athenian trireme and its rowers, dating back to the end of the Peloponnesian War, when the Athenian fleet was defeated at Aigos Potamoi. Despite clear-cut social distinctions at the time, this relief speaks to the existence of what McInerney calls Athens' "egalitarian ethos"¹.

During the time of the Peloponnesian War, Athens was embroiled in a series of conflicts around all of Greece that made a strong military presence necessary to assert any form of control. While Athens was famous for its naval capabilities, land-based units were also of utmost importance for establishing control of the mainland. By the sixth century BCE, these land units had evolved to become phalanxes of hoplites, armed from head to toe in heavy armor, and carrying a shield. Hoplites relied on one another to defend themselves, as the shields of nearby hoplites served to shore up any potential weaknesses in the heavy armor. As a result, participation in the Athenian infantry was fundamentally limited to those that could afford the armor and shield required to make the phalanx effective². Those who could not afford the required equipment to be a hoplite were instead relegated to become a rower of a trireme. As

¹ McInerney 2018: 277.

² Ibid.

depicted above, these rowers appear to be more or less nude, a far cry from the heavy protection provided by the phalanx. Even within the trireme itself, there seems to be a distinction between the rowers on top, who can see their surroundings, and the rowers below deck, who seem to be rowing blind and confined to the hull of the ship. As a result, this divide in Athenian military operations seems to provide clear evidence of an inegalitarian mindset, building upon the social distinctions defined by Solon about a century prior.

However, these social divisions must be contextualized within ancient Athenian society. Athenian perceptions of virtue are heavily influenced by tales of Homeric heroes in constant pursuit of glory³. This attitude towards self-importance can be traced to the same general period as the rise of the Athenian empire through Herodotus' writings, in which he depicts Solon as claiming that "before he dies, you must hold back: do not yet name him 'prosperous' or 'blessed'"⁴. Records tell us that ideal Greeks define themselves by the circumstances of their death just as much as by the content of their life. Within this context, the lines between hoplite soldier and trireme rower become blurred. Both men are risking their lives to fight for the success of Athens and have the opportunity to demonstrate values that characterize Greek excellence. This idea is further supported by Pericles' famous funeral oration, throughout which he continuously pushes the idea of uniting together as a common people to spread and defend Athens' influence, fighting for a common cause⁵. This view reinforces the idea of the military as a vessel for democratic expansion. In addition, Athens was known for its naval dominance, not its powerful infantry. After all, it was the naval battle at Salamis that catapulted Athens into its status as a military powerhouse and formed the narrative that Athens had won the Greco-Persian War for the Greeks. This idea was prevalent at the time, as seen in surviving works of

³ McInerney 2018: 274.

⁴ *Histories* 1.32

⁵ *The War of the Peloponnesians and Athenians*: 115.

pseudo-Xenophon, in which he claims that, “it is the ordinary people who man the fleet and bring the city her power... it is these people who make the city powerful.”⁶ Therefore, not only did naval service provide an opportunity for the poor to act in accordance with Greek virtue, but it gave them an arguably more important role in Greek power dynamics as a whole.

Even from a mechanical perspective, it is understandable how these rowers may have contributed to an egalitarian mindset throughout Athens. Much like how hoplite soldiers rely on their counterparts to protect them, these rowers rely on each other to succeed. Just one rower on his own is useless, but together, the rowers of the trireme form the tools by which Athens established dominance throughout the Aegean. While on duty, these rowers are forced to form an almost familial bond with one another, literally putting their lives in their fellow rowers’ hands. The rowers depicted below deck in the relief would have to have full trust in those above deck to guide them on their expeditions. All rowers aboard a trireme would have to be trained to row in time, perform complex tactical maneuvers, and act in unison under duress, promoting solidarity between rowers⁷. This idea is emphasized by how the rowers of the trireme in the relief are depicted nearly identically. This lack of individuality brings attention to the unit as a whole, not a single rower, further depicting an egalitarian attitude. This kind of mentality was ever-present throughout Athenian military service, bringing Athenians together through the turmoils of warfare. In this way, the trireme can be seen as a microcosm of the Athenians as a whole, who worked to develop institutions that promoted brotherhood and the democratic spirit. Unlike the divided world of ancient Greece, which was characterized by constant conflict between various factions and city-states, the Athenians were able to redirect their aggression towards their enemies, uniting their citizens under a common goal.

⁶ *The Constitution of the Athenians* 1.1-2

⁷ McInerney 2018: 294.

Despite the surface-level inegalitarianism of hoplites and triremes, a deeper analysis of Athenian military activity shows that it served to promote the democratic spirit within Athens. This concept is further reinforced by textual evidence from ancient Athenians such as Thucydides and Herodotus, and is embodied by the Lenormant Trireme Relief. Whether the relief is examined physically, or within the greater context of Athenian politics, it can be seen that the apparent divisions within Athens' military do not undermine its egalitarian nature.