Financing the Peloponnesian War: the Peloponnesian perspective

2003 has been a year in which it has been patently clear that money is the sinews of war. But to zoom back to the fifth century BC. Lisa Kallet has shown in two persuasively argued books1 that money (chreimata) as the basis of the naval power of Athens is a fundamental theme in Thukydides’ History. On the other hand, what we know about the financial resources of the Peloponnesians is nugatory, and indeed Thukydides’ overall lack of interest in coinage as such as historical evidence has been noted by Gomme and Hornblower.2

Of course there are several good reasons for this disparity. First, money was far more pertinent to the situation of Athens, a naval power, than to Sparta, a hoplite power, though by no means exclusively so. The Peloponnesians will have had to build ships, and maintain them, and feed if not also maintain their crews, whether their own citizens or mercenaries. Secondly, as Kallet wrote, one of the hallmarks of Thukydides is ‘his ability to eliminate what is extraneous or insignificant to his purpose.’ In Book 2.13 Thukydides lists Athens’ substantial resources, as well as her manpower, in some detail, but this is not matched by any analysis of the Peloponnesians’ wealth. Thirdly, the Athenians, in addition to their holdings in Athens, and annual tribute from the allies, were blessed with the silver mines at Laurion, –that is, until Sparta occupied Dekeleia in 413 BC. Fourthly, the contrast in volume between the epigraphic records of Athens and the Peloponnesians is notorious, thanks both to Athenian democracy and a plentiful supply of pentelic marble. An inscription listing contributions to the Spartan war chest4 is the only epigraphic record for their resources.

Of course the Peloponnesians were to make overtures to Persia for money, first in 430 BC (Thuk. 2.67.1) but these were not successful until towards the end of the century, in 412/11 when operations shifted to the eastern Aegean. Only exceptionally does Thukydides mention a specific coinage.5

How much money the Peloponnesians needed for their particular campaigns has not been considered, let alone estimated, either by Thukydides himself, or by modern scholars. It is not my purpose to investigate this now. Instead I want to ask the commonsensical if perhaps prosaic question: what money –chreimata–, in other words, what coinage did they have to use?

Sparta of course did not strike coins until the third century. Hodkinson in his wide-ranging exploration of Spartan wealth as such refers to Spartans stockpiling foreign currencies or sending them for safekeeping to Arkadians.6 As for their historic iron money (pelanors), it is difficult to believe that such a crude, impractical form of currency would be acceptable to combatants on campaign, or even silver bullion that had to be weighed out. The observation of Polybios at Book 6.49 is pertinent.7


5. Thuk. 1.27.1: Corinthian drachms. Thuk. 8.101.1: Chian fortieths.


7. ‘... as long as they [sc. the Spartans] aspired to rule over their neighbours or over the Peloponnesians alone, they found the supplies and resources furnished by Laconia itself adequate, as they had all they required ready to hand, and quickly returned home whether by land or by sea. But once they began to undertake naval expeditions and to make military campaigns outside the Peloponese, it was evident that neither their iron currency nor the exchange of their crops for commodities which they lacked, as permitted by the legislation of Lycurgus, would suffice for their needs, since these enterprises demanded a currency in universal circulation and supplies drawn from abroad.’
In the fifth century the Messenians were still helots, subject to the Lakedaimonians and unable to strike their own coinage. In 431 BC Athens occupied Aigina, and so there was no question of Aiginetan coinage, hitherto so massive, continuing to be struck during the war, though no doubt it continued in circulation. Argos was not a member of the Peloponnesian League during the Archidamian War, but was neutral, and anyway did not strike staters until the fourth century. North of the Corinthian Gulf the Phokians were ambivalent in their support of the Peloponnesians, and issued only a modest number of hemidrachms. Boiotia supported Sparta during the Peloponnesian War, but the Theban staters of that period, probably plentiful, have not yet been subject to detailed study with a die count.

What other coinages could have been available for the Peloponnesians to use during the war? The coinages that come into question are those of the Arkadians, Elis, Corinth and Sikyon.

The silver coinage of the Arkadians a priori might have seemed a likely candidate, given the reputation of the Arkadians as mercenaries, their proximity to Sparta, and information that the Spartans sent money their for safe keeping. But Williams in his die study of the ARKADIKON coinage showed that the output of the final period, which he dated c.428-c.418 BC, was tiny, using only 8 obverse dies.10

What of the coinage struck by the two mints of Elis at Olympia? Seltman could identify only 35 obverse dies for the entire period from 432 to 365 BC.11 The iconography is so obviously related to the festival cults of Zeus and Hera that additionally it seems an unlikely candidate for a war coinage.

Next, Corinth. The prime instigator of the war, embroiled in the dispute over Epidamnos to the west and the siege of Potidaia to the north, it would be natural to expect Corinth to have provided the major war coinage. In fact Kraay has importantly shown that there was a massive coinage of Ambracia which must be associated with the Epidamnian affair (15 obverse dies used during those few years, c.436-43312) and c.418 BC.13 The coinage showed that the output of the final period, which he dated c.428-c.418 BC, was tiny, using only 8 obverse dies.14

Finally Sikyon,15 Corinth’s immediate neighbour along the Corinthian Gulf to the northwest, whose population and land area, on Beloch’s reckoning,16 were both half of those of Corinth. Subject to Argive hegemony earlier in her history, Sikyon was a loyal ally of Sparta and generally committed member of the Peloponnesian League. In about the first half of the fifth century Sikyon struck fractions with dove types, but on drachms and hemidrachms of the middle of the century the chimaira appears: it seems likely that the adoption of this aggressive new type was in response to the Athenian attacks on Sikyonian territory in the 450s by Tolmides and his Perikles. At about the time of the beginning of the Peloponnesian War the surprisingly large stater series of Sikyon started, with chimaira on the obverse, flying dove on the reverse.17 In a paper to the Royal Numismatic Society in 1967 on the autonomous coinage of Sikyon in toto, both silver and bronze, and incorporating a die study of the fifth century stater coinage of the mint, I suggested that this was the major coinage used by the Peloponnesian League during the war.18 This suggestion was adopted (with acknowledgement) by Kraay in his Archaic and Classical Greek Coinage.19

The stater series of Sikyon is invaluably divided into

two sections by the contents of the large Myron Karditsa 1914 hoard (IGCH 62), buried about 364 BC, from which the later fourth century issues are excluded. The die study that I did of the fifth century staters showed a steady succession of groups of die-linked coins whose very gradual stylistic progression is clear. (A curious stylistic indicator is seen in the goat’s near leg of the chimaira, which, starting out waving in the air, on successive issues describes a circle.) In the 1960s I had identified some 125 obverse dies; in the following 40 years some more will probably have come to light, especially as in several cases only a single specimen from each pair of dies is known. The number of coins likely to have been struck from an obverse die has of course been much debated, estimates ranging between 10,000 and 40,000. A coinage of some 125 dies is a large one, even if the coins are to be spread over a period of 30 to 50 years, from 430 or 420 BC to 404, or, if it continued through the Corinthian War, 390 or 380. Perusal of the figures in De Callataÿ’s valuable compilations of the number of dies used at the Classical and Hellenistic mints which have been studied20 shows that the use of 2, 3, or 4 obverse dies per year, as Sikyon shows on the different dating options, are to be expected of the larger coinages (excluding for example the exceptional Athenian fifth century and New Style coinages).

But what evidence is there for dating this series to the time of the Peloponnesian War and perhaps the subsequent Corinthian War also? Undoubtedly, bar one precarious exception, almost nothing as specific as one would like to see (such as a fixed hoard burial date within the period). Nonetheless this supposition seems convincing, and indeed unavoidable: first because of the explanation that such a large coinage, produced by a minor polis demands; secondly because of its steady tempo; thirdly on general stylistic grounds (though admittedly it does not seem possible to parallel the iconography of the chimaira, which there is not time to discuss here.) A curiosity of the series is the two obverse dies featuring a lion and bow in place of the standard chimaira, and linked by a single reverse die; it is possible — though not certain— that one of these lion staters was in a hoard found in Euboia in 1951 (IGCH 42).21 These lion staters occur about two-thirds of the way through the fifth century stater series (not, in fact, half way, as was erroneously stated in a review of Carradice and Price, Coinage in the Greek World22). The hoard has variously been dated to circa 400 BC, though of course exactly how long before its burial this intriguing coin was struck is uncertain.

What does Thukydides say about how the Peloponnesians could raise the money that they were to need for the war? At the first conference at Sparta, there were four speakers, the Corinthians, Athenians who happened to be present, the Spartan king Archidamos, and the ephor Sthenelaidas (Thuk. 1.67). On this occasion the Corinthians and Athenians did not touch on the subject; but Archidamos spoke discouragingly of the Spartans’ lack of money, and difficulty of raising it by taxation (1.80.4). He suggested a strategy of making allies of Barbarians as well as Hellenes as possible sources of ships and money (1.82.1). Sthenelaidas belittled the importance of having money by comparison with having brave allies. At the second Peloponnesian conference the Corinthians spoke of the allies contributing from their own funds and using those of Delphi and Olympia (1.121). (Delphi had already offered the Peloponnesians support, but this strategy, so far as we know, they did not use.) Subsequently Perikles was to pour scorn on the Peloponnesians’ financial resources, asserted the need in war for accumulated wealth, not taxation under stress, and derided the idea that the stored wealth of Delphi and Olympia could be used to lure Athens’ mercenary sailors away with higher wages (1.140-144). So, there is no mention otherwise of sources of money; the overall picture that Thukydides gives of the financial resources of the Peloponnesians is that they would have to rely on what each ally might or might not have.

If there really is a lacuna in the stater series of Corinth at the time of the Peloponnesian War, and I would repeat that this is not entirely certain, why was this filled apparently by the stater series of Sikyon? A distinguishing feature of the two series is that is that Corinthian staters were on the Corinthian standard, used by her colonies in NW Greece, but Sikyon’s staters were on the heavier Aiginetic standard, used almost universally in the Peloponness. But why did not Corinth change her weight standard? It would have been easy enough for her to have done so (as the

Euboian League, Abdera and Maroneia were to do. I would like to suggest, very much as an hypothesis, a possible reason for this. After what Sikyon had suffered in the 450s from Tolmides’ and Perikles’ incursions into her territories – on both occasions there was a battle and the Sikyonians were defeated – she may well have been reluctant to vote for war. It is certainly true that the Sikyonians appear to have joined the Corinthians and Epidaurians in the repulse of the Athenians at the landing at Halieis in 459/8 BC, and in 446 BC again with the Corinthians and Epidaurians helped Megara to revolt from Athens. But interestingly the Sikyonians are not among those who supported Corinth with ships or money at the time of the siege of Epidamnos: Megara, Pale, Epidaurus, Hermione, Troizen, Leukas, Ambrakia, Thebes, Phlius, and Elis (Thuk. 1.27.2). Thukydides notes (1.119.3) that before the second meeting at Sparta, the Corinthians had already privately begged the allies, city by city, to vote for the war. Is it possible that Corinth did a deal with Sikyon, offering her the production of a stater series for the use of the Peloponnesians during the war, as a reward for Sikyon’s support for the war? The production of a silver coinage, after all, would be profitable for Sikyon.

Although the Sikyonian stater coinage must certainly have been used as the major coinage of the Peloponnesian League during the Peloponnesian War until Persian money was forthcoming, it was in no strict sense a federal coinage, like for example that of the Achaian League in the second century BC. Unsurprisingly there is no record of the Peloponnesian League having adopted it, few if any of the staters have been found in fifth century archaeological contexts or hoards, and the ethnic is in the local form, SE for SEKYON, not SI.

Two problems arise. Where did the Sikyonians get the bullion from? Perhaps from currency in the Corinthians’ or Lakedaimonians’ possession, or from sale of booty. (even though the activities of the Spartan bootysellers (lafuropolai) are not attested until the fourth century).

The second problem is when the stater coinage began, whether at the start of the War, as suggested above, or not until c. 420 BC. Remarkably there is a die shared by a innovative and very rare bronze issue, and a drachm which relates stylistically to the stater series, to an issue struck by the fifth obverse die. But how early can the bronze coin be dated? Rutter dated the start of the bronze coinage of Thurii as early as c. 440 BC, and Dionysios ho Chalkeus, one of the founders who unsuccessfully recommended to the Athenians that they should adopt bronze coinage also, might well have encountered, and successfully proselytised, Sikyonians on a journey home via Corinthians. Thus a start for the Sikyonian stater series circa 430 BC is surely not beyond the bounds of possibility.

Finally, the one extant list of contributions to the Spartan War fund, IG V. 1. 1: this curiously diverse list of contributions, ranging from darics to raisins, since it contains the names of none of the formal allies of the Spartans, has been interpreted as no more than a propaganda device.

25. See Loomis (n. 4 above).