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Independent Colonies Emerge into Flourishing Independent City-States

Abstract

Did Greek city-states create colonies in the ancient world in order to expand their sphere of influence? This is the focus of the article and an extremely important concept to grasp. In order to fully understand how colonies became self-sufficient, an analysis of financial, social, and militaristic values within the colonial society is necessary. Creating a distinction between colony and city-state helps to clarify why members of colonies, such as Methone, sought freedom and independence from their mother-cities.

Keywords

Methone, Phoenician, Eretria

Independent Colonies Emerge as Flourishing Independent City-States

Did Greek city-states create colonies in the ancient world in order to expand their sphere of influence? If the answer is yes, then why did one of these colonies break away from its mother-city in order to better itself? The answer is a complicated one and is subject to analysis on both a macro and micro level. The primary example of a colony that found itself at odds with its mother-city is that of Methone. Eretria had originally sent out a group of colonists, before 750 BCE, with the intention of founding Corcyra due to its advantageous trading location between Greece and Magna Grecia; however, some of the colonists fled when there was internal instability, as well as threats from exposed sides of the area. The colonists from Corcyra attempted to return to the mother-city of Eretria but they were “driven off by a hail of sling-bullets” and forced to travel towards Thrace, where they founded the new colony of Methone on the Thermaic Gulf.¹ Methone’s colonization story is unique in the sense that it was founded more so for the colonists’ purpose of establishing their own goals and aspirations for a colony, instead of increasing the sphere of influence of Eretria. The significance of Methone, in defying traditional colonial roles, establishes the idea that colonies could be independent of their mother-city and still attain financial, political, and militaristic success.

As always, an analysis of ancient colonies, and the politics and socioeconomic factors that come with that colony, are subjected to the recounting of primary sources. Sources such as Thucydides, Plutarch, and Diodorus Siculus provide valuable information for interpreters in modern times, but that information may also contain some sort of bias or misrepresentation within it. For example, Thucydides was an Athenian

¹ N.G.L. Hammond, “Eretria’s Colonies in the Area of the Thermaic Gulf,” *The Annual of the British School at Athens* 93 (1998): 393.

general before he wrote his *History* and, therefore, may have written favorably about the Athenians. This loyalty to the Athenian empire can belittle other city-states at the time, such as Macedon, in order to glorify Athens. The way that Thucydides explains the confrontations near Methone between the Athenians and the Macedonians makes it out to seem that Athens was never the instigator of confrontation, but always the protector of Methone and the region. Diodorus Siculus, a resident of Sicily, does to an extent confirm the Athenian protective nature towards Methone and that the aggressive side of the conflict was Macedon. All in all, all relevant accounts about colonization in the ancient world must be taken as viewpoints from a certain historical figure and how they assumed the world functioned.

Methone severed all financial ties to Eretria and became entangled in the economic web of Athens and the Delian League. Methone allied itself heavily with Athens for various reasons but the focus of their relationship was primarily financial, as documented in the *Athenian Tribute Lists*. Before introducing the textual evidence that displays the relationship between Athens and Methone, it would be beneficial to understand the nature of the Methone Decrees. The Methone Decrees were the primary decrees that guided the Athenian financial holdings in relation to the tribute lists of other nations within the alliance. Securing a financial arrangement with Athens was an intelligent decision by the colonists of Methone due to the protection and power of the Delian League because of its association with Athens. Protection and power both refer to the benefits of being allied with Athens as opposed to being allied with Eretria, mostly due to the fact that Athens was far and away superior in terms of world power and influence. The translations of these tablets allow scholars to make valid assumptions

about the nature of the relationship between Athens and Methone by interpreting the statistical and financial data. It is important to remember that when analyzing the financial relationship between Athens and Methone, one must be cautious of making generalizations about the relationship based on the interpretation from other scholars of the tablets.

The first decree suggested that Methone's loyalty to Athens was backed heavily by the monetary advantages that Athens could provide, such as only paying quota instead of full tribute, as well as receiving favorable "treatment of its arrears."² In terms of Methone's arrears, the outstanding debt the colonists had accumulated was made manageable with help from Athens. The mercifulness that Athens often showed towards Methone helped not only to decrease the amount of economic stress on Methone's national treasury, but also served as a major factor in the strong alliance that would follow between the two.

The second decree stated that Methone was given special advantages in terms of exportation and importation of goods from other nations. Specifically, the tablet makes mention of a trade agreement between Methone and Byzantium which, by Harold B. Mattingly's interpretation, allowed Methone to import a "duty-free annual quota of corn" as well as be "exempted from such obligations as might be imposed on allies by imperial decrees."³ The Athenian officials had held other members of the Delian League liable for paying importation taxes, however, Methone was excused from this practice for reasons that can only be viewed as secondary interpretations. This offering of a tax free importation arrangement to Methone by Athens suggests that Methone's loyalty to

² Harold B. Mattingly, "The Methone Decrees," *The Classical Quarterly* 11 (1961): 154.

³ Ibid.

Athens was very important to Aristides and that there may have been an advantageous agenda behind the agreement. Since Aristides was one of the leading Athenian commanders in power, he certainly would have commended the idea of having a colony in such great geographic and trade positioning under the loyalty of Athens.

Another part of the decree focused on Athens' usage of Methone as an extension of the Athenian trading landscape. Athens declared that Methone would be allowed to "sail the seas and import as of old,"⁴ which created a network of trade within Macedonia on behalf of Athens. The positioning of Methone in relation to Macedon allowed for easy access to Macedonian materials and resources. Methone would then be expected to share, with Athens, the resources and goods attained through trade with the Macedonians.

Apart from receiving financial relief from Athens, Methone also received financially-related political support from Athens against other foreign policies. In 426 BCE, Athens decided to send diplomats to Macedon with a message strongly suggesting that they remove the blockade from Methone. Methone's early financial woes can be traced directly to the blockade by Perdikkas of Macedon; however, Athens made special exceptions for Methone to attain grain and other imports without much cost from other allies.⁵ Athens would continue to do all it could to support Methone and help the colony achieve economic stability. Even though Methone's mother-city, Eretria, had turned its back on the young colony, Methone was able to reposition itself with the Athenians in order to achieve economic stability. This kind of relationship reinforces the idea that it was possible for colonies to thrive under the direction of a nation other than its original mother-city.

⁴ *IG D21*, 4-8.

⁵ Mattingly, "Methone Decrees," 164.

Another aspect of Methone's financial situation was based around its geographical location and advantageous trade routes. Athens valued Methone's location and focused on creating an emporion that would represent the Athenian empire's authority within the Macedonian territory.⁶ Establishing an emporion in this area would allow Athens to utilize Methone's location as a trading post, and also as a buffer between them and Macedon. This theory suggests valid reasons—trade and buffer—for why Athens wanted to protect the colony of Methone and annex it into the empire. Athens opened up the trading routes for Methone to the Macedonian rulers Arrhabaios and Perdikkas in order to secure trade with some region of Macedon.⁷ By doing so, Methone's economy thrived by having ample trading partners with whom they could expand their catalog of products for exportation and importation. Methone was also able to use its large importation of grain products from the other allies in order to negotiate favorable characteristics of trade with Macedon.

Colonies established by the Greeks, Romans, and Phoenicians valued specific strategic geographical regions for trade routes before settling each colony. For example, Eretria had colonized other areas in the Thermaic Gulf under the notion that the high volume of trading activity taking place there would yield a profitable outcome for those colonies. Dicaea and Mende were other colonies whose designed purpose was to exploit trade routes in the Thermaic Gulf, and by doing so, grow the wealth of, not only themselves, but Eretria as a whole.⁸ Methone clearly is representative of the model for

⁶ F.A. Lepper, "Some Rubrics in the Athenian Quota-List," *The Society for the Promotion of Hellenic Studies* 82 (1962): 51.

⁷ *IG* 12, 71.

⁸ Hammond, "Eretria's Colonies," 395-398.

other Eretrian colonies to embrace establishment on the coastline of the Thermaic Gulf due to its success in achieving a monopoly of timber and pitch for shipbuilding.⁹

While the argument that Methone and Athens benefited financially from each other cannot be ignored, there is evidence that Methone traded with Eretria and benefited from those transactions as well. An inscription, found through excavation, states that some of the oars, planks, triremes, and triacontors manufactured in Methone/Macedonia were shipped to Athens while others were traded to Eretria.¹⁰ The existence of trade between Methone and Eretria may weaken the argument of complete independence of the colony from its mother-city; however, it could also mean that Eretria recognized the need to affiliate itself with a close ally of Athens because they were the only real threat to the Eretrian navy. The important concept to understand from this minor counter-argument is that there is no way to determine the nature of the trading relationship between Eretria and Methone. Even if there was an existing trading relationship between Eretria and Methone, there is no evidence that it improved their non-financial relationship.

It is no secret that politics in the ancient world were centered on Athens and all of its allies, perhaps due to a modern idea that militaristic dominance dictates the flow of politics. Methone joined the Delian League, created a welcoming trade relationship with Macedon, and exhibited peaceful relations with the local Thracians. All of these political relationships and agreements signify a break from political dependence on Eretria. Analyzing the existence and continuity of these three key relationships with Methone helps create an accurate picture of the political landscape in the fifth century BCE.

⁹ Ibid., 399.

¹⁰ Russell Meiggs and David Lewis, *A Selection of Greek Historical Inscriptions to the End of the Fifth Century B.C.* (Clarendon Press: 1989), 91.

Methone became heavily involved in Athenian politics due to its inclusion in the Delian League. Around 435 BCE, Methone became associated with the Delian League, even though an official join date is yet to be agreed upon.¹¹ Methone's decision to eventually join the Athenians most likely stemmed from two factors: 1) the Athenians were tightening control over trade in the region and 2) Methone sought a strong alliance for protection. The first factor has already been discussed, and the conclusion that both parties benefited financially would support this reason for joining in an alliance with Athens. The other factor brings into the discussion the matter of how much protection, and what kind of protection, could have been achieved through an alliance with Athens at that time.

Athens offered protection in war for Methone, which appealed to the young, growing colony that was still trying to stabilize itself. The significance of looking at Methone's relationship with Athens, compared to the other choices that the colony had for protection, is to understand that financial, political, and militaristic decisions were all linked and all equally important. Mende, a colony of Eretria, had made an enemy of itself against Athens, most likely by refusing to join the trade network of Athens in this region. Thucydides recounts the history of a battle between Athens and Mende in which Methone became directly involved by being part of the Athenian army and attacking the colony of Mende.¹² This literary evidence from Thucydides clearly exhibits the extent to which Methone supported Athens over Eretria. By attacking Mende, Methone also defied Eretria because, traditionally, colonies of the same mother-city shared the same loyalty towards each other that they did towards the mother-city itself. Overall, this act of

¹¹ Lepper, "Rubrics," 51.

¹² Thucydides. *The History of the Peloponnesian War* (London, J. M. Dent; New York, E. P. Dutton, 1910), 4.129.

defiance against other extensions of Eretria is a strong reinforces the argument that Methone had broken away from any kind of association with Eretria and reestablished itself within the network of Athenian power.

Other than maintaining strong relations with the Athenians, Methone was also able to solidify a strong trade agreement with Macedon and maintain a peaceful relationship with the local Thracians. As explained earlier, Athens basically established the trading routes between Methone and Macedon for its own benefit. The need for this relationship existed out of necessity for Methone to have uninterrupted access to the source of hinterland in areas close to Macedonian control. Perdikkas attempted many times to encroach upon the lands of Methone in order to potentially weaken the economy and militaristic strategy of Athens.¹³ The basis for the peaceful agreement between Athens and Macedon, with respect to Methone's freedom in that region, stems from the fact that Athens had to surrender Therme to the Macedonians and, in exchange, Perdikkas allowed leniency for Methone.¹⁴ Overall, the relationship with Macedon was primarily orchestrated and imposed by Athens, but it was to the mutual benefit for both Methone and Macedon.

On the other side of Methone, the local Thracians were well-established in the territory, and the colonists of Methone had to find a balance between their own culture, the culture of Eretria, and the existing culture of the locals. The theme of Hellenization within the ancient world suggests an overtaking of existing cultures and replacing local customs with those of Greece. While the Thracians closest to Methone, referred to as the Midoni, already held onto some Hellenistic customs, they also created some of their own

¹³ Allen B. West, "Methone and the Assessment of 430," *American Journal of Archeology* 29 (1925): 442.

¹⁴ Thucydides, *History*, 2.29.

customs specific to the locals of the Methonean region. The presence of the Thracians in the Thermaic Gulf region suggests that there may have been peaceful relations between them and any other colonists that came to the area—due to a lack of documentation for any kinds of battles or skirmishes in the region. Plutarch recounts how the similar origins of the local Thracians and the colonists of Methone actually helped create a sense of community between them.¹⁵ While Plutarch wrote a history of the relationship between Greeks and Thracians, his details about Methone should not be considered the absolute truth, but rather, as a secondary opinion based on information he gathered from firsthand sources. Specifically, the two colonies have a shared ancestry in regards to Orpheus, whose ancestors gave their names to both Thrace and Methone.¹⁶ The main point of the cultural and geographical similarities between Methone and the local Thracians is that they established an avenue for mutual respect and loyalty to each other. By making a cultural connection to the local Thracians, the colonists of Methone embraced new ways of life and associated themselves with the Thracians, thus increasing separation from the old culture and customs of Eretria.

While Methone did not necessarily have the most powerful freestanding army, it did involve itself in a very powerful military alliance within the Delian League and was able to strengthen its colonial might by association. There were various factors at work in regards to Methone's successful defense of its territory, such as the geographical location and the military ties with both the local Thracians and Athens. In 1990, archeologists found remains of Methone north of Nea Agathoupolis and by the mouth of the Toponitsa,

¹⁵ Plutarch. *Moralia*, trans. Frank Cole Babbitt, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1936), 268.

¹⁶ Hammond, "Eretria's Colonies," 393.

labeling the location as Site A.¹⁷ The characteristics of Site A exhibit traces of an easily defensible territory with an inland area that was surrounded by the sea on three sides, undoubtedly making the inland very difficult to reach for invading Macedonians. The significance of the geographic foundation for the colony of Methone is that its great location on the coast, along with support from Athens, made it able to fend for itself against invaders without having to rely on Eretria for military assistance.

In addition to the strategic location of the colony, Methone also secured its defenses by entering into strong military alliances with the locals. Since three sides of the colony were protected by the sea, and could be defended easily, the fourth side of the colony relied on the help of the local Thracians in order to better protect it from Macedon. This defense alliance between the Midoni and Methone was expected to go both ways, regardless of which colony was under attack from Macedon. The Methone Decrees make numerous references to having allies within the “Thraceward” region, meaning that Athens must have had a good relationship with Thrace so it could secure the placement of forces near Methone to help protect it.¹⁸

The importance of having the Thracian backing in the area was not only one of military alliance, but it also supported the idea of a Hellenistic culture against Macedon. This concept is based heavily on the idea that the culture of Greeks outweighs the culture of other peoples and that the banding together of different types of Greek people against a common enemy will generate a more powerful Greek culture. Athens also supported a Hellenistic alliance of sorts (until the Peloponnesian War with Sparta), but was more concerned with assisting Methone militarily in order to protect its own interests.

¹⁷ Ibid., 394.

¹⁸ *IG D21*, 5-8.

After joining the Delian League and receiving financial assistance from Athens, Methone was utilized as a military base on behalf of Athens against Macedon.¹⁹ Thucydides explains how complex the relationship between Athens and Macedon really was and, ultimately, how hostile the two nations were towards each other.²⁰ While the basis for Athenian military support in Methone was enacted for the gain of Athens, it indirectly helped Methone by allowing the colony to tend to other internal matters instead of concerning itself with issues of foreign invasion. The vast amounts of support that Methone received from Athens and the local Thracians not only helped the colonists of Methone break connection and dependence from Eretria, but also contributed to the growth and stability of the independent colony of Methone.

Eventually, Methone's success and development was stifled due to an invasion by Phillip of Macedon around 350 BCE. Accounts from Diodorus explain that Methone was conquered by Phillip, and thus some of the cultural aspects of Methone were lost or destroyed. The reasoning for Phillip breaking a trade agreement with Methone was that he was infuriated by the harboring of Athenian enemies so close to Macedon.²¹ The people of Methone were dispersed from the colony, only being allowed to take with them one garment of clothing, while Phillip destroyed the city and everything else in it.²² This act of brutality towards the artifacts and buildings of Methone signifies the loss of a once flourishing colony. The irony of Methone lies within both its rise and fall stemming directly from Athens. While Athens helped to establish Methone as a commercial power on the Thermaic Gulf, the association with Athens resulted in invasion by Macedon.

¹⁹ Mattingly, "Methone Decrees," 161.

²⁰ Thucydides, *History*, 1.57.

²¹ Diodorus Siculus, *Library*, trans. C. H. Oldfather (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), 16.34.4.

²² *Ibid.*, 16.34.5.

Methone's unique colonization story sets it apart from other colonies and paves the way for understanding how disconnecting from its mother-city, and repositioning itself, can strengthen a colony. Many factors could have influenced a colony after it had established itself, and those factors should be analyzed in order to measure the growth of the colony to see if it met its full potential.

In the case of Methone, its new geographic location exposed the colony to different financial situations, power struggles, and political influences. The process of adapting to a new environment required Methone to change loyalties and reposition itself within the realm of the Thermaic Gulf in order to survive and prosper. Becoming loyal to Athens and maintaining strong relationships with the local Thracians gave Methone the ability to disregard their past troubles with Eretria and to progress towards becoming a more independent city-state. The uniqueness and significance of Methone's decision to reestablish the colony on its own terms and ally itself with other cities, rather than their own mother-city, stands out against other colonies in that time period. Whether the colonization story is that of the colony as a whole, or if it is the story of certain individuals within the colony, is rather difficult to prove. Could the individuals of Methone have achieved the same results if they had been founding a colony in a different region (i.e. North Africa) or if they had a different economic situation (i.e. not having a vast supply of natural resources)?

Overall, generalizations about the loyalty of colonies cannot be made due to the uniqueness of the origins, finances, and politics of each individual situation. Methone is just one example of an independent colony that flourished into a commercially rich and culturally prosperous city-state without the help of its mother-city.

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