CHAPTER SIX

ATHENS' STRATEGOI AND ALLIED COMMANDERS

Throughout the classical period Athens was frequently involved in joint operations, expeditions which were conducted by two or more states and whose forces were composed of contingents provided by each ally. Depending on the nature of their agreement with the confederates and their commitment to a particular undertaking, states participating in an allied campaign might or might not provide generals together with the fighting men they contributed. When generals were provided they presumably retained command of their state’s contingent under most circumstances, but the authority of allied generals over their national units is likely to have been subordinated to that of a supreme commander who was invested with leadership of the entire allied army either temporarily or for the duration of the campaign. A number of questions relating to the authority of Athens’ generals arise in connection with the state’s participation in the fifth and fourth centuries in joint operations in which she shared leadership with one or more allied states. (1) With whom on each occasion did the supreme leadership (if any) of allied campaigns lie? (2) By whom were questions related to campaign leadership decided, the states which contributed forces to an allied expedition, for example, or the allied generals themselves, acting as representatives of their respective governments? And (3) when Athenian generals were present on campaigns but were not invested with supreme command, to what extent was their authority in the field attenuated?

1. The Hellenic League

The defense of Greece against the Persians during 480 and 479 and offensive operations against Cyprus and Byzantium in 478/7 were conducted by a coalition of states, the “Hellenic League”, which had united in 481/0 in anticipation of the Persian invasion (Hdt. 8.145).\(^1\) Athens was a prominent member of this association and contributed to it the largest single contingent of ships (8.1, 42.2, 44.1), yet she was not the league’s hegemon.

Athenian leadership of the combined Greek fleet had been proposed at the first meeting of the allies, but the objection of certain league members to the suggestion had prompted the Athenians to withdraw their claim (8.2-3). Control of the navy thereafter passed to the Spartans, whose leadership on land had presumably never been in question. Spartan officers thus served as the supreme commanders of the league's naval and land operations. Each allied state in turn supplied a general to command its own contingent.

Although the Spartans were the recognized leaders of the Greek coalition, they did not exercise unlimited authority over the conduct of allied campaigns. Decisions relating to the prosecution of the war were made by representatives of the member states. On at least two occasions delegates of the allies (probouloi) met in the Peloponneses for the purpose of deliberation, first in the autumn of 481 (7.145), and a second time in the spring of 480 (7.172.1). Subsequent decisions of the league were made by the allied commanders.

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2 According to Plutarch (Them. 7.3) the question of the Athenians' command of the fleet arose much later, when the Greeks were at Artemision. Herodotus clearly states that the Greeks discussed the leadership of the coalition no later than at the first league congress (8.3.1), but that he refers to the debate in a brief digression from his account of the Artemision campaign may have suggested to Plutarch that the question arose on that occasion.

3 The hostility of Aegina to Athens and the recognition by other league members of the need to placate the Aeginetans were probably behind this rejection of the Athenians as leaders of the fleet (so Brunt [1953], p. 139).


5 Thus the Spartan king Leonidas held supreme command at Thermopylae, but each city which sent forces to the pass supplied its own general (Hdt. 7.204). At Artemision (8.2.2) and Salamis (8.42.2) the Spartan Eurybiades had the greatest authority, whereas Themistokles commanded the Athenian contingent on both occasions (8.4.2; 8.57.1). Pausanias was the supreme commander at Plataia (Diod. 11.29.4; Plut. Arist. 15.5), and Aristides led the Athenians (Hdt. 9.28.6). At Mykale Leotychidas commanded the Greeks (8.131.2-3, 9.90.1) and Xanthippos the Athenian contingent (9.114.2). Pausanias commanded the Greeks at Cyprus and Byzantium (Thuc. 1.94.2), while Aristides and Kimon commanded the Athenians (Diod. 11.44.2 [Aristides]; Plut. Arist. 23.1 [Aristides and Kimon]. Cim. 6.1 [Kimon]). It must be admitted, however, that nothing in Herodotus' brief account of the expedition to Thessaly, the first action of the newly-formed league, suggests that Sparta's general had more authority on that occasion than his Athenian counterpart (7.173). On the relationship of the Spartan supreme command to the generals of the allied contingents see also Hammond (1969), pp. 134-135.

6 According to Pausanias (3.12.6), the probouloi first met in Sparta. This evidence has been doubted (Hignett [1963], p. 98), but see Brunt (1953), p. 148 n. 2. In the spring of 480 the meeting was held at the Isthmus of Corinth.

7 At the first congress the Greeks decided, among other things, to end whatever feuds were in progress among allied states (Hdt. 7.145.1). Plutarch reports that Themistokles was largely responsible for reconciling the Greeks before the invasion (Them. 6.5), which suggests that he participated in the first congress as an Athenian proboulos. But Herodotus makes no mention of Themistokles' involvement on this occasion, and Plutarch's evidence is not to be trusted: when discussing events of the Second Persian War in his lives of Themistokles and Aristides, Plutarch repeatedly attributes to his subjects actions which Herodotus ascribes to the Athenians in general (see, for example, Plut. Them. 7.3-4 vs. Hdt. 8.3; Plut. Arist. 12.1-3 vs. Hdt. 9.26-27; Plut. Arist. 14.4-5 vs. Hdt. 9.21; Plut. Arist. 16.1-7 vs. Hdt. 9.46-47). On Plutarch's tendency...