World-Systems based on Reciprocity. Eastern Empires, Aegean Polities and Greek Mercenaries in the Archaic Age

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Abstract: Trying to describe the world-system in the eastern Mediterranean between 800 and 479 B.C. and to place the Greek polities within it, some theoretical developments of Immanuel Wallerstein’s world-system theoretical framework are made. Starting from Karl Polanyi’s list of patterns of integration, it is argued that in pre-modern eras, besides subsistence economies and world-empires, there were also world-systems based on reciprocity, where the most important objective was the acquisition of symbolic capital. Thus, in the archaic age, the Greek world was a periphery of the Eastern empires, the phenomenon of Greek mercenaries serving Eastern monarchs representing a consistent proof for the actual structure of the world-system in that period.

Keywords: patterns of integration, world-systems, reciprocity, periphery, gifts trade

Immanuel Wallerstein’s “The Modern World-System” provided scholars in both international studies and history with a powerful and popular, still controversial, theoretical tool. However, Wallerstein’s focus on modern Europe, a world-economy characterized by the emergence of capitalism, left ancient and medieval historians with a crux: as their field of inquiry was composed mainly of world-empires and pre-capitalist economies, the theory was underdeveloped. World-empires and pre-capitalist economies were only marginally discussed by Wallerstein and although he designed these concepts as opposites of the world-economies and the capitalist economy, their theorization was only accidentally attempted in his work.

Whether they want to use the theoretical framework established by Wallerstein, ancient and medieval historians have to do much more than applying it to a given spatio-temporal context: they have to adapt it to such realities as pre-capitalist economies and world-empires. Although this is not an easy task, some

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scholars attempted to carry it out\textsuperscript{2}, as the centre-periphery theoretical framework was regarded as the most fit to explain the intuitive observation that some polities are stronger than others in the international systems and exert a huge influence over a large part of the rest of the world.

This article is more like an essay in which I attempt to draw a picture of the structure of the international system occurring in eastern Mediterranean during the Greek archaic age (cca. 800-479 B.C.), to place the Greek polities into the scheme and to subsequently develop one of the arguments for the placement, respectively, the use of Greek mercenaries by Oriental monarchs. In doing this, I shall use some of the theoretical developments of Wallerstein’s framework made by others scholars in ancient history, but I shall also try to pay my own contribution in the field.

My hypothesis is the following: after the collapse of the Late Bronze Age international system, which was dominated by four great powers (the Egyptian New Kingdom, the Hittite empire, Babylon and Mitanni, replaced during the fourteenth century B.C. by the Middle Assyrian Kingdom), the eastern Mediterranean started to slowly recover from the severe crisis, provoked either by huge migrations or a climatic change or both. The new polities that emerged on the ruins of ancient empires rebuilt a series of political and economic networks which provided the background for the Neo-Assyrian conquest and domination, starting from the ninth century B.C. and ending in the last quarter of the seventh century B.C. The Neo-Assyrian state, a world-empire of unprecedented extent\textsuperscript{3}, comprising the most populated, rich and developed territories between Indus and the Pillars of Hercules, represented the core of a world that regained some of its earlier connections, although it would probably be inappropriate to refer to it in terms of a world-system. The Neo-Assyrian state was replaced for a short time by four others empires, which recall the Late Bronze Age great powers, Babylon, the Medes, Egypt and Lydia, empires which were conquered one after another by the Persians. Between 525 and 330 B.C., all of the Ancient Near East and a great part of the eastern Mediterranean was once again under one world-empire.


During the dark ages that followed the collapse of the Late Bronze Age international system and for some time afterwards, while the above mentioned empires represented the core of the world, due to their demographic, military and economic power, the Aegean, mostly inhabited by Greeks (but also by native Anatolian peoples, as the Carians, or by the Thracians, in the north), represented one of the peripheral areas surrounding the core, acquiring luxuries in change of some staples and manpower. However, even since the archaic age, the Greek inhabited world turned into a semi-periphery, acting as an intermediate in the trade between the Eastern empires and the rest of the Mediterranean and acquiring and further developing the technological and administrative skills of the core.

Human mobility from Greece towards the East represented at the same time one of the markers of the peripheral/semi-peripheral statute and the means that allowed the acquisition of wealth and new skills. Particularly Greek mercenaries were important, as they represent a proof of the relative poverty of the Aegean, compared to the Oriental wealth. However, they were also a catalyst for creating relations between Eastern monarchs and Greek politicians and represented people which brought home material wealth, technological skills and cultural practices from abroad.

Even nowadays, the old paradigm of a “pure, classical Greece in splendid isolation”\(^4\), rooted in the idealism of the eighteenth and nineteenth century German scholarship and even further in the Renaissance and the Enlightenment\(^5\), stands out as a model of a relatively closed society, whose contacts with the outer world were made with minimum of consequences over Greek culture. The discovery of the oriental civilizations, with their impressive palaces and huge archives, rendered this paradigm obsolete, although the evolution was relatively slow. Only the second half of the twentieth century brought the outcome that recognizes the consistent influence of the oriental world over Greek civilization during the archaic age, outcome illustrated by works like Walter Burkert’s “The Orientalizing Revolution” (1992) or M.L. West’s “The East Face of Helicon. West Asiatic Elements in Greek Poetry” (1997).

Nevertheless, scholars mainly investigated the cultural and technological influence of eastern civilizations over the Greeks. The place of the Greek city-states in the larger international system of the period remained relatively unexplored. The fact that recent syntheses on the international affairs during the

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archaic age are concerned only with contacts between Greek polities is revealing. Even clear cut expressions such as “around 700, the Greek world was emerging as a backward periphery, which was highly stimulated through contact with and influence from the older, richer, more developed and more powerful world of the Near East” remain without a proper demonstration.

One of the problems that discourage historians in tackling this issue, besides the uncomfortable gaps in information, is the theoretical one. Wallerstein model has never been fully adapted for the archaic age and especially for the relations between Greeks and the East, whereas, the attempts to use it in matters such as colonization partially discredited it.

In fact, Wallerstein never developed his framework for pre-modern societies. In his theoretical essay at the end of the first volume of: “The Modern World-System”, after he writes that there are only two types of world-systems, the world-empires and the world-economies, the issue of pre-modern societies is briefly dismissed: “Finally, we have argued that prior to the modern era, world-economies were highly unstable structures which tended either to be converted into empires or to disintegrate”. This steep dichotomy between the long-lasting modern world-economy and the ephemeral pre-modern world-empires and even more ephemeral and limited world-economies is much too simple to be true. It is generated by the criteria for definition used by Wallerstein. The basic unit of analysis employed by Wallerstein is the system, conceived as an autonomous being that can exist in the same conditions irrespective of the outer world. The need for autonomy means that only two types of systems could have existed: the most simple, subsistence economies, and the highly complex “worlds”, economic entities based on extensive division of labor and composed of multiple cultures.


7 K. Vlassopoulos, Greeks and Barbarians, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2013, p. 7. The same idea is repeated several times; see p. 24, 226, 274.

8 As an example, see Irad Malkin’s small-world network model, best developed in A Small Greek World: Networks in the Ancient Mediterranean, Oxford - New York, Oxford University Press, 2011. However, Malkin’s critic of the centre-periphery model and the efforts to replace it with a more suitable theoretical framework had started earlier, in the 80s. Nevertheless, his critic is aimed only to applying the centre-periphery model to Archaic Greek colonization.

criterion is the economic division of labor\textsuperscript{10}, imposed by political and military force in the former, by productivity and comparative advantages in the latter.

However, as Karl Polanyi pervasively demonstrated, in ancient societies economy does not exist \textit{per se}, being embedded instead in all sorts of other human activities\textsuperscript{11}. By adopting this substantive view on economy\textsuperscript{12}, there is no need to look for the same characteristics of a world-economy in pre-modern societies as in the modern society, nor is correct to use only the concepts of “small subsistence economies” and “world-empires”. In fact, it would be more appropriate to talk about world-systems even greater than world-empires, somehow similar with world-economies, but different as trade between them, quantitatively smaller than in modern societies, is at the same time qualitatively different. Integration is not solely a matter of market exchanges, as in industrial societies. Some other patterns of integration existed and supplanted the relatively small extent of market trade: redistribution, which can be equated with the political and economic process of collecting and spending tribute, that Wallerstein thought of as the core mechanism in world-empires, and reciprocity, “\textit{the movement of goods between correlative points of symmetrical groupings within or between societies}”\textsuperscript{13}, a pattern that has no place in Wallerstein’s framework\textsuperscript{14}.

So, we can develop a scheme of correspondence between Polanyi’s patterns of integration and Wallerstein’s world-systems, as it follows: non-integration – subsistence economies; redistribution – world-empires, market trade – world-economies. However, reciprocity, one of the most important patterns of integration in and between ancient societies does not have a correspondent in Wallerstein framework. And this is the reason for the difficulties that crippled the attempts to

\textsuperscript{10} Wallerstein, p. 349: “\textit{We have defined a world-system as one in which there is extensive division of labor. This division is not merely functional - that is, occupational - but geographical}”.


\textsuperscript{12} The differences between the substantive and the formal rationality in economic activities were outlined by Max Weber in \textit{Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology}, Berkeley, CA, University of California Press, 1978, and are some of the most important theoretical developments that help to understand ancient societies and economies.

\textsuperscript{13} Möller, p. 11.

\textsuperscript{14} K. Polanyi, \textit{The Great Transformation: The Political and Economic Origins of Our Time}, 2nd ed., Boston, Beacon Press, 2001, p. 45-58, with P. Bohannan, \textit{Social Anthropology}, New York, Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1963, p. 231-232. It should be kept in mind Polanyi’s warning that “\textit{It should by no means be inferred that socioeconomic principles of this type are restricted to primitive procedures or small communities; that a gainless and marketless economy must necessarily be simple. The Kula ring, in western Melanesia, based on the principle of reciprocity, is one of the most elaborate trading transactions known to man; and redistribution was present on a gigantic scale in the civilization of the Pyramids}”. (Polanyi, p. 52).
use the world-system approach in pre-modern societies. Without introducing a new type of world-system, internally based on frequent and large-scale reciprocal exchanges, we cannot explain the intuitive observation that some ancient societies were integrated for a long period of time, although they were not subjects of the same empire or related through market exchange. The above-mentioned example of Near Eastern Late Bronze Age international system is evocative: for nearly three hundred years, strong ties were held between the four empires that controlled the Near East mainly by gift exchanges of large scale between their monarchs, who called themselves “brothers”. Nevertheless, beside the four great powers, there were also actors of lesser importance, as the Levantine princes or the West Anatolian and Aegean rulers from Arzawa and Ahhiyawa (the Mycenians), who either paid tribute, when they were subjected by the great kings, or entered the gift trade mechanism when they managed to preserve their independence. The system proved to be very stable and was disrupted only by the emergence of exogenous factors as large migrations, on the background of severe drought.

What is particular about this type of world-system is the absence of exploitation and the gradual shift towards greater material inequality, one of the most important criteria in separating core and periphery in world-economies and world-empires. As Bohannan highlights, reciprocity, conducted mainly through gift exchange, occurs between people who are bound in non-market, non-hierarchical relationships to one another\textsuperscript{15}. Chase-Dunn, Alvarez and Pasciuti aptly describe the situation as “core/periphery differentiation”, opposing it to “core/periphery hierarchy”\textsuperscript{16}. Nevertheless, core and periphery exist: some polities are obviously stronger and wealthier than others. What is the role of reciprocity in differentiating core and periphery in pre-modern world-systems, other than world-empires?

The answer is the provision of prestige. The one who gives the most has the best status among the others. For example, in the Late Bronze Age international system, the pharaoh was deemed the most important among the four “brothers”, because he was able to make the richest gifts\textsuperscript{17}. This is another sort of capital acquisition. Whereas the aim in the modern world-economy is to gather material benefits and acquire financial capital, in ancient world-systems the goal is the

\textsuperscript{15} Bohannan, p. 232. Cf. Woolf, p. 54, who underscores the fact that ancient and medieval economies are not exploitive perforce.


acquisition of symbolic capital\textsuperscript{18}. The reproduction of wealth is not direct: people and societies do not invest in order to immediately gain material profit, they invest in acquiring status among the others (usually spending a lot of their wealth on apparently nothing), which presumably will provide them with opportunities to gain back the wealth thus invested. Anticipating the discussion on mercenaries, I provide the following example: the pharaoh makes a gift to a certain Greek sanctuary and his prestige among the community that controls the sanctuary is enhanced. Through reciprocity, he can easily recruit mercenaries attracted by his recently increased prestige, mercenaries which he uses afterwards for a raid in Nubia. Part of the booty goes to the mercenaries, further increasing the pharaoh’s prestige, but the largest part remains to him. So, the indirect investment resulted in higher prestige and, fortunately enough, in regaining and multiplying the initial wealth. Although the exchange is also beneficially to the Greek community, both publicly and privately (the sanctuary also acquired higher prestige as it received a rich gift, the mercenaries are wealthier), the differentiation between core and periphery is obvious.

So, this particular type of world-systems is also composed of core states and peripheral zones. Interesting enough, most of the core states are world-empires, which can also be represented as world-systems divided between a centre and a ring of peripheries. This framework has already been proposed for the Roman Empire\textsuperscript{19}. The border between an internal periphery and an external periphery of a world-empire is usually dynamic, the pattern of exchange easily varying between redistribution and reciprocity.

However, between the core and the peripheries of the world-systems based on reciprocity there are also semi-peripheries. They play practically the same role as the semi-peripheries in the world-economy, in this particular case mediating the gifts exchange and also having an important part in the development of market forces. Especially in pre-modern societies, because peaceful exchanges provides rather material and technological benefits for those underdeveloped than inequality, semi-peripheral societies often rapidly replaces the core societies in the

\textsuperscript{18} An interesting analysis of how Bourdieu’s concept of “symbolic capital” is appropriate for describing international and interpersonal relations in archaic Greece is provided by G. Crane, \textit{Thucydides and the Ancient Simplicity: the limits of political realism}, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1998, p. 152-161.

centre of the world-system. The fact was highlighted by Chase-Dunn and was investigated under the name of “semi-peripheral development”\textsuperscript{20}.

As a last theoretical remark, we should observe that world-systems of reciprocity are not restricted to this pattern of integration. We have already seen that inside world-empires the most important pattern of integration is redistribution. At the same time, market exchanges are also conducted in parallel with reciprocity exchanges, although their scale has never equaled the scale of the capitalist world-economy. But not only trade was crucial in developing the links between the world-system societies: military confrontation, political alliances, travelers, refugees are other instruments that bound together culturally different societies into a single system.

In conclusion, rather than a definition based on division of labor, a more suitable definition for world-systems in antiquity seems to be the one given by Chase-Dunn, Álvarez and Pasciuti: “World-systems are intersocietal interaction networks in which culturally different peoples are strongly linked together by trade, political-military engagement and information flows”\textsuperscript{21}. Differences between world-empires, world-economies and world-systems based on reciprocity should be addressed by adding to the definition the characteristic pattern of trade.

Bearing in mind the theoretical framework sketched above, we should return to the particular spatio-temporal context of eastern Mediterranean during the archaic age.

There are many parameters which can be used to demonstrate that the Eastern Empire represented the core of a world-system: population and population density, military power, wealth and, the most important, prestige/status. Comparisons of these parameters between the Greek polities and the Eastern empires are revealing. For example, around 650 B.C., the largest city in the Near East is considered to be Nineveh, the Assyrian capital, with no less than 120,000 inhabitants. It was replaced in the next century by Babylon, with roughly the same size\textsuperscript{22}. In comparison, the whole Athenian state, the most important city-state in Greece, comprising Athens and the region that surrounded Athens, had at its height (431 B.C.) nearly 300,000 people\textsuperscript{23}. It seems that Athens itself had only 35,000-

\footnote{Chase-Dunn, Álvarez, Pasciuti, p. 95.}
\footnote{Chase-Dunn, Álvarez, Pasciuti, p. 93.}
\footnote{Chase-Dunn, Álvarez, Pasciuti, 99-100. City size is all the more important as it is used as a reliable indicator for societal power and the strength of an empire.

40,000 inhabitants.\textsuperscript{24} With regard to the military, we should notice that Lydians and Persians had no difficulties in conquering the Greek cities in Anatolia. Furthermore, the military strength and prowess of the Eastern monarchies seem to have been even a benchmark for the early Greeks, as a contemporary fragment of Sappho from Mytilene (fl. 590 B.C.) demonstrates:

The fairest thing in all the world some say is a host of foot, and some again a navy of ships, but to me 'tis the heart’s beloved. [...] See to it then that you remember us Anactoria, now that we are parted from one of whom I would rather the sweet sound of her footfall and the sight of the brightness of her beaming face than all the chariots and armoured footmen of Lydia. (Sappho \textit{L-P} F16, trans. J.M. Edmonds)\textsuperscript{25}

It is obvious that the most impressive and effective military was considered to be the neighboring Lydian host. Also, the wealth of Eastern monarchs was fabulous in comparison to that of the Greek states or other polities. There are numerous tales and myths about it, which are partly supported by archaeology. For instance, Greeks started to largely use stone for buildings, abandoning cheap and perishable materials only after 700 B.C.\textsuperscript{26}, at a time when Assyrians had already built their impressive palaces at Nimrud and Nineveh. In fact, the Assyrian palaces were so impressive by their wealth, that Alkinoos’ and Menelaos’ fabulous palaces descriptions in the Odyssey (Hom. \textit{Od}. 4.43-4.48, 4.72-75, 7.84-90) nearly match the way the Assyrian palaces should have looked in reality\textsuperscript{27}.

However, the most important criterion is prestige. There are many ways to prove that Eastern monarchies were much more prestigious then the Greek polities in the archaic age. First of all, there are narrative sources that record the awe and admiration inspired to the Greeks by the oriental wealth and power (e.g. Menelaos’ account of his trip in Phoenicia and Egypt – Hom. \textit{Od}. 4.81-90; 120-135; 227-232; 613-619). Those sources are nearly matched by the archaeological record: Greeks


\textsuperscript{26} Vlassopoulos, p. 231.

boasted with the oriental artifacts they brought back from the East, just as after 1989 East Europeans boasted with the goods they gained in the West when they returned to their countries. Greek sanctuary thesauri, places for social display par excellence, were filled with Eastern artifacts, some of them bearing even written records in this regard, as the following: “Pedon dedicated me, the son of Amphinneos, having brought me from Egypt; to him the Egyptian king – Psammetichos – gave as a reward of valor a golden bracelet and a city, on account of his virtue.”

Although it is dangerous to generalize from a fragmentary set of sources, an ultimate proof of the superior prestige of the Oriental monarchies compared to the Greek city-states is the huge imbalance between the numerous Greek accounts of Eastern empires and the scarce Eastern accounts of Greeks.

The disparity between the Oriental monarchies and the Greek polities is obvious, but for stating that they were part of the same world-system, the former as core states and the latter as periphery/semi-periphery, it is needed more than that. The strong reciprocity ties between the two areas should also be demonstrated.

I have already mentioned the large inventory of Oriental artifacts in Greek sanctuaries, probably dedicated by Greeks that received them during their staying in the East. However, there are also some other gifts that prove the strong linkage between the Greek peripheral area and the Oriental core: the gifts and dedications of Eastern monarchs to Greek cities and sanctuaries. Most of them were lost during the ages, but Herodotus kept a very detailed account of them so we are informed about the huge quantities of precious metals and the fine craftsmanship of the objects donated by nearly every Lydian and Egyptian monarch after 620 B.C. Some artifacts found at Rhodes offer us insight into the scale of such exchanges. One example is illustrative for figuring out how much prestige was gained by such kind of gifts and how reciprocity worked as pattern of integration: having consulted the oracle in Delphi on the matter of whether attacking or not the Persians, Croesus, king of Lydia received an answer that met his expectations. As a

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gratification, he gave each citizen of Delphi two staters of pure gold (cca. 31 g),
gift that prompted the Delphians to respond with laying all sorts of honors on
Croesus and all Lydians: “the right of first consulting the oracle, exemption from
all charges, the chief seats at festivals, and perpetual right of Delphian citizenship
to whoever should wish it” (Hdt. 1.54.2, trans. A.D. Godley).

I have highlighted the gift trade between Greeks and Eastern monarchies,
that shows the obvious superiority of the latter and also the scale of the reciprocity
ties between the two types of society. However, there were much more other ways
in which Greeks and Easterners interacted, besides those of reciprocity:
intermarriages between the elites (Croesus had a half-brother of Ionian origin,
named Pantaleon – Hdt. 1.92.3, Amasis married the daughter of the king from the
Greek colony of Cyrene – Hdt. 2.181 etc.), market trade in ports of trade such as
Naukratis in Egypt and probably Al Mina in Syria, frequent wars, such as those
between the Lydian monarchs and the Greek cities in Asia Minor. Some of the
cities in Asia Minor finally came under the Lydian and Persian rule and had to pay
tribute, entering the inner periphery of successive empires. Such frequent and
substantial contacts ended with the adoption of numerous technologies, skills and
ideas by the Greeks, such as alphabet, monumental building, coinage31, even
tyrranny as a political system32. I assume that we do not need to find evidence for
huge exchanges of commodities in order to conclude that Greek polities and
Oriental empires were parts of the same world-system, the former representing a
peripheral area, the latter the centre.

What did the Greeks gave in exchange for the gifts they received from the
Oriental empires? Probably they provided wares, olive oil (a very important
commodity in the antiquity, as it had much more uses than nowadays) and ores
(entering the same business as the Phoenicians, recognized as the merchants that
provided Assyrians with metals from all over the Mediterranean, a true semi-
peripheral activity)33. Some of these commodities were exchanged in the market;
others were probably given as gifts.

31 Vlassopoulos, p. 226-235.
32 R. Drews, “The First Tyrants in Greece”, Historia: Zeitschrift für Alte Geschichte, vol. 21, no. 2,
1972.
33 As attested by the early settlement at Pithekoussai, across the Etruscan coast (nowadays the
island of Ischia), most probably founded for the development of a more comprehensive iron ore
trade (G. Buchner, “Early orientalizing: Aspects of the Euboean connection”, in D. Ridgway, F.
Ridgway (eds.), Italy Before the Romans: The Iron Age, Orientalizing and Etruscan Periods,
London – New York, Academic Press, 1979), and the traditions of Colaios of Samos, Greek trader
who reached the kingdom of Tartessos in Hispania (covering the nowadays area around Cádiz, Hdt.
4.152), one of the most important sources of mineral ores for Phoenician trade (S. Frankenstein,
However, we should not look too much in this purely economic direction in order to find the balance between the two areas. The scheme of benefits for the core states in the modern world-economy, provided by Chirot, might be useful in this respect: 1. access to a large quantity of raw material; 2. cheap labor; 3. enormous profits from direct capital investments; 4. markets for export; 5. skilled professional labor through migration of these people from the non-core to the core\textsuperscript{34}.

Some of this benefits are anachronistic for pre-modern societies (3 and 4), others does not apply to this particular case (2, partially 1). Nevertheless, I consider there is a strong case for admitting that the peripheral status of Greek world was achieved through the temporary and permanent migration of skilled professional labor: craftsmen, engineers, builders, sailors, doctors and eunuchs are mentioned as working for the Oriental monarchs. However, probably the mostly sought “Greek commodity” was represented by the Greek mercenaries.

The evidence for the archaic age is relatively scarce. The best documented situation is that of Egypt, where we have the account of Herodotus (Hdt. 2.30, 2.152-154, 2.163, 2.178-179, 3.4, 3.11) and a series of epigraphic and archaeological pieces of evidence. For the rest of the eastern Mediterranean, we rely on very fragmentary and unreliable evidence: some pots in Levant, archaic poetry fragments for Babylon, some historical and lyrical fragments for Lydia. However, by inference, the presence of Greek mercenaries in the Eastern Mediterranean should have been larger than the insight permitted by the scanty evidence. The new trend is to attribute part of the orientalia in Greek sanctuaries to mercenaries, although before they were attributed to merchants. In the same way, some of the sites that were thought to be ports of trade are now credited as possible camps for mercenaries.

There are also other possible ways to argue in favor of a consistent Greek mercenary presence in the East. First of all, there is the situation in the fourth century B.C., when tens of thousands of Greek mercenaries were employed by the Persian kings, satraps and even regional rebels. In fact, the mercenary boom in the fourth century might be the norm for a longer period, starting in the archaic age, while the fifth century could be the anomaly, an anomaly explainable by the

intensive fighting against Persia and by a powerful civic ethos that left little room for private enterprise such as fighting abroad as a mercenary. Secondly, there are the comparisons with better known historical examples, such as the Viking and the Swiss mercenaries of the middle ages, or the Stradiotes of the early modern age. All of them came from peripheral, relatively poor areas, and were intensively employed by core states. Some of them started, just like the Greeks as fierce raiders. And just like in the case of the Greeks, the fact that some core states employed them repeatedly meant that the relations between those core states and the polities where mercenaries originated became stronger and stronger, reaching the state of de facto alliances. Thirdly, we should consider that the phenomenon of Greek colonization towards west and north might be paralleled by something similar to the south and east. There is evidence for a significant demographic increase in the Aegean during the archaic age, phenomenon that in the context of low agricultural productivity, determined the need of migration for some part of the population. It seems probable that expansion was sought in every direction, but took different forms depending on the societal power of the polities encountered: in the west and north, Greeks managed to found independent polities, while in the east and south they had to submit to the will of the great Oriental monarchs. Thus, some of the Greek mercenaries serving in Egypt were turned into veritable coloni, receiving for their duty land and rights of marriage, according to the dispositions of the pharaoh. The settlement was made under the control of the Egyptian authorities, which regulated in the same manner the way that trade between Egypt and the Aegean should be conducted, the consequence being the unique status of Naukratis in the Delta.

The case of Greek mercenaries in Egypt is evocative for the place they occupied in the world-system of the time. They started as raiders or reinforcements sent by the Lydian king Gyges to his ally, pharaoh Psammetichos I, or both. They took part in all the major campaigns conducted by the pharaohs of the Saite dynasty: the unification of the Delta (664-648 B.C.), the war in Syria and Levant against Babylon (612-597 B.C.), the campaign against Nubia (592/591 B.C.), the defending of Egypt against the Persians (525 B.C.). They were so appreciated that

35 The importance of international norms and cultural ideas in inhibiting or stimulating the mercenary phenomenon is demonstrated by S. Percy, Mercenaries, The History of a Norm in International Relations, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2007.

36 Percy, p. 84-85.


their number increased to approximately 30,000 in the first quarter of the sixth century (Hdt. 2.163), a number probably exaggerated, although not very much if we consider the evidence for disgruntlement and even revolts of the local elite of warriors against the foreigners (Hdt. 2.30, Diod. 1.66). Some of the mercenaries were even appointed to important administrative and military functions. All the clues point to the mercenaries as one of the backbones of the Saite regime. However, they were put under the command of local officers and their dislocation was strictly regulated. At the end of their service, they whether chose to remain in Egypt and integrate in the Egyptian society or went back to their native cities in the Aegean.

Their case is very interesting because it serves as an explanation for the gifts made by pharaohs to Greek communities and sanctuaries. It can be almost safely held that gifts were directed specifically to those regions that provided or were expected to provide mercenaries or allied troops. Moreover, for the first time in Egyptian history, pharaohs were interested in controlling the eastern Mediterranean, Amasis even conquering Cyprus and making an alliance with Polycrates, the powerful tyrant of Samos. Although some other explanations can be given for this reorientation in foreign affairs, it might also demonstrate the huge impact that Greek mercenaries had in the international system of that age, bringing near a core state and a peripheral area.

The relationship was beneficial for both the core and the peripheral areas: while Egypt was once again able to use its impressive resources in order to avoid foreign rule and even to project power outside its borders, the Greek city-states were freed from demographic pressure and received a continuous flow of wealth.

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and new technological skills or ideas. Eastern monarchs generally improved their status and gained powerful and relatively cheap standing or temporary armies, whereas the Greeks who served as mercenaries received expensive gifts for their valor, gained considerable booty and enhanced their prestige among their peers in Greece.

This relationship based on reciprocity was very strong and resilient because it was embedded in the structure of the world-system itself. After a relatively short and never complete interruption generated by the Persian and Peloponnesian wars, the flow of Greek mercenaries from the Aegean periphery to the Eastern core was resumed. Once again, Oriental wealth attracted Aegean labor in a world-system where inner peripheries of the Persian Empire like Egypt and Western Asia Minor contested the rule from Susa and Persepolis. This time, however, to the reciprocal ties between Eastern members of royal families, satraps or rebels and Greek military commanders, typical market trade mechanisms were added: Greek commanders ceased to be aristocrats exclusively making gifts and distributing booty to their retainers, being instead professionals who had to regularly pay a certain amount of money to their soldiers. Some phenomenal characteristics had changed, but the structure of the main phenomena regulating the ancient world-system remained basically the same.

In conclusion, during the archaic age, Eastern empires and Greek polities were part of the same world-system, the former being the core, while the latter represented one of the peripheries/semi-peripheries. The fact that Eastern monarchs employed significant numbers of Greek mercenaries is a consistent proof of the unequal distribution of power and of both symbolic and material capital in the archaic world-system. The employment of Greek mercenaries was one of the key components of the gift trade that connected the Aegean periphery and the Eastern core, representing a revealing example for the integration based on reciprocity. Moving from particular to general, it should be noticed that in assessing the existence and peculiarities of pre-modern world-systems, along Wallerstein’s category of “world-empire”, we may also use the concept of “world-system based on reciprocity”, where the various parts are mainly integrated neither by the economic forces of market trade (as in world-economies), nor by political and military coercive forces (as in the case of world-empires), but by the complex pattern of reciprocity.
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