

## Symposium Laureoticum final draft 21/8/06

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## Ancient Philosophy – Today's Golden Wisdom

[lead]

Dusty old inscriptions may be the scholar's delight, but do they have any real import for modern man? Apostolos Pierris answers with a resounding 'yes' and invites world-renowned philosophers in the Symposia Philosophiae Antiquae to support the argument. Karen Lee draws Pierris out in extended conversation about the work.

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Seated for lunch on the veranda of the Grecotel Cape Sounion, Dirk Obbink, director and general editor of the Oxyrhynchus Papyri project at University of Oxford, swept an arm across the view of Poseidon's temple across the small bay. 'Imagine what it's like to be here, in this place, central to the topics we're discussing!' Around the bay lay the Sounion peninsula and the nearby Lavrion silver mines that fueled the rapid rise of Athens, in the 5th century BC, from peripheral power to vibrant, hegemonic city-state. The rise took only three decades and held sway until Athens was defeated in the Peloponnesian Wars.

'Mind, Might and Money: The Secular Triad in Golden Age Athens' brought Obbink and 16 other scholars to the July 2006 colloquium. Organized by the Institute for Philosophical Research, Patras, under the leadership of Apostolos Pierris, Symposium Laureoticum was one in a series

under the aegis of the Ministry of Finance and Economy, with special interest from Deputy Minister Petros Doukas. Doukas himself has done extensive research into ancient Greek thinking on economic issues. The series is also variously supported by the Ministries of Culture and Tourist Development, as well as private funding and local government entities. The Symposia bring distinguished scholars together to discuss at length and in depth their research, focusing on, though not exclusively, ancient Greek philosophy. Papers are presented, critiqued at length, and then afterwards, the scholars produce their final versions which are published as 'proceedings' of each symposium.

The Sounion meetings took a fresh look at the ascent of Athens as an intellectual, military and economic preeminence in the Greek world, as well as her 'subsequent lapse into defensive contentment and final miscarriage'.

There are articles the writer isn't sure how to approach, and this was one of them. Surely, the sheer weight of world-renowned academicians deserved a sober demeanor. And yet, this small gathering of intellectuals showed a great deal more energy than I'd expected, not to mention a keen sense of humor.

What was perhaps the most salient comment of the day can't be included. It came, also over lunch, when Pierris was well into his thesis on why, perhaps, Athens fell, at the height of its prowess and regional hegemony: wealthy beyond dreams, full of itself and its contribution to philosophy, theater, the graphic and tactile arts. Might it have been that 'softening' that did it in? Might it have been the conscious, societal decision – framed by but also influencing its mid-century leader, Pericles – to shift its wealth from military investment to the creation of monuments celebrating its exalted position? So that when the Spartans were emboldened to challenge its hegemony and the Peloponnesian Wars broke out, Athens lost! There was no reason it should have. Athens' 'aggressive strategy of globalization', as Pierris termed it, had drawn an increasing array of city-states, regions and foreign lands into a common web of interaction. Its 'Mind, Might and Money' should have prevailed.

It was that loss of a 'forward dynamic' in the crucial military domain -- the overwhelming superiority of power that had discouraged challengers -- suggested Pierris, that may have led to a series of small failures that lost the war. The Spartans, he noted, though renowned for their fighting trim, were the weaker, less progressive entity and, in fact, fell themselves only two decades after defeating Athens.

Relating ancient truths to modern dilemmas, I asked him if perhaps his suggestion could apply to certain superpowers of my acquaintance. (I'm American, I should point out.)

'Yes, precisely!' came the philosopher's response.

'Do you mind if I don't quote you on that?' I queried.

At which he burst into laughter, 'No, please! Don't!' It was a stellar quote, and I'm terribly sorry I can't use it in this article!

Unless ... unless we carry on and delve deeper into the implications, which is exactly what we did, the following month, when Pierris and Obbink joined Gene Ware of Brigham Young University (Utah, USA) to work on the Mesavouno inscriptions on Santorini.

As an aside, the Institute has three main thrusts of activity: individual research by Pierris and others, the symposium gatherings such as Laureoticum and such collaborative efforts as on Santorini. Pierris, Obbink and Ware, and their respective institutes and universities, began their collaboration on the digital analysis of the charred and heretofore nearly unreadable Derveni scroll. The results were announced earlier this year and the enhanced images will be available within the next year via Internet to scholars around the world. A stone's throw from the Thira excavation – Greece's Pompeii – the same state-of-the-art multi-spectral analysis, in which BYU is a leader, is now being applied to some of the oldest rock inscriptions in Greece. Particularly exciting, according to Pierris, they form a homogeneous body of texts, expressions on the life of an 8th-7th century BC Doric settlement, texts in which certain names appear repeatedly. And it's the first such analysis since Thira was excavated at the turn of the last century!

Santorini raises Derveni to the next order of magnitude. The technique is being honed, the frontiers of this new technology extended. The current project takes the equipment into the field, in the open, on the raw material, undoctored by essayists, as Pierris explained. It also bodes new educational pursuits for graduate students in the classics and gives the scholar, the philosopher, precious new materials to study.

So, back to philosophy itself and its modern significance. From the relative quiet of August in Athens, I phone-chased the concept Pierris had hinted at over lunch, that of 'forward dynamic', that knotty modern question: Is military might, aka an arms race, a good idea? Much of Pierris' work has examined ancient economics, as evidenced both by historians of the time and by extant records of financial transactions. He described the vision that led to Athens' growth, 'Themistocles recognized the trade benefits that would derive from the Lavreon silver. He also knew he needed military might to protect his trade routes.'

So much for two parts of the Triad; what about 'Mind'? Again, Pierris attributes it to Themistoclean vision. 'He consciously encouraged immigration, particularly of the 'cream' of other cultures,' he said, noting that Themistocles was not unopposed in this matter but had prevailed. 'You know philosophy was not native to Athens,' he added, 'It was the product of thinkers attracted to Athens by its prosperity.' These thinkers, and artisans and a host of other skilled and talented people – other Greeks and 'barbarians' – were welcomed and offered the fruits of the burgeoning trade. While they could never become citizens – native-born Attic males only – these 'metoics' enjoyed almost all other privileges of living in the city-state through their transactions with citizens.

And so did the slaves, unlike the ugly image associated with slavery in modern times. Their 'attachment' to an owner was not unlike modern labor contracts for foreigners in Greece. They received wages and often pursued trades, living apart from the owner. Payment records, for instance, for the polishing of the Acropolis columns, show that slaves received the same wage as citizens. Unlike some modern models – my superpower comes to mind again – Golden Age Athens offered its wealth to all who contributed to it and provided for a closely defined category

of 'adynatoi' who could not care for themselves. There is no record, in prosperous Golden Age Athens, of slave or metoic unrest, let alone an uprising.

Is that the rest of the 'forward dynamic' then? Yes, says Pierris, "Mind (culture, philosophy, wisdom) was financed by Money (commerce), which was protected by Might (military)." And the concept comes full circle with Mind working out the balance among the three. Themistocles wrought the balance; Pericles, it appears, let it slip. A microcosmic lesson for modern man.

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Want to read more?

Conference series. Proceedings of Symposia Philosophiae Antiquae, Institute for Philosophical Research, Kolokotroni 42, Patras, 26221GR.

Nature of money and credit in ancient Greek economy, 3-volume undertaking.

Vol. 1, Value and Knowledge: The Philosophy of Economy in Classical Antiquity, A. Pierris, 2001, Bank of America grant.

Vol. 2, Origins of Money Economy, out soon.

Vol. 3, in progress, examination of the most developed ancient Greek economy, Athens from 5th into 4th century BC.

Origin of Rationality, the emergence of reason from the spirit of mystery, 3-volume undertaking, Heracles Cement grant.

Vol. 1, Religion and Mystery, A. Pierris, 2006.

Vol. 2, 'mixed thinking', Orthism and Pythagoran philosophers, etc, coming in October.

Vol. 3, in progress, compares/contrasts ancient Greek & modern European notions of rationality.

(\*) Text of an interview published in the "Athens Insider".