Utilizing Athenian History in the *De Corona*

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**Abstract**

The *De Corona*, given by the famous Athenian orator Demosthenes, depicts him battling against his fierce rival Aeschines. While the speech’s goal was to defend a fellow Athenian being prosecuted for awarding Demosthenes for his services to the city, Demosthenes attempts to justify his award by defending his actions against Philip and his son Alexander the Great of Macedonia and mainly focuses on his personal rivalry with Aeschines. Considered one of the greatest orations in history, one of the main strategies utilized in the *De Corona* by Demosthenes is an appeal to past Athenian history, such as the Persian Wars. Through this strategy Demosthenes explains how he deserves praise for his actions taken against Macedonia.

One of the greatest criticisms of Demosthenes made by his rival Aeschines is how he pales in comparison to other famous Athenians of the past. In fact, a large part of Aeschines’ speech *Against Ctesiphon*, sections 178-188, is dedicated to how Demosthenes is in no way fit to be compared to the great Athenian forefathers, bringing up famed statesmen such as Themistocles, Miltiades, and Aristides. Aeschines states, “But I by the Olympian gods do not think it is fit to remember those men on the same day as this monster!” (ἀλλ’ ἔγωγε μὰ τοὺς θεοὺς τοὺς Ὀλυμπιῶν οὐδ’ ἐν ταῖς αὐταῖς ἡμέραις ἄξιον ἡγοῦμαι μεμνῆσθαι τοῦ θηρίου τοῦτον κἀκείνων τῶν ἄνδρῶν, Aes. 3.182). While this invective would seem to discourage Demosthenes from referencing Athenian history, he still constantly discusses it throughout his speech, especially the events of the Persian Wars and Themistocles, who led the city for a large part during this time period. Using these historical references, Demosthenes attempts to create a parallel between Athens’ conflicts with foreign powers in the Athenian past, specifically with Persia, and their recent conflict with Philip of Macedon, as well as compare himself to famous statesmen such as Themistocles. By doing so, Demosthenes is able to defend his actions taken against Philip, particularly the Battle of Chaeronea. However, he must be cautious about how he goes about doing this, as referencing the wrong historical moment or in an inappropriate way will do much more harm than good.
The first mention of the Persians by name occurs about two-thirds through the speech, in which Demosthenes shows the historical precedent of Athens being offered safety in return for allowing another state to take control of Greece:

\[ τίς \ γὰρ \ οὐκ \ οἶδεν \ Ἑλλήνων, \ τίς \ δὲ \ βαρβάρων, \ ὅτι \ καὶ \ παρὰ \ Θηβαίων \ καὶ \ παρὰ \ τῶν \ ἐτι πολλῆς \ χάριτος \ τοῦτον \ ἔδόθη \ τῇ \ πόλει, \ ὅ \ τι \ βούλεται Λακεδαιμονίων \ καὶ \ κατασκευαζόμενον \ Φίλιππον \ ποιεῖν \ καὶ \ ἐὰν \ ἕτερον \ τῶν \ Ἑλλήνων \ προεστάναι; \]

For who of the Greeks, who of barbarians, does not know that from Thebes, from the Lacedaemonians being stronger still before them, and from the king of the Persians, this would be given gladly with every grace to the city, taking whatever it wishes and keeping what it already had, to follow this order and allow another to rule over the Greeks? (18.302).

Here Demosthenes alludes to an episode documented by Herodotus, in which Xerxes promises to allow Athens to retain its possessions if they assist the Persians with their fleet against the rest of Greece.\(^1\) However, the Athenians ultimately reject this offer, choosing to go to war with Persia rather than submit to them. Demosthenes purposefully references this event due to how relevant it is to their ordeal with Philip, and he shows the similarity of the two conflicts when he states, “What was fitting that the city should do, having seen Philip arranging an empire and tyranny over the Greeks for himself?” (τι τὴν πόλιν, Αἰγύπτου, προσῆκε ποιεῖν ἄρχην καὶ τυραννίαν τῶν Ἑλλήνων ὑπόσχον ἐκείνῳ κατασκευαζόμενον Φίλιππον; 18.66). Just as the Persians, Philip was seeking to form a hegemony over not just the Athenians, but all of Greece. The refusal of Xerxes’ proposed terms by Athens mirrors the same sentiments of Demosthenes’ policy against Philip. Kochin mentions how “it was therefore fitting for the Athenian demos more than any other Greek city to resist Philip… present actions must be worthy of the city’s past.”\(^2\) By choosing a policy in line with the strategy of the past which Athenians had adopted against a foreign aggressor, he shows how he embodies the ideals of their ancestors in a similar dilemma.
In one of the most striking passages of the *De Corona*, Demosthenes invokes the Athenian veterans of several famous battles from their history:

> ἀλλ᾽ οὐκ ἔστιν, οὐκ ἔστιν ὅπως ἡμάρτετ᾽, ἄνδρες Ἀθηναῖοι, τὸν ὕπερ τῆς ἀπάντων ἐλευθερίας καὶ σωτηρίας κινδύνων ἀράμενοι, μὰ τοὺς Μαραθῶνι προκινδυνεύσαντας τὸν προγόνον, καὶ τοὺς ἐν Πλαταιαῖς παραταξαμένους, καὶ τοὺς ἐν Σαλαμίνι ναυμαχήσαντας καὶ τοὺς ἐπ᾽ Ἀρτεμισίῳ, καὶ πολλοὺς ἔτερους τοὺς ἐν τοῖς δημοσίοις μνήμασιν κειμένους ἄγαθους ἄνδρας, οὓς ἅπαντας ἄνδρας τὴν πόλις τῆς αὐτῆς ἁπάντων ἐλευθερίας καὶ σωτηρίας κίνδυνον ἀράμενοι, Ἀισχίνη, οὐχὶ τοὺς κατορθώσαντας αὐτῶν οὐδὲ τοὺς κρατήσαντας μόνους. δικαίως: ὃ μὲν γὰρ ἦν ἄνδρον ἄγαθὸν ἔργον ἔπραξα καὶ τάξιν ἔδωκε για τὸ τυχῆ δ᾽, ἦν ὁ δαίμων ἐνειμένος ἐκόμισε, καὶ ταῦτα κέρδησαν. (18.208)

But there is no way, no way in which you were wrong, Athenian men, having chosen danger for freedom and salvation for all, by those of the forefathers who took risks beforehand at Marathon, and those who lined up at Plataea, and those who fought on the sea at Salamis and those at Artemisium, and many other brave men buried in public tombs, all whom the city, having deemed them worthy of the same honor, buried them the same, Aeschines, not only those who succeeded and prevailed. Rightly so. For the deed which was the duty of brave men was done: but they met fate itself, which a daimon dealt out to each individual.

Again, Demosthenes relates the conflict with Philip to the Persian Wars, listing off four separate battles in which not only did the Athenians fight their foreign aggressor, but also defeated them. However, Demosthenes wisely does not describe the Athenians as victors in these battles, just how they fought in them and faced the dangers. In order to successfully compare their conflict with Philip to the Persian Wars, it is important not to say how the Athenians of the past were successful because that would contrast with how Demosthenes’ strategy was ultimately unsuccessful. This is highlighted by how he mentions that all Athenians who fought bravely deserve the honor of a public burial, even those who lost, as long as they were valiant. Yunis states, “...he adds this further layer of explanation that has nothing to do with utilitarian considerations, but which creates
in the audience an emotionally resonant awareness of the rightness of the action.” The rightness of the action was not the success of the Athenians over the Persians, it was what motivated them to fight in the first place. Additionally, Ober discusses how it was important not to insult the audience when discussing history, saying, “when using historical and poetic examples, the orator must avoid taking on the appearance of a well-educated man giving lessons in culture to the ignorant masses.” The Athenian assemblymen know the outcomes of these battles, so it is unnecessary for him to explicitly state they were victorious. Demosthenes is not attempting to compare the outcomes of the separate conflicts, but rather the sentiments which motivated Athens to pursue a defiant strategy against its aggressors, which certainly appeals to the good-natured, patriotic assemblymen. Again, Demosthenes compares the ideals and values present in both conflicts.

Another important aspect of the Persian Wars that Demosthenes alludes to is the Battle of Thermopylae. Thermopylae is first mentioned near the beginning of the speech, when Demosthenes discusses Aeschines’ conduct during the crisis with Philip. He proclaims, “That there was no need to make an uproar on account of the crossing of Philip within Thermopylae?” (ὡς οὐ δεῖ θορυβεῖσθαι τῷ παρεληλυθένα Φίλιππον εἴσῳ Πυλῶν, 18.35). The Battle of Thermopylae during the Persian Wars was vital for the Greeks, as it bought Athens enough time to evacuate the city, however it was still technically a victory for the Persians. Thermopylae is significant due to how it is one of the only ways to get into the mainland Greece from the North, so a foreign aggressor easily passing through was an ominous sign for the safety of Greeks, considering how Athens was razed to the ground the last time this happened. This reference to Thermopylae criticizes Aeschines, for he does not recognize the historical precedent of an enemy, undisturbed, crossing through this area. Thermopylae again is mentioned later on towards the end of the speech, when Demosthenes claims that no Greeks on either side of it would be in trouble if there had been someone like him in Thessaly or Arcadia (οὐδὲνες οὔτε τῶν ἔξω Πυλῶν Ἑλλήνων οὔτε τῶν εἴσω τοῖς παροῦσι κακοῖς ἐκέχρην ἂν, 18.304). Again, the significance of Thermopylae is stressed by Demosthenes, except he recognizes how it is a vital area in terms of defending against enemies.

While there are numerous references to the Persian Wars, it is noticeable how there are no real mentions of another
important conflict in Athenian History: the Peloponnesian Wars. Why would Demosthenes not want to directly mention their conflict with their old rival Sparta and remember certain battles from this time? Referencing the Peloponnesian Wars would most likely weaken Demosthenes’ speech considering that Athens ultimately lost to Sparta, who ended up ruling over them for a period of time. The Peloponnesian Wars included great failures such as the expedition to Syracuse, in which Athens’ navy was entirely devastated. Additionally the plague struck Athens during this time period, which is definitely not a pleasant memory. While the Persian Wars are filled with memories of victory and vanquishing a foreign enemy, the wars with Sparta are filled with bad memories of suffering and great losses. The Peloponnesian Wars also would not serve as a helpful comparison to Athens’ conflict with Philip because it was centered around a heated rivalry between the two powerful city-states. Jealousy and personal hatred between cities does not align with how Demosthenes portrays the conflict between Athens and Philip. Plus, Demosthenes argues that personal rivalries should be put aside in a conflict like this, which is reflected in how he negotiated an alliance with the Thebans who had been their enemies for many years. Demosthenes policy against Philip is based upon achieving salvation and freedom by fighting a foreign aggressor, not fighting with a fellow Greek nation over a heated rivalry.

As well as to the events of the Persian Wars, Demosthenes also makes references to the great Athenian statesman and general Themistocles. He first mentions him by name around the middle of the speech, in which Demosthenes explains how no other policy was possible in dealing with Philip, and resisting him was in line with the values held dearly by their ancestors:

For who would not rejoice on account of the excellence of those men, who dared to leave behind the land and the city embarking
onto the triremes in order to not follow a command, having chosen Themistocles, who proposed these things, as general, having stoned Cyrsilus, advising them to yield to those giving commands, not only him, but also your women stoned his wife.

Just as the Athenians back then chose Themistocles as their leader and followed his strategy, the Athenians during the crisis with Philip chose Demosthenes as their leader and followed his policies. Both leaders were able to convince Athens to do a difficult task: Themistocles persuaded the Athenians to abandon their homes five and Demosthenes persuaded them to forget old rivalries and forge an alliance with the Thebans, both proposals seen as the only chance of achieving salvation. Demosthenes hopes to create a parallel between himself and Themistocles, and as Frost states, “the memory of the great man was such that all factions within the fourth-century democracy evoked his name to support their arguments.” Six This parallel is also supported by mentioning his opponent Cyrsilus, who can be seen as representing Aeschines in this comparison. Just as the Athenian men stoned Cyrsilus to death for proposing that Athens should submit to Persia, Demosthenes hopes that the Athenian jurymen will condemn Aeschines and other statesmen for being corrupted by Philip.

Another passage which may allude to Themistocles and his policies concerns Demosthenes’ discussion of trierarch laws which he implemented himself:

πάντα γὰρ τὸν πόλεμον τῶν ἀποστόλων γιγνομένων κατὰ τὸν νόμον τὸν ἐμὸν, οὐχ ἰκετηρίαν ἔθηκε τριήραρχος οὐδὲς πώποθ’ ὡς ἀδικούμενος παρ’ ὑμῖν, οὐκ ἐν Μουνιχίας ἐκαθέζετο, οὐχ ὑπὸ τῶν ἀποστολέων ἐδέθη, οὐ τριήρης οὔτ᾽ ἔξω καταλειφθείσ’ ἀπόλετο τῇ πόλει, οὔτ᾽ αὐτοῦ ἀπελείφθη οὐ δυναμένη ἀνάγεσθαι. (18.107).

Throughout the whole war, with all the expeditions being according to my law, no trierarch at any time placed a suppliant’s branch at your foot on account of being wronged, or was sitting in Munichia, or was imprisoned by the naval magistrates, and no trireme was abandoned out at sea or lost to the city, or was left behind here, not being able to be put to sea.

One of Themistocles’ greatest achievements was convincing the Athenian populace to use the silver found in the mines of
Laurium to finance a new fleet of triremes to fend off Persia, and eventually Sparta. Normally when Athens obtained a large amount of silver, it would be distributed amongst all of the Athenian citizens, however Themistocles successfully persuaded the Athenian populace to instead follow his own ambitious naval policy.\(^7\) Demosthenes in this passage discusses the successes of his own naval policy, attempting to create another parallel between him and the famed Athenian statesman.

However, Demosthenes at times seems to claim that he is even greater than Themistocles in some aspects, especially in respect to his building program. Demosthenes towards the end of his speech gives a few details about it, saying, “I proposed these things in defense of Attica, as much as it was possible by human calculation, and therewith I fortified the whole country, not just the ring around Piraeus or the citadel.” (ταῦτα προὐβαλόμην ἐγώ πρὸ τῆς Ἀττικῆς, ὅσον ἦν ἄνθρωπινῳ λογισμῷ δυνατόν, καὶ τούτοις ἐτείξασα τὴν χώραν, οὐχὶ τὸν κύκλον τοῦ Πειραιῶς οὐδὲ τὸν ἁστεῖον, 18.300). By mentioning a wall around Piraeus and the citadel, he is referring to the building program of Themistocles, another one of his greatest accomplishments. But Demosthenes says how his is much more impressive considering he built walls around the whole country. He also criticizes Themistocles for how he enacted his building program, which was done in secrecy.\(^8\) Frost mentions this criticism, saying how he “also claimed that the rebuilding of the walls by Conon was a greater accomplishment than the original construction by Themistocles, because the latter had worked by stealth.”\(^9\) While Themistocles is certainly a great Athenian statesman and Demosthenes attempts to be seen as an equal to him, he also shows how he is in some ways even greater than him.

While there are many references to Themistocles in the *De Corona*, there do not appear to be any references to another famous Athenian leader, Pericles. Again, just like the Peloponnesian Wars in general, Pericles’ leadership does not fit with the image of the conflict with Philip Demosthenes attempts to create. Pericles was an incredible leader for Athens, but he was a leader during the Golden Age, a time in which Athens was a great power in the Mediterranean. In contrast, Athens during Demosthenes’ time is much weaker than the empire it once was, and this is referenced when he discusses the lack of allies and tribute Athens had when Philip attacked: “In respect to strength, the city had the islanders, not all, but only the weakest: for neither Chios nor Rhodes nor Corcyra were with us: a tribute of
45 talents, and it was collected beforehand." (δύναμιν μὲν τοῖνυν ἔλεξεν ἢ πόλει τοὺς νησιώτας, οὐχ ἀπαντάς, ἀλλὰ τοὺς ἀσθενεστάτους; οὔτε γὰρ Χίος οὔτε Ῥόδος οὔτε Κέρκυρα μεθ᾽ ὤμοιν ἦν: χρημάτων δὲ σύνταξιν εἰς πέντε καὶ τετταράκοντα τάλαντα, καὶ ταῦτ᾽ ἦν προεξειλεγμένα, 18.234). Compared to the large tributary system Athens had in place in the late 5th century, Athens during Demosthenes’ time was much weaker. Pericles is seen by some critics as a demagogue or populist, relying heavily upon the support of the Athenian populace. One institution that Pericles introduced was the system of public fees, discussed by Plutarch in his Life of Pericles, which he says led the people to adopt bad habits. The direct democracy utilized by Pericles certainly helped individuals prosper with these public allotments, yet the vices that afflicted the Athenian people definitely hurt the state as a whole. Demosthenes does not advocate for the same type of radical democracy that Pericles does, especially if it led to the weakening of the state. In Section 298, Demosthenes explains how he never advised Athens like Aeschines and other corrupt statesmen, “leaning like a scale towards personal gain.” (ὁσα συμβεβούλευκα πώποτε τοιοτι, ὀμοίως ὑμίν ὀσπερ ἄν τρυτάνη ῥέπων ἐπὶ τὸ λήμμα συμβεβούλευκα, 18.298). Demosthenes does not seem to be in favor of these public fees, and Pericles does not fit the parallel he is trying to create.

While Demosthenes clearly references the Athenian past throughout his speech, one passage near the end of the speech conflicts with this strategy: εἶτα τῶν πρῶτερον γεγενημένων ἄγαθῶν ἄνδρῶν μέμνησαι. καὶ καλὸς ποιεῖς. οὐ μέντοι δίκαιόν ἐστιν, ἄνδρες Ἀθηναίοι, τὴν πρὸς τοὺς τετελευτηκότας εὐνοίαν ὑπάρχουσαν προλαβόντα παρ᾽ ὤμον πρὸς ἐκεῖνους ἐξετάζειν καὶ παραβάλλειν ἐμὲ τὸν νῦν ζῶντα μεθ᾽ ὤμον. (18.314).

Then you remember the good men of the past. And you do this rightly so. But this is not just, Athenian men, taking advantage of the goodwill accrued towards the dead from you to compare me to those men and to examine me, now living with you.

If Demosthenes says it is unfair to compare himself to past Athenians, why does he do it anyway? Aeschines, by bringing up in his own speech how Demosthenes does not deserve to be compared to their Athenian forefathers, in a way has actually
benefitted his rival. As long as Demosthenes does not overtly say he is as great as statesmen such as Themistocles and Miltiades, he can still make implicit comparisons. Additionally, Demosthenes turns this invective right back onto Aeschines, asking, “Then you say that I am not similar to those men? Are you like them Aeschines? Is your brother? Is some other of the orators now? For I say not one.” (εἶτα λέγεις ὡς οὐδὲν ὁμοίος εἰμ’ ἑκείνοις ἐγώ; σὺ δ’ ὁμοίος, Αἰσχίνη; ὁ δ’ ἀδελφός ὁ σός; ἄλλος δὲ τῶν νῦν ρητόρων; ἐγώ μὲν γὰρ οὐδένα φημί, 18.314). Demosthenes claims that because Aeschines brought up these famous statesmen first, he is attempting to compare himself to them, which is rather arrogant and would not be received well by the audience. Since Aeschines first brought up the question of whether or not his opponent was worthy to mention the Athenian past, Demosthenes is free to use past references.

Although Aeschines tries to use the Athenian history to his own advantage, claiming his rival does not even compare to the great Athenians of the past, nevertheless Demosthenes refers to the history of Athens throughout the De Corona. Referencing past history appeals to the patriotic and good-natured Athenian assembly, but Demosthenes also attempts to create a parallel between the conflict of Philip and conflicts of the past, especially the Persian Wars, as well as compare himself to the great Athenian forefathers, especially Themistocles. Demosthenes uses historical precedent to justify his own actions during the crisis with Philip, as well as to criticize the actions and judgments of Aeschines. However, in order to create a beneficial parallel, it is important to choose the correct historical references, which is why Demosthenes shies away from mentioning the Peloponnesian Wars or Pericles, which both do not fit the image he wants to make. By utilizing Athenian history, Demosthenes is able to align himself and his strategy against Philip with victorious Athenians of the past, and ultimately defeat his rival in this trial.
Bibliography


Herodotus. *Histories*


Plutarch. *Life of Pericles*

Thucydides. *The History of the Peloponnesian War*


Notes

1 Hdt. 8.140-143
2 Kochin, Michael. “Time and Judgment in Demosthenes’ De Corona.” p.84-85
3 Yunis, Harvey. “Politics as Literature: Demosthenes and the Burden of the Athenian Past.” p.384
5 “What precise heights of oratory he attained, what stirring and memorable phrases he pronounced, we have no way of knowing...only by the effect it had on the assembly can we gauge what surely must have been its electric and vivifying quality—for Themistocles' audacious proposals, when put to the vote, were
ratified. The Athenian people, facing the gravest moment of peril in their history, committed themselves once and for all to the alien element of the sea, and put their faith in a man whose ambitions many had long profoundly dreaded." (Holland, Tom. “Persian Fire.”).

6 Frost, Frank J. “Themistocles’ Place in Athenian Politics.” p.109
7 Plut. Them. 4
8 Thuc. 1.90
9 Frost, p.109
10 Plut. Per. 9