

Conclusion

The manner in which the Greek states obtained and processed information was subject to a number of variables, of which the most important were era, perception of security, and political structure. Assessing information-gathering efforts before the fifth century (and indeed before the Peloponnesian War) is quite difficult, due to a scarcity of relevant contemporary material. Later periods may not be well documented but they are better documented. Therefore, the relative paucity of examples of information gathering in earlier periods may be caused by the distribution of source material.¹ Nevertheless, many of the examples attributed to the earlier period are derived from late authors, such as Plutarch and Pausanias, and hence may be anachronistic. There are indications that between the eighth century and the middle of the fourth, an awareness of the importance of information gathering increased, along with an interest in its application, which reached its height at the hands of such men as Xenophon, Aeneas Tacticus, and Alexander. There was a corresponding tendency for information-gathering processes to become more systematic over time, but this was a function of political development rather than chronological evolution.

Patterns of Information Flow and Processing

Perception of security had considerable influence on the vigor with which the Greeks pursued their information-gathering needs, and it had some impact on the relative importance of various channels. In general, the more secure a state felt, the less attention it paid to information gathering; hence the flow structure (such as it was) became dominated by rela-

1. Fewer *types* of agents and sources are attested in Homer than, e.g., in Thucydides, but this may reflect difference in genre as much as difference in practice, except for the absence of mercenaries and *proxenoi* (who are first attested in the sixth and late seventh centuries, respectively).

tively passive collection (e.g., listening to tales of news from abroad told by merchants), while active efforts (e.g., spies) were neglected. This could be true even in time of war, when one would expect the belligerents to have every interest in being alert—a case in point is the Athenian failure to anticipate, or even guard against, Spartan naval threats to the Piraeus in the Peloponnesian and Corinthian Wars. The contexts of war and peace were, however, marked by somewhat different characteristics. Some channels and sources (especially military ones—e.g., reconnaissance agents and captives) might be inactive in times of peace, while others (e.g., envoys, merchants) would be more important. In wartime, these roles would shift (e.g., envoys would be less common and no longer able to operate without heralds, while reconnaissance agents would come into play). Exceptions naturally occurred, especially in that uncomfortable gray area where war was not yet violent but peace was hardly tranquil.

With regard to foreign affairs, there was no real conceptual distinction between military and political intelligence—indeed, the latter seems to have been encompassed by the former. It is certainly true that there were mechanical differences involved in gathering and processing types of information that we might today distinguish as political or military. These were reflected in the different types of agents and sources employed and to some extent, in military contexts, in a tendency toward centralized command and delegation of the supervision of agents. In states in which there existed a division of political and military authority—fourth-century Athens, for instance—mechanical differences could combine with different fields of expertise and different ambitions to create some sort of practical disjunction. But again there is little evidence for a contemporary conceptual distinction between the political and military spheres.² Further, when political and military power were in the hands of a single individual, any distinction between the two types of intelligence was not terribly meaningful. There was a fair bit of overlap, even when the combination of powers was far from complete or not formally recognized, as in the cases of Pericles in the mid-fifth century and Agesilaus in the early fourth.

Perceptions of domestic insecurity stemmed principally from fear of potential fifth columns within a state's populace or of revolts of a subject population. As the numbers of exiles increased in the late fifth and fourth centuries, these fears were expanded to encompass plots originating out-

2. Cf. Plut. *Phocion* 7.3.2.

side the walls as well as those within. The *types* of mechanisms employed to deal with such threats were dictated more by constitutional structure than by circumstance. In brief, democracies relied on legislation backed by private activity on the part of informers and sycophants, together with some oversight bodies. These existed as early as the prototypical democracy of Solon in the sixth century. An ad hoc arrangement for fielding covert agents in democratic Argos may have other unrecorded parallels. Measures taken by oligarchies are less well attested but seem to be similar to those of democracies. However one might classify the government of Sparta, it is fairly certain that it featured a force dedicated to internal security, augmented by informers and ad hoc engagements of covert agents. Some monarchies and many tyrannies also boasted organized networks operating covertly among the populace. No such organizations are attested before Hiero's in the early fifth century, but it is possible that the sixth-century tyrants had similar arrangements.³

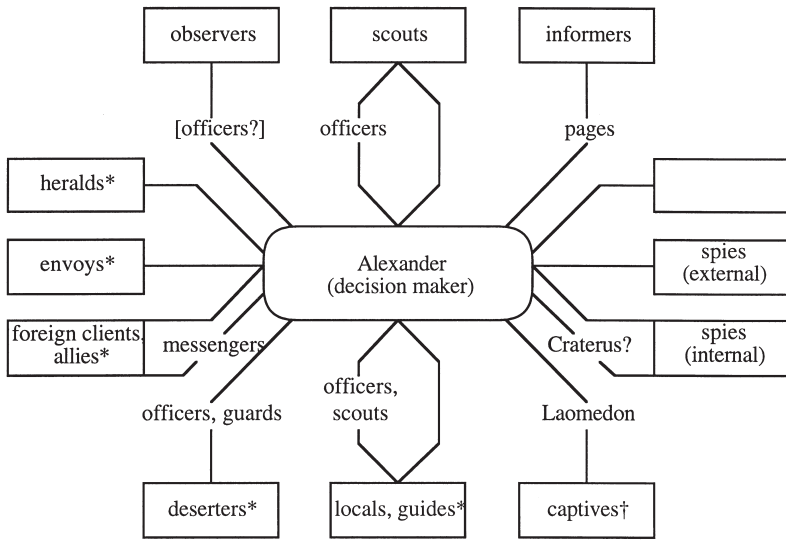
More generally, there was a clear difference in the way different forms of government handled and evaluated information. The distinction between oligarchy and democracy here (as elsewhere) was somewhat blurred—the principal factor was whether authority rested in the hands of one man (herein called a “centralized command”; see fig. 1), or in those of more than one (herein called a “diffused command”; see fig. 2).

A centralized command was typified by a spiderlike array of information channels, all leading, sometimes through various intermediaries, to a central authority.⁴ This arrangement held a number of advantages over diffused commands, since the same individual possessed both a complete intelligence picture and an ability to act unilaterally on it.⁵ Thus those

3. I am not arguing that these organizations were characteristic of *all* tyrannies. Pisistratus, e.g., seems to have survived without one (although he might not have been thrown out of Athens twice if he had possessed adequate information-gathering resources).

4. Intermediaries were more common between the decision maker and those agents that gathered tactical information. In general these intermediaries (other than messengers) were found more often in later periods than earlier. Specialized subordinate officers with intelligence duties, such as Democrates son of Temnus (in effect, a reconnaissance *skoparkhos* of the Ten Thousand) and Laomedon (Alexander's officer in charge of captives), appeared occasionally from the late fifth century onward. Delegation of authority to leaders of surveillance detachments seems to have been more or less constant over time. If anything, Greeks of later periods seem to have been more haphazard in this respect than the Mycenaean.

5. With incidental variations, charts similar to that in fig. 1 might be constructed depicting the information flow to Dionysius the Elder (derived principally from Diodorus Siculus, supplemented by Aristotle and Plutarch), the Lacedaemonian “general staff” centered on a king on campaign (Hdt. 6.57; Xen. *Lac. Pol.* 13.1, 3, 7; cf. Thuc. 5.66.3–4; Pritchett



* In some circumstances interpreters acted as mediums between the imparter and recipient of information.

† Laomedon spoke Persian as well as Greek (Macedonian); captives unable to speak these languages would have to be questioned through interpreters.

Fig. 1. Information flow to a centralized command: Alexander the Great (in the context of a campaign—i.e., normally, 336–323). (Derived principally from Arrian and Quintus Curtius, with additions from Diodorus Siculus and Plutarch.)

authorities possessing centralized information flows enjoyed the ability to respond to intelligence quickly (in a few cases, perhaps, too quickly).⁶ In general, centralized commands tended to be constant over relatively long periods, which enabled individuals to acquire and improve arrangements for information flow. Their efficacy was, naturally enough, determined by the abilities and capabilities of the commander.

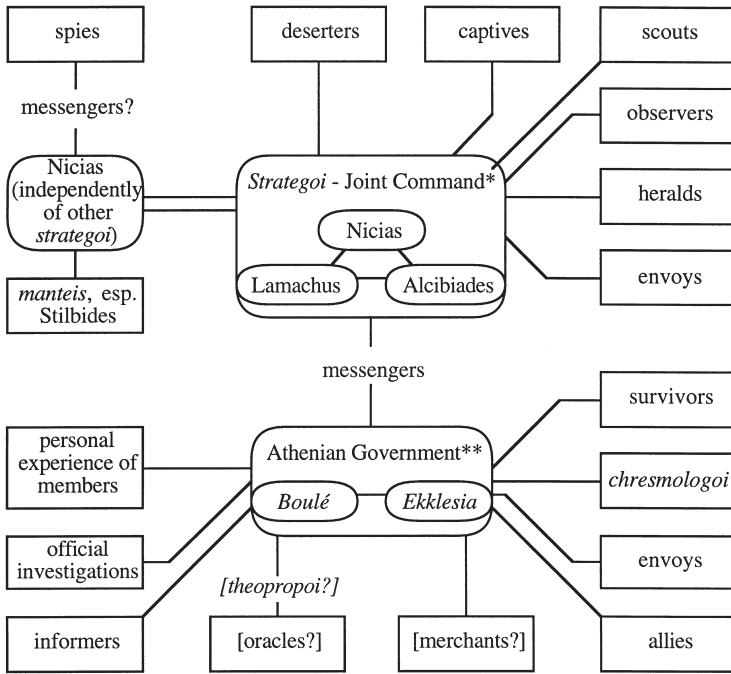
2.36–38), Xenophon’s network centered on a *hipparkhos* (Xen. *Cav. Com.* passim), his program for Cyrus’ model command (Xen. *Cyr.* 6.1–4), and Aeneas Tacticus’ system centered about the commander of besieged forces (Aen. *Tact.* 22.2–3). Earlier tyrants and monarchs, for whom evidence is scant, seem likely to fit the same pattern.

6. Isoc. III (*Nicoles*) 22: monarchies have every advantage in war, including the ability to forestall and mislead their enemies. Cf. Demosth. XVIII (*On the crown*) 235.5 (of Philip II); Plut. *Mor.* 782c (of Dionysius I).

In diffused commands, there existed a separation between spheres or levels of authority, with lines of communication between them.⁷ One might be tempted to draw a distinction between political and military authorities, but again the differentiation between strategic and tactical intelligence (with operational intelligence lying in a hazy middle ground) more accurately reflects ancient practice. “Political” authorities, such as the Athenian *ekklesia*, made decisions on the conduct of war at the strategic and operational levels (deciding, for example, the size of the expeditionary force sent by the Athenians to Sicily in 415). They did not normally, however, directly interfere with tactical decisions in the military sphere. “Military” leaders might make political decisions at tactical levels (e.g., Agesilaus declined to grant an audience to Theban envoys before he received news of the disaster that befell the Spartans at Lechaem). Few military leaders, however, were authorized to make strategic commitments on behalf of their states. Not unnaturally, authority in the operational and tactical realms tended to be subordinated to their strategic counterpart, and thus military commanders were obliged to keep their states informed through dispatches or other arrangements. In many cases, more than one commander led forces at any one time, either on separate or on joint enterprises—such as the command of the Athenian expedition to Sicily, which was (initially) split between Nicias, Alcibiades, and Lamachus. Hence there was a need for information flow along levels as well as across them.

An all-too-common problem with diffused commands was a lack of two essential ingredients: clear delineation of authority and excellent communication between decision makers. Imperfect arrangements varied in their impact on the ability of decision makers to act effectively on intelligence. In some cases, the same quantity or quality of intelligence was not available to each party—in the aforementioned example of the Athenian expedition sent to Sicily in 415, the Athenian *stratego*i in Sicily possessed tactical and operational intelligence to a far greater degree than did the Athenians at home, while the latter might have been in better touch with the overall strategic situation. The time lag for communication between Athens and Sicily could only have hampered effective

7. Structures similar to that in fig. 2 can be found particularly (but not only) in other democracies, which range from the chaotic “allied” command during the Persian Wars (480/79) to more hierarchical and ordered examples, such as Astyochus’ command in the Aegean early in the late fifth century.



* The *strategoi* were involved as advisors and officials in the decisions of the *ekklesia* before departure; henceforth they contributed information and advice through dispatches but were separated by distance from the decision-making arena.

**The *ekklesia* and *boule* in turn represented a diffusion of authority and intelligence (not only in relation to each other, but also regarding their own compositions), which I have not attempted to depict or describe here. As noted in the text, the relationship between political structure and information flow awaits extensive study.

Fig. 2. Information flow into a diffused command: the Athenians and the Sicilian Expedition (415–413). (Based principally on Thucydides and Plutarch.)

action, since the decision makers on either side of the Ionian Sea would be reacting to messages whose relevance was likely to have been overtaken by subsequent events. Even without time lag, communication could be a problem. Returning again to the example of Nicias in Sicily, one can see that both the disaster at Epipolae and the failure to order a timely evacuation were caused by Nicias’ failure to share with his fellow

commanders the extent and nature of the intelligence he had acquired from his personal network.⁸ This communication failure was caused by personal interest that, combined with other forms of partisanship, hindered, far more often than aided, effective application of intelligence.⁹ Differences in perspectives might have been supposed to enhance evaluation and decision making, but in practice they commonly resulted in conflict or unhappy compromises.

A Question of Application

Figures 1 and 2 illustrate channels through which information could and did flow to decision makers, but they describe flows that were aggregates over extended periods. At specific points in time, relatively fewer channels would be flowing simultaneously. Frequently, circumstance dictated which agents and sources would be available, and hence scholars have been led to believe that the Greeks applied themselves to information gathering and intelligence in an ad hoc manner.¹⁰ While applicable in some instances, the picture this model presents does not do justice to actual practice.

The problem might be best explained in terms of an analogy to methods of irrigation. A farmer might, with much labor and expense, contrive a permanent irrigation system from a water source to all his fields. Although requiring maintenance, the system would serve continuously. Alternatively, he might rig a pipeline from the water source to a point in his fields that he sees needs water, irrigate it, then dismantle or move the pipes when the job is done. He might merely divert natural channels here and there and so achieve a degree of success dependent on terrain. Or he might devote his efforts to other problems and hope that water will somehow wend its way to where it is needed.

8. Nicias spoke against the night attack on Epipolae, since his agents led him to believe that the best policy for the Athenians was to wait, because the Syracusans were exhausted by the war and disgruntled with Gylippus. Due to his concern for the security of his sources, he was vague in communicating this intelligence to his colleagues, who attributed his statements to cowardice. They went ahead with the attack against his will and met with disaster (Plut. *Nicias* 21). Thucydides (7.43.1) passed over this dispute, simply noting that Demosthenes persuaded Nicias.

9. An exception might be the contrivances of Themistocles at Salamis.

10. Cf. Adcock and Mosley 174; Gerolymatos, *Espionage*, 4, 15; Starr 28. There are only two notable exceptions: (1) the *proxenos-episkopos* relationship of the Athenian Empire, discussed by Meiggs (*Athenian Empire*), Gerolymatos (*Espionage*), and Balcer ("Athenian Episkopos"); and (2) Alexander's intelligence system, discussed by Engels.

Similarly, an authority might establish permanent and coherent arrangements to ensure that information flow was reliable and timely. Such a practice was found most often among tyrants and fairly frequently among monarchs and military commanders on campaign. In such cases, the demand for information was constant, so that real threats might be countered. Thus the requisite expenditure could be justified. In some tactical applications, such as coherent and elaborate networks of watchers, democracies and oligarchies had recourse to such measures as often as did other more centralized forms of government. With the possible exception of watchers, the incidence of such arrangements increased over time.

The second method, that of employing agents and sources as need arose, was fairly common, particularly with “political” agents, such as envoys and heralds, and in most cases with spies recruited from one’s own populace for specific missions in foreign territory. It required some sense of direction and effort and sometimes featured a degree of specialization on the part of the agents involved. It remained in practice throughout the period in question.

The third and fourth methods were forms of adaptation to opportunity commonly practiced in all eras. Their difference was more one of aspect than one of essence, since informers, deserters, and to some extent captives naturally fell into both categories. However, those individuals and states who saw fit to encourage informers and deserters, and to make efforts to procure captives for questioning, can be differentiated from those who did not. The former would belong to the third category; the latter would belong to the fourth, since little effort was required on the part of the recipient of the news, aside from making oneself available and spending the time necessary to listen to a report.

These four methods were naturally used in conjunction with each other. And one would expect a decision maker who made extensive arrangements for receiving information not to overlook that which presented itself as a gift on his doorstep (although this could happen).

Efficacy

It is time to face the fundamental question—how well did all this work? Generally speaking, the more energy an individual or state put into obtaining, communicating, and evaluating information, the better the result was. Good intelligence, handled skillfully, enabled people and

states to maximize military and political efforts, on all levels. In some instances good intelligence prevented action that would probably have led to failure. In some cases it provided opportunity for effective action. It by no means guaranteed success in any endeavor, even as it does not today. In some situations excellent intelligence was of no use, since its possessor lacked the means to act on an opportunity or to prevent a disaster. Indecision or undue expenditure of time on evaluation also wasted opportunities.

Conversely, neglect of information gathering or intelligence did not necessitate disaster, but it courted it. Given a strong enough position, the Greeks could and did succeed with very poor intelligence. Poor evaluation of reports might merely result in wasted effort, but it could also mean defeat and death. One scorned the use of information-gathering agents at one's own peril, and one neglected their reports at great risk.

For the most part, the Greeks heeded the need for information and intelligence on basic levels throughout the classical period. Although there are a number of harebrained schemes recorded in our sources, one rarely finds instances when hares initiated aggression against lions. No consistently successful military commander failed to heed the importance of intelligence, and while some great statesmen, like Pericles, put their bets on the wrong horse, their policies were effective insofar as they were based not only on imagination but on a practical awareness and evaluation of reality.