

Studying the Athenian empire has always been a bit of a paradox—“a tiny empire surrounded by a vast but narrow rampart of scholarship” (Morris 2005, 1). But in spite of all this scholarly attention, the Athenian empire is still under-conceptualized. Historians generally take it for granted that the Athenians had an empire in the fifth century and then irrevocably lost it in the fourth, but few actually find it necessary to define what empire is and how imperial rule differs from other forms of political and economic domination (Ma 230). One of the few exceptions is Morris’ recent reappraisal, which, borrowing concepts and theoretical lenses derived from political science and sociology, delivers a startling conclusion: Athens’ expansion in the fifth century followed the trajectory not of empire building, but rather of “state formation” (Morris 2009). Be that as it may, Morris’ study raises the bar by bringing some much needed analytic rigor to the study of the Athenian empire. In this paper, I too will draw on a representative body of scholarship from the social sciences to demonstrate that the Athenians reestablished their empire in the fourth century, which was largely (but not exclusively) predicated upon indirect forms of rule, especially those relying on the control of economic resources.

Empire can be defined as a political system in which one state controls or dominates other societies, both politically and economically, so that their effective sovereignty is infringed (Doyle 45; Motyl 118-19). As such, it lends itself well to structural analysis, the most successful and well known of which has been from the perspective of center and periphery (Shils). According to this model, imperial structure resembles an incomplete wheel with a hub (center) and spokes extending to the edge (periphery) but without a rim, in which the center controls the periphery (e.g., by setting foreign and domestic policy agendas, appointing local ruling elites, passing laws, monopolizing trade, etc.), while the periphery exerts no such control over the center (Galtung 89; Motyl 121). The structure is said to be rimless because significant interactions among peripheral states are missing or monopolized by the center. In fact, the “rimlessness” of the periphery is what differentiates empire from other forms of political rule (e.g., hegemony and the nation state).

In light of this theoretical discussion, I will argue specifically that the Athenians dominated the Aegean periphery by diminishing and in some cases even eliminating important political and economic interactions between states. My study will focus on Athenian relations with five poleis: Delos, Clazomenae, Ceos, Histiaea, and Cos. In appraising Athens’ foreign policy, much of the scholarship (e.g., Griffith, Cargill, and Harding) has focused strictly on Athens’ formal allied relationships with members of the Second Athenian League, a necessary but not sufficient litmus test (I submit) for determining the nature of Athens’ *archē*. By contrast, I will not only examine Athens’ interactions with non-allied states of the periphery (Delos, Clazomenae, and Cos), but also consider other forms of imperial domination, not just those relying on direct political control. A variety of sources (literary and inscriptional) attest to a change in the imperial behavior of the Athenians, whereby they increasingly came to rely on their sea power to dominate the periphery in more indirect ways, particularly by controlling resource flows and trade through taxes and other extortionate measures. I hereby aim to provide a more nuanced view of Athenian foreign policy in the fourth century.