The focus of my summer research has been investigating how rowing a trireme influenced the political empowerment of Ancient Athens’ thetes. This class of poor, landless citizens provided the manpower to build Athens’ naval empire. Nevertheless, there is little in the historical record that speaks directly to the experiences of these men. Throughout my research, I have sought to put together what does remain to create a more comprehensive image of the thetic class and their role in Athenian politics.

I began by researching the workings of the Athenian Navy itself. I learned about their triumphs and blunders from the Battle of Salamis in 481 B.C. to their defeat at the hands of the Macedonians in 322 B.C. Starting with Themistocles’ decree to build a hundred new ships in 483 B.C., I then tracked the political maneuverings and logistical challenges of turning a military predominantly geared towards hoplite warfare into the dominant sea power of the Aegean.

During this era known as the Greek Classical period, the Athenian’s battleship of choice was the trireme. While scholars still disagree over its design, the renowned Greek naval scholar, J.S. Morrison, put his popular trireme design of three banks of oars to the test with the building of the ancient trireme replica, Olympias. Morrison’s team exhaustively documented the sea trials of the galley, proving the plausibility of his hypothesis and giving insight into the experience of fifth century B.C. oarsman.

Using this data, I investigated whether it was reasonable, from a technical perspective, for Plutarch to suggest that the Athenian fleet trained eight months a year to keep the crews fit and disciplined for battle.1 As a starting point, I explored the techniques and results of Olympias to determine if indeed it was possible for the Athenians to meet the speeds suggested in the ancient sources. Using archaeological and literary evidence in addition to my own personal experience as a rower, I broke down the movements of the stroke on a trireme. This analysis I used to frame the debate as to whether or not the ancient trireme’s stroke incorporated a leg drive. While Plutarch’s assertion is likely hyperbolic, all of this evidence suggests the high degree of precision required of the thetes rowing a trireme.

The logistics of organizing the fleet coupled with the realities of serving on a trireme contextualized the political realities of Athens’ transition into a radical democracy. The landless poor’s climb to political primacy, however, did not come without detractors, who believed the thetes were corrupting the city. Surely, intellectuals, such as the Old Oligarch, were sore about surrendering some of their own influence to the thetes, but their commentary proved useful in identifying the scope of the thetic class’ burgeoning influence in Athenian politics.

In closing, I thank the Surdna Foundation for giving me this research opportunity. Heading into this summer, my project was simply an idea. This has given me the time to indulge my academic interest with the guidance of my advisor. Now that idea has evolved into a roadmap for an independent study this fall and, hopefully, an honors thesis in the spring of 2012. Having spent the summer gathering resources and notes, I am now prepared to start writing my thesis, rather than trying to brainstorm ideas and begin writing in the midst of the academic term. Because of this fellowship, the challenge of completing a humanities thesis, which once seemed daunting, has become an enjoyable, manageable process.

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1 Plutarch, Pericles, 11.4.