

TIMBER, NAVAL POWER, AND ASYMMETRIC DEPENDENCE: ATHENS AND MACEDON

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Abstract: The article contends that Athenian reliance on Macedonian timber limited the diplomatic and military room for manoeuvre available to both states between c. 510 and 450 BC. Attica lacked an adequate supply of shipbuilding timber, whereas Macedon controlled substantial forest resources, inland transport routes, and key points of access to the northern Aegean. Their exchange gave rise to an unequal relationship: both sides derived benefit, but Athens stood to lose more from any disruption, particularly once confidence in secure and continuing access began to erode.

Keywords: Athens; Macedon; timber; naval power; resource dependence; northern Aegean; Persian Wars; interstate relations

1. This article addresses a straightforward question, albeit one that is often obscured by the manner in which the subject is typically presented: to what extent did Athens' reliance on Macedonian timber constrain the diplomatic and military options available to both Athens and Macedon during the late sixth and early fifth centuries BCE? The trade in timber for shipbuilding tied the two states together for a long time. Yet this connection never evolved into trust. Rather, it coexisted with suspicion, shifting allegiances, and eventual hostility.

The main chronological framework covers the period from around 510 to 450 BCE, with brief references to the 430s where these serve to strengthen the argument¹. Timber is at the heart of this history, because Athenian naval expansion required a sustained external supply of shipbuilding material, which Attica could not provide in sufficient quantities. By contrast, Macedon held the decisive leverage over the forest resources and the routes by which they reached the northern Aegean. This disparity did not dictate policy in a straightforward

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¹ The starting point is practical; this period saw both Macedon and Athens operating within the Persian imperial sphere, making regular contact between them historically plausible, rather than merely conceivable in retrospect. The mid-fifth century is a sensible endpoint, since by then Athens had come to rely on a permanent naval system, while Macedon had become a more substantial northern kingdom. The references to the 430s are included in order to throw earlier tendencies into clearer relief.

manner, however, as governments still had room to manoeuvre, and they did so. However, the scope for manoeuvre was more limited than diplomatic narratives usually imply. Accounts that treat relations between Macedon and Athens as a series of embassies and alliances, detached from their resource base, overlook a fundamental aspect of Athenian sea power.

Although modern scholarship has done much to clarify leadership, diplomacy and cultural positioning, the economic dimension is still often overlooked. It is easy to see why. The evidence is sparse and inconsistent, mostly in the form of narratives, and does not lend itself to elegant quantitative claims, so the imbalance remains². Although timber appears frequently enough in the literature, it is usually used for scene-setting rather than explanation. Here, however, we shall try to treat timber supply as one of the conditions that made political history possible in the first place. First, we will consider the physical and logistical context of timber exchange, as geography and transport were as important as ownership; we will then situate Macedon and Athens within the broader Persian and Aegean political landscape; a third stage will introduce stricter terminology for dependency, asymmetry and expectation;³ finally we will test this framework against the actual sequence of events: cooperation, mistrust, and delayed escalation⁴.

² The principal narrative sources for this period are Herodotus, above all Books IV and V, where he describes the Scythian campaign and the first operations of the Persian army in Europe; Thucydides, especially the opening two books, which follow the growth of Athenian power towards supremacy in the Aegean; and Plutarch, in the Lives of the men concerned, most notably Cimon and Pericles.

³ Such an approach is often criticised as controversial, or, in a milder version, as excessively bold. Economists, in brief, object that such categories as war and peace, co-operation and conflict, are too abstract to be accommodated within the sort of cost-benefit analysis on which their method rests. Historians, for their part, are inclined to admit the exercise only as an experiment, pointing out that for the ancient economy we possess neither fully elaborated nor aggregate data in any sphere, and that the enquiry may therefore end in false conclusions. Even so, the aims of the present study lie elsewhere. What concerns us is not the measurable detail of economic regularities in antiquity, but the degree to which economic developments bore upon the foreign policy of Macedon or Athens; or, to put the matter more exactly, the degree to which the *homines politici* of the time acted and thought as *homines oeconomici* as well. Be that as it may, an economic interpretation has already been advanced in recent scholarship; see, for example, Floris Van den Eijnde, “The ‘First Athenian Empire’? Athenian Overseas Interests in the Archaic Period,” in *Empires of the Sea: Maritime Power Networks in Global History*, eds. Rolf Strootman, Floris van den Eijnde, and Roy van Wijk (Leiden: Brill, 2020), 52–80.

⁴ The observations offered in this section draw their initial impetus from the findings set out in the studies of S. G. Levy, “Psychology and the Study of Inter-Group Conflict,” *Peace Economics, Peace Science and Public Policy* 7, no. 2 (2001): 88–121; R. Reuveny, “The Trade and Conflict Debate: A Survey of Theory, Evidence and Future Research,” *Peace Economics, Peace Science and Public Policy* 6, no. 1 (2000): 23–49; S. W. Polachek, “Conflict and Trade: An Economics Approach to Political International Interactions,” in *Economics of Arms Reduction and the Peace*, eds. W. Isard and C. H. Anderton

The evidence imposes real limits, and it is futile to pretend otherwise. No source enables us to fully reconstruct timber volumes, prices, or contracting arrangements, nor does any fifth-century author offer anything like a formal theory of strategic dependence. A narrower claim is sufficient. The relationship between Macedon and Athens becomes clearer once timber dependence is considered as part of political history, rather than background scenery.

2. Throughout this period, relations between Macedon and Athens were shaped by one physical fact: the material most necessary for Athenian naval power lay outside Attica. Timber was essential for shipbuilding, repairs and routine maintenance; once Athens embarked on sustained naval activity, the supply of timber ceased to be an ordinary commercial matter⁵.

Macedon occupied a favourable position within the resource geography of the northern Aegean. Forested areas in Pieria, the lower Axios region and the surrounding countryside supplied timber for ships and related materials⁶. Unfortunately, the sources do not provide extraction figures or annual output, and they remain frustratingly silent on the very points where precision is most needed. Nevertheless, one point is clear: Macedonian rulers controlled access to substantial timber-bearing regions at a time when demand in the Aegean was rising.

Macedonian forests were politically valuable due to their geographical location. Wood had to be transported from the interior to the coast, and this depended on river corridors, local routes and maritime approaches⁷. Macedonian authority over these corridors was part of the resource itself: the Argead rulers could regulate access, tax movement and convert environmental advantage into political leverage, all the while adapting to stronger neighbours and Persian pressure. Athens faced a different strategic geography: the city-state could build ships, train crews, and maintain naval operations with remarkable

(Amsterdam: North-Holland, 1992), 89-120; Wayne Nafziger and Juha Auvinen, "Economic Development, Inequality, and Humanitarian Emergencies," Kansas State University (October 2001); and Dale C. Copeland, *Economic Interdependence and War* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015).

⁵ On this point one would do well to consult Russell Meiggs, *Trees and Timber in the Ancient Mediterranean World* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982). Though now somewhat dated, it remains the fullest study of timber in the ancient Mediterranean and still provides the standard point of departure for any argument about the timber needs of fleets, the geography of supply, and the limits imposed by transport.

⁶ Moreover, Theophrastus commends the firs and pines of Macedonia as superior to all others for shipbuilding and for construction; see, for example, *Historia Plantarum* 1.9.2; 4.5.5; 5.2.1; 7.1-3.

⁷ 'Control' here should be understood in a practical and political, rather than a fully administrative, sense. Argead authority was neither uniform nor uncontested across all timber-bearing areas; yet the kings could exercise sufficient leverage over the main corridors, coastal nodes, and conditions of transit to make access to timber a matter of policy, negotiation, and constraint.

efficiency, but Attica could not supply the quantity of timber required for long-term fleet maintenance. Local wood existed, but was insufficient; therefore, Athenian naval power rested on external supply chains from the outset⁸.

This dependence grew sharper as the Athenians' naval commitments increased⁹. Themistocles' fleet-building programme before the Battle of Salamis in 480 BC, the rebuilding effort that followed, and the naval demands of the 460s each increased the need for reliable ship timber. Triremes required the constant replacement and repair of their hulls, masts, yards, fittings and oars. It is not possible to determine exact quantities, and no figure should be invented to create the impression of certainty; nevertheless, the scale of Athenian operations makes one thing clear – decades of fleet activity presupposed a steady flow of wood.

The northern routes and coastal nodes were therefore as important as the forests themselves. Eion, at the mouth of the Strymon, was one such node, linking inland resources to maritime circulation¹⁰. Places where river systems met sea routes were strategically important because they organised the movement of timber and other materials. The procurement mechanisms remain obscure: contracts, prices, shipping arrangements and payment structures are largely absent from the surviving record. However, the likely forms of access are fairly straightforward – direct dealings with Macedonian authorities, transactions through coastal intermediaries, and arrangements embedded within wider diplomatic relations. In early Greek interstate practice, these forms could overlap, as one would expect.

The asymmetry was already evident at the logistical level¹¹. Macedon controlled a vital resource and the channels through which it reached the coast. Athens needed these channels to remain open, but had only limited control

⁸ Cf. Meiggs, *Trees and Timber*, especially the section “Athenian Timber Supplies”, 188–217. For the broader framework of Macedonian royal control, see Selene Psoma, “Athenian Owls and the Royal Macedonian Monopoly on Timber,” *Mediterranean Historical Review* 30, no. 1 (2015): 1–18, which treats royal monopoly over timber as an analytical category and relates it to Athenian naval requirements and wider patterns of exchange. That timber could function as a strategic commodity with considerable leverage is further shown by Robyn J. Veal, “The Politics and Economics of Ancient Forests: Timber and Fuel as Levers of Greco-Roman Control,” in *Économie et inégalité: Ressources, échanges et pouvoir dans l'Antiquité classique*, ed. Sitta von Reden (Geneva: Fondation Hardt, 2017), 317–68.

⁹ Barry O'Halloran, *The Political Economy of Classical Athens: A Naval Perspective*, Mnemosyne Supplements 425 (Leiden: Brill, 2018), shows how naval demands were bound up with the wider political economy.

¹⁰ Amphipolis belongs to a later phase, but illustrates the same logic very well.

¹¹ On the scale of fleets and the practical realities of their maintenance, see J. S. Morrison, John F. Coates, and N. B. Rankov, *The Athenian Trireme: The History and Reconstruction of an Ancient Greek Warship* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000). That naval commitments generated recurrent material and financial demands is shown by Vincent Gabrielsen, *Financing the Athenian Fleet: Public Taxation and Social Relations* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994).

over them. This exchange thus produced revenue and bargaining power for Macedon, while ensuring naval continuity for Athens¹².

3. The Persian expansion into Europe fashioned the conditions for a stronger economic contact between Macedon and Athens. Whatever one makes of the exact legal form or chronology,¹³ Macedon's accommodation with Persia constrained Argead policy at every turn. Macedonian rulers had to consider imperial interests, troop presence and the cost of resistance; survival and prudence were as important as initiative, often more so in practice. Athens pursued a different course. In the late sixth century, Athenian contacts with Persian authorities reflected vulnerability and a support search, but this phase was short-lived¹⁴. By the early fifth century and particularly following the Ionian Revolt and the Persian Wars, Athens was openly opposed to Persian power. Thus, while trade between Macedon and Athens could continue under these conditions, the political relationship was unstable, as the two states approached Persia differently.

Persian predominance also altered the terms of local cooperation over time. Imperial hegemony could facilitate contact among subordinate or neighbouring powers one moment, and make mixed alignments markedly more expensive the next. Macedon treated Persia as an immediate security threat. Athens, on the other hand, made Persia a central military enemy and a defining political reference point. This divergence deepened bilateral mistrust without bringing trade to an end. Macedon's position within this system was particularly

¹² Cf. Konstantinos Karathanasis, "A Game of Timber Monopoly: Atheno-Macedonian Relations on the Eve of the Peloponnesian War," *Hesperia* 88, no. 4 (2019): 707–26. Although focused on 432 BC, it remains the most prominent and closely argued recent study linking Macedonian control of timber to Athenian grand strategy, explicitly relating political dynamics, resource leverage, and naval vulnerability.

¹³ The account of the first contact between Persia and Macedon, now for the most part rejected as unhistorical, is given by Herodotus, 5.17–21. For discussion, see N. G. L. Hammond and G. T. Griffith, *A History of Macedonia*, vol. 2, 550–336 B.C. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979), 99; E. N. Borza, *In the Shadow of Olympus: The Emergence of Macedon* (NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990), 102; R. M. Errington, *A History of Macedonia* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 9; "Alexander the Philhellene and Persia," in *Ancient Macedonian Studies in Honor of Charles F. Edson*, ed. H. J. Dell (Thessaloniki: Institute for Balkan Studies, 1981), 142; and E. Badian, "Herodotus on Alexander I of Macedon: A Study in Some Subtle Silences," in *Greek Historiography*, ed. Simon Hornblower (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), 107–130; for a caution against over-simple assumptions about satrapal structures, cf. Vojislav Sarakinski, "The Fallacy of the European Satrapy," *Živa Antika* 60 (2010): 77–108. For a modern synthesis of Macedonia's entanglement with Achaemenid power, see Marek Olbrycht, "Macedonia and Persia," in *A Companion to Ancient Macedonia*, eds. Joseph Roisman and Ian Worthington (Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 342–69.

¹⁴ Herodotus, 5.73, refers to the Athenian embassy to the satrap Artaphernes, though he does not tell us what came of the negotiations. For discussion, see Badian, "Herodotus on Alexander I of Macedon," 125.

vulnerable. The kingdom of the late sixth and early fifth centuries was not the expansionist monarchy of Philip II that came later, and it would be a mistake to view it in that light¹⁵. The Argead rulers lacked the military and institutional capacity for broad, sustained power projection, and internal consolidation remained incomplete. Macedon's importance during this period lay in survival, adaptation and the selective use of local advantages. The most significant of these advantages was control of timber-rich regions and export routes. Even a kingdom with limited military reach could matter greatly to stronger states if it controlled something they required; Macedonian rulers could use the timber supply to secure revenue, maintain diplomatic relevance and gain room to manoeuvre among competing powers. This was not grand strategy in the modern sense, but merely practical – and often effective – politics. The same logic explains Macedonian flexibility: a policy based on supply and positioning required it. From an Athenian perspective, Macedonian conduct could therefore seem selective, opaque, or opportunistic, and one can hardly blame the Athenians for interpreting it that way. Their concern was rational enough: a supplier whose cooperation was valuable for fleet maintenance, but whose allegiances could change under pressure, created persistent insecurity, even without open confrontation.

Meanwhile, Athens entered the fifth century as an increasingly naval state. Ships extended Athenian power across the Aegean and the eastern Mediterranean, facilitating communication over long distances and enabling oversight of allied communities. In that context, timber from the north was directly tied to the functioning of Athenian power¹⁶. The post-war alliance system increased the pressure. Once Athens had taken control of the Delian League, fleet readiness became essential for collecting tribute, launching anti-defection campaigns, controlling routes, and deterring attacks. Disruption to the timber supply would have had far-reaching consequences beyond the shipyards, putting a strain on the machinery of alliance management itself. Athenian policy also evolved amid multiple simultaneous commitments: the islands, the Ionian and Anatolian theatres, maintaining the balance in the Peloponnese, and the northern Aegean. Athens could recognise the strategic value of northern timber yet still delay direct action because other fronts demanded attention, manpower and political capital. This point is significant, as it helps to explain the delays without denying intention.

¹⁵ For a recent and detailed treatment, see Christos Giamakis, *Identity, Power and Group Formation in Archaic Macedonia (600–400 BC)* (Leiden: Sidestone Press, 2024); cf. Olbrycht, “Macedonia and Persia.”

¹⁶ That is to say, control of the vital trade routes by which timber and grain were supplied; supervision of the economic and political activity of Athens' allies; preventive and defensive military intervention; the maintenance of the cleruchies; and, in the end, the exercise of the hegemonic role within the Delian league.

By the mid-fifth century, the structure was clear enough. Macedon held a position of considerable diplomatic flexibility and limited military projection, but was resource-rich; meanwhile, Athens commanded a large maritime system with considerable projection capacity, but was chronically exposed to supply disruption. Their relationship was sustained by exchange;¹⁷ however, it remained politically unstable because the wider Persian and Aegean order kept changing the terms on which that exchange could continue.

4. 'Interdependence' is too loose a term for this case,¹⁸ if it means little more than regular trade¹⁹. A more useful question is how disruption would be handled: who would pay the higher price if the exchange faltered, how quickly could alternatives be found, and would those alternatives be politically secure? For Athens, the relevant capability was naval continuity. Timber was essential for constructing and maintaining triremes, but Attica could not produce enough of it. The critical issue was substitutability. Although alternative sources existed in principle, access to them depended on routes, coastal nodes and political conditions that Athens could not confidently control. Therefore, a supply interruption would have imposed high adjustment costs and affected fleet readiness, alliance management and coercive reach simultaneously. Macedon faced a different situation. While the Athenian connection could sometimes be valuable, Macedon controlled the timber at the source, and Argead rulers could plausibly redirect the supply to other buyers in the northern Aegean or beyond. However, the evidence is too fragmentary to trace these alternatives in detail,

¹⁷ The manner in which Athens paid for timber remains obscure. Cf. M. I. Finley, *The Ancient Economy* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1973); and especially E. N. Borza, "Timber and Politics in the Ancient World: Macedon and the Greeks," *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 131, no. 1 (1987): 32–52.

¹⁸ The canonical formulation that operationalises the term is found in Robert Keohane and Joseph Nye, Jr., *Power and Interdependence* (Boston: Longman, 2012). I use "interdependence" as a convenient label, though the relationship was markedly unequal. What matters in the present case is Athens' dependence on Macedonian timber, the asymmetry of vulnerability between the two sides, the leverage that followed from Macedonian control of access, and Athenian expectations concerning the future security of supply. For Athens, the issue was naval timber, while for Macedon, relations with Athens formed one consideration among several. The strategic problem turned on unequal exposure and changing expectations of access. These terms are employed in a strictly analytical sense, as a convenience of description, and are not meant to import mechanically any formal model from modern economic or international-relations theory. The object is simply to distinguish, in a more exact way, between dependence, asymmetry, and leverage in the present case.

¹⁹ See Veal, "Politics and Economics of Ancient Forests," 324 *sqq.*; from the post-Finley landscape, cf. Alain Bresson, *The Making of the Ancient Greek Economy: Institutions, Markets, and Growth in the City-States*, expanded and updated English ed., (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016); and Edward M. Harris, David M. Lewis, and Mark Woolmer, eds. *The Ancient Greek Economy: Markets, Households and City-States* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016).

and one should not over-interpret the available information. Nevertheless, the structural contrast remains clear – Athens had more to lose from disruption than Macedon did²⁰.

This disparity is the core asymmetry. High trade volume can coexist with sharply unequal vulnerability, and this case illustrates this neatly. Even when both sides profited from the exchange, timber supply was of greater importance to Athens than to Macedon. The relationship mattered for different reasons: Athenian naval maintenance on the one hand, and Macedonian revenue and bargaining room on the other. This asymmetry created leverage, in the sense that Macedon did not require overt coercion to influence Athenian decisions; selective access, delayed cooperation or uncertainty about future supply were just as effective, because the costs of interruption were unevenly distributed. The strategic response from the Athenian side is equally obvious in principle – reduce exposure by improving substitutability or by tightening control over the nodes and routes linking forests to the sea. A limited comparison may clarify the framework. The configuration is a familiar one: a naval power depends on raw materials beyond its own territory, with access mediated by vulnerable routes and a small number of critical nodes. In such cases, the crucial question is rarely trade volume alone, but security of supply, substitutability, and control over access. The Athenian-Macedonian case fits this pattern with some clarity²¹: exchange could continue and even remain profitable to both sides, while strategic vulnerability nonetheless deepened.

This framework may clarify what was at stake, but it does not account for the timing. The missing factor is expectation. Policy was not driven by current trade levels, but by assessments of future availability. This point can be made without theoretical fuss. Athenian leaders could tolerate a vulnerable supply line so long as they expected continued access at an acceptable political cost. They could maintain trade with a distrusted partner if the alternatives were worse. They would revise their strategy when they anticipated tighter conditions, greater political pressure or less reliable access in the future. Macedonian rulers made similar calculations. Continued supply to Athens could preserve revenue and leverage; however, the same arrangement could become dangerous if Athenian demand grew so much that it encouraged encroachment upon the routes, ports or hinterlands necessary for timber exports. Macedonian

²⁰ This becomes all the clearer when one sets it against past experience, which had already shown plainly enough that the Macedonian kingdom acted, and was guided, by its own interests alone. A good illustration is the episode in the Greco-Persian Wars in which Alexander I, for all that he was a *euergetes* (benefactor) of the Athenians, came to Athens as the envoy of the Persian commander Mardonius and urged the Athenians to surrender. The episode is related by Herodotus 8.136–144.

²¹ Even so, the limits of scope and the force of recent critiques must be kept in view; cf. Massimo Morelli and Tommaso Sonno, “On Economic Interdependence and War,” *Journal of Economic Literature* 55, no. 3 (2017): 1084–97.

policy therefore had to balance profit against security, and this balance could shift quickly.

Persian pressure, Aegean alliances, and changes in local control altered these expectations on both sides. This is why chronology is so important here. Trade could continue while mistrust deepened and policy hardened long before a decisive break occurred. The key variable was confidence in future continuity, rather than the mere existence of present-day exchange.

5. The argument depends on the sequence of events. The question is at what point Athenian behaviour began to demonstrate a sustained interest in securing access to timber in the north, and how this interest interacted with other strategic concerns. In other words, we must observe how priorities change over time rather than extracting a single motive from a single episode.

In the earliest phase, the timber connection emerged within a Persian-dominated environment²². On the reconstruction followed here, Macedon's alignment with Persia belongs roughly to 510 BC, Athenian contact with Persian authorities to c. 508 BC, and a direct Macedonian–Athenian timber arrangement may be placed, more conjecturally, around 507 BC. The precise diplomatic mechanics remain uncertain and may be impossible to recover; for the present argument, the value of this reconstruction lies in the sequence it provisionally suggests. If this sequence is broadly right, it helps to explain the initial stability: Athens needed timber, and Macedon had good reasons to supply it – revenue, status, and a stronger external position. Even after the Ionian Revolt exacerbated Athenian animosity towards Persia, the timber trade could well have continued, since both parties still had reasons to maintain it and the costs of interruption remained high. In short, on this reading, what trade required was not trust, but a workable expectation that the arrangement would endure. This early phase is significant for another reason, as it suggests that exchange could survive political strain without much sentiment being attached to it. This is important, because later narratives often attribute more strategic confidence to periods that had very little of it.

After the Persian Wars, the same commodity took on a new strategic importance. Athenian naval power ceased to be a temporary measure and became the core of a wider maritime order. The fleet that enforced Athenian influence, protected routes, and upheld alliance discipline was now sustained by timber from the north. Therefore, the issue was no longer procurement in

²² For a fuller examination of this environment – and of the processes that produced it – from an Athenian perspective, see Van den Eijnde, “The ‘First Athenian Empire’?”; for an archaeology-based discussion of the limits of the evidence, *cf.* Laura Laslett, “The Making of Philip’s Macedonia: The Archaeology of the Macedonian Kingdom from the Persian Wars to the Fall of Perdiccas III (c. 510–359 BC)” (DPhil diss., University of Oxford, 2020).

isolation; Athenian leaders had to preserve an entire naval system. As commitments widened after 480 BCE, the cost of supply disruption increased accordingly. A break in the timber supply chain would have jeopardised military operations, tribute collection and control over allies because all three depended on ships.

Athenian activity in the Strymonic and northern Aegean regions must be understood in this context²³. Eion and the Thasian theatre cannot be attributed to a single motive, and timber security must not be separated from concerns about tribute, anti-Persian policy, route control or alliance discipline. However, timber security is firmly rooted in this cluster. Northern nodes continued to attract Athenian attention because they combined strategic geography with fleet maintenance.

A further point should be stated more exactly. Tribute, anti-Persian policy, and alliance management help to explain why Athens remained active in the northern Aegean; they do not, by themselves, explain the particular persistence of concern with access, routes, and coastal nodes through which timber reached the sea. The timber argument matters here because it clarifies the shape and continuity of Athenian attention. As naval commitments increased, northern positions acquired a significance that exceeded any single campaign or diplomatic episode, since they bore directly upon the security of a supply on which fleet readiness depended. In that sense, timber dependence accompanies the chronology and helps to explain why the same northern problem repeatedly returned under changing political conditions.

The chronology itself does not reveal an immediate turn against Macedon, but a rather slower shift. As Athenian naval obligations increased, the cost of leaving a critical supply line outside of Athenian control steadily rose. This pattern sharpened in the 460s; the timber problem itself had not changed much, but the Athenians' ability to act on it had. Athens showed a stronger interest in the north and in access points nearer the supply chain, yet major action remained constrained by pressure elsewhere. This is exactly what one would expect in a crowded strategic environment, and the surviving evidence aligns reasonably well with this expectation. At the same time, Athens was dealing with Persian commitments, tension with Sparta, unstable allies, and domestic political change. Under these circumstances, northern objectives could persist without becoming the top operational priority. Athenian policy shifted towards the north, proceeding cautiously.

The political shift that followed Cimon's downfall in 461 BCE makes the point more clearly still. The strategic case for looking north did not disappear, yet Athenian priorities were reordered: a long-term aim could endure even as its pursuit was deferred, redirected, or temporarily set aside. It is simply

²³ For the classic imperial synthesis, see Russell Meiggs, *The Athenian Empire* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972); esp. "The Early Years", "The Crisis of the Forties".

what strategy looks like under pressure. No source preserves a direct Athenian statement linking a specific decision to timber insecurity, and it is unreasonable to expect a memorandum where none could survive. A stronger pattern emerges elsewhere: a long-term dependence on the navy, limited alternatives, strategic congestion across multiple theatres and Athenian efforts to reinforce northern positions without taking decisive action.

By the mid-fifth century, the pattern was clear. Relations between Macedon and Athens began as a useful exchange under Persian predominance; this continued after the Persian Wars, even though Athenian naval expansion made dependence more costly. In response, Athenian policy gradually reoriented towards the north.

6. Rising concerns over timber access may not have made war inevitable, but it certainly altered incentives²⁴. The feasibility of war still depended on timing, capacity and the burden of Athenian commitments across the wider Aegean, considerations that are never trivial. Athens possessed substantial advantages in terms of naval strength, allied manpower, and its overall military profile. A successful northern campaign would have offered clear benefits – greater control over timber access, stronger positions at strategic locations, improved protection of allied territories, and the denial of valuable resources to rivals. In strategic terms, the attraction was clear; however, those advantages had limits. While Athenian strength was maritime, the timber system depended on inland forests, transport routes and local authority. Naval superiority could secure sea lanes and coastal points, but it could not guarantee extraction, inland movement, or durable control over the hinterland by itself. Even geography increased the cost of a decisive campaign: the distance involved, the need for inland operations, coordination problems and the disparity between coastal control and resource control all made northern warfare costly and uncertain. Therefore, war could be a rational option under favourable conditions, but certainly not a cheap default option. Finally, there was the wider strategic burden that reinforced caution. At the same time, Athens had to manage alliance discipline, Persian concerns, Peloponnesian rivalry and the politics of an expanding maritime empire. The northern question competed with each of these fronts, often directly and sometimes painfully.

This pressure helps to explain the pattern of the mid-fifth century. While Athenian concern for northern access remained evident, Athens often addressed the problem indirectly through positioning, route management and stronger coastal defences, rather than launching a full-scale campaign for direct

²⁴ See Karathanasis, “Game of Timber Monopoly,” who argues that Perdikkas effectively resisted Athenian imperialism by restricting his monopolistic supply of silver fir. Cf. Psoma, “Athenian Owls”; O’Halloran, *The Political Economy of Classical Athens*, sets out the connection between resource dependence and policy formation.

territorial control. This indirectness is itself historically significant: if the central issue had been territorial aggrandisement in the north, one might expect a stronger and earlier preference for decisive inland conquest. What appears instead is a recurrent concern with positioning, maritime access, and control of key approaches. That pattern is entirely consistent with a strategy shaped by supply vulnerability: Athens could reduce exposure by securing routes and nodal points, even where full control of the inland timber zone remained too costly or too uncertain. Timber dependence therefore helps to explain the form of Athenian action, not merely its background incentive.

Three factors account for the repeated postponement of a decisive war. First, overextension limited available forces; while Athens could project power widely, those same capacities were continually tied down in other theatres. The long-term incentive to secure northern resources remained in place, but the means of achieving this remained uncertain. Secondly, uncertainty inflated risk. While direct control of timber promised substantial gains, the costs of war depended on timing, the behaviour of allies, local resistance and the possibility of broader spillover. As confidence in future trade weakened, coercion became a more attractive option, but the choice itself did not become simpler. Thirdly, Athenian priorities shifted within a stable strategic orientation: northern concerns persisted across changing circumstances, even when immediate efforts moved elsewhere. In a multipolar system, strategic triage can delay action for years without abandoning the underlying objective. The historical outcome aligns closely with this logic. Dependence on timber and declining confidence in future access placed steady pressure on Athenian policy; however, feasibility constraints, timing and other commitments prevented this pressure from resulting in an immediate, decisive war. This helps explain why heavy exchange and growing tension could coexist: the issue was never commerce in the abstract, but exposure to interruption in a strategically necessary supply.

7. In sum, in the late sixth and early fifth centuries BCE, Macedon and Athens were connected by an unequal trade relationship. Athens required a steady supply of timber for shipbuilding and maintaining its fleet; Macedon held the decisive leverage over the forests and the routes by which timber reached the coast. While both sides could benefit from trade, Athens would suffer greater losses if trade failed. The value of the timber argument lies less in isolating a single motive for any one episode than in explaining the recurring geography, timing, and strategic form of Athenian policy in the north.

Chronology reveals the mechanism at work. During the period of Persian predominance, accommodation and trade could persist without deep trust; following the Persian Wars, Athenian naval expansion increased the strategic value of the timber trade. The commodity remained the same, but the political cost of its disruption did not. The decisive refinement lies in expectations. Athenian and Macedonian policy did not depend on trade in

general; rather, it depended on whether each side expected future access to remain secure, tolerable and advantageous under changing political conditions. When confidence in continuity remained strong, exchange remained viable; as this confidence weakened, Athens had stronger reasons to secure access more directly, even when war remained impractical.

While the evidence at hand is uneven and largely narrative – timber volumes, prices and contracts cannot be precisely reconstructed, and strategic expectations must be inferred from behaviour and context – it does not undermine the central conclusion. Throughout the relationship, resource geography shaped political choice, and the stability of relations between Macedon and Athens depended less on trade itself than on the confidence that the timber supply would continue.