

The Mines of Laurion as One of the Earliest Examples of State Ownership in the Modern Sense of the Term

Abstract

The silver mines of Laurion constitute one of the earliest well-documented examples of property vested in a political community and administered by its institutions. This article examines the Athenian mining system as a historical arrangement separating public ownership, official powers, and private economic activity. Its interpretation rests on a distinction between a monarch's property, which may provide the material foundation of personal rule, and communal property, which officeholders administer by virtue of their functions. Literary and epigraphic evidence reveals the institutional character of the allocation of mining rights and of political decisions concerning mining revenues. Laurion exemplifies a principle also present in the modern concept of state ownership: the continuing public attribution of a resource despite changes in the individuals exercising authority.

Keywords: Laurion, Athens, polis, state ownership, monarchical property, public assets, mining leases.

Introduction

State ownership emerges as a distinct category when particular assets are vested in a political community and those exercising authority administer them through powers attached to their offices. Public resources retain their institutional affiliation despite changes in officeholders. From this perspective, the history of state ownership concerns, above all, the separation of the community's proprietary rights from the personal position of those who govern it.

The silver mines of Laurion, in south-eastern Attica, offer a clear example of this relationship. Their economic significance was connected with the constitution of the Athenian polis: revenues supported communal undertakings, the allocation of mining rights fell within the functions of public institutions, and extraction involved private capital. Surviving evidence illuminates both the decision to use revenues for a fleet in the early fifth century BCE and the detailed administrative practices of the fourth century.¹

The phrase 'in the modern sense' refers here to the institutional principle by which property is vested in a public body, rather than to a complete identity between Athenian and modern law. In this article, state ownership means the enduring entitlement of a political community to a resource whose allocation and revenues are administered by its constituted institutions. This comparative definition identifies a structural similarity without attributing a later theory of state legal personality to the Athenians.

The discussion draws on Herodotus' *Histories*, the *Constitution of the Athenians* associated with Aristotle's school, Xenophon's *Ways and Means*, the speech *Against Pantaenetus*, and the official record of the poletai for 367/366 BCE. These sources illuminate different aspects of the mining economy: political decisions about revenue, the powers of officials, and the property relations of entrepreneurs. Together, they make it possible to reconstruct the principles of a system whose administrative details are most clearly documented for the fourth century BCE.²

¹ Herodotus, *Histories* 7.144; [Aristotle], *Constitution of the Athenians* 22.7 and 47.2; Agora XIX P5 = Rhodes-Osborne 36, lines 40-83. References to ancient works use the conventional numbering of books, chapters, and sections.

² [Aristotle], *Constitution of the Athenians* 47.2; Xenophon, *Ways and Means* 4; Demosthenes, *Against Pantaenetus* 37.3-5; Agora XIX P5. Brackets indicate attribution to Aristotle's school.

This interpretation belongs within scholarship on the public resources of the polis. Richard T. Neer examines the communal dimensions of mineral wealth, while Lisa Kallet-Marx connects Themistocles' initiative with the formation of ideas about public finance and Athenian power. The present article develops an approach centred on the holder of proprietary rights, comparing the continuity of communal entitlements with the material foundations of personal rule.³

The monarch's property as the material foundation of rule

The relationship between property and power can be explored through a patrimonial model. In this model, resources at the ruler's personal disposal support the maintenance of a following, the organisation of armed forces, and the acquisition of supporters. Economic superiority sustains political superiority: control over land, precious metal, and income makes it possible to impose decisions and secure obedience. This model serves to analyse the relationship between assets and domination without assuming that all monarchies shared the same origins.⁴

Within such an arrangement, functions benefiting the state as a whole may be financed from the ruler's property. Maintaining an army or constructing fortifications does not automatically change the ownership of the resource that provides the revenue. The classification of the asset depends on the title under which it is controlled. A monarch's personal property may have significance for the entire state while retaining its role as the economic foundation of personal rule.

This relationship also explains the political consequences of dispersing property. If a ruler transfers resources to others without retaining equivalent instruments of control, the ruler's own capacity for action diminishes while the recipients become more independent. Grants of land can thus strengthen the material foundations of separate centres of power. A reduction in the ruler's personal property does not in itself establish public ownership. The latter requires assets to be vested in the political community and rules for administering them on its behalf.

Alexander I of Macedon illustrates the close connection between mining revenues and a ruler's position. Herodotus mentions a mine yielding him a talent of silver each day. This statement conveys the scale of a resource providing royal income. Although the account does not describe the precise legal title, it reveals a characteristic identification of the beneficiary: revenues are attributed to a particular individual exercising authority.⁵

A similar mechanism of consolidating personal rule appears in Herodotus' account of Peisistratus. The tyrant secured his position through income from Athens and the Strymon region, together with armed force. For constitutional analysis, the significant feature is the connection between resources and the capacity to maintain power. It provides a point of comparison with an arrangement in which public assets sustain the polis, while a political leader influences their use through the community's institutions.⁶

³ R.T. Neer, "Framing the Gift: The Politics of the Siphnian Treasury at Delphi," *Classical Antiquity* 20, no. 2 (2001), pp. 273-336, especially pp. 307-308, DOI: 10.1525/ca.2001.20.2.273; L. Kallet-Marx, "Money Talks: Rhetor, Demos, and the Resources of the Athenian Empire," in P. Low (ed.), *The Athenian Empire* (Edinburgh, 2008), pp. 185-212, especially pp. 203-204 (reprinted from the 1994 study).

⁴ M. Weber, *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology*, ed. G. Roth and C. Wittich (Berkeley-Los Angeles-London, 1978), Part I, Chapter III, section 7a, pp. 231-233. The patrimonial model serves a comparative purpose here; it is not a uniform classification of all historical monarchies.

⁵ Herodotus, *Histories* 5.17. The account identifies Alexander as the recipient of revenue; it does not establish the precise legal construction of his rights over the mine.

⁶ Herodotus, *Histories* 1.64. The source connects the consolidation of Peisistratus' rule with income from Athens and the Strymon region and with armed force.

Communal property and the powers of officeholders

The separation of public assets from personal property changes the relationship between ownership and the exercise of authority. An official's right to administer a resource derives from the function entrusted to that official. Assuming office confers particular powers; leaving office does not deprive the community of the resource. The property remains public even as decision-makers change.⁷

Two directions of dependence can therefore be distinguished. Where personal material superiority is decisive, assets enable an individual to exercise rule. Under a public arrangement, the community establishes institutions to which it entrusts the exercise of rights over its property. This second mechanism is the central feature of Laurion considered as an early example of state ownership.

Communal property must also be distinguished from the private assets of the community's members. Participation in decisions concerning a resource does not confer an individual right to detach and freely dispose of a portion of it. Citizens may decide to distribute particular revenues or retain them for a joint undertaking. In either case, the decision concerns the use of income belonging to the public sphere.⁸

The public character of a resource is also compatible with privately organised exploitation. A public owner or public body controlling the resource may determine conditions of access, collect payments, and retain its rights, while an entrepreneur invests private capital and bears commercial risk. This arrangement distinguishes state ownership from the direct operation of an enterprise by the state apparatus.

Laurion in the economy of the Athenian polis

Laurion's significance arose from the combination of silver deposits with a developed organisation for exploiting them. Silver supplied a means of storing value, conducting exchange, and financing substantial undertakings. The mines were also a setting in which public entitlements and private investment interacted. From a constitutional perspective, the polis's ability to derive income from a resource remaining under its control was particularly important.

Communal use of mineral wealth also occurred in other Greek poleis. Herodotus describes the annual distribution of mining revenues on Siphnos and their use for a dedication at Delphi. For Thasos, he presents revenues from mainland possessions and mines as the basis for building ships and strengthening fortifications. These accounts reveal a broader institutional setting in which resource revenues became subject to decisions by political communities. Laurion is distinctive because such a decision can be examined alongside detailed records of the allocation of mining rights.⁹

For early fifth-century Athens, the principal evidence for the public character of these revenues is the account of Themistocles' initiative. For the fourth century, this is supplemented by sources describing administrative procedures and individual transactions. Considering the two bodies of

⁷ Weber, *Economy and Society*, Part I, Chapter III, section 3, especially pp. 218-219, on the separation of organisational property from an official's personal assets. This provides an analytical criterion rather than an identification of Athenian institutions with Weber's type of modern bureaucracy.

⁸ Herodotus, *Histories* 7.144; [Aristotle], *Constitution of the Athenians* 22.7. The distinction between distributing revenue and the attribution of the underlying resource is an institutional interpretation of these accounts.

⁹ Herodotus, *Histories* 3.57-58 (Siphnos) and 6.46-47 (Thasos). The aggregate income reported for Thasos includes revenues from mainland possessions and mines. The accounts do not describe detailed procedures for granting private parties rights to work mines.

evidence together reveals an enduring principle of management: the resource remained associated with the polis, while its allocation and the use of its revenues fell within specified public powers.¹⁰

The allocation of mining rights by the institutions of the polis

The *Constitution of the Athenians* describes the poletai as a board of ten officials selected by lot, one from each tribe. Their duties included transactions concerning mining rights, conducted in the presence of the Council and in cooperation with financial officials. The source thus identifies both a specialised body and the institutional setting of its actions. The disposal of mining rights formed part of the administrative order of the polis.¹¹

The Greek terms for sale and purchase found in the sources describe transactions generally treated in scholarship as leases or the paid allocation of extraction rights. Their limited duration reveals the separation between the community's rights and those of the entrepreneur. The *Constitution of the Athenians* specifies a three-year term for one category of mines; the number of years for another category requires restoration of a damaged passage. The detailed reconstruction of these terms remains a matter of philological investigation.¹²

The record for 367/366 BCE, known as Agora XIX P5, provides direct evidence of administrative practice. It lists mine names, locations, boundaries, purchasers of rights, and amounts payable. The document links an official transaction to an identified object and the obligation of a named person. Public record-keeping preserved the economic relationship beyond the immediate contact between an entrepreneur and an individual official.¹³

The record includes mines situated on land attributed to particular private persons. Such entries reveal a distinction between surface rights and the mining entitlements being allocated. Different proprietary titles could coexist in the same area, and private rights to land did not exhaust the rules governing the use of mineral resources. The public body retained its own sphere of action.¹⁴

This arrangement clarifies the institutional meaning of ownership by the polis. The community appeared as an enduring party to economic relationships; officials performed their assigned functions, and private contractors acquired specified rights. The separation of these roles brings the Laurion system into comparison with later forms of administering state property. A change in officeholders affected the persons exercising the relevant powers, rather than the body in which the resource was vested.

Private capital and public revenue

Working the mines required investment in the organisation of extraction and ore processing. A private entrepreneur could possess a workshop, equipment, and working capital, obtain credit, and enter into contracts with other participants in economic activity. The speech *Against Pantaenetus* presents a mining-related establishment as the object of transactions securing finance. It reveals the

¹⁰ Herodotus, *Histories* 7.144; [Aristotle], *Constitution of the Athenians* 22.7 and 47.2; Agora XIX P5. Fifth- and fourth-century evidence is combined to identify a principle of public control without assuming that every procedure remained unchanged.

¹¹ [Aristotle], *Constitution of the Athenians* 47.2. The account also includes the military treasurer and officials responsible for the theoric fund.

¹² [Aristotle], *Constitution of the Athenians* 47.2; D. Vanhove, "Aristote et les mines du Laurion. À propos de la Constitution d'Athènes XLVII.2," *L'Antiquité Classique* 65 (1996), pp. 243-249, especially p. 243, DOI: 10.3406/antiqu.1996.1258. Different restorations have been proposed for the number of years applying to the second category.

¹³ Agora XIX P5 = Rhodes-Osborne 36, lines 40-83, trans. S. Lambert, J. Ashwell, and R. Osborne, Attic Inscriptions Online. The edition's commentary identifies this as the earliest surviving account recording mining leases.

¹⁴ Agora XIX P5, especially lines 45-48, 55-58, and 65-75. The distinction between surface rights and mining entitlements is reconstructed from the practice recorded in the document; it does not imply identity with modern property law.

complexity of private property relations within a sector in which access to mines was publicly regulated.¹⁵

Economically, this produced distinct but interconnected interests. The polis derived income from making the resource available. The entrepreneur undertook operations in the expectation of returns exceeding the costs incurred. Public ownership of the mines coexisted with the accumulation of private fortunes. The community's revenue and the enterprise's results belonged to separate economic accounts.

The surviving records specify amounts associated with the granting of rights. A complete reconstruction of the payment system, however, depends on the interpretation of mine categories, payment schedules, and the nature of the sums recorded. For an analysis of ownership, the central point is that the polis granted access to the resource in return for payment. The precise level and structure of these obligations constitute a further dimension of research into the mining economy.¹⁶

Public property could therefore benefit the community without its administration becoming organisationally identical with a mining enterprise. The public role as owner or controller encompassed determining access and obtaining the corresponding income. The entrepreneur's role consisted in exploiting the entitlement commercially. This separation is one reason why Laurion provides an important reference point in the history of state ownership.

Laurion's revenues and the state's capacity for action

The decision associated with Themistocles' initiative in 483/482 BCE shows public ownership in operation. Revenues that might have been distributed among citizens were devoted to building a fleet. Herodotus connects the initiative with the war against Aegina and emphasises its subsequent significance for the defence of Greece. The *Constitution of the Athenians* describes the use of one hundred talents by entrusting the financing of ship construction to the hundred wealthiest citizens.¹⁷

At the centre of this episode lies the community's authority to redirect revenue. Themistocles proposed a project whose implementation required political acceptance. His influence depended on persuading citizens to approve a particular use of the funds. The money retained its public character even when its expenditure involved particular private individuals.¹⁸

Communal property was thereby converted into a capacity for collective action. The mines generated revenue, revenue enabled investment in ships, and the fleet increased Athens' defensive and political capabilities. The relationship between assets and power concerned the potential of the polis. The economic basis of state action remained distinct from the personal property of the leader directing policy.

The time horizon of the decision is also significant. An immediate individual benefit was forgone in favour of an undertaking whose consequences affected the community's security and future position. Public revenue could be planned collectively without transforming the underlying resource

¹⁵ Demosthenes, *Against Pantaenetus* 37.3-5 and 11-12, trans. A.T. Murray, available through ToposText from the Perseus Digital Library. The forensic speech presents a litigant's position.

¹⁶ Agora XIX P5, lines 40-83; [Aristotle], *Constitution of the Athenians* 47.2. The recorded sums attest payments due; their relationship to the entire revenue system requires separate reconstruction.

¹⁷ Herodotus, *Histories* 7.144.1-2; [Aristotle], *Constitution of the Athenians* 22.7. Herodotus gives two hundred ships, while the Constitution specifies one hundred triremes and one hundred talents. The numerical difference does not alter their shared evidence for a public decision about revenue.

¹⁸ Kallet-Marx, "Money Talks," 2008 edition, pp. 203-204; Neer, "Framing the Gift," p. 308. These studies examine the public dimensions of allocating revenues to a fleet and the importance of the leader's persuasion.

into the citizens' private property. Communal ownership became a foundation for the continuity of state action.¹⁹

Laurion and the concept of state ownership

The Athenian system reveals several features also significant for the modern concept of state ownership. The first is the continuing attribution of the resource to the community. The second is the exercise of rights through institutions with specified powers. Another is the separation of public property from the private capital used in its exploitation. These are complemented by the ability to allocate revenue through political decisions concerning the purposes of the polis as a whole.

Taken together, these features explain Laurion's particular significance. Public property was more than a label for income collected by a ruler. Its institutional attribution was expressed through recurring official transactions, the recording of entitlements, and decisions about expenditure. The public character of the resource had practical consequences: it structured relations among the community, its institutions, and entrepreneurs.

This interpretation leaves room for differences between the polis and the modern state. It assumes neither direct legal continuity nor an identical construction of ownership. It identifies an institutional principle visible at an early date: those who govern can influence the use of assets without acquiring them merely by assuming power. In this sense, Laurion belongs among the earliest well-documented examples of state ownership understood as the property of an enduring political community.

Conclusion

The mines of Laurion reveal communal property taking shape as an independent basis for collective action. Public entitlements to a resource, their exercise through the institutions of the polis, and privately organised exploitation formed a system in which administration was distinct from the personal ownership of those who governed. Revenues served politically determined purposes, while the resource remained associated with the community despite changes in officeholders. This relationship provides the principal basis for treating Laurion as one of the earliest examples of state ownership in the modern sense.

The Athenian community nevertheless remained far from social and legal equality. Women were excluded from participation in the Assembly and from holding public office, while their independent participation in property transactions was restricted. Metics, despite their economic participation and obligations towards the polis, lacked full political rights. Mining relied substantially on enslaved labour. Public ownership thus belonged to the institutional order of a community in which participation in decision-making was limited.²⁰

A historical assessment of these restrictions requires attention to the persistence of exclusion in modern states as well. In the United States, slavery continued into the period of the Civil War; its constitutional abolition came with the ratification of the Thirteenth Amendment on 6 December 1865. The development of state institutions and public property there long coexisted with the denial of personal freedom to part of the population.²¹

¹⁹ Herodotus, *Histories* 7.144; [Aristotle], *Constitution of the Athenians* 22.7. The discussion of the time horizon of expenditure and collective capacity for action is an economic interpretation of the decision.

²⁰ [Aristotle], *Constitution of the Athenians* 42.1 and 58.2-3; Xenophon, *Ways and Means* 2.1-7 and 4.14-19; [Demosthenes], *Against Neaera* 59.52. For restrictions on contractual capacity, see Isaeus, *On the Estate of Aristarchus* 10.10.

²¹ United States Constitution, Amendment XIII, section 1, ratified 6 December 1865; National Archives, "13th Amendment." The text retains an exception for punishment following criminal conviction.

Women's equality was likewise a gradual process that unfolded differently in different countries. In the United States, the Nineteenth Amendment of 1920 established a constitutional prohibition on denying the vote on grounds of sex; in Britain, equal terms for women's and men's participation in parliamentary elections were introduced in 1928. Significant restrictions on married women's economic independence were still being removed in the twentieth century: in France, the 1965 reform expanded their ability to administer their own property and pursue employment without their husbands' consent. Political and property equality had no single common date of establishment.²²

These examples distinguish two dimensions of historical development: the emergence of separate state property and the widening of the circle entitled to participate in governing the state. The Athenian arrangement belongs to the history of the first process, with clear limitations in the second. Its significance lies in the institutional recognition that the community possesses assets which those who govern administer by virtue of their entrusted functions, rather than under a personal title of ownership.

Note on collaboration in preparing the article

This article was developed through a dialogue between the author and ChatGPT (OpenAI). The author supplied the initial material, defined the research problem and the principal direction of interpretation, and corrected and developed the argument. ChatGPT assisted with structuring and drafting the text, locating and comparing sources and scholarship, and preparing the English translation and both language versions as PDFs. This note discloses the use of an AI tool; it does not assign the tool the status of an author or an independent scholarly reviewer.

²² United States Constitution, Amendment XIX, ratified 18 August 1920; UK Parliament, “Women get the vote”; France, Law no. 65-570 of 13 July 1965 reforming matrimonial property regimes, discussed by the Haut Conseil à l’Égalité (web addresses in the bibliography). The Nineteenth Amendment removed the criterion of sex, not every other barrier to voting. The French reform was a stage in expanding women’s independence rather than a single establishment of complete equality in every domain.

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Online sources were checked on 15 October 2026. References to ancient texts follow conventional section numbering; the article contains no direct quotations attributed to an English translation.