

Athenian Democracy & Empire

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Chapter 1

On the Evolution of Athenian Democracy

In all Greek poleis the original governing bodies were monarchies, which eventually gave way to aristocracies, as nobility outside the ruling family vied for power. In many poleis these aristocratic states evolved into oligarchies, the rule of the few. Similar to aristocracies, the oligarchies consisted of only a few people ruling the many, but birth was not the determining factor. The determining factor in an oligarchy was most likely wealth, and the power that perpetually comes with wealth.

Athens, unlike most other poleis, took one more step in its political evolution, progressing from the rule of the few toward the rule of the many (*demokratia*). There were two parallel sets of circumstance that influenced politics in Athens: the military importance of the hoplites and later the rowers of ships, and the political reforms of Solon and Kleisthenes. Our focus in this chapter will be on these reforms, their impact on the political evolution of Athens, and the motivation of their implementers. There is no doubt that the reforms of these men led to the development of democracy in Athens, but was this their goal, or did their reforms simply facilitate its evolution?

Our knowledge of the life and reforms of Solon come mainly from Aristotle's *The Athenian Constitution (Ath. Pol.)* and Plutarch's *Life of Solon*. Herodotus' account of Solon focuses primarily on his relationship with Croesus, but he does mention that Solon made a code of laws for Athens at the request of his countrymen.¹

Solon, one of the seven sages of Greece, was appointed archon for 594/3.² Before the reforms of Solon there was much struggle in Athens between the aristocracy and the masses. In fact, many people were considered sixth-partners (*hektemoroi*), and if they failed to pay rent for the land on which they worked they were subject to seizure, along with their children. Solon himself mentions the condition of these people in his poetry:

To Athens, to their home of origin,
I brought back many who had been sold,
Some unjustly, some justly,
And some who had fled out of dire necessity,
Who no longer spoke the Athenian tongue
After wandering in many places.
Others, who were subjected here to shameful slavery,
Fearing the whims of their masters, I set free.³

At this time all loans were made on the security of the person. Because of the conditions at Athens and the changes he made, Solon can be considered the first champion of the people.⁴

Solon was asked by the people and nobles alike to help end their strife. According to the *Ath. Pol.*, "Solon was by birth and repute one of the leading citizens, but by wealth and position one of the middle sort."⁵ This made him an appealing candidate as a mediator to both parties.

¹Herodotus, I.29

²Aristotle, 5.2

³Ibid., 12.4

⁴Ibid., 2.2

⁵Ibid., 5.3

Before making any reforms to the political system in Athens, Solon acted to undo some great injustices that had taken place. He canceled all debts, both public and private, and returned to Athens citizens who had been sold into slavery or who had fled in fear of not being able to repay their debt.⁶ This is known as the *seisachtheia*, or shaking off of burdens, and was but the first step in Solon's plan to remove the wealthy and powerful from their role as oppressors of the masses.

Ehrenberg raises some interesting, but probably unanswerable questions about the recovery of those Athenian citizens who had been sold into slavery. Solon would have had to have known where these people were, which he might have been able to learn from those who had sold them, and he also must have had some means of buying them from their owners. Solon might have made their former masters pay for their return, or perhaps he used some form of public money.⁷ Either way, recovering those who had been sold into slavery was probably not an easy task to accomplish.

Solon made many reforms to the Athenian government and way of life in general, but the three most democratic reforms, as it seems today, just as it did in Aristotle's time, are the ban on loans made on the security of the person, the permission for third parties to prosecute those who have done wrong, and the right to appeal to the jury court.⁸ These reforms were all made to protect the masses from the ambitions of the rich and powerful and the exercise of arbitrary justice.

It is rather obvious how the first of these reforms helped protect the masses from the wealthy. Today, slavery is viewed as one of the most despicable conditions, and even during the time of Solon this form of slavery must have been viewed as unjust by many. One possible explanation as to why the poor Athenians were put in a condition that could so easily lead to slavery is that unlike many other Greek poleis Athens did

⁶Plutarch, *Solon* 15

⁷Ehrenberg, p. 62

⁸Aristotle, 9.1

not send out colonies. This caused the population to grow to the point where the resources of Athens were not sufficient to support the population. Because of this the land was cultivated with increased intensity, which led to diminished fertility in the soil. Poor farmers were then forced to rent land from the wealthy land owners, pledging a portion of their produce as rent. When unable to pay this amount, the farmers were subjected to the will of the landlords, as they would have taken the loan of land on the security of themselves.⁹ This is just one theory, and assumes that land was inalienable outside of the family in early Athens, but it clearly shows how the wealthy might affirm their power over the masses.

The ability of a third party to prosecute those who have done wrong is another innovation that decreased the dominion of the rich over the poor. Osborne notes that the offenses against which third parties could prosecute suggest that this ability was implemented to prohibit powerful men from inhibiting the poor in a way that would prevent them from pressing charges for themselves.¹⁰

The right of appeal to a jury-court increased the power of the masses, or rather decreased the power of the wealthy, in two ways. People would appeal to a jury-court if they were unsatisfied with a decision of a magistrate, who, by the laws, must be a member of the upper class. Before Solon, this would have been a way for the powerful men of the magistracies to oppress the poor, by making decisions in the favor of other upper class men. The right of appeal gave poor Athenians one more way to combat the oppressive forces of the wealthy.

The increased importance of the jury-court helped the poorest Athenians, the thetes, in another way, because although they could not hold any magistracies, they were allowed to participate in the assembly and to act as jurors. This turned out to

⁹Sealy, p. 109

¹⁰Osborne, pp. 220-21

be a great privilege, since almost all disputes were settled in the jury-courts, and with Solon's reforms people could appeal the decisions of the magistrates. Plutarch tells us that Solon purposefully created his laws with obscure and ambiguous wording in order to increase the honor of the courts. Since many disputes could not be reconciled by the letter of the law, they would be brought before the jury-court, whose members were in a way the masters of the law.¹¹

It seems obvious from the reforms themselves that Solon's goal was to assuage the oppression of the wealthy on Athens lower class, but since he was attempting to settle arguments and not to start them, he was not willing to make more impressive reforms for fear that this would enrage the wealthy. For instance, Aristotle tells us that although the Council of the Areopagus was no longer in charge of choosing the annual archons, as they had before Solon's reforms, they were still responsible for being the guardians of the laws and for keeping watch over the magistrates.¹²

We learn that every day after the enactment of his reforms people would come to him and question his laws, suggesting the addition of such-and-such a law or the removal of another, and demanding explanation. Seeing that his new laws were adequate and not wanting to be harassed in this way, Solon took a ten year leave from Athens, in which time he hoped the citizens would grow accustomed to his laws.¹³

The people were disappointed in Solon's reforms because they had expected him to carry out a complete redistribution of land. Aristotle tells us that while he could have taken them into his party and become tyrant, he instead chose to incur their hatred, as well as the hatred of the wealthy, by saving his country and legislating for the best.¹⁴ Although Solon may have looked down upon the actions of the wealthy,

¹¹Plutarch, *Solon* 18

¹²Aristotle, 8.4

¹³Plutarch, *Solon* 25

¹⁴Aristotle, 11.2

he also saw the poor for what they were. In a fragment of his poetry he says that the people follow their leaders best if they are neither unleashed nor restrained too much, “for excess breeds insolence, when great prosperity comes to men who are not sound of mind.”¹⁵

Solon’s feeling about the condition of Athens at the time of his reforms can be inferred from the fragments of his poetry which still remain. In regard to his achievements, Solon writes:

I gave to the people as much esteem as is sufficient for them,
Not detracting from their honor or reaching out to take it;
And to those who had power and were admired for their wealth
I declared that they should have nothing unseemly.
I stood holding my mighty shield against both,
And did not allow either to win an unjust victory.¹⁶

Solon’s immediate goal, therefore, was to end the strife between the wealthy and the masses, which he accomplished by giving the masses slightly more political freedom than they previously had, without dealing a great blow to the politically powerful upper class. It is not unreasonable, however, to think that perhaps Solon had hoped that these reforms would someday lead to a society where the many were ruled by themselves, instead of by the few. This is likely because Aristotle tells us that Solon altogether blamed the rich for the strife, and in his poetry Solon himself says to the rich, “But quieten the strong spirit in your hearts, you who have pushed through to glut yourselves with many good things.”¹⁷

In 561/0 the ambitious Peisistratus made his first attempt to take power as tyrant of Athens. He was unable to hold power for a substantial time until 546 and his third attempt to rule Athens. Upon his death, the tyranny fell to his sons Hipparchus

¹⁵Aristotle, 12.2

¹⁶Ibid., 12.1

¹⁷Ibid., 5.3

and Hippias. Hipparchus was assassinated in 514, and after Hippias was expelled in 510 by the Spartans, a power struggle ensued between Kleisthenes, a member of the Alcmaeonid family, and Isagoras, son of Tisander, a man of reputable family.

Kleisthenes eventually won the support of the people by proposing to reform the political system in a way that would give political power to the demos. There are two related reforms, namely the reorganization of the tribal system from four tribes to ten, and the creation of the council of five hundred. Although Aristotle tells us they were made during the archonship of Isagoras in 508/7¹⁸, it was probably closer to 503/2 since the council first swore their oath in 501/0, and it is unlikely that seven years would have passed in the interim.

The tribal reforms of Kleisthenes can be rather confusing, so I will not go into detail, but a brief explanation is necessary. Kleisthenes divided Attica into thirty groups of villages, or trittyes, of which ten comprised the city district, ten the coastal region, and ten the inland areas. The ten tribes were each composed of one trittys from each region. We draw most of our information about Kleisthenes from the *Ath. Pol.*, in which Aristotle tells us that Kleisthenes wished to mix up the people of Attica so that more men should have a share in the running of the state, but to what end is debatable.

Kleisthenes' council of five hundred goes hand in hand with his tribal reforms, since the council took fifty members from each tribe. The political year was divided into ten parts called prytaneis, and the members from each tribe would take turns presiding over the council.

Like those of Solon, the reforms of Kleisthenes affected the political evolution in Athens by increasing the power of the people. By making the demes the basis of the new tribal system, Kleisthenes gave ordinary men their first experience in self

¹⁸Aristotle, 21.1

governance. As a member of a deme, a man had say in the local affairs of the deme, and was eligible to represent his deme and tribe in the council. This privilege was granted by lot, and representation was based proportionally on the population of the deme. The council was responsible for preparing the business of the ekklesia, and in this way the members of the council could influence the political affairs of the state.

Another aspect of the Kleisthenic reforms which is strikingly democratic is the fact that people from all regions of Attica were represented in the council at all times.¹⁹ This is ensured by the implementation of housing the presiding tribe's council members in the Tholos in the agora at Athens. Since many people lived a good distance away from the city it was not always possible for all members of the council to attend meetings. Since the members of the presiding tribe, which was probably the most influential, were housed right at the political center of Athens, there would always be citizens from the coastal and inland regions present at meetings of the council.

Ostracism is another Kleisthenic implementation that increased the power of the masses. If the ekklesia found it necessary, the citizens of Athens could vote for a person they wished to be expelled from Attica for a period of ten years. This increased the power of the masses by allowing them to expel a person who had gained, in their eyes, too much power and fame, and whose ambitions might lead him to attempt to gain tyrannical rule of Athens. In this way the demos were given a means of preserving their democracy.

Although Aristotle presents the view that Kleisthenes truly wished to mix up the people so that every man would have an equal share in running the state, we find when we look at the methodology of his reforms that it seems unlikely that Kleisthenes was really acting altruistically, and I tend to agree with Sealy when he says that, "any

¹⁹Stockton, p. 27

hypothesis which fails to allow for a partisan element in the reforms should be highly suspect.”²⁰ Since these reforms were implemented during a period of struggle between Kleisthenes and Isagoras, and since they allowed Kleisthenes to win the favor of the people, the possible selfish ambitions of Kleisthenes should not be dismissed.

First of all, the council of five hundred, the *ekklesia*, and all but one of the tribes held their meeting in the city²¹, which means that the percentage of citizens from the city that attended was probably much greater than that of the citizens from the coastal or inland regions. This would cause disproportionate representation in these meetings, allowing the citizens of city demes to pursue their own interests.

The new system of electing generals was also advantageous to citizens from the city. Under the Kleisthenic reforms, the military regiments were divided by tribe, and each tribe elected a general to command their regiment. These elections were held in the city, since it was the political center of the state. This gave an advantage to candidates from families such as the Alcmaeonidae because it was easier for prominent men of the city to bring adequate numbers of their dependents to vote than for prominent men from the other regions. Since every tribe had membership in the city, it would be foreseeable that many, if not all general positions might be filled by citizens of city demes.²²

The fact that most of the magistrates were appointed by lot brings up an interesting issue. Any male citizen of a certain age could hold office, and there were no special skills or talents required. While this makes the system democratic, by opening up political involvement to a very large portion of the citizen body, it removes any prestige from these offices, leaving all the political influence with those magistracies that were chosen based on merit. Because of this, the generalships, which eventually

²⁰Sealy, p. 154

²¹Ibid., p.154

²²Ibid., p. 155

became the only office chosen by election, grew to be very influential offices, and it was this office that politically ambitious men sought. It was the generals who held the most political power, although it was unofficial because their designated responsibility was simply to run the military.

The fact that the generalships were the only elected positions is somewhat paradoxical. It indicates the importance of the office, since only especially qualified men were suitable to fill this position, but the main responsibility of the generals was to command the military. Their power over the people extended only as far as the generals could influence them, while the magistrates that made binding decisions for the state required no special skills or talents. This system assumes a widespread knowledge and interest in the political affairs of state. A modern democracy could not operate under such an assumption.

Also, by the reforms of Kleisthenes the council of five hundred became the preparatory body for the business of the ekklesia. Before the reforms, there must have been some group of citizens that prepared the business for the ekklesia, for without this it would have been difficult for the ekklesia to get anything accomplished. Preparing this business was almost certainly left to a smaller group of powerful men, and Sealy suggests that this group might have been the Council of the Areopagus, which would have been filled with the tyranny-supporting archons that had been appointed during the reign of the Peisistratidae.²³ By making it the responsibility of the council of five hundred to prepare business for the ekklesia, instead of the Council of the Areopagus, Kleisthenes increased the influence of the citizens by making it easier for men of the city to attend meetings of both the council of five hundred and the ekklesia.

Although it may seem that these ideas detract from the overall effect of the reforms, views such as these are not intended to diminish the importance of the reforms

²³Sealy, pp. 156-57.

of Kleisthenes, but to put them into perspective and to help us understand the conditions under which democracy was formed in Athens.

Clearly the political reforms of Solon and Kleisthenes were major steps toward democracy in the evolution of Athenian politics. It seems that Solon was truly acting to end the strife between the wealthy and the poor, and to give the masses more political power in the process. The reforms of Kleisthenes were much more substantial and longer lasting than those of Solon, and it is at this time that many scholars believe the political system at Athens can truly be called a democracy. The motivation of Kleisthenes might not have been as altruistic as Solon, but the great effects of his reforms overshadow any private ambitions he may have had. With these ideas taken into consideration, it seems that although the reforms of Solon and Kleisthenes certainly facilitated the evolution of democracy in Athens, this was by no means the goal of the great reformers.

Chapter 2

On the Development of the Athenian Empire

It is very interesting, and sometimes revealing, to examine the links of a string of events when studying history. Take, for instance, the events of the fifth century in Greece. The heroic victory of the Greeks over the barbarian invaders led to the empowerment of Athens, and the creation of the Athenian empire. The imperialist ambitions of Athens eventually led to strife between Athens and her Peloponnesian neighbors. In this chapter we will examine the development of the Athenian empire, and the effect of Athenian imperialism on democracy.

After the Persians had been expelled from the Greek mainland, and the Athenians had fortified their city, Pausanias of Sparta was sent with twenty ships from the Peloponnese to command the Hellenic forces, which included thirty ships from Athens along with support from other cities. Pausanias, however, began to show his arrogance, and the allies, especially those of Ionia which had recently been liberated, were put off. They appealed to the Athenians, who promised to protect them and to prevent Pausanias from acting tyrannically if he should try. Pausanias was eventu-

ally recalled to Sparta to face charges, and when his replacement, Dorcis, arrived to command the Hellenic forces, the allies would not accept him as their commander. Dorcis returned home, and the Spartans no longer sent men to command the Greeks.¹

Thucydides tells us that “they [the Spartans] no longer wanted to be burdened with the war against Persia” and that “they [the Spartans] regarded the Athenians as being perfectly capable of exercising the command.”² McGregor suggests that the former justification for withdrawal expresses their true reason for leaving command to Athens. The foreign policy of the Spartans had always been based on the stability of the Peloponnese, which would guarantee security against the helots, who outnumbered their Spartan masters by a large margin. This meant that adventuring overseas would not be possible.³ Also, large scale naval expeditions are very expensive, and, unlike Athens, Sparta did not have the financial capability of raising and sustaining a navy.

Now that Athens had gained control from Sparta, the Athenians assessed the contributions to be made for the operations of the allied states. Each state was to send some contribution, either in the form of money or in ships, and the Athenians decided how much each state should send. This tribute was collected at the treasury at Delos, which is also the place where meetings of the representatives were held.⁴ Delos was a good choice for the treasury for several reasons. First of all, it had religious associations, which were shared by the Ionians and Athenians, as well as the island states of the Aegean. Other, more practical, reasons are that it was situated in the center of the Aegean and had a good harbor. Perhaps more importantly, Delos was a small state, and was not powerful enough to have its own political ambitions.⁵ This

¹Thucydides, I.94-95

²Ibid., I.95

³McGregor, pp. 31-32

⁴Thucydides, I.96

⁵Meiggs, p. 43

last point is interesting, since we know that later the treasury was moved to Athens, a powerful state that certainly had its own political ambitions. Because the treasury of this alliance was found on Delos, it is known in modern times as the Delian League.

At the time of this first assessment, the Athenians swore an oath with the Ionians that they should have the same enemies and same friends, and to confirm this oath they sunk lumps of iron in the sea.⁶ This ritual of sinking lumps of iron was also performed by the Phocaeans, and it signified that the oath was not to be broken until the iron floated up again, that is, the oath was never to be broken. Surely the members of the League would swear allegiance until they were secure from threats of Persia, but it is hard to believe that they expected this alliance to last until the end of time. The Greeks, however, had either been at war with the Persians or had been threatened by the Persians for generations, and perhaps the Greeks at this time could not foresee a time at which they would be completely safe from the imperialist threat from ambitious Persian kings.⁷

Presumably, the oath would have banned warfare between the members of the League, as well as unilateral succession from the League.⁸ Because of this, Athens was, perhaps, justified in rejecting Naxos' demand to leave the League, and subsequently suppressing the revolt, and also in interfering in the war between Samos and Miletus.⁹ Of the Naxian revolt, Thucydides tells us that Athens' suppression of the revolt was the first instance when "the original constitution of the League was broken and an allied city lost its independence."¹⁰ Contrary to the previous idea, Thucydides obviously does not see the actions of Athens as within the scope of their power according to the oath, but the first step in a series of instances when Athenians

⁶Aristotle, 23.5

⁷McGregor, pp. 33-34

⁸Ibid., p. 34

⁹Meiggs, p. 46

¹⁰Thucydides, I.98

overstepped their limitations as leaders of the Delian League, and began to enforce imperial rule over an ally.

According to Thucydides, the primary intention of the League was to ravage the territory of the Persian king in order to compensate themselves for their losses, but this must have been only one aspect of their purpose. Surely the members of the alliance would not have sworn such solemn oaths if their goal was simply to compensate for their losses. They must have had the intention of protecting themselves from any further Persian aggression, and of liberating Greek states that were still under the control of the Persians.¹¹ Indeed, when explaining to the Spartans why they had revolted from Athens, the Mytilenaeans claim that, “the object of the alliance was the liberation of the Hellenes from Persia, not subjugation of the Hellenes to Athens.”¹² This also helps to explain why states might be tempted to secede from the alliance.

In 454 the Athenians moved the treasury of the Delian League from Delos to Athens. Certainly by this point, if not sooner, we can say that the League in its original form no longer existed; the members of the league were now all part of the Athenian empire. The Athenians were able to maintain control of this empire, at least for a while, because of their political strategy and the tribute that financed their navy.

From the time of Themistocles Athens had had a strong navy, but since they were now receiving tribute from their subject states their naval power in the Aegean was unparalleled. Thucydides blames the subject states themselves for allowing Athens’ navy to become so powerful. Originally the members of League would contribute either ships or money to the shared cause of protecting against the Persians, but over time most of the states contributed money instead of sending ships, since they were

¹¹Meiggs, p. 47

¹²Thucydides, III.10

reluctant to face military service.¹³ This allowed the Athenians to fund more ships for themselves, which, ironically, led to the subjugation of the allies.

Athens' subject states were militarily weak, and this new found naval might allowed the Athenians to keep her subjects in line if they should attempt to revolt or otherwise challenge the supremacy of Athens. The suppression of the revolt of Naxos was mentioned above, and was the first such instance of disobedience. Sometime after the Naxians revolted, the Thasians followed suit. The conflict was caused by a dispute over control of markets on the mainland opposite Thrace, and also of a mine there that was under control of the Thasians. The Athenians sent a fleet to Thasos to resolve the matter, where they promptly won a naval battle and proceeded to besiege the island. The Thasians appealed to Sparta for help, but the Spartans were preoccupied by conflict with the helots, so after three years of siege the Thasians were forced to surrender. As punishment, the Athenians forced them to demolish their walls and surrender their navy, to pay an indemnity immediately and to pay tribute in the future, and the Thasians were forced to surrender their rights on the mainland and the mine there.¹⁴ It is military pressure like this that allowed the Athenians to subdue the insurrections of her subjects.

Another way the Athenians used their naval supremacy to rule their subjects was by controlling imports and exports. In *The Constitution of the Athenians*, Pseudo-Xenophon emphasizes the importance of being able to import goods that one does not have naturally in their land and to export those goods which one has in abundance. Since the Athenians controlled the Aegean it was very easy for them to restrict trade to and from subject-states when this benefited the empire. As Pseudo-Xenophon puts it, "...if some city is rich in iron, copper, or flax, where will it distribute without

¹³Thucydides, 1.99

¹⁴Ibid., I.100-101

the consent of the rulers of the sea? In addition, they will forbid export to wherever any of our enemies are, on the pain of being unable to use the sea.”¹⁵ This was yet another way that the Athenians used their naval power to control their empire.

The naval empire of the Athenians affected the development of democracy in less direct ways as well. The economy of the Athenians was largely based on the import and export of goods, which brought a lot of money and many luxuries into the city. Because of this, many Athenians were engaged in this business, as were their slaves and many of the metics living in the city. Pseudo-Xenophon tells us that, “the people are no better dressed than the slaves and metics, nor are they any more handsome.” He goes on to say that it is financially necessary for the people to be slaves to the slaves in order that they take a portion of their earnings. Similarly, it is important to have metics in the city for the business of the city to run smoothly.¹⁶ Although the slaves and metics were not given political rights, the metics at least were accepted as almost being socially equal to Athenian citizens and social equality like this is one of the most important aspects of a democratic society.

The Athenians also used political methods to control their subjects. In order to prevent revolts in the first place, the Athenians needed to ensure the ascendancy of those men who were pro-Athenian, and this was sometimes accomplished by modifying the constitution in a subject city. This is clearly demonstrated by a decree about Erythrae, which instituted an annual council of one hundred and twenty, chosen by lot, which was modeled on the Athenians council of five hundred. The Athenians also encouraged pro-Athenian individuals in their subject states by passing decrees in their honor, and they instituted a policy by which judicial cases of serious matter were transferred from a subject state to Athenian courts. These involved cases in

¹⁵Xenophon, II.11-12

¹⁶Ibid., I.10-12

which the penalty was exile, death, or loss of civic rights, and allowed the Athenians to ensure that cases would be found in favor of pro-Athenians.¹⁷

The Athenians were at this time in control of a large portion of the Greek lands, and were receiving substantial annual tributes from their subjects. This money was used for several purposes, the most well known being the building programs on the Acropolis. Pericles commissioned these projects in order to replace the temples that had been destroyed by the Persians. He used public money for this, most of which came from the annual tributes, and justified using this money by declaring that as long as Athens was upholding her part of the deal made among the members of the League, that is, to protect those Greeks from future Persian invasions, the allies had no business questioning what the money they sent was used for.¹⁸

The tribute that Athens received from her subjects was not only used in building programs to beautify the city. This money was also used to pay thousands of civil servants, and in this way the empire of Athens supported her democracy. More than twenty thousand men were supported by the tribute, which was a very significant portion of the population of Athens. The positions paid for with this money included jurors, the council of five hundred, about seven hundred internal offices and a similar number of offices overseas, among others.¹⁹

It was important to have stipends for public servants because there were, at this time, many public jobs, and the men filling these positions would have been unable to support themselves financially were they not paid with public funds for the services they provided. Previously in Athens there were far fewer public jobs, and the ones that did exist were paid for by the wealthiest citizens as their own service to the state. Such a system was oligarchic however, and in a democracy one wants to be paid by

¹⁷Sealy, p. 305

¹⁸Plutarch, *Pericles* 12

¹⁹Aristotle, 24.3

the state as a whole, not by a few private citizens.

The payment of jurors was especially important, since men from every class could participate, and because Athens had become a rather litigious state. The policy of paying jurors for their service was introduced by Pericles, originally at a rate of two obols per day, which was later increased to three obols per day, or half a drachma.²⁰ Considering that the average daily wage for a laborer in Athens was one drachma, this was not bad payment for one day of jury service.

Aristotle accuses Pericles of instituting this policy because of partisan politics. He claims that Pericles started paying jurors to combat the generosity of Cimon, who was “rich as a tyrant”, and would give aid to any who sought it. Pericles, apparently, was influenced by Damonides of Oe to pay the people with their own money, since he did not have sufficient funds to do so himself. Aristotle goes on to say that the payment of jurors led to the deterioration of the judicial system in Athens, because men would participate in the juries simply for the money, and therefore it was the ordinary men instead of the better sort who were eager to be chosen for jury service.²¹

It is more likely however, that Pericles instituted pay for jurors to ensure that there would be sufficient numbers of jurors for the growing judicial business of the state. Also, this partisan view does not account for the extension of pay to the council of five hundred or other magistracies.

One of the reasons there was a need for so many jurors in Athens is that, as mentioned above, cases from subject states that involved heavy penalties were to be tried in Athens. Not only did this benefit the Athenians because it meant more jurors would be paid for their service, it brought money into the city in other ways as well. Pseudo-Xenophon tells us that there was a one percent tax in Piraeus, which was a

²⁰Sealy, 298

²¹Aristotle, 27.3-4

customs duty of some kind, and also that when foreigners came to the city people who had lodging for rent, or a team of animals or a slave to hire out would make money through this practice. Also, bringing foreigners into the city helps promote democracy. If citizens of the subject states never came to Athens, they would only know of and honor those greater Athenians who traveled abroad, namely generals, trierarchs, and ambassadors. Instead, they came into the city and honored all Athenians, since they found that the outcome of their judicial proceedings depended upon the entire populace.²²

While these effects of the empire are beneficial to Athenian democracy, there might be other effects that are detrimental, especially regarding the ideals of the society. Balot suggests that imperialism teaches citizens to value those qualities of character that lead to acquisition of material goods, which leads them away from the pursuit of other activities, such as political cooperation or the contemplation of the truth. When a citizen sees the actions of his city abroad, he develops the belief that aggressive behavior is rewarded, which leads him to believe that acting aggressively within the state, instead of participating in rational discussion, is the correct way to conduct oneself politically.²³

²²Xenophon, I. 17-18

²³Balot, p. 1

Chapter 3

On Thucydides' Assessment of Athenian Democracy and Empire

The funeral oration of Pericles after the first year of the Peloponnesian War is one of the best known passages from Thucydides' *History of the Peloponnesian War*. It is often presented as a testament to the wonders of the democratic system of government, but most people do not view the oration in its full context. Immediately following the funeral oration, Thucydides gives his grim account of the plague that had descended upon Athens, of which he himself had been afflicted, and this is followed by Pericles' final speech, in which he castigates the Athenians when they begin to lose heart and start laying blame.

The fact that these two speeches of Pericles are separated by an account of a great disaster that affected all Athenians - men, women, and children alike - is certainly no coincidence. Thucydides provides them in this arrangement in order to make an evaluation of Athenian democracy, and if we take some of his other passages into consideration, especially the Melian Dialogue, Thucydides also seems to be commenting on the status of the Athenian empire.

There are several conclusions that can be made after carefully examining these passages from Thucydides. First of all, the democracy and empire of Athens had flourished because of the self-interest of the people, although it may have been believed to be due to the altruism and virtue of their ancestors. Similarly, while earlier stages of democracy in Athens might have been beneficial to the state, the extreme form of democracy during the time of Pericles benefited the people individually, while the state as a whole suffered. We also find that although the standards for equality that are essential for a democratic society were present among the Athenians, this was not propagated throughout their empire. Finally, we see that the naval empire benefited the Athenians, but was a detriment to people everywhere else in the empire.

After a brief introduction, the first thing Pericles does in his oration is to praise their ancestors. He says that “by their courage and their virtue”¹ they had handed Athens down to the current generation as a free country. This is not the only time Pericles praises courage and virtue. When contrasting the military of Athens and other Greek states, notably Sparta, Pericles says that Athens does not rely on secret weapons, but on the courage and loyalty of those fighting for her.² Later in his speech, after praising the virtues of Athens, Pericles says that it is this kind of city that those men, who could not bear to lose her, nobly fought and died for.³

From all of this it seems that every man of military age would jump at the chance of fighting for Athens, for no other reason than to preserve the virtues therein. We get a different perspective, however, when we look at the account of the plague and at Pericles’ final speech. Because of the plague there was unprecedented lawlessness in the city. People really began to appreciate their own mortality, and seeing how short their lives might be, they began to venture on acts of self-indulgence, and they

¹Thucydides, II.36

²Ibid., II.39

³Ibid., II.41

spent their money quickly and on things of pleasure. “No fear of god or law of man had a restraining force” and “no one expected to live long enough to be brought to trial or punished.” So much for having courage and virtue.⁴

Pericles addresses this issue in his final speech before the Athenian citizens. In his opinion, “when the whole state is on the right course it is a better things for each separate individual than when private interests are satisfied but the state as a whole is going downhill.”⁵ At this crucial time, when Athens needed their support the most, the people had abandoned the state and were only concerned with their own affairs. This is not surprising, however, since many of the developments that had brought Athens to the situation it was in were motivated by self-interest.

As mentioned in the first chapter, the reforms of Kleisthenes were not made because he was an altruist who really cared about the empowerment of the people; he made those reforms in order to overcome his rival, Isagoras. While the acts of self-interest of Kleisthenes eventually turned out to be arguably beneficial for the city, other, more wide-spread acts of self-interest were certainly detrimental. Aristotle tells us that some people believed that the courts deteriorated due to the implementation of payment for jury service. Because of this, it was the ordinary people who were eager to serve rather than the “better sort.” These people, who wanted to serve for the monetary benefits, were susceptible to bribery, which led to the deterioration of the jury courts.⁶

The democracy at Athens benefited people individually, by giving them some political responsibilities and because they had a share, in some way, of the large sums of money coming in from all over the empire. But as with many good things there is an adverse aspect as well. By increasing the power of the people and allowing

⁴Thucydides, II.53

⁵Ibid., II.60

⁶Aristotle, 27.4-5

more participation in government the Athenians left themselves with no authoritative leader. Since all magistrates except the generals were chosen by lot and the fact that men could be elected general multiple times, the generalships grew to be prestigious offices that were sought by politically ambitious men. The problem with this system is that while the generals held supreme power over the military and were very influential among the people, they could not make binding political decisions themselves, and had to rely on influencing the ekklesia that their policies were worthwhile.

Pericles experienced this side of democracy firsthand. After two invasions by the Peloponnesians and the onset of the plague, the Athenians no longer supported Pericles' military policy. In their current state of desperation, having to contend with both the war and the plague, the Athenians wished for an end of the hostilities with Sparta. They blamed Pericles for having influenced them to go to war, and they held him responsible for their misfortune. Being so eager to make peace, the people sent ambassadors to Sparta, but they failed to accomplish anything.⁷ While these ambassadors were unable to undermine Pericles' military policy and make peace, this incident clearly illustrates the generals' lack of executive power. Pericles, who was elected general for fifteen consecutive years, was obviously qualified to lead the state, and he felt that his strategy would do the most good for the state, albeit in the long-term. This strategy can never work, however, if the people are free to act contrary to it when it suits them.

Pericles goes on to defend himself, explaining that while they blamed him for their troubles, he was among the small number of men who had the ability to see what ought to be done. He then lays out the necessary qualities of an ideal leader:

A man who has knowledge but lacks the power to clearly express it is no better off than if he never had any ideas at all. A man who has

⁷Thucydides, II.59

both these qualities, but lacks patriotism, could scarcely speak for his own people as he should. And even if he is patriotic as well, but not able to resist a bribe, then this one fault will expose everything to the risk of being bought and sold.⁸

A man who exhibits these qualities is the man that one wants to lead the government, but surely a man who satisfied these criteria would be hard to come by. The Athenians, however, considered Pericles to be superior to most men with regard to these qualities, or else they would not have elected him. While they had previously counted Pericles as a great citizen they were now accusing him of doing wrong.

Since all the citizens were charged with the running of the state, and no one enjoyed supreme authority, the politics of Athens were largely subject to the whims of the masses. Thucydides gives us a great example of this in his conclusion after the final speech of Pericles. The situation in Athens had not changed, and the people, having lost much to the plague and incursions of the Peloponnesians, condemned Pericles to pay a fine for his wrong-doing. “Not long afterwards, however, *as is the way with crowds*, they re-elected him to the generalship and put all their affairs into his hands.”⁹

Thucydides also evaluates, as it seems, the morality of the Athenian empire. The Melian Dialogue clearly illustrates the Athenians unethical, almost sinister, treatment of their subject states. Melos was a colony of Sparta, and, maintaining its neutrality, had refused to join the Athenian empire like the other island. During the early stages of the war the Melians had remained neutral, but became enemies of Athens when they had opposed an Athenian force that had been laying waste to their land. Already we see how the Athenians acted towards the other Greek states. The dialogue is an account of the negotiations, or rather ultimatums, of the Athenians at a meeting of

⁸Thucydides, II.60

⁹Ibid., II.65 (italics added for emphasis)

the heads of state of the Melians. Simply put, the Athenians were demanding that the Melians either surrender and become part of the empire, or to cease being a bother to the Athenians by being destroyed.¹⁰

At one point in the dialogue the Athenian delegation tells the Melians that they plan to show them that it is for their own good, as well as for the good of the empire, that the Melians submit and join the empire without further hostility. The Melians ask why it would be good for them to become the slaves of Athens, and the Athenian delegation replies that it would be good not to be destroyed.¹¹ Indeed, submitting to the Athenians would not be the good decision, but the lesser of two bad decisions, and one which would not be respected within the Athenian community.

In his final speech, Pericles addresses this exact quandary. The Athenians were in a bad position in the war against Sparta, and while many people wanted to submit to the Spartans and sue for peace, Pericles preferred not to give in. “But suppose the choice was forced upon us - submissions and immediate slavery or danger with the hope of survival: then I prefer the man who stands up to danger rather than the one who runs away from it.”¹²

The Melians were in the same position that the Athenians had been in, but the Athenians were advising them to submit for their own good, and when the Melians spoke of relying on hope, they were told that there was no hope; the Spartans would not come to their aid, and the gods favored the Melians no more than they favored the Athenians.¹³ Submitting to one's enemies would be viewed as cowardly in Athens, but the standards of the Athenians do not translate overseas.

In the funeral oration, Pericles says that the Athenians “make friends by doing

¹⁰Thucydides, V.84

¹¹Ibid., V.91-3

¹²Ibid., II.61

¹³Ibid., V.102-5

good to others, not by receiving good from them.”¹⁴ Surely he must be joking; that is the exact opposite of how the Athenians “make friends”. They subdued the members of the Delian League, making them their subjects, and created the Athenian empire, and then demanded tribute from them in order to finance the political institutions of Athens. The Athenian delegation at Melos tells the Melians how one should behave toward others with regard to war – “to stand up to one’s equals, to behave with deference to one’s superiors, and to treat one’s inferiors with moderation.”¹⁵ The Melians, therefore, being inferior to the Athenians, should be treated with moderation. When the Melians refused to submit, the Athenians laid siege to their city, and eventually the Melians were forced to surrender. The Athenians put to death all the men of military age, sold the women and children as slaves, and sent a group of five hundred men to colonize the island for themselves.¹⁶ This can hardly be considered moderate treatment.

Thucydides also shows us that while the naval empire is a great benefit to the Athenians, it is a detriment to others. We have already seen that the naval empire is good for Athens because it brings in a large quantity of money which is used to pay for the political institutions and affairs of the state. In the funeral oration, Pericles also praises the naval empire for allowing the Athenians to import good things from all over the world, which increases the beauty of living in Athens.¹⁷

This benefit for Athens comes with cost, a cost which burdens the subject states. During negotiations at Melos, the Melians offer the Athenians friendship and neutrality to prevent their destruction, but the Athenians say they must make them an example to the other subjects. If they did not in some way subdue the Melians, their

¹⁴Thucydides, II.40

¹⁵Ibid., V.111

¹⁶Ibid., V.116

¹⁷Ibid., II. 38

subjects would view this as a sign of weakness, whereas the Melians' hatred of Athens is evident of Athens' power.¹⁸

The Melians warn the Athenian delegation that if they continue to act in this way, they will make more and more enemies, as other states see how the Athenian empire is growing and how the Athenians treat their subjects, but the Athenians claim they are not afraid of this, since the Greeks of the mainland had their freedom and would not soon be concerned about any Athenian threat.¹⁹

In his final speech, Pericles admonished the Athenians for not defending their city and preserving her empire. He felt that since they benefited from the empire, they should shoulder some of the burden. "Your empire is now like a tyranny: it may have been wrong to take it; it is certainly dangerous to let it go."²⁰ The empire financed the political institutions of Athens, as well as other affairs of state, such as support of orphans, and giving up the empire would mean giving up their very way of life.

Of the assessments of Athenian democracy and empire made by Thucydides, the most important concerns the power in the democracy. Thucydides tells us that Pericles was a noble and well-qualified leader, and under his leadership the government in Athens, though nominally a democracy, had become the rule of the first man.²¹ Pericles was a strong leader, and was able to influence the people to accept his policies, at least most of the time. The men who followed him lacked his virtue, and although they were able to persuade the people sometimes, they did not always lead Athens to success, since they were more concerned with their own affairs than the affairs of the state. What Athens needed was more leaders like Pericles, and it would probably have been even more beneficial for the state to have a leader who was able

¹⁸Thucydides, V.94

¹⁹Ibid., V.98-9

²⁰Ibid., II.63

²¹Ibid., II.65

to make binding decisions instead of having to rely on persuading the masses. The people were often ignorant of the correct course of action and were likely to put their own interests before those of the state, and could not be relied upon to successfully rule a nation, especially in times of war.

A powerful leader in Athens would still have to cope with public opinion and the morale of the citizens during wartime, but he would at least have been able to adopt and maintain a consistent policy. A leader like this could certainly make mistakes, as we see in modern democracies, but his policy and actions would not have been governed by the whim of the selfish and greedy populace.

Chapter 4

Conclusions

Ancient Athens is commonly heralded as the great inventor of democracy and the model for modern democracies; anyone who has taken a junior high school social studies class will know this. What we have seen, however, is that while the idea of modern democracy comes from the Greek *demokratia* - rule of the *demos*, the people - the Athenian form of democracy would not make a good model for modern democracies.

The political system at Athens first became a true democracy after the reforms of Kleisthenes. It is likely, however, that these reforms were at least partially motivated by Kleisthenes' own self-interests. In order to defeat his rival, Isagoras, he won over the people by altering the political system in such a way that the people had more control of the government, but these changes favored one group of people, namely the citizens residing in the city, such as Kleisthenes' family, the Alcmaeonidae. This certainly goes against the modern ideals of a democratic system of government.

Not only was the democracy of Athens motivated by self-interest, it flourished because of the subjugation and exploitation of Athens' former allies. While democratic ideals were respected in Athens, they were completely ignored in international

relations. The subjects of Athens were treated like slaves, while the slaves in Athens were treated like citizens. International policy like this would not be tolerated in the modern world, especially not from a democratic state.

Although not as severe as in ancient Athens, these same faults exist in modern democracies. Politicians still pursue the interests of parties other than the state, whether it is their own interests or those of special interest groups. With regard to international relations, stronger nations do not always treat other nations and the citizens of other nations according to the democratic ideals that exist within their own countries. The democracy of Athens can still be used as a model in today's society, but not as a model of how a democratic government should be managed. It would serve as an excellent model of how *not* to manage a democratic government. While the pursuit of one's own interest and the subjugation of other states allowed Athens to flourish, these flaws ultimately led to the state's defeat.

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