

ATHENS AND ROME: LIFE AND CULTURE IN CLASSICAL ANTIQUITY

Lecture 7 – Athenian Democracy

CLCS4007

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Demokratia

- ▣ Dēmos = people.
- ▣ Specifically, it may mean
 - The entire Athenian people $\approx$ the state
 - The common people $\approx$ the poor
 - A community within Athenian territory (one of 139 *demes*).
- ▣ Krateō = I rule.

Types of Government

- ▣ Demokratia = the people's rule
in contrast to:
- ▣ Monarkhia = one person's rule.
- ▣ Oligarkhia = a few people's rule.
- ▣ Tyrannis = despotic rule; tyranny.
- ▣ Aristokratia = the best people's rule
 - do not assume that this means best by birth; for Aristotle it means most popular (elected).

Ancient Thought

- ▣ There was much debate (and fighting) in Greek states about which was the best type of government.
- ▣ Major thinkers on the topic are Plato (against demokratia), Xenophon (against demokratia), Aristotle (against demokratia), and Socrates (against demokratia).
- ▣ Beware anachronism. Ancient demokratia ≠ modern democracy.

“With regard to the Athenian constitution, this is the reason for my lack of approval of this form of government: in choosing it they have also chosen to give the worthless precedence over the competent...

... it does seem fair for the poor [*penetes*] and the people [*demos*] to take precedence over the well-born [*gennaioi*] and the rich [*plousioi*], for this reason: it is the people who are the driving force behind the navy and who give the city its power...

...in every area the Athenians grant precedence to the worthless, the poor, and the common people over the competent...” – “**Old Oligarch**”
Constitution of the Athenians 1.1-4.

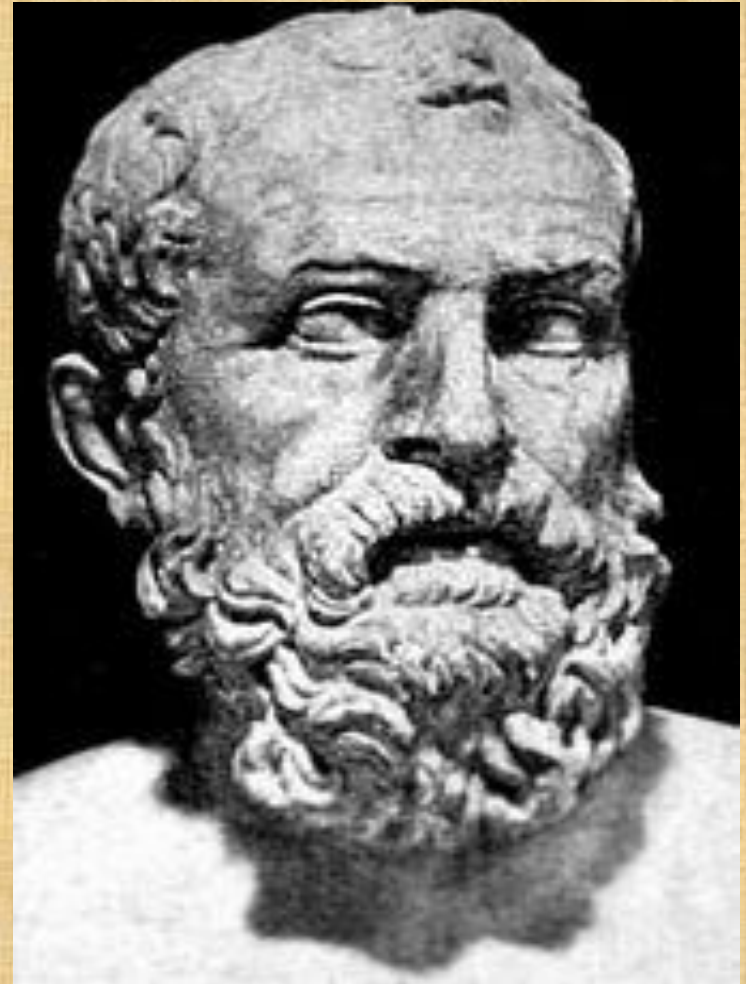
Archaic Period

- ▣ **Archaic Period – Seventh and Sixth Centuries BC.**
- ▣ Earlier semi-mythic period of Kings (e.g. Aegeus, Theseus).
- ▣ Subsequent domination of aristocratic clans by Archaic period (phratries = brotherhoods).
- ▣ Archons and the Areopagus.

Solon

“there was for a long time civic struggle between the nobles and the people” – Aristotle *Athenian Constitution* 2.1.

- ▣ Laws of Dracon (621 BC).
- ▣ Apparently widespread debt and domination of land by elite.
- ▣ Solon Archon for the year 594/93.
- ▣ Frees debtors, cancels debts and abolished debt slavery.



Peisistratids

- ▣ Τύραννος - a person with absolute rule.
- ▣ Peisistratus – three attempts at establishing a “tyranny”.
- ▣ 546 BC, he succeeds in establishing a more permanent tyranny.
- ▣ Sons Hippias and Hipparchus.

“As noted already, Peisistratus’ administration of affairs of state was measured and more consistent with constitutional than tyrannical rule. He was in all respects humane... Furthermore he advanced loans of money to the needy for their work so that they could make a living from agriculture.” - **Aristotle *Athenian Constitution* 16.2.**

Harmodios and Aristogeiton

- ❑ Murder of Hipparchus in 514/13 BC.
- ❑ Hippias rule turns harsher.

“These men [Alcmaeonids], as the Athenians say, established themselves at Delphi and bribed the Pythian priestess to bid any Spartans who should come to inquire of her on a private or a public account to set Athens free.” –
Herodotus *Histories* 5.63.1.



Cleisthenes

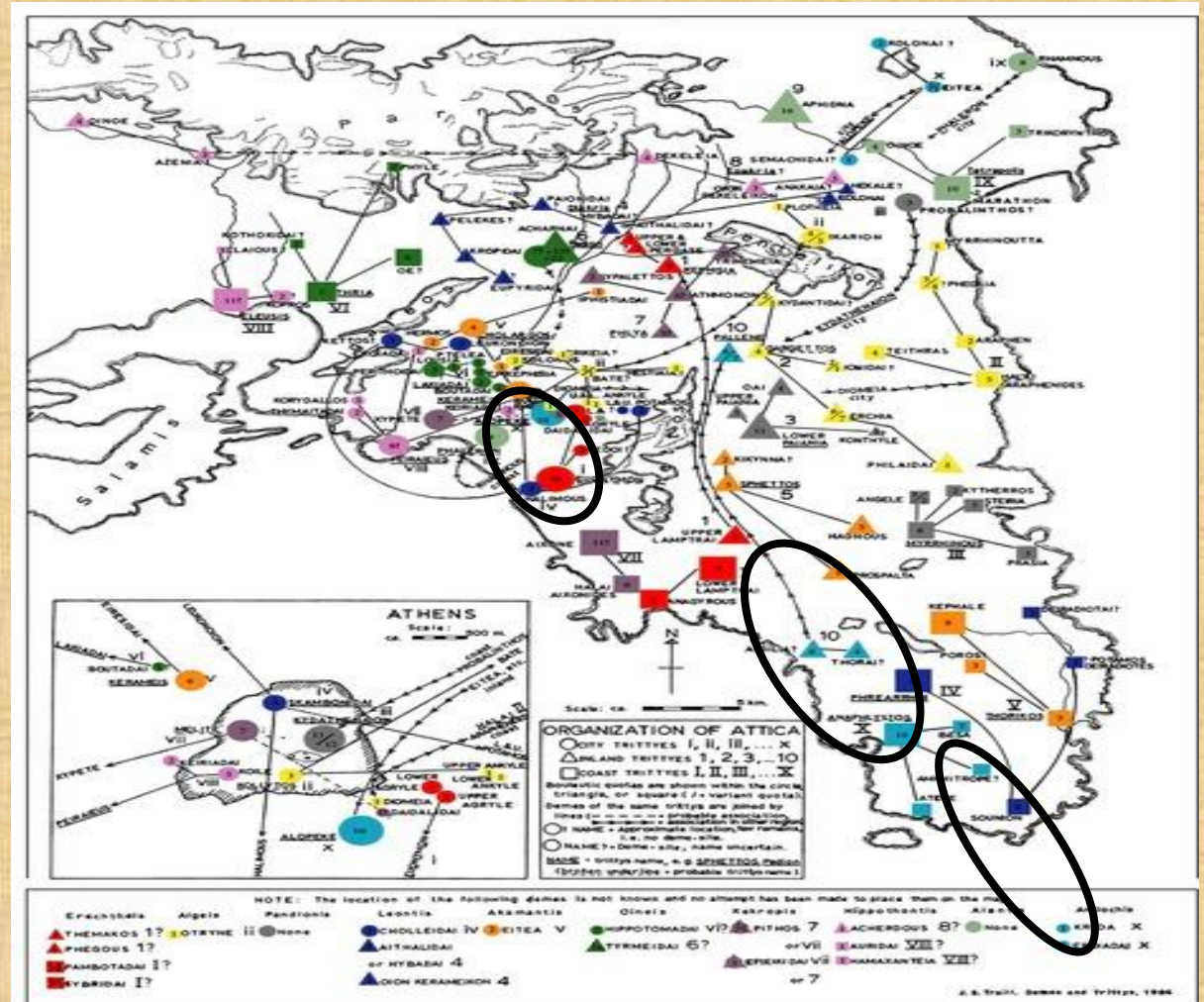
“... and the two men who had power in the city were Cleisthenes, and Alcmaeonid... and Isagoras son of Tisandrus... these men were locked in a struggle for power, and when Cleisthenes began to lose he proceeded to associate himself with the common people.” – **Herodotus** *Histories* 5.66.1.

“The people having taken control of affairs, Cleisthenes was their leader and was head of the people. For almost the chief initiative in the expulsion of the tyrants was taken by the Alcmaeonids, and they accomplished most of it by party faction” – **Aristotle** *Athenian Constitution* 20.4.

Cleisthenes' Reforms

- ▣ Reforms took place from 508/07 BC onwards.
- ▣ Demes (townships), *trittyes* (thirds), and Tribes.
- ▣ Four Tribes became ten and were renamed – each tribe had a inland, coastal and city district (*trittys*) of which there were 30 of these in total.
- ▣ Each *trittys* had ten demes.
- ▣ Boule (council) increased from 400 to 500 members, 50 from each tribe chosen by lot.
- ▣ Courts of 201 to 5001 jurors.
- ▣ Boule proposed legislation, assembly (*ekklesia*) voted on it.

Cleisthenes' Organisation of Attica



Map from Traill *Demos and Trittys* 1986.

Ostracism

- ❑ Exile for a ten year period – property and citizenship remain intact.
- ❑ Minimum of 6,000 citizens must vote.
- ❑ Man with majority of votes ostracised.
- ❑ First used in 487 BC to banish Hipparchos son of Charmos.



Themistocles son of
Neocleos.

Ostracism of Hyperbolos

“Alcibiades differences with Nicias came to a head, and there was an ostracism... Hyperbolos of the deme Perithoedae... he had in the city brought disrepute... he hoped that with one of the two men exiled he would become rival to the other. When Nicias and Alcibiades learned of the man's unscrupulousness, they held a secret discussion and, bringing together and uniting their two factions, they achieved their goal and it was Hyperboulous and not either of them who was ostracised. – **Plutarch *Nicias* 11.1-4.**

Radical Democracy (1)

- ▣ Ephialtes moves most of powers of the Areopagus to the Ekklesia, Boule, and the Courts (462/61 BC).
- ▣ Impeaches large numbers of members of the Areopagus for mismanagement – officials now subject to an examination of conduct.
- ▣ Areopagus becomes primarily a court for homicide and some religious matters.
- ▣ Boule now supervised legislative procedure and dealt with crimes against the state.

Radical Democracy (2)

- ▣ *Graphe paranomon* – public action against decrees which contradict existing laws.
- ▣ *Zeugitai* become eligible to be archons (457/56 BC).
- ▣ Pericles introduction of pay for attending the courts – two obols per day (later 3 – 425/24 BC).
- ▣ Pericles citizenship law (451/50 BC) – subsequent requirement for citizens to be born of both an Athenian mother and father.

Ekklesia – Assembly

- ▣ Ekklesia met, on average, about once every 10 days through the year
- ▣ All adult males entitled to attend
- ▣ *Ho boulomenos* (anyone who wished) could propose a motion, comment on motions, and vote
 - Strictly observed rules on procedure, e.g. only one chance to speak on any one issue, to make people think before speaking

Peiraios



Pnyx



Areopagus



Agora



Akropolis



Boule – Council

- ▣ Ekklesia's agenda prepared by the Boule.
- ▣ Members selected by lot from the Tribes.
- ▣ Can be a member of the Boule twice, but not in succession.
- ▣ Meetings convened and chaired by the Prytaneis (Presidents)
 - executive committee of Boule and Ekklesia
 - one tribal contingent of 50 in the Boule is placed in charge for one tenth of the year (10 month civil calendar)
 - at least one third of them were on duty at any time during their period of presidency (about 35 days).

Elections and Sortition

- ▣ Most offices filled by sortition (drawing of lots), notably membership of the council.
- ▣ Some important offices elected, notably ten generals (*strategoi*).
- ▣ Boards of ten – balances out the incompetent.
- ▣ Usually annual tenure of office – limiting potential abuses of magistrates.
- ▣ Ban on repeated holding of offices (except military).

Overthrow of the Democracy (1)

- ▣ Oligarchy of 411 BC.
- ▣ Motion to limit the government to 5,000 of the “best” men.
- ▣ Council of 400, seized council house by force.
- ▣ Democracy restored by 410 BC.

“The following motion was drawn up by Demophantus... Anyone dissolving the democracy in Athens... is to be an enemy of the Athenians and killed with impunity, his goods becoming state property... - Andocides *On the Mysteries* 96-98.

Overthrow of the Democracy (2)

- ▣ Athens surrenders to Sparta in 404 BC – the Peloponnesian War comes to an end.
- ▣ Spartan commander Lysander imposes a tyranny of 30 men in Athens – this is later extended to 3,000 men.
- ▣ Democratic faction seizes the Piraeus – civil war.
- ▣ Truce declared, democracy restored and general amnesty, except for 30, ten and the eleven.

“...in the presence of Lysander... they convened the assembly to discuss the constitution. At this no public speaker could oppose them or make threats against them... Theramenes stood up and told you to turn the city over to thirty men...” – **Lysias *Against Eratosthenes* 72-73.**

End of the Radical Democracy

- ▣ Battle of Chaeronea in 338 BC – Philip II of Macedon defeats an alliance of the Boeotia, Athens, Megara, Corinth, Achaea, Leucas, and Corcyra.
- ▣ Allies compelled to join an alliance with Philip.
- ▣ Lamian War – rebellion upon death of Alexander.
- ▣ Extent of popular participation varying through Hellenistic and Roman periods.