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ATHENIAN DEMOCRACY

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Human beings living in the ancient Greek *polis* constituted a body politic, a community bound together by a common regime or way of life (*politeia*). When domestic and foreign affairs were debated, treaties ratified, coins struck, decrees proclaimed, or laws passed, it was always in the name of “the Athenians” or “the Lakedaimonians” – never in terms of “Athens” or “Sparta.” Active citizens by direct participation formed the free *polis*. From the end of the sixth century to the last quarter of the fourth century, the regime of the Athenians, with a few brief exceptions, was democracy – the world’s first. (All dates herein are BCE.)

The Greek word “democracy” (*dēmokratia*) literally refers to “power” (*kratos*) exercised by “the people” (*dēmos*) as the authoritative element in the *polis*. Democracy, as distinguished from other regimes (*monarchia*, *aristokratia*, *oligarchia*) and certain authoritative non-regimes (*dynasteia*, *tyrannia*), denotes a collective capacity in the *dēmos* to exercise rule and governance over the population of a *polis*, that is, over the incorporated body of citizens, their dependents, metics (foreign residents), freed slaves, and slaves. By virtue of its collective strength as a body of active citizens drawn broadly from the overall population and its ability to act in concert when necessary, the *dēmos* under democracy asserted its control over all the institutions by which the *polis* accomplished its domestic and foreign affairs. Thus, beyond “people-power” or “power in hands of the people,” *dēmokratia* conveys the capacity of the people to act politically.

Citizens under Athenian democracy shared in the political art (*politikē*), ruling and being ruled in turn, thereby achieving freedom (*eleutheria*) and justice (*dikē*). The three pillars upon which Athenian democracy rested were the political equality of citizens (*isonomia*), the equal opportunity and access of citizens to the political process through free speech (*isēgoria*), and the freedom of citizens to speak their minds openly (*parrhēsia*). Through their active participation in political life, Athenian citizens enjoyed self-government and insofar as each citizen participated directly in political life and contributed his skills or virtues to the best of his ability, *dēmokratia* could be conceived as meritocracy (Thucydides II 37.1-41.1; Aristotle, *Politics* VI 1317a40-b).

Compared to modern democracy, which is almost exclusively representative democracy, ancient democracy was direct. Athenian citizens took responsibility for legislative and judicial decisions of the *polis*, without representation or a bureaucracy to administer its will. The legacy of Athenian democracy has greatly influenced the western political and intellectual tradition, but has been tainted by theoretical objections rooted in anti-democratic and anti-Athenian sentiment (Roberts 1994). Critics of Athenian democracy, both ancient and modern, denounce the regime as ochlocracy (“mob rule”) or anarchy. Contemporary scholarship has exposed this criticism as an elite or philosophical disagreement over who should rule which denies that “the people” have any capacity or competence for self-government (Ober 1998).

Athenian democracy represents a form of self-government grounded on core principles of popular sovereignty and freedom, and exhibiting signs of its success through institutional design, competence in governance and stability over the long term, and resistance to destabilization caused by internal factional strife – success achieved through active, wide-spread participation and the direct control of its citizens (Hansen 1991; Hedrick and Ober 1996; Munn 2000; Rhodes 2004; Ober 2008).

Brief History

The rise of Athenian democracy began with key social and political reforms instituted by Solon (594) and Kleisthenes (508/7) who, following the expulsion of the domestic tyranny of the Peisistratids, founded “democracy” (Herodotus VI 131.2). Solon established justice for the entire *polis* by protecting all citizens from abuses of power, without denying the aristocratic prerogative to rule. But factional strife continued and led to the emergence of Peisistratos as a popular tyrant who paradoxically prepared the way for Kleisthenes’ later reforms by curtailing old aristocratic privileges and concentrating political power at Athens. The oppressive reign of his sons, Hippias and Hipparchos, ended with assassination and overthrow (514, 510/9). With the support of the Athenian *dêmos*, Kleisthenes introduced reforms reorganizing Athenian territory and the citizen-body, thus altering the character of the hoplite army and important Athenian political institutions. These reforms further integrated the Athenians as a unified community, enhanced civic equality and protection of rights, and increased the direct political participation of a broad base of citizens – formally bringing democracy into being (Raaflaub 2006).

Themistokles (493/2) persuaded the Athenians to invest sudden profits from public silver mines in a magnificent public works project rather than to disperse the revenues among citizens. The decision to create a permanent navy of 170-200 triremes radically transformed the nature of the Athenian citizen-body. Landless citizens (*thêtes*) in vast numbers worked in shipyards and as crews for the new fleet – which proved to be the most important source of Athenian greatness. These citizens acquired a significant interest in and influence over political decisions, elections, and the administration of the *polis* and its maritime empire. The attention of the Athenian *dêmos*, hence the attention of the *polis* as a whole, was inexorably drawn seaward. Athenian democracy, especially in the fifth century, was buttressed by the wide-spread economic prosperity, maritime trade, and imperial power and revenue created by the fleet. Imperialism abroad strengthened the legitimate claim to rule of the *dêmos* at Athens, reinforcing and even hastening the process of democratic reforms and increasing democratic control of the regime. The Athenians flourished as a result of their command of the sea (Boedeker and Raaflaub 1998; Hale 2009).

The term *dêmokratia* is first attested in the 420s (Herodotus VI 43.3 and III 80-83; see Antiphon 6.45; Aristophanes, *Birds* 1570), but was likely coined in the 460s (see Aeschylus, *Suppliant Women* 604) as the power of the Athenian navy in the Delian League (a confederation of Greek *poleis* formed in 478 to defend against future Persian invasions) reached its peak, and the Athenians achieved hegemony over their allies. This alliance gradually was transformed into a remarkably successful empire, one which depended heavily upon the fleet of ships manned by thousands of Athenian citizens. The demographic power base for empire translated into political influence at home.

Legislative and judicial reforms introduced by Ephialtes (462/1), and later expanded by Perikles, confirmed and entrenched the sovereignty of the *dêmos* at Athens, and established an

enduring framework of institutions and laws for *dēmokratia*. These reforms tilted the balance of power and authority even more toward democratic political institutions, such as the Assembly and law courts, at the expense of bodies traditionally oligarchic or aristocratic, like the Council of the Areopagos. Pay for citizen service on juries and certain offices guaranteed that lower-class Athenians, as well as citizens with wealth and leisure, could participate in magistracies and the law courts. Selection by lot replaced election almost entirely as the democratic means to assign annual magistracies. The sinews of democracy grew stronger as political authority, institutional control, and the means of accountability became more firmly gathered in the hands of the *dēmos*.

Towards the end of the Peloponnesian War (431-404), with the democracy strained to the limits by imperial expeditions, the Athenians experienced the internal faction and strife (*stasis*) so destructive of other Greek *poleis*. After the surrender of the Athenians to the Spartans, and the sudden loss of empire, the *dēmos* acquiesced before an oligarchic movement that orchestrated a political coup using democratic means – its ranks severely depleted by losses in war, especially after the Sicilian disaster. The people in Assembly agreed to drastic measures which effectively suspended democratic rule. Earlier efforts by the oligarchic faction at Athens to take advantage of events and restrain democratic rule (411/0) by instituting an oligarch regime of “the 400” and then “the 5000” had failed. Within a few months democracy was restored, and harsh laws were passed punishing those charged with supporting tyranny and conspiring to overthrow or subvert the democracy.

Emboldened by the presence of a Spartan garrison and fleet (404/3), the Athenian oligarchs again gained control of Athens. This group known as “The Thirty” (later “The Thirty Tyrants”) sought to purge the *polis* of its democratic character by imposing stricter qualifications for citizenship and expelling democratic supporters. A violent but brief civil war ensued between the democratic resistance in exile and the oligarchic faction at Athens, ending once more in the restoration of democracy. A reconciliation agreement, founded upon an unprecedented amnesty (401), reunited the citizens and preserved Athenian democracy (Xenophon, *Hellenika* II 4.43).

In the following decades, the Athenians enjoyed a high degree of domestic tranquility and stability, reacquiring much of their former power in foreign affairs. Chastened by the tumultuous affairs at the end of the fifth century, Athenians introduced legal reforms aimed to moderate the exercise of popular power without undermining the democratic regime. An ambitious review and revision of the laws was undertaken (410-399) and new procedures for legislation were approved by the *dēmos*, restraining the Assembly. Measures were taken to insure consistency, and prevent arbitrariness or contradiction, in legislation (*graphê paranomon, nomothetai*); explicit decisions of the people with the force of “laws” (*nomoi*) were also distinguished from popular “decrees” (*psêphismata*), creating in effect a nascent system of checks and balances that helped clarify the relation between popular sovereignty and the constitutional rule of law (Ostwald 1986).

It would be misleading to describe fourth-century Athenian democracy as less dynamic or successful than the radical democracy of the fifth century; its accomplishments may in fact be more impressive, given the tumultuous events of the fourth century (Xenophon, *Hellenika* VII 5.26-27). While the practice of democracy changed slightly, the Athenians continued to flourish and the core principles of their democratic regime remained strong throughout the fourth century, until Macedonian military dominance compelled the Athenians (322/1) to surrender autonomy. Its institutions and offices continued to exist, even in the Roman period, but Athenian democracy as a regime was abolished.

Citizenship

Each *polis* had a core of active citizens (*politai*), men of age to bear arms and wage war in defense of their households and territory, administering justice within the borders of the *polis*. Eligibility for full citizenship did not require land ownership or social status. Athenians, rich and poor alike, who held an equal share in the democratic *polis*, enjoyed the same political privileges and rights. Some duties, however, such as special property taxes (*eisphora*), financial liturgies associated with public projects (sponsors of triremes or dramatic performances), and enrollment in hoplite and cavalry ranks, fell to citizens with resources to expend on behalf of the *polis*.

Adult males who actively participated in warfare and the governance of the *polis* were, precisely speaking, full citizens. Younger men reached political maturity once they had finished their military training as ephebes. Women were considered passive citizens of the *polis* who, like children of citizen-parents, possessed limited civic rights and obligations protected by the laws. They participated in the religious cults and festivals of the *polis*, for example, but were excluded from direct political activity. The number of full citizens may have been as high as 50,000 in the mid-fifth century, but that number declined significantly (due to plagues and warfare) to around 30,000. Total population ranged between 250,000 and 400,000 people, including around 100,000 citizen households (Athenian men, women, children), in addition to tens of thousands of metics and 100,000 (or more) slaves. Active citizens appear to have numbered about one-tenth of the general population (free, foreign, slave) and about one-fifth of the adult population at any given time (Hansen 1991). The Athenians were by far the largest *polis* in the ancient Greek world.

Athenian democracy cultivated the concept of political freedom (*eleutheria*) which was a characteristic concern of all the Greek *poleis*. In Athens, this concept was not restricted to elites, or a particular class, but was pursued by the *dêmos* as a whole, that is, the citizen-body at large. The Athenian democratic *polis* understood itself to be a free and sovereign community grounded firmly upon a broad base of popular support from enfranchised citizens with political equality (*isonomia*) in legislative and judicial proceedings, exercising their freedom of speech (*isêgoria*), especially in the Assembly, with a frankness and boldness (*parrhêsia*) that was the hallmark of Athenian democracy. The *dêmos* regarded their civic rights or liberties (*isonomia* and *isêgoria*) as pre-requisites for the practice of direct democracy and an expression of their political freedom (Raaflaub 2006; Saxonhouse 2006).

Political Institutions

The people exercised power through a complex arrangement of institutions, procedures, and offices at Athens related to deliberation, legislation, and judgment. Democracy did not rely upon ancestral custom or claims of natural distinction and inequality used to support aristocratic or oligarchic rule. The democratic constitution and its institutions promoted active and direct involvement by the citizen-body and entrusted the people with the decision-making and judging powers of the *polis* as a whole. (A second layer of democratic governance grew out of the need for the Athenians to administer and manage their empire.)

Each citizen was enrolled in a local *deme*, the entry point for political activity. The *demes* were in one of three regions in Attika (coastal, rural, urban) and distributed by lot into one of the ten eponymous tribes created by Kleisthenes. The tribes were thus composed of *demes* randomly aggregated and representative of all three regions. Each citizen as a member of his *deme* met in

assembly, debated issues, elected local officers, organized and celebrated local cults or festivals, levied property taxes, and administered common land. Citizens garnered practical experience in democratic politics as demesmen and then composed the citizen-body who, at Athens, gathered, debated, and voted in the Assembly (*ekklêsia*); served as members of the Council and jurors in the law courts (*dikastêria*); and executed the will of the *dêmos* as magistrates.

Political power in democratic Athens was not scattered among separate branches or arms of government. The Assembly and the law courts equally manifested “the people” at Athens, and decisions taken by the *dêmos* gathered in either venue were considered to be authoritative and final. The general business of the Assembly, which met 40 times per year, was to hear motions, deliberate, and vote (majority rule) on matters domestic and foreign involving the whole *polis*. Assembly sessions lasted no longer than one day. Meetings were announced with a notice of five days and the agenda was published in advance; emergency sessions could be called as needed. The Assembly met on a rocky hillside facing the *agora* and *akropolis* which could accommodate more than 6,000 citizens (the number needed for a quorum). Athenian male citizens over the age of twenty could attend, and any citizen present had the right to speak. Most young men did not attend until they had finished a few years of active military service. Citizens in the fourth century collected pay for attending regular meetings.

Most legal issues (but not all) were settled by juries composed of citizens over the age of thirty who were not indebted to the public treasury or otherwise deprived of civic rights (*atimia*). Names were chosen by lot to form a pool of 6,000 citizens available for jury duty each year (600 from each of the 10 tribes). A complicated stone mechanism randomly assigned individual jurors (*dikastai*) to the law courts on a daily basis. Legal cases – like Assembly meetings – lasted only one day, so sortition prevented the corruption of jurors by litigants, who were solely responsible for arguing their own cases. The magistrate assigned to each law courts served as its time-keeper for the speakers and recorded decisions, but could not interpret the laws or instruct the jurors in any way. Once assembled in court, jurors heard all of the arguments, deliberated in silence, and passed judgment immediately by secret ballot. Juries had 201, 401, or 501 citizens, with additional increments of 500 assigned in cases of great public significance. The largest law court could number as many as 6,000, if all citizens in the jury pool were called to deliberate on a single case, essentially reconstituting the *dêmos* along the lines of the Assembly but acting in a judicial capacity. (The Assembly itself presided over certain cases, such as treason.)

The administrative business of the Assembly and the judgments of the law courts were executed by more than 1,000 officials, the vast majority of whom were selected for office by lot, while the remainder were chosen by election, including generals (*stratêgoi*). These magistrates served on commissioned boards, rather than as individuals, which insured collegiality. The most important board was the Council of 500 (*boulê*) which prepared the agenda for the Assembly and carried out its orders or decrees. The Council, instructed by the Assembly, formulated questions or issues to be put to a vote at a future meeting and provided recommendations (*probouleumata*) for consideration by the Assembly to approve, reject, or return for revision. Composed of 500 citizens over the age of thirty selected by lot (50 from each of the 10 tribes), the Council served for one year. Within the Council, a rotating executive committee (*prytaneis*) was assigned to the fifty members from a given tribe, who served for one month as a “standing” committee responsible for day-to-day contingencies. One citizen from the *prytaneis* was chosen by lot to serve for one day as president (*epistatês*), presiding over any meetings of the Assembly or Council but without holding any formal powers.

With the exception of the board of generals and admirals, office-holders were limited to an annual term and could not be selected for any office more than once (except for the Council, where citizens could serve twice but not successively). The distribution of magistracies was open to all and the constant need to fill offices annually insured the rate of active citizen participation in administrative capacities would be high and spread across social and economic lines.

Accountability and Participation

The Athenians invented various mechanisms to insure democratic participation – lottery, sortition, rotation, annual terms, scrutiny, pay, limited iteration in magistracies, and the complex system for assigning citizens to demes, tribes, and boards – which also effectively blocked the accumulation of power or influence in the hands of individuals or small groups and elite cliques, thus safeguarding democracy from oligarchic influence. With no institutional means to control or rule the *dêmos* without its consent, democratic leaders could not impose policies on the *dêmos*. Their success as statesmen-orators (*rhêtôres*) derives from their capacity to act as advisors to the *dêmos*, articulating and defending their advice publicly and persuasively (Yunis 1996). Further, the transparency of much public activity in the ancient *polis* and especially the strict procedures of accountability applied to all the magistracies – including formal review (*dokimasia*), scrutiny of performance in office (*euthynai*), impeachment (*eisangelia*), censure (*atimia*), and ostracism – preserved popular control over office-holders and other administrators of the people’s will. In the absence of formal institutional checks and balances, Athenian democracy developed such rules and mechanisms, often enforced by severe sanctions, to protect the rule of the people against the threat of subversion from within.

Several thousand citizens each and every year, and for many years during their lifetimes, were politically active in ways that far exceeded occasionally attending the Assembly, voting on an issue, or sitting on a jury. Broad participation in political affairs by “the rich” or “well-born” few (*plousioi, gennaioi, oligoi*) as well as by “the middling sort” (*metrioi*), together with “the many” (*to plêthos, dêmotai, oi polloi*) of average means or the poor without land, guaranteed that the entire Athenian population had a direct stake in the success and the benefits of democracy (Hansen 1999; Raaflaub 2006; Ober 2008). Athenian democracy created the conditions for active participation in the body politic by a wide and diverse range of citizens, cultivated a strong sense of civic identity and concern for the public good, and thus generated a system of governance that was not only stable and successful, but also capable of sustained, coherent, direct deliberation and decision-making consistent with democratic principles.

CROSS-REFERENCES

See also: Democracy, Direct Democracy, Ancient Constitution, Thucydides, Xenophon, Aristotle

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