

Democracy in 5th Century (BCE) Athens



Academic Paper by Audrey Hinson
Parthenon Docent, Class of 2009

Today I will attempt to put unto perspective the word democracy relative to the period that the original Parthenon was commissioned and explore what it might have meant to 5th century (BCE) Athenians as a whole. In modern day democracy voters elect representatives to government on their behalf whereas in 5th century (BCE) Athens, democracy, rule of the *demos* equated to government of the people carried out by the people for the people. There were certain qualifications to the word *demos* but in effect government was achieved through an assembly of male citizens over the age of 18 and a council of 500 men, 50 of whom were elected by lot from the 10 districts. The council members had to be over the age of 30 and were only allowed to serve one year and then not more than twice. In addition, 10 generals were elected annually by the people and only they were allowed continuous re-election. Indeed, the great General Pericles, regarded as the guiding spirit of Democracy, was elected every year from 443 until his death in 429. So in essence what they had then was a direct democracy as opposed to our representative democracy today.

However, Democracy held other connotations in the ancient Greek World. *Demokratia* translates literally as, sovereign power over the *demos* – this seems contradictory to ‘rule for the people by the people’ – so this begs the question who specifically qualified as the *demos* and if a sovereign power did exist who were they and how did they hold power?

The two most relevant translations of *demos* to the discussion here are the meanings ‘whole citizen body’ and ‘the masses’. There was a certain polarization between these positions in the extent to which they enjoyed equality. For example, to attain citizenship one had to comply with strict criteria – as Aristotle noted in Xenophon’s *Constitution of Athens* (S.T. 55.3), “When they are checking qualifications they first

ask ‘who is your father...who was your mother?’ ... whereas the masses were all males under the age of 18, excluding foreigners and slaves. Women had an ambiguous situation; generally their place was within the household, although those related to Athenian citizens had limited legal rights, but they could not own land or be involved in politics. By contrast the male citizens had various rights and obligations – only they could own land and participate in the Assembly which voted on all the important issues and elected other state officials. One example of this power was the Assembly’s decision to execute the generals who had won the 406 (BCE) sea battle of Arginoussai, citing their dereliction of duty in not picking up survivors. Despite a summons claiming that such a proposal was unconstitutional the Assembly said “it would be monstrous if the people were not allowed to do whatever they pleased.” (Xenophon, *Hellenika* 1.7.7-35, W.A. p.200). However, despite such overt practice of democracy within the citizen body there were, as in our own democracy, opportunities for corruption. The council that prepared the agenda for the Assembly was paid for their service, perhaps giving incentive as to which topics were to be raised. This suspicion was observed in Xenophon’s *Constitution of Athens* (S.T. 28) “it is said that if you approach the Council or Assembly with money, you will get things done.”

If this were the case then it could suggest that the Assembly actually held sovereign power, i.e. operational control over the majority who were left out. This would be in sharp contrast to a speech given by Pericles where in his appeal to the Athenian notion of supreme state, he calls their constitution a “democracy because power is in the hands not of a minority but of the whole people.” (Thucydides BK. II, p. 145). So why would Pericles allude to such a notion?

War was endemic in Athens between 497-338 (BCE) and exploitation of its empire had made Athens prosperous. Wartime evacuation from the countryside had meant many hands were available to help the booming economy. Wealth came from many sources. Enormous tributes, either in cash or ships, were extracted from colonies under Athenian control. With empire came visitors and merchants. The Athenian port of Piraeus was a major trading center for the Aegean and the Eastern Mediterranean. The Athenian navy aided in the vital grain supply and land, which had always been a source of wealth, was further increased thanks to successful campaigns abroad. Rich oligarchs may have gotten richer but other sections of society avoided starvation and also had opportunities to make a living. So with the masses being able to provide food for their families and bring home a wage, being disenfranchised was perhaps of no real consequence to them. Pericles, it would seem, was astute enough to realize that the masses played an essential part in the growth of Empire and recognized the need to give them some degree of opportunity in return.

Thus, the political and economic inequality between the citizen body and the masses cannot really clarify ‘democracy’ as democratic in our sense, but neither can it be regarded as imperialistic, given the willingness to allow the masses to share in some of the Athenian prosperity. As such, the actual nature of Athenian democracy

appears to be a mélange of the two. In sum then, it seems fair to say that there were divergent shades of democracy in 5th century (BCE) Athens and that democracy meant different things to the very different sections of society.

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