

Judging Theramenes

Theramenes figures in the history of late fifth-century Athens in five episodes: his role in the two revolutions of 411 at Athens, his generalship in the Hellespont, his participation in the battle of Arginusae of 406 and the subsequent trial of the generals, his role in negotiating the peace agreement ending the war, and his membership in the Thirty in 404. Ancient and modern assessments of Theramenes have been very mixed, ranging from admiration to extreme vituperation. Given the biases and omissions of the ancient sources, a definitive judgment is probably unachievable, but a fresh look at the most important sources may be useful.

Surviving sources dating to Theramenes' lifetime are limited to two passages in Aristophanes' *Frogs* and a few fragments of lost comedies. Of the works of contemporaries writing after his death, the most important are Lysias, Thucydides in Book VIII, Xenophon in the first two books of the *Hellenica*, and Cratippus (whom I would identify with the Oxyrhynchus Historian, the probable inspiration for the pro-Theramenes bias found in Aristotle's *Athenaion Politeia* and in Diodorus Siculus).

Lysias' *Against Eratosthenes* (XII) has a lengthy digression attacking Theramenes, whom he blames both for the oligarchy of the Four Hundred and for the establishment of the Thirty; Lysias believed that Eratosthenes could benefit from claiming to have been a supporter of Theramenes. Lysias' *Against Agoratus* (XIII) attacks Theramenes for his role in negotiating the terms of peace with Sparta. For many of the details Lysias is our only source, but the speeches were given before Athenian juries who had personal memories of the events of 411 and 404. Thucydides names Theramenes as one of four men most responsible for the overthrow of the democracy in the spring of 411, without specifying exactly what Theramenes did, and is fuller on

Theramenes' role in overthrowing the regime of the Four Hundred several months later.

Although most Athenians appear to have believed that Theramenes had thwarted an attempt to betray Athens to the Spartans, Thucydides seems reluctant to give Theramenes credit for doing so and praises the defense speech of Antiphon, whose condemnation Theramenes brought about.

Xenophon barely notices Theramenes' actions as a general in the Hellespont but gives him a sinister role in what he sees as the unjust condemnation of the generals after Arginusae. He shows him as clever but callous in the peace negotiations. He does portray him favorably as a member of the Thirty opposing the unjust actions of Critias and gives him a noble defense speech (and a memorable death scene) in 404, but allows Critias in his attack on Theramenes to reinforce the negative picture of his role in 406.

Unfortunately, Cratippus' account is not preserved; we know from Plutarch that he covered Theramenes' overthrow of the oligarchy (evidently dissatisfied with Thucydides' account of 411). If Cratippus is the Oxyrhynchus historian, he developed a fraudulent defense of Theramenes as an adherent of the "ancestral constitution" in 411 and 404, which can be partly reconstructed from Aristotle and Diodorus. Aristotle praises Theramenes as one of the best Athenian politicians "after the men of old," along with Thucydides son of Melesias and Nicias; I would see this opinion as drawn from Cratippus rather than Androtion. Aristotle's defense of Theramenes, that he was not a destroyer of all governments, appears to be a rebuttal of Lysias' accusation in 12.78.

Whether Theramenes' actions were motivated by a consistent political ideology (as Xenophon has him allege), by personal ambitions (as Thucydides implies and Lysias charges) or simply by what the current situation dictated, may be impossible to determine. We have nothing from Theramenes himself and it is not clear if Cratippus had any direct ties to him or merely

found him a convenient figure. But examining his career sheds light on the challenges to the Athenian democracy in 411 and 404, and examining the sources helps us understand the limitations of our knowledge.

Bibliography:

Buck, Robert J., "The Character of Theramenes," *AHB* 9 (1995) 14-23

Harding, Phillip E., "The Theramenes Myth," *Phoenix* 28 (1974) 101-111

Kagan, Donald, *The Fall of the Athenian Empire* (Ithaca and London, 1987)

Munn, Mark, *The School of History: Athens in the Age of Socrates* (Berkeley, 2000)

Murphy, Thomas M., "The Vilification of Eratosthenes and Theramenes in Lysias 12," *AJP* 110 (1989) 40-49

Ostwald, Martin, *From Popular Sovereignty to the Sovereignty of Law* (Berkeley, 1986)

Shear, Julia L., *Polis and Revolution: Responding to Oligarchy in Classical Athens* (Cambridge, 2011)