

Deceptions and Perceptions in the Athenian Revolutions of 411 B.C.

Deceiving one's enemy had a long and honored tradition among the ancient Greeks, from the Trojan horse to Themistocles' tricking of Xerxes. False perceptions, whether because of intentional deception by someone else, or because of wishful thinking, play a significant role in the two Athenian revolutions in 411 B.C., that which brought the Four Hundred to power and that which replaced them with the Five Thousand. For these events we rely most heavily on Thucydides, whose zeal for finding the truth is rarely questioned, although we rarely have other reliable information to serve as a check, and from Thucydides' narrative it's not always clear which perceptions are accurate.

Alcibiades uses the illusion of his influence with Tissaphernes to get the oligarchical movement started among the Athenians at Samos, but Thucydides seems uncertain about his actual degree of influence with the satrap. Later the belief that he had been deceived causes Peisander to break with Alcibiades. The oligarchs take power in Athens by deception. The perception that the Four Hundred are plotting to betray Athens to the Spartans leads to their overthrow—but Thucydides leaves some ambiguity as to their actual designs. Thucydides is selective in what he tells us, and differs from the common Athenian opinion about Phrynichus and Antiphon, and about the group led by Theramenes and Aristocrates. The son of Polystratus, one of the Four Hundred, claimed that his father was always loyal to the democracy ([Lysias] XX), but we don't know if he was able to convince an Athenian jury.

Since 1891 we have had a second major source for 411, that found in Aristotle's *Athenaion Politeia*, which differs radically from that of Thucydides. The discrepancies have been variously explained by scholars, most of whom assume that the documents in *Ath. Pol.* 29-

31 are genuine, at least generated in 411 even if only as propaganda. If the oligarchs in 411 had claimed to be restoring the “ancestral constitution” (*patrios politeia*), it would have been a hoax, but there is no sign in Thucydides or Lysias that they did so. Aristotle was deceived by a later, fourth-century, author, who invented the “ancestral constitution” motif to present the oligarchical revolutionaries as well-meaning constitutional reformers.

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