

Demagogues and Tyrants: Populist Reform in Athens from the Sixth to the Fifth Century BCE

This paper examines the constitutional reforms of Athenian democracy in the sixth and fifth centuries BCE. Cleisthenes' reforms removed tribal politics from the political organization of Athens' citizen body by replacing the clan (*genos*) with the deme (*demos*) as a primary unit of division (508 BCE). Bradeen's scholarship on Cleisthenes concludes that this was a means of breaking the political power of the Eupatridae in the phratries. (Bradeen, 1955, 22) Walker similarly finds that the admission of new citizens motivated Cleisthenes' substitution of the clan for the deme. (Walker, 1926, 146) Oliver concurs with this view, adding that the elevation of local rites to public rites and the substitution of patronymics for demonymics provides further evidence of an attempt to dissolve old separatist habits. (Oliver, 1960, 504) The clan had religious connotations, admitting a mass of new members simultaneously would have created a tremendous cultural shock. By reorganizing the citizen body using a highly artificial unit of organization based upon residency, Cleisthenes could admit large numbers of new citizens, who were previously ineligible being of non-Athenian descent. This radical change allowed free residents of Athens to attain citizenship for the first time while securing a base of future support for Cleisthenes and his ideological successors.

Pericles deepened and radicalized the democracy by granting more authority to the *Ekklesia*, Athens' most inclusive citizen body, and introducing jury pay to strengthen the dikasteric courts. Ancient sources are extremely antagonistic towards Pericles, claiming essentially that he had purchased the goodwill of his supporters through pay for public service. Plutarch's framing hardly suggests Perikles believed in democracy at all. He is instead a man who used a democratic platform to achieve power, ruling benevolently but firmly. Plutarch

writes, “ὑποθρυπτομένης ἔνια δημαγωγίας...ἀριστοκρατικὴν καὶ βασιλικὴν ἐντεινάμενος πολιτείαν, καὶ χρώμενος αὐτῇ πρὸς τὸ βέλτιστον ὀρθῇ καὶ ἀνεγκλίτῳ.” Leaving behind his relaxed (former) management of the people, he exerted himself vehemently to an aristocratic and royal state, utilizing it for the general welfare in a correct and unceasing way. (Plutarch, *Pericles*, 15.2) Kagan recounts the many admirable decisions Perikles undertook and the genuine devotion he had for democracy in part because of his ancestral relation to Cleisthenes and in part because of his faith in democracy being the most effective government for channeling the energy of the Athenian state. (Kagan, 1991, 63) Yet, even if Perikles had honest intentions, Plato’s warning that the city could fall into the hands of bad cupbearers would swiftly become a reality. (Plato, *Republic*, 8.562c) These reformers strengthened the democracy, but in doing so, they also created an avenue for ambitious statesmen to circumvent the moderating influence of the nobility, asserting unilateral control over the city by securing the loyalty of the masses. The very policies which consolidated democratic power in Athens left the democracy vulnerable to the manipulations of aristocrats.

Bibliography

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