

Thucydides and the Rise of the Four Hundred

Thucydides and the *Athenaion Politeia* differ fundamentally in their accounts of the rise of the Four Hundred. Thucydides emphasizes the political machinations and the campaign of violence that conspirators carried out to overthrow the democracy. The *Athenaion Politeia*, by contrast, focuses on the proposals that they presented in the *ekklesia*. Although the *Athenaion Politeia* relies heavily on Thucydides, it also provides information that is clearly derived from independent sources (Rhodes 1981: 362–69). We can therefore use the *Athenaion Politeia* to determine how much Thucydides' views on historical causation distort his narrative. In recent studies, he has not fared well. Shear (2011: 19–69) believes that the events which took place after the restoration of the full democracy clouds his narrative on the Four Hundred. Although Hornblower (2008: 945) finds the accounts of Thucydides and the *Athenaion Politeia* to be complementary, he faults Thucydides for being too dismissive of the oligarchs' motives. Taylor (2002) resolves the discrepancies in Thucydides through a hermeneutical reading. The contradiction between his narrative and his judgment on the rise of Four Hundred was intended to be ironic in order to emphasize the fickleness of the *demos*.

These readings do not do full justice to the complexity of Thucydides' account. The conspirators had competing private motives, personal agendas, and ideological biases that caused them to join forces. Believing that he would only be recalled if the democracy was overthrown, Alcibiades first proposed the conspiracy to like-minded citizens (8.47). Although Phrynichus did not have any prior antipathy towards democracy, his deep hostility for Alcibiades caused him to side with the conspirators once Alcibiades lost their favor. Phrynichus became a zealot oligarch and provided the conspirators with vital support because he believed that the democracy had to be overthrown to prevent Alcibiades' return (68). Other powerful citizens who had suffered

much during the war wanted to overthrow the democracy so they could gain control of the state (8.48). At the same time, Athenians—whether they supported or opposed the democracy,—were united in the belief that Persia would only assist Athens if they dissolved the democracy. Phrynichus realized the foolishness of this strategy, but personal motives prevented him from warning his fellow citizens.

Some conspirators may have been serious in their efforts to reform the Athenian constitution (see Osborne 2003). However, their discussions remained private until 411, and they had very little impact on the events leading up to the rule of the Four Hundred. This is why Thucydides mentions neither Pythodorus' proposal or Cleitophon's rider (*Ath. Pol.* 29). These omissions were not because he had no interest in the inner workings of the Athenian democracy. The content of these motions could not help him explain to his reader why the *ekklesia* voted in favor of the oligarchs' demands. The Athenians were in a desperate situation which made them willing to do whatever was necessary to prevent a Spartan victory. In fact, once the Four Hundred came to power and the Athenians realized that the oligarchs could not win over Persia, the Athenians immediately rallied together to depose them and their rule quickly came to an end. More than anything else, the vain hope that Persia might become an Athenian ally explains why the democracy was overthrown. Yet the conspirators still had to cow the Athenians by assassinating democratic leaders who opposed their plans and by convening the assembly outside the city's walls so no one would have the wherewithal to stop them.

Until 411 discussions on *patrios politeia* were held exclusively in private among the opponents of the democracy. After they had brought these private discussions to light and the democracy had been restored, the democrats responded in kind with their own search for the *patrios politeia*. Then when the Thirty came to power under the same pretense as the Four

Hundred, the constitutional debate was only heightened (Wolpert 2002: 35–42). This explains why the *Athenaion Politeia* places so much emphasis on these constitutional maneuvers. He transposes a highly contentious public debate from the fourth century onto the events of 411. Thucydides, by contrast, rightly calls attention to the public fears and private agendas that made Athens vulnerable to revolution.

Bibliography

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