

The Revolution of the Four Hundred: Dates and Deceptions

For the oligarchical revolution of 411 B.C. at Athens, our two most important sources are the 8th book of Thucydides and chapters 29 to 33 of Aristotle's *Athenaion Politeia*. Aristotle offers documents purportedly dating from 411 and precise dates in the Athenian lunar calendar (32.1). For determining when the Four Hundred seized power, there are two major issues to be resolved: whether to accept Aristotle's dates as accurate and whether Thucydides' system of summers and winters was "rigid" (with firm astronomical dates for the beginning of summer and the beginning of winter), as argued by A. W. Gomme and W. K. Pritchett (Gomme 1956, Pritchett 1964, Pritchett 1986) or was "flexible" or "elastic" (that is, depending on the weather in a given year), as maintained by B. D. Meritt (Meritt 1962). I believe that Gomme and Pritchett are correct: only rigid seasons make sense of Thucydides' assertion (5.20.1) that the Ten Years' War lasted exactly ten years with the difference of a few days.

The oligarchical movement began with talks between Alcibiades and some of the Athenians at Samos, with Alcibiades promising to win the king's support for Athens if they would replace the democracy with an oligarchy. Peisander went to Athens with this message. He and 10 others were sent to negotiate with the satrap Tissaphernes. After the negotiations failed to produce an agreement, Peisander returned to Athens and not long afterwards the Four Hundred seized power. Efforts to date the revolution have focused on the travels of Peisander (Lang 1967, Avery 1999, Karkavelias 2014) and on trying to reconcile Thucydides with Aristotle. The negotiations with Tissaphernes (Thuc. 8.56) were before the end of Thucydides' winter (8.60.3). If Aristotle's dates are accurate, the Four Hundred did not take power until May

or June (Lang 1967), an improbably long delay for conspirators seeking to deprive the Athenians of the government to which most of them were devoted.

Rather, Thucydides' narrative indicates that the Four Hundred took power very early in the spring (March or April 411). I will address the problems created by certain details in Thucydides (the figure "80" in 8.44.4 and the regnal year of Darius II in 8.58.1) and whether Aristophanes' plays (*Lysistrata* and *Thesmophoriazusae*) shed light on the timing of the *coup d'état* (Sommerstein 1977). Aristotle's dates should be rejected as incompatible with Thucydides: they are later inventions by someone seeking to minimize the illegality of the oligarchs' coup by reducing the length of time the legitimate Council of Five Hundred was deprived of office. Aristotle provides one detail of value: that Mnesilochus was archon for two months in the year of Theopompus (33.1), indicating that the Four Hundred most likely were overthrown during the second month of 411/0. That the Four Hundred were in power about four months may be about right (*Ath. Pol.* 33.1). Aristotle's dates may come from the same source as the bogus constitutions of chapters 30-31, a source which was intent on minimizing the illegality of what the oligarchs had done. An earlier date for the installation of the Four Hundred also allows time for the events between their overthrow in July or August 411 and the last datable event in Thucydides (8.108.2) which is in mid-September 411.

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