

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-80793-7 - The Cambridge Companion to the Age of Pericles

Edited by Loren J. Samons II

Excerpt

[More information](#)

INTRODUCTION: ATHENIAN HISTORY AND SOCIETY IN THE AGE OF PERICLES

L. J. Samons II



SOURCES

Our literary sources for the study of mid-fifth-century Athens consist of contemporary Greek historians (especially Herodotus and Thucydides), Athenian orators and intellectuals (especially Andocides, Antiphon, Plato, and the anonymous author known as Pseudo-Xenophon or “The Old Oligarch”), and Aristotle’s works analyzing Athenian and Greek political life (the *Politics* and the *Constitution of the Athenians*, the latter probably but not certainly composed by Aristotle).¹ Besides the references to older (but no longer extant) works found in such late authorities as Plutarch and the Hellenistic and Byzantine commentators, we also possess a significant number of fifth-century decrees (*psephismata*) passed by vote in the Athenian assembly. The Athenians often inscribed these measures on stone pillars (*stelai*), and fragments of many of these decrees (and other inscribed documents) have survived into the present age.

Plutarch composed his biography of Pericles (and those of his contemporaries Themistocles, Aristeides, Cimon, Nicias, and Alcibiades) between ca. A.D. 90 and 120. The biographer was therefore removed from his fifth-century B.C. subjects by more than five centuries. Plutarch’s anecdotal style and purpose – to shed light on his subjects’ characters rather than their political careers – make his work difficult for the historian to exploit confidently. Nevertheless, Plutarch had access to contemporary fifth-century sources lost to us, and any attempt to flesh out Athenian life or understand Athenian politics in the Age

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-80793-7 - The Cambridge Companion to the Age of Pericles

Edited by Loren J. Samons II

Excerpt

[More information](#)

THE CAMBRIDGE COMPANION TO THE AGE OF PERICLES

of Pericles must rely heavily (if often uneasily) on his biographical works.

Sometimes historians are able to supplement our picture of mid-fifth-century Athenian life with inferences drawn from contemporary dramatic works, especially those of Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Aristophanes. However, the tragedians usually depicted Greece in its mythic or heroic past, and scholars differ on the degree to which those depictions reflect contemporary Athenian life. Although Aristophanes usually set his comedies in explicitly contemporary circumstances, his works require careful analysis of dramatic context and authorial intent: Aristophanes meant to entertain his audience and win a competition, not to inform posterity about real Athenian life. However, as several contributions to this volume demonstrate, his works provide an invaluable resource for gauging many aspects of Athenian life and politics in the period just after Pericles' career.²

As a non-Athenian contemporary of Pericles, and one who traveled widely in (and apparently outside) the Greek world, Herodotus tantalizes the modern historian as a potential source about Periclean Athens. However, Herodotus focused his attention on the period before and during the Persian Wars (490–479), providing little explicit information on mid-fifth-century Greece. If Herodotus, as sometimes alleged, was a member of a "Periclean circle" or even a friend of the statesman, his reticence might seem surprising. In any case, even certainty about Herodotus's extended residence in Athens or his membership in such a circle would do no more than confirm that Athens attracted intellectuals and artists from all over Hellas in this period, and that Pericles regularly befriended such individuals – facts to which other sources already testify.³ Unfortunately for our purposes, Herodotus was neither a product nor a chronicler of Periclean Athens, and thus his work can do little more than suggest a kind of prose that might have been popular late in Pericles' life or thereafter.

Thucydides' history remains the single best source for the Periclean period and the statesman himself. An Athenian and younger contemporary of Pericles – born perhaps ca. 470–460 – and witness to the entire course of the Peloponnesian War (431–404), Thucydides tells us that he began composing his great work as soon as the war began, because he believed he was witnessing an unprecedented conflict (1.1).⁴

Thucydides' chronicle of the war begins in earnest with events ca. 435 and breaks off in 411/10, yet he also provides us with a crucial (if brief) narrative of events between the Persian and Peloponnesian Wars (479–ca. 439: 1.89–117). Because he served as an Athenian general in the

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-80793-7 - The Cambridge Companion to the Age of Pericles

Edited by Loren J. Samons II

Excerpt

[More information](#)

INTRODUCTION: ATHENIAN HISTORY AND SOCIETY IN THE AGE OF PERICLES

war against Sparta and came from a politically prominent Athenian family, Thucydides was well placed to provide an account of fifth-century Athenian history. Even after his exile in 424/3, Thucydides' wealth and aristocratic connections enabled him to move around the Greek world gathering material from sources that included the Peloponnesians themselves (Thuc. 5.26). Along with invaluable information about the war, Thucydides also presents three long speeches by Pericles. If scholars dispute how much of these speeches derives from the historian rather than the statesman, they nonetheless agree that the orations are crucial sources for attempting to reconstruct Periclean policies and politics.⁵

In a kind of eulogy to Pericles after his last speech in the history, Thucydides praises the Athenian statesman for his political character and his ability "to lead rather than be led by the people" (2.65), contrasting him with more demagogic leaders that followed. This passage and the admiration modern historians often feel for Periclean democracy have led many scholars to conclude that Thucydides' praise of Pericles as a leader – one able to make what was "in name a democracy, in fact the rule of the first citizen" – equates to admiration of Athenian democracy or specific Athenian/Periclean policies (such as imperial expansion or war with Sparta). Such a conclusion is belied, however, by Thucydides' explicit praise for the moderate oligarchical government that ultimately resulted from, and for at least one of the core oligarchs (Antiphon) who was responsible for, the revolution that briefly ended Athens's democratic government in 411 (8.68, 97). Thucydides clearly felt free both to praise a democrat like Pericles for his political integrity and leadership and to praise an oligarch and revolutionary for his intelligence and oratorical skill. In short, Thucydides cannot be treated as a straightforward "admirer" of Pericles or of Pericles' particular policies. (Thucydides' independence of mind should actually increase the modern historian's confidence when approaching his treatment of Pericles.) We may, however, see Thucydides as a product both of the intellectual hotbed Athens became under Pericles' leadership and, perhaps even more, of the embattled – and ultimately defeated and demoralized – city she became after his death.⁶ For although Thucydides may have begun work on his history during the last days of the Periclean age when Athens was at the height of her powers, he composed most of that work during and after the debilitating Peloponnesian War.

A late authority deserving of special mention is the first-century B.C. Greek historian Diodorus Siculus. Diodorus composed a kind of world history, which drew heavily on the work of previous authors. For the mid-fifth century, he relied primarily on the now lost fourth-century

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-80793-7 - The Cambridge Companion to the Age of Pericles

Edited by Loren J. Samons II

Excerpt

[More information](#)

THE CAMBRIDGE COMPANION TO THE AGE OF PERICLES

work of the historian Ephorus, and Diodorus's value consists primarily in preserving for us something of Ephorus's work. However, it seems unlikely that Ephorus himself possessed much better information on the mid-fifth century than what he could read in Thucydides. Moreover, Diodorus's adaptation of Ephorus is confused and chronologically inaccurate. Where he contradicts Thucydides he is usually mistaken, and where he supplements Thucydides he is often untrustworthy. Modern historians therefore must employ his work with great caution.

Finally, the physical remains uncovered by increasingly scientific archaeological methods in the last 150 years have contributed greatly to our understanding of Pericles' Athens. Beyond the ongoing excavations in the Athenian *agora* (marketplace) and study of the Acropolis, work in such areas as the Peiraeus harbor and the silver-mining region of southern Attica has fleshed out the image of Athens appearing in our literary sources. In the last several decades, this work has helped scholars come closer to capturing the bustling, culturally and economically complex imperial city that was Periclean Athens.⁷ More than a city of poets, philosophers, and statesmen, it was a place of miners, farmers, artisans, slaves and slavers, foreign traders, shipwrights, shield makers, potters, and prostitutes.

ATHENS AND POLIS GOVERNMENT

Ancient Greece, which the Greeks (Hellenes) called Hellas, was dominated by hundreds of independent, self-governing city-states (*poleis*, singular *polis*).⁸ The origins of the polis are controversial, but this form of settlement was firmly established in Greece by the eighth century B.C.⁹ A typical polis comprised a town or city center (*astu*) surrounded by land (*chora*) farmed and owned by the polis's citizens. Goods were exchanged and formal and informal public interaction took place in the main square and marketplace (*agora*) in the city center. Some poleis possessed a citadel, often located on defensible and/or fortified high ground. At Athens, this citadel came to be called the *akropolis* ("high city").

Greek poleis ranged in size from tiny villages with perhaps fewer than several hundred citizens to super poleis, of which Sparta and Athens were probably the largest. Athens covered an area (known as Attica) of approximately 1,000 square miles and probably had at least 30,000–40,000 adult male citizens for most of the classical period. Attica's total population is unknown and depends to a large degree on variables like the number of slaves or resident foreigners ("metics") living there at any

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-80793-7 - The Cambridge Companion to the Age of Pericles

Edited by Loren J. Samons II

Excerpt

[More information](#)

INTRODUCTION: ATHENIAN HISTORY AND SOCIETY IN THE AGE OF PERICLES

given time, but it cannot have been less than 100,000 souls and may have been as great as 400,000 or more.¹⁰

Despite the wide range of sizes among Greek poleis, so far as we are able to tell, most possessed fairly similar governments by the classical period (ca. 500–323 B.C.). Each polis relied on an assembly of adult male citizens that acted as a more or less sovereign authority within the state. In the assembly, citizens of each polis might vote to elect magistrates; approve legislation, treaties, and decisions about war or peace; and, at least in some cases, render judicial decisions.¹¹ In Athens, this assembly was known as the *ekklesia* and it eventually consisted of all free citizen males, regardless of whether they owned property or not.

Most of the poleis' executive functions were fulfilled by magistrates elected by the citizenry (the *demos*) or chosen by lot, although some offices were restricted to the members of certain families or economic classes.¹² In Athens, the chief magistracy originally consisted of an annual board of nine archons (plus a secretary), at first elected but after 487 chosen by lot from a list of elected candidates (*AP* 8.1, 22.5). Among these magistrates were the eponymous archon, who gave his name to the year and perhaps originally acted as chief magistrate; the *polemarchos*, or “war archon;” and a primarily religious official called simply the *basileus*, or “king” (sometimes translated as “king-archon”).

After 487 and the advent of lot-based selection of Athens's archons, the elected office of general (*strategos*, plural *strategoí*) played an increasingly important political role in Athenian government. Pericles, for example, served as one of Athens's ten elected generals for fifteen consecutive years, making the office the formal basis of his power in the state. But in the fifth century, many other *strategoí*—including Themistocles, Aristides, Cimon, Cleon, and Alcibiades—acted as both military and political leaders, proposing policies and addressing the people in the council or assembly and then commanding the armies that implemented those policies.

A small council (often of elders or former magistrates) usually completed the tripartite arrangement of polis government. In Sparta this council consisted of twenty-eight elected elders plus the two Spartan kings.¹³ In Athens the oldest (known) council was the Areopagus. This body consisted of all former archons, who served for life, and it acted as a high court for certain kinds of offenses and served in a general advisory (and perhaps supervisory) role in early Athenian government.¹⁴

Of course, this composite picture of “typical” polis government, with assembly, council, and magistrates, must be adjusted when we possess enough evidence to describe any particular city-state in detail.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-80793-7 - The Cambridge Companion to the Age of Pericles

Edited by Loren J. Samons II

Excerpt

[More information](#)

THE CAMBRIDGE COMPANION TO THE AGE OF PERICLES

For example, when around 507 B.C. Athens instituted the government that would become known as *demokratia*, the Athenians created a second council (the *boule*), this one of 500 citizens chosen (at least eventually) by lot from the citizen body and serving for one year. This *boule* of 500 became the most important council of the Athenian state.¹⁵ It prepared business for and provided members to preside over meetings of the assembly, heard embassies from foreign powers, supervised financial and military matters, and could act as a kind of court. For one-tenth of each year, the fifty members of the council representing one of the ten Athenian tribes¹⁶ acted as a standing committee for the council as a whole, and these *prytaneis* (“presidents”) had to remain in Athens for this entire period (thus known as a “prytany”). Again, the members of the council of 500 (or *bouleutai*) were chosen by lot, apparently from all Athenian citizens that possessed a moderate amount of property, although by the fourth century, even the poorest citizens were apparently able to serve.¹⁷

Property qualifications for citizenship or office-holding were apparently common in Greek poleis. In many poleis ownership of a small farm and the consequent ability to afford the arms necessary to fight in the infantry phalanx as a hoplite (i.e., one with a *hoplon* – a large shield) probably qualified one for citizenship.¹⁸ However, one of the defining qualities of Athens’s *demokratia* – a word combining the basic ideas of power (*kratos*) and the people (*demos*) – was the absence of a property qualification for citizenship. Thus at Athens even the poorest individuals had the opportunity to cast their votes in the assembly and (at least eventually and perhaps unofficially) to serve on the council of 500.¹⁹

Nevertheless, both before and after the institution of *demokratia*, the Athenians did divide their citizen body into stratified groups based on the ownership of property and restrict certain offices to those reaching a given property qualification. According to Athenian tradition, the lawgiver Solon (ca. 594/3) separated the Athenians into four categories based on the agricultural production of their land: the *pentakosiomedimnoi* (possessing land yielding 500 *medimnoi* of dry or wet produce per year) formed the highest group, followed by the *hippeis* (“horsemen”), *zeugitai* (“yokemen”), and *thetes* (“laborers”).²⁰ Athenian archons initially had to belong at least to the class of *hippeis*, but after the year 457 the *zeugitai* also could hold this office (*AP* 26.2). The treasurers (*tamiai*) of the sacred wealth of Athena, in some ways Athens’s highest financial position in the fifth century, had to belong to the highest property class.²¹

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-80793-7 - The Cambridge Companion to the Age of Pericles

Edited by Loren J. Samons II

Excerpt

[More information](#)

INTRODUCTION: ATHENIAN HISTORY AND SOCIETY IN THE AGE OF PERICLES

Solon's property qualifications actually represented a radical movement in Greek politics, because they formally separated the qualifications for office-holding from one's birth.²² At an earlier point in Athenian history, perhaps even into the period just before Solon's reforms, it appears likely that only the members of Athenian families known as *eupatridai* (literally, the "well-fathered") were able to hold Athens's highest offices. After Solon, any citizen rich enough to join the *pentakosiomedimnoi* could (theoretically) hold any political position in Athens. Nevertheless, the members of the clans of the *eupatridai*, which claimed descent from the ancient Athenian aristocracy, continued to play a major role in Athenian government and society through their control of particular religious cults and their potential influence in the social groups that made up the *demos* as a whole.²³

These smaller religio-social units represent another way in which the Athenian *demos* divided itself into component elements.²⁴ Membership in one of the aristocratic families or clans (*gene*) obviously provided advantages for those wishing to wield power in Athens, both in terms of the land and wealth these clans usually controlled and because of the supposed antiquity and religious associations of the families. The aristocratic clans in turn apparently wielded significant influence in the *phratries* ("brotherhoods"), poorly understood organizations based at least theoretically on common descent and connected through religious cults. It seems likely that the *phratries* approved citizenship for individual Athenians before the institution of *demokratia*, and thus the aristocratic clans probably played a crucial role in determining who was and who was not considered an Athenian citizen.²⁵ Larger than the *phratries* were the original four tribes (*phylai*) into which the members of the *demos* were divided. These tribes also related (theoretically) to descent, and most Ionian Greeks (the ethnic/linguistic subgroup of Hellenes into which the Athenians fell), whether they lived in mainland Greece, the islands, or Asia Minor, were divided into similar *phylai*.²⁶ Like the *phratries* and the clans, these tribes were religious as well as social and military organizations, with their own cults, priests, and rituals.

The Athenian *demos* of Pericles' day was thus divided in both economic and religio-social ways into subgroups that played particular roles within the *polis* (and in most cases probably resembled similar divisions in other *poleis*). Aside from their religious functions, the tribes and *phratries*, for example, almost certainly served (at least originally) as organizing units for the Athenian military.²⁷ But the *demos* as a whole also functioned as a unit, particularly in the worship of the *polis*'s tutelary goddess, Athena.²⁸ The city came together to propitiate and celebrate

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-80793-7 - The Cambridge Companion to the Age of Pericles

Edited by Loren J. Samons II

Excerpt

[More information](#)

THE CAMBRIDGE COMPANION TO THE AGE OF PERICLES

the goddess in a festival known as the Panathenaea, held once every year and every four years with special splendor. The celebrations included a procession to the Acropolis, where the temple of Athena was located and her sacred treasure was stored.²⁹

Eligibility for Athenian office-holding did not depend only on the actual wealth of the would-be magistrate. Every Athenian chosen by lot or election for office went through a vetting process known as the *dokimasia*, in which his citizenship was checked and anyone who wished could lodge a complaint against him.³⁰ A prospective member of the council of 500 or a candidate for the office of archon also answered certain questions put to him by the council of 500, including whether he was enrolled in certain cults, whether he treated his parents well, and whether he had served in the military when called upon and paid his taxes.³¹ Candidates for other magistracies answered similar questions before a court of Athenian jurors.³² In this way, the Athenians placed formal checks on the persons that could hold their most important offices, even if the individuals were selected by lot from the citizen body. But one must emphasize that prospective Athenian officials faced questions about their character and behavior and not about their knowledge, intelligence, experience, or technical skills.³³

ATHENS IN THE SIXTH CENTURY B.C.

Understanding of the Age of Pericles requires some attention to the century that preceded it. Not long after the period of Solon's reforms, Athens fell under the control of the tyrant Peisistratus and his sons (ca. 561–511/10).³⁴ Like many Greek tyrants, Peisistratus was simply an “unconstitutional” ruler, someone who had seized power in a polis and had done so outside the normal avenues of political action. The position of tyrant in sixth-century Greece did not carry the particularly negative connotations later associated with the term. Peisistratus was said to have left the traditional Athenian constitution in place, only ensuring that his own supporters held the most important offices.³⁵

The period of Peisistratid rule is especially crucial for understanding Periclean Athens because so many of the trends that developed under the *demokratia* seem to have their origins under the Athenian tyrants. Coming to power during and in part because of conflict between rival aristocratic factions, Peisistratus perhaps styled himself a kind of champion of the demos – one who claimed to protect the common people of Athens from the aristocrats who controlled so much of Athenian

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-80793-7 - The Cambridge Companion to the Age of Pericles

Edited by Loren J. Samons II

Excerpt

[More information](#)

INTRODUCTION: ATHENIAN HISTORY AND SOCIETY IN THE AGE OF PERICLES

political and social life and drew the members of the *demos* into their struggles. Besides suppressing these conflicts, Peisistratus seems to have opened up avenues of citizenship to those of questionable birth or connections, thereby increasing the ranks of his supporters while undermining his aristocratic opponents.³⁶

Other important trends that began under Peisistratus include the expansion of Athenian power into the Aegean, especially in the area around the Hellespont. Peisistratus (or his sons) apparently also constructed a major temple to Athena on the Acropolis (later partially destroyed by the Persians and then replaced by the Parthenon and Erechtheion), and may have offered loans to poor farmers, as well as instituting the first tax on agricultural produce in Attica.³⁷ He also used economic power apparently derived at least partly from mines in Thrace and in Attica to fund the military support on which he relied. In all these ways, Peisistratus and his sons set important precedents for fifth-century, democratic Athens.³⁸

The overthrow of the Athenian tyrants in 511/10 was accomplished not by the Athenians themselves but by the Spartans. Peisistratus's son Hippias had become a harsh ruler after the murder of his brother Hipparchus in 514 by a pair of insulted aristocratic lovers, one of whom had rebuffed the tyrant's amorous brother. After Hippias's subsequent expulsion of certain aristocrats from Athens, some of the exiles apparently then tried to oust the Peisistratids from power, but failed. Fortunately for these Athenian aristocrats, the sixth-century Spartans made something of a habit of destroying tyrannies, and their overthrow of the Peisistratids allowed the reestablishment of the more typical style of polis government in Athens.³⁹

After the Spartans removed the Peisistratids in 511/10, the Athenian aristocrats returned to power and apparently resumed their quarreling. Eventually an Athenian named Cleisthenes (a former brother-in-law of the tyrant Peisistratus and the grandson of another tyrant, Cleisthenes of Sicyon) seemingly determined, in effect, to reconstitute the faction that had supported Peisistratus. By appealing to the *demos* for support against the other aristocrats, Cleisthenes was able to defeat his rivals and pass the reforms that would create the government eventually known as *demokratia*. The Spartans most probably took Cleisthenes' regime for a new form of tyranny (since the only forms of Greek regime known to them at that time were rule by a tyrant or the typical aristocratic/timocratic polis government) and returned to Athens to force Cleisthenes and his family (the Alcmeonids) from power. The Athenians dutifully expelled Cleisthenes and his relatives. But when the Spartans

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-80793-7 - The Cambridge Companion to the Age of Pericles

Edited by Loren J. Samons II

Excerpt

[More information](#)

THE CAMBRIDGE COMPANION TO THE AGE OF PERICLES

then attempted to dismantle Cleisthenes' political reforms, the Athenians balked and ejected the Spartans, who ultimately decided to accept Athens's new regime.⁴⁰

Precisely what Cleisthenes accomplished ca. 507 and by what means he managed it are problematic questions. It appears that he partially separated control of citizenship from the potentially aristocrat-dominated phratries and gave more power in this and other areas to the individual residents of the villages/neighborhoods of Attica (the *demoi*, or "demes"). After Cleisthenes, a man's citizenship would be determined (at least in part) by his neighbors, and not (at least technically) primarily by his connection with aristocratic families or patrons.⁴¹ At the same time, Cleisthenes created a new council of state, made up not of the aristocratic former archons (as was the Areopagus) but rather of 500 citizens (at least eventually) chosen by lot.⁴² These 500 would be chosen through the increasingly important demes. The demes themselves were now allocated into ten new tribes, each containing some demes from the coastal region of Attica, some from the interior region around the city of Athens, and some from the city itself (*AP* 21). Each new tribe therefore represented a geographical microcosm of the polis as a whole, perhaps reflecting a desire to use the ten tribes as organizational tools for the Athenian military, as well as for the political and religious arrangement of the polis.⁴³ After 501/0, each tribe elected one of the polis's ten generals, although at some point in the fifth century the specific allocation of one general per tribe was abandoned.

By around 500 B.C. the structure of Athens's government had taken the basic form it was to have for nearly two centuries (apart from two brief periods of oligarchic rule). The most unusual aspects of Athenian government at this time – what at least arguably made it *demokratia* as opposed to the type of polis government that might be called either *aristokratia* (rule by the *aristoi*, or "best") or *oligarchia* (rule by the rich *oligoi*, or "few"), depending on one's point of view – was the absence of any property qualification for participation in the assembly and the influence on citizenship and the council of 500 (and thus on government policy) of the neighborhood demesmen. The demes now became in some ways the most significant subdivision of the Athenian polis.⁴⁴

We know very little about precise legislative and judicial procedures in this early period of *demokratia*. The Athenian assembly passed decrees (*psephismata*) by majority vote on issues placed before it by the council of 500. The council had the option of putting an actual measure before the assembly (which might then be amended), or simply placing