

CHAPTER I

Changing visions of democracy

Democracy is not what it once was.¹ Even Athenian democracy is not what it once was. When on 23 January 1952 A.H.M. Jones gave his inaugural lecture as Professor of Ancient History in the University of Cambridge, he chose to lecture on ‘The Athens of Demosthenes’.² Jones set himself to persuade his audience that fourth-century Athenians were not ‘an idle, cowardly, pleasure-loving crew’, and to do so by detailed examination of what he termed the ‘war tax’ (*eisphora*) – its nature, its amount, who paid it, and more generally how the Athenians financed their wars. I begin my review of how the study of Athenian democracy has changed over the last half century from Jones’s lecture both because it was an extremely important departure in the study of Athenian democracy and because I want to suggest that what has happened to the study of the subject since Jones has not only transformed the way in which we see classical Athens – and in the process raised important questions about how we see democracy – but has taken us to a position where we need to think even more imaginatively about how we can gain further insights into the way Athenian democracy worked.

What was new about Jones’s approach emerges by comparison with a book published in Oxford in the same year, Charles Hignett’s *A history of the Athenian constitution to the end of the fifth century BC*. Hignett’s title gives no indication of his sweeping scepticism about much of the tradition on the archaic Athenian constitution, but it well indicates his capacity to study the constitution apart from the practice of politics or the working of the community. It also indicates the way in which the domination of the fifth century continued to lead scholars, as it had Jones’s predecessor, Frank Adcock, and his collaborators in the first edition of the *Cambridge ancient*

¹ This chapter is a revised version of my own inaugural lecture as Professor of Ancient History in the University of Cambridge, delivered on 23 January 2002.

² Published as Jones (1952a); reprinted in Jones (1957) 23–38.

history, to attempt to study the working of Athenian democracy without considering the century for which we have by far the richest evidence. On this latter point, at least, Jones's promotion of the Athens of Demosthenes has clearly and rightly won the day. To study Athenian democracy at all now involves studying *The Athenian democracy in the age of Demosthenes*.³ In the new edition of *Cambridge ancient history* the machinery of government and the anatomy of politics at Athens are reserved for Peter Rhodes to cover in the fourth-century volume.⁴

Jones's further innovation, the insistence that to understand the working of Athenian democracy one must first understand its economic base, was one that he took further in the same year, 1952. His paper 'The economic basis of the Athenian democracy' stands at the front of the very first issue of a new journal of historical studies, *Past and Present*; when Jones brought together his contributions in *Athenian democracy* in 1957, he put that paper first. Jones's particular contention, that Athenian democracy was so little dependent upon slavery that to free all slaves would have had no significant impact, is one few would now share. It depends upon his further unbelievable contention, explicit in his 1955 *Economic History Review* paper on the social structure of fourth-century Athens, that there were no more than 20,000 slaves at Athens. But the importance of both papers lies not with some demonstrably aberrant answers; the importance lies rather with their questions. One of Jones's lasting achievements is to have made questions of Athenian democracy not questions of political organisation alone, but also questions of social and economic organisation.⁵

In *Athenian democracy*, Jones placed between his papers on the economy and his paper on the social structure a paper on 'The Athenian democracy and its critics'. This paper stood alone for more than forty years as a systematic discussion of democracy's critics. Discussions of Greek political theory prior to Jones, such as T.A. Sinclair's *A history of Greek political thought*, which had appeared in 1951, were organised by author, were much more ready to consider philosophers than historians as political thinkers, and were not much concerned with the implications of the views they discussed for democracy. Jones looked at prose authors of all sorts – though only fleetingly at tragedians – and he put the criticisms in the context of

³ As Mogens Herman Hansen has insisted and as he entitled his textbook (Hansen 1991). Not that there has been no resistance: compare Stockton (1990).

⁴ Rhodes (1994).

⁵ Finley's *Studies in land and credit*, published in 1951, also played a part in this change of emphasis, of course.

the grubby details of the day-to-day operation of the Athenian political system.

The operation of that system forms the final chapter of *Athenian democracy*, 'How did the Athenian democracy work?' Here we might expect an account modelled on the second half of the Aristotelian *Constitution of the Athenians*, starting with the making of the citizen and moving through the Assembly and Council to the various magistrates and the courts. Arnold Gomme's 'The working of the Athenian democracy' in *History* for 1951, had precisely restricted itself to the Assembly and the Council. But Jones starts with the army and navy and how they were run, then moves on to religious festivals, before turning to the boards of magistrates, starting there with financial officials. The Council comes in as a co-ordinating body for these boards before its rôle in decision-making is assessed. The Assembly, which does indeed end up receiving most attention, is examined for its social composition as well as its constitutional powers; Jones spends a long time excavating Athenian practice from decrees, examining details of their drafting as a clue to the location of political initiative.

Jones's achievement in the string of papers brought together in *Athenian democracy* was to present Athenian democracy as 'joined-up writing'. Earlier discussions of Athenian politics had been lively enough, but even the best of histories treated democracy as a system of government separately from democratic politics. Grote, for example, had chosen to discuss the constitution when covering Kleisthenes' reforms, as if democracy was born fully developed, and his famous discussion of Pericles is largely carried on without reference to how the institutions of democracy worked.⁶ Athenian finance had been studied with some intensity by August Boeckh, in particular, but in isolation from the study of the democracy.⁷ Epigraphic studies had not concerned themselves with how the procedures manifested in inscribed decrees bear upon the issue of democratic participation. Of course there had been exceptions – such books as J.W. Headlam's marvellous *Election by lot at Athens* of 1891 – but no one previously had extended their historical purview across the whole of Athenian democracy in the way that Jones did.

Nor has anyone since. *Athenian democracy* has been reprinted many times. When Blackwell decided to reprint no longer, the book was taken on by Johns Hopkins University Press, who still keep it in print. Jones's work has not been replicated or replaced. It has shaped the whole study of the subject, and has done so in three distinct ways: by grounding study of

⁶ Grote (1851) chs. 31 and 46. ⁷ Boeckh (1817).

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Robin Osborne

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the constitution in discussion of its practical working; by making study of political theory discussion of debates implicit at Athens as well as of explicit argument by philosophers; and by grounding study of all aspects of Athenian political life in their material conditions. In all three of these areas a further crucial part has been played by Jones's successor in the Cambridge chair, Moses Finley.

Jones had acknowledged Finley's criticisms and suggestions in the Preface to *Athenian democracy*, and Finley's paper on 'The Athenian demagogues' in *Past and Present* (1962) acknowledges Jones's help.⁸ This classic paper starts where Jones had left off. Jones concluded the last paper in *Athenian democracy*, on how Athenian democracy worked, with the claim that 'It was informed advice, and not mere eloquence, that the people expected from rising politicians, and they saw to it that they got it' (p. 133). Finley argued that the demagogues, more particularly, should be seen as the indispensable advisors without whose consistent aid the Athenians would not have been able to make the informed decisions that secured the democracy for two centuries. Jones had sustained his assertion that the people saw to it that they got informed advice partly by resorting to some tendentious ancient descriptions of what went on, and partly by writing the advisors out of his description of moments that went wrong, blaming instead the ability of crowds to be 'unduly swayed by mass emotion' (p. 132). Finley addressed the difficult moments head on, concentrating on the much maligned demagogues, who, he proceeded to argue, were in fact structural to democracy. Taking decisions in mass meetings in a system without government or bureaucracy demanded advice, and, because at every vote they were being tried and tested, those who sought to advise had to ensure their positions by their freedom from partisanship. All-out warfare between leaders, pursued in the courts, was the way in which leaders sought to protect their own positions; to survive in the Assembly they had to subordinate their own interests to the best interests of the whole people. With this argument Finley took one stage further Jones's insistence that political activity be seen in the context of political structures: those structures were made to yield a way of seeing behind the ancient attacks on popular politicians to the rôles which practical politics necessitated.⁹

⁸ Jones was on the editorial board of *Past and Present* and presumably instrumental in seeing that Finley's paper was published there.

⁹ Finley's paper was published more or less simultaneously with Antony Andrewes's discussion of the Mytilene debate (1962), which acknowledges Finley and similarly insists on the importance of the expertise of a Kleon.

Discussions of political leadership at Athens have moved on rather little since Finley's paper.¹⁰ Although works such as Josiah Ober's *Mass and elite in democratic Athens* (1989) explore the incipient factional tensions and their resolution in much more detail than Finley did, and with much more attention to the fourth century, the basic form of argument has not been changed by them. Such work as there has been on demagogues has shown some reluctance to follow Finley in his disregard for the hostile presentation of popular political leaders in Aristophanic comedy and Thucydides, but it has not undermined Finley's position. Finley had, to my mind, successfully sealed his position against attacks from that quarter. What he had not done, however, was to take seriously the evidence which Jones paraded so effectively: the evidence of the inscriptions on which Athenian decisions are recorded.

Finley's argument presupposes the need for political leadership, and, by implication, for a crucial rôle to be taken by a relatively limited number of major figures. Such a vision of Athenian politics is indeed the one promoted by the literary evidence. It is supported too by parallels from more recent politics, though Finley was rightly insistent upon the wide divergence between Athenian and modern democratic practice. The 'iron law of oligarchy' – that whatever the constitution a small number of individuals end up holding power – similarly encourages this perspective, and is explicitly the point from which Ober begins.¹¹ But what the rich inscriptional record from the late fifth century shows is that active participation in political debate was *not* restricted to the small number of individuals familiar from literary sources. The men who get up in the Assembly and successfully persuade their fellow citizens to amend the decisions they are taking are, in the large majority of cases, otherwise unknown to us. Indeed the names of the great political figures, and even of the not so great political figures, appear only rarely. The practical business of getting their fellow citizens to get the details right was not in the hands of the demagogues, it was widely shared. When Thucydides has the second debate about how to respond to the revolt of Mytilene decided by a showdown between Kleon, advocating mass execution, and the unknown Diodotos, advocating a more selective cull, he may be giving a distorted picture of Kleon, as Geoffrey Woodhead long ago argued, but there is every reason

¹⁰ Connor (1971) represents no conceptual advance.

¹¹ Ober (1989) 14–15. The work by Robert Michels from which the phrase 'iron law of oligarchy' derives was first published in 1915, but was reprinted in 1962.

to think that he has correctly attributed the crucial opposition to a man who was not otherwise regularly in the public eye.¹²

What are the consequences of this? In many ways this evidence reinforces Finley's argument. It demonstrates, more powerfully than any other evidence, the keen involvement of the people in affairs in the Assembly and the competitiveness of debate. But the possibility of being defeated in debate by an unsuspected rival also shows how little effect damaging known rivals in the courts would have on political competition in the Assembly. More importantly, it suggests that we need to give less emphasis to a picture of an assembled people thirsty for good advice, and more emphasis to their ability to choose between the many advisors. Some amendments were trivial: Jones himself drew attention to the decree passed to honour Oiniades of Skiathos being amended to refer to him as Oiniades of Old Skiathos (ML 90/OR 187). But many amendments had a fundamental effect on the impact of decisions: we might think of the amendment limiting the opportunity to settle at the new foundation of Brea to those of the two lowest property classes (ML 49/OR 139), or the amendment preventing the people from giving *carte blanche* to Kallikrates to build a temple to Athena Nike without an official or committee being appointed to oversee what he does or how much he spends (ML 44/OR 138).

The frequent amendment of decrees by men who were not career politicians strongly supports the arguments which Finley brought in his discussion of democratic political theory. Jones had opened his chapter on 'The Athenian democracy and its critics' with the claim that 'there survives no statement of democratic political theory' (p. 41), and that claim was many times repeated and re-echoed by Finley: 'The Greeks themselves', he writes in *Democracy ancient and modern*, 'did not develop a theory of democracy ... The philosophers attacked democracy; the committed democrats responded by ignoring them, by going about the business of government and politics in a democratic way, without writing treatises on the subject.'¹³ Finley's major contribution in this area was to present the issues of Athenian democracy against the background of debates in

¹² Woodhead (1960). The following are the names of proposers of amendments to fifth-century decrees published in *IG I³* 1–228: Antibios (8), Euphemos (11) Lysanias (32, an interested party), Hestaios (35), Arkhestratos (40), Phantokles (46, an interested party), Skopas (63), P...kritos (68), Arkhestratos (72, also the proposer of the primary decree), Eukrates (76), Diokles, Eudikos (102), Antikhares (110), Arkhe... (125), Klesophos and his fellow prytaneis (127, the proposers of the primary decree), Phrasmon (228).

¹³ Finley (1973a) 28.

the contemporary study of political thought. In this Finley was particularly indebted to work being done in Cambridge; his paper on the demagogues had made reference to the first of the volumes, *Philosophy, politics and society*, the published version of his inaugural lecture acknowledged the comments of John Dunn, and *Democracy ancient and modern* of 1973 acknowledged those of Quentin Skinner. What this involvement with contemporary debates led him to emphasise in particular was community, both in an attempt to characterise how Athenian democracy could work and in his arguments against seeing apathy as a virtue in modern democracies.

The problem of explaining the absence of apathy at Athens, or, to put it in the terms in which economists state it, the problem of why these ‘meetings with costly participation’ were not dominated by extremists, remains an important one.¹⁴ Finley’s answer was in terms of Athens being a ‘face-to-face society’, an idea he borrowed from Peter Laslett.¹⁵ That has long seemed to me inapt as an analogy for classical Athens as a whole, with its fifth-century adult male citizen body of some 50,000.¹⁶ But Finley’s more general point about the Athenian people, carefully and elegantly restated by John Dunn as that ‘its day-to-day political life continuously displayed the intimacy and intensity (if by no means always the harmony) of its common commitments’,¹⁷ is one that subsequent writing has done more to reinforce than to undermine. It has done so, in part, by rather Jonesian means, that is by looking at the way that life worked on the ground, and in particular by bringing to the fore, once more, the epigraphic evidence. That evidence shows us Athenians replicating the structures of central decision-making in the truly face-to-face groups of which they were part, groups which have attracted much increased scholarly attention in the past twenty years, that is the phratries, the *gene*, and perhaps above all the demes, those village-like communities to which official naming patterns (Pericles, son of Xanthippos of the deme of Kholargos) tied citizens and as members of which they were allotted, if at all, to the Council of 500.¹⁸

This point about the way in which the democratic structures of the city were writ small in its subdivisions is beautifully illustrated in an excellently preserved inscription from the deme of Aixone, honouring two of

¹⁴ Osborne, Rosenthal and Turner (2000). I would argue that the stress on the tension between ‘mass’ and ‘élite’, which Ober’s work has put at the centre of attention, actually diverts attention from the fact that on every particular issue there will be individuals with particular interests, not necessarily shared by the rest of their class or status group, keen to sway debate in one direction.

¹⁵ Laslett (1956). ¹⁶ Osborne (1985a) 64–5. ¹⁷ Dunn (1992) 247.

¹⁸ Osborne (1985a); Whitehead (1986a); Lambert (1993); Jones (1999); see further chs. 2 and 3 below.

its members (*IG* ii² 1202). Here the deme dates its actions by the Athenian eponymous archon, identifies the meeting at which the decree was passed as the ‘chief meeting’, just as ten of the forty Assembly meetings each year were identified as ‘chief assemblies’, records that the people of Aixone took its decision on the proposal of one of its members, Glaukides, carefully records the words of his proposal (‘Be it decreed ...’), gives the grounds for the decision and praises them in terms that can be exactly paralleled many times in decrees of the city (they were ‘good and loved honour’, showed ‘excellence and uprightness’), manifests the honour, as the city does, with gold crowns, takes the funding for those crowns from a budget, as the city had begun to do during the fourth century, makes announcement of the honours at the performance of plays, in this case comedies, at the festival of Dionysos, and carefully identifies officials, here the treasurers and demarch, to pay the money and inscribe the stone. At every point the actions of the deme parallel the actions taken on many occasions by the city – even to the point that, as the city often does, the deme leaves us in the dark as to what exactly it was that those honoured had done: their qualities are paraded, but the grounds for believing that they had those qualities, although surely mentioned in debate when the honours were passed, are left out of sight, and out of the reach of future debate.¹⁹

We can, then, give more substance to Finley’s arguments for community than he himself offered, but it is nevertheless basically his case that we reiterate. Much work done since in the areas of political theory has indeed done little more than enlarge upon points made by Finley and by Jones, situating their arguments more precisely in the historical data but offering little that is substantially new. The most exciting possibility seems to me as yet to have been only gestured towards rather than realised – the exploration of democracy as a way of thought. By that I mean the possibility that what made it feasible for a very large body of Athenians to take a direct and active part in political decision-making without those decisions becoming unmanageably incoherent was the building in of democratic assumptions, not just to their political views, but to their whole way of seeing the world.²⁰ This is to turn on its head the suggestion that it was democratic debate that brought about the opening up of the ‘second order questions’ that lie at the foundation of western philosophy – a suggestion which it is hard to square with the actual order of events – and to insist

¹⁹ On this tendency see further ch. 4 below.

²⁰ This is a proposition now pursued, in a slightly different way, by Josiah Ober (2008).

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[More information](#)*Changing visions of democracy*

9

instead that the growth of particular assumptions about how the world works were essential to, or at least went hand in hand with, the possibility of effective democratic debate.²¹ Or, to put it another way, this is to insist on taking further Cynthia Farrar's insight that the terms in which debates about how we know were carried on in the fifth century relate directly to the justification of democratic practice.²² I suggest that coming to think about human understanding of the world in those sorts of ways itself enabled not only confidence in, but, and for that reason, also the practical operation of, the procedures of democratic decision-making. Our further understanding of how Athenian democracy avoided being an 'unruly and incoherent master', in John Dunn's phrase once more,²³ and managed responsible government in the absence of a 'Government', will depend upon our raising our sights from the explicitly political world, whether of practice or of theory, and understanding better the situation of the political in the wider structures of Athenian life and thought. Arguably, in a world where everyone thought they were living in Plato's cave, the government envisaged in *Republic* would be practical.

The wider structures of Athenian life take us back to the third way in which Finley's work built upon and extended that of Jones – the grounding of an understanding of Athenian democracy in its material conditions. Finley did not share Jones's interest in the Athenian public economy. The Athenian liturgy system, whereby individual rich citizens were expected to take on the financing of festivals and so on, furnished him with a very clear example of the embedding of economic practices in social practices, but, unlike Jones, he never turned his attention to the Athenian tax system. But where Finley did revisit Jones's work, and deny his conclusions, was over the relationship between slavery and democracy.

Jones had argued that freeing all slaves in Athens would have had little effect; Finley insisted, first in his classic paper of 1959, which acknowledges Jones's assistance, and consistently thereafter, that the growth of freedom in Athens had gone hand in hand with the growth of slavery.²⁴ Finley's work on slavery sometimes manifests a polemical edge that scholarly disagreement alone hardly justified, but it represents a watershed in the study of the subject. Whereas Jones had allowed himself to get mired in the debate about absolute numbers, Finley, while dismissing Jones's own figure of 20,000 slaves at Athens as 'impossible', insisted that it was the 'social and economic' location of slaves, not their absolute number, that

²¹ The classic statement of the association between democracy and philosophical debate is Lloyd (1979) ch. 4. I offer an alternative account in Osborne (1997a).

²² Farrar (1988). ²³ Dunn (1992) 248. ²⁴ Finley (1959).

was crucial.²⁵ As to that location, he had no doubt: 'slaves were fundamental to the ancient economy'.²⁶

Finley pioneered the use of the comparative history of other slave societies, but, for all his interest in *Ancient slavery and modern ideology*, he explored very little the links between slavery and democratic ideology. Where Finley considered that 'psychology is all that we have to fall back on' and implied that it was a matter of ingrained prejudice that peasants and artisans refused to become hired labour,²⁷ we must surely stress that the very sense of community among citizens that he stressed in other contexts depended upon one citizen not having his freedom curtailed by another in an employer/employee relationship.²⁸ That was something that Rousseau already perceived in Book III of the *Social contract*,²⁹ and the neglect of that observation has led scholars to ignore Finley's arguments about location and to go back to worrying about absolute numbers or proportions of households owning slaves.³⁰

To stress the interconnection between the material circumstances of democracy and, if not the explicit theory, at least the ideology of democracy, is to return to democracy as 'joined-up writing'. Finley's discussions of politics remained curiously insulated from his discussions of slavery or of the economy.³¹ The liveliness of the engagement with Finley's particular views on the economy, as in the contrasting treatments of credit at Athens by Paul Millett and Edward Cohen, has arguably discouraged rather than encouraged exploration of the political implications of the views taken.³² Such standard works on Athenian democracy as Mogens Hansen's *The Athenian democracy in the age of Demosthenes* (1991) have been sufficiently influenced by Jones to think that the social, if hardly the economic, background has to be sketched in, and political theory as well as practice explored, but insufficiently influenced to integrate that discussion. Simply to allude to the relationship between slavery and democracy as an unresolved problem, as Hansen does, is to leave the writing spectacularly unjoined-up.

²⁵ Finley (1973b) 71. ²⁶ Finley (1973b) 79. ²⁷ Finley (1980) 89–90.

²⁸ See further ch. 5 below.

²⁹ Rousseau *Du contrat social* book III, ch. 15. I am grateful to Keith Thomas for drawing this passage to my attention.

³⁰ Cf. Ober (1989) 24–7.

³¹ Compare for example the titles of his Wiles Lectures of 1980, published as *Politics in the ancient world* (1983): 'State, class and power', 'Authority and patronage', 'Politics', 'Popular participation', 'Political issues and conflict', and 'Ideology'.

³² Millett (1991); Cohen (1992).