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978-0-521-19104-3 - Race and Citizen Identity in the Classical Athenian Democracy

Susan Lape

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RACE AND CITIZEN IDENTITY IN THE CLASSICAL ATHENIAN DEMOCRACY

In *Race and Citizen Identity in the Classical Athenian Democracy*, Susan Lape demonstrates how a racial ideology grounded citizen identity. Although this ideology did not manifest itself in a fully developed race myth, its study offers insight into the causes and conditions that can give rise to race and racisms in both modern and pre-modern cultures. In the Athenian context, racial citizenship emerged because it both identified who the citizens were and explained why they deserved to share in the goods of citizenship. By investigating Athenian law, drama, and citizenship practices, this study shows how racial citizenship worked in practice to consolidate national unity and to account for past Athenian achievements. It also considers how Athenian identity narratives fueled Herodotus' and Thucydides' understanding of history and causation.

Susan Lape is Associate Professor of Classics at the University of Southern California. She is the author of *Reproducing Athens: Menander's Comedy, Democratic Culture and the Hellenistic City*.

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PREFACE

RACE AND CITIZEN IDENTITY IN THE CLASSICAL ATHENIAN DEMOCRACY examines how social actors identified as citizens during the fifth and fourth centuries BCE. From the mid fifth century onward, citizens increasingly appealed to a language of birth and ancestry to develop narratives about who they were as citizens. Citizens assumed that having the right birth and ancestry not only qualified them for citizenship but also endowed them with capacities and characteristics associated with citizenship, including an inherited love for democracy. In this study, I argue that these narratives articulate a vision of racial citizenship.

Since there is no current consensus on the issue of whether the concepts of race and/or racialism can be used to analyze ancient identities, I thought it might be helpful to clarify why I am using the term “racial” and what I mean by it. In this study, the term “racial” describes one component or narrative of citizen identity (citizen identity was composed of several narratives). I treat this narrative, racial citizenship, as a form of social identity, and investigate the causes and conditions that encouraged the Athenians to formulate and embrace it as well as the way this narrative worked in practice. The study is roughly divided between an examination of why and how racial citizenship emerged and an investigation of its consequences for citizenship practices, historiography, and policy decisions (*inter alia*). What must be stressed is that nothing in this project hangs on the use of the term “racial” *per se*. One might read this entire study substituting “ethnic” or some other less controversial term for “racial.” In the final analysis, what I hope will matter is the argument about citizen identity in the democracy rather than simply the term I apply to one component of that identity.

Although speaking of racial citizenship opens this work up to potential misunderstanding, I have elected to use the label for two reasons. The first is specificity. Although the fit is not exact, the concept of racialism more closely captures the elements of the identity narrative under consideration here than does “ethnicity” or recent amalgams like

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“racial ethnicity,” as I discuss at length in Chapter 1. I stress, however, that to speak of Athenian citizenship as having a racial component is not to argue or assert that race and racisms as we know them today existed in democratic Athens. The Athenians were not interested in classifying all of humanity in hierarchically ranked and biologically and/or culturally distinct races. They were interested in themselves, in delineating the body of citizens and rationalizing who was entitled to belong. By answering the question “Who belongs?” with reference to bilateral nativity norms, they inadvertently paved the way to justify their answer in racial terms.

The second reason I have chosen to employ the concept of racial citizenship involves the apparent motivation behind its genesis. The Athenians did not initially embrace racial citizenship in order to express pre-existing ideas about their racial or ethnic superiority. Rather, the need to justify the distribution of the polis’s resources, material and symbolic, supplied the impetus for citizens to develop and adopt the racial possibilities that their citizenship practices made available. Historians have shown that these are precisely the kinds of concerns that stand behind the emergence of the race ideologies that remain with us today (particularly in the United States). Although Athenian racial citizenship does not prefigure modern racisms, it does offer a snapshot of the conditions that can give rise to racial ideologies and racism. But above and beyond whatever label we give to the narratives comprising citizen identity, these narratives are part of the history of Athens’ democracy. We should remember “that most grand democratic projects in human history – from Athens to America – have xenophobic and imperial roots” (West 2004, 42). Accordingly, if we wish to understand something of this paradoxical entanglement or, more simply, what made the Athenian democracy possible, we must supplement the study of institutions and the ideology promulgated therein to consider the prior questions of “Who belongs?” and “Why?”

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Portions of this book were also presented at the UCLA/USC Greek seminar (2004); the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill (2004); the University of Southern California (2004); Davidson College (2005); the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign (2006); the University of California, Santa Barbara (2007); and the Center for Law, History and Culture, University of Southern California (2007). I am grateful to the audiences at all of these events for their presence and comments, and I wish to give special thanks to Jim Dengate (University of Illinois) for his remarks on ancient slavery and to Daria Roithmayr (University of Southern California) for helping me with social identity theory. Material from Chapters 2 and 5 was presented at the Early Spectacles of Race conference held at the University of California, Irvine, in May 2004. I thank Karen Bassi, James Dee, David Goldberg, Geraldine Heng, and Daniel Seldon for their feedback and support at this event.

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