

CHAPTER 14

“THE HANDS OF THE MANY”

DEMOCRACY IN ATHENS

Things looked rosy in the Greek *poleis* after they defeated the Persian Empire. They had emerged from the war stronger than ever, and their economies continued to grow.

Persia was still a threat, though. Maybe the next time the two forces clashed, the gods—or luck—wouldn't be on the Greek side, as they had been at Marathon and Salamis. So some of the Greek states thought it would be prudent to join together to keep an eye on things in the Aegean. With many navies patrolling the area, Persian ships would be easier to spot before they attacked anyone. And Persian vessels often carried valuable goods. To the Greeks it seemed only fair for anyone who happened upon one to loot its cargo to get revenge for the destruction that had happened on their soil.

So the *poleis* closest to Persia asked Athens to lead a new alliance. More than 100 *poleis* joined them. Modern historians call this group the Delian League because its treasury was on Delos, the island sacred to Apollo.

Not everyone thought that putting Athens in charge was such a great idea. The Spartans, for example, thought that the Athenians were getting altogether too much credit for the victories over Persia. What about Leonidas and the heroic Spartans who died at Thermopylae, after all?

At first, the Greeks were thinking of asking Sparta to head up their league. But the Spartan king acted so arrogantly that the Greeks told the Spartans to forget it and asked Athens instead. So the Spartans had to be content with leading their own alliance (which is now called the Peloponnesian League and which had already existed for several years). These two groups didn't get along at all.

“ PERICLES,
ISOCRATES, AND
AESCHINES



A woman representing democracy crowns a man who symbolizes the Greek citizenry, showing that the people were the real rulers.



The Agora was the center of public life. The open area on the right was the marketplace, where people not only shopped but met to discuss and argue over the matters of the day. The buildings on the hill on the left housed the offices that ran the city and its religious life.

The Spartans were suspicious of the Athenian form of government, which was completely different from theirs. In Sparta, even though all citizens were supposedly equal, a small group of aristocrats made all the important decisions, from waging war and making peace to deciding which children would be exposed and which would be allowed to live. The soldiers had a vote, but they hardly ever went against what the aristocrats wanted. And the way they voted was by banging on their shields—whichever side made the most noise won.

This was quite different from the way things were run in Athens. There, the reforms of Solon had given the people some say in how they were governed. Over the years, more Athenians had achieved rights. The differences in the rights held by the various classes grew smaller and smaller until most citizens were treated very much the same. Eventually, all the important matters were decided by the people as a whole, not by the officials. This form of government is called a democracy. The Athenian statesman Pericles defined it as “the administration [of the *polis*] . . . in the hands of the many and not of the few.”

66 Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, 431 BCE

Some Athenians came to think that rule by the people had some problems. Many years later, the Athenian writer Isocrates, who obviously longed for the “good old days,” looked back on this time and wrote in his *Antidosis* that Athens:

grew powerful and seized the empire of the Greeks, and our fathers, growing more self-assured than was proper for them, began to look with disfavor on those good men and true who had made Athens great, envying them their power, and growing to look instead to men who were low-born and full of insolence.

“” Isocrates, *Antidosis*, 354 BCE

So even some Athenians were skeptical about the ability of ordinary people to decide important matters.

Athens also had many government officials. The most important were:

- The ten generals (*strategoi*) in charge of the military and many civil matters as well.
- The nine *archons* in charge of political and legal matters, and with some religious duties.
- The council of 500 *bouleutai*—councilors who served a one-year term in the council preparing business for the assembly.

It’s hard to be precise, but it appears there were about 100 elected officials and 600 who were chosen by lot, in addition to the 500 councilors. With so many people in charge of different functions, it was unlikely that anyone would take over the whole government.

This was no accident. The Athenians set things up this way because they were worried about any one person or group of people getting too much power. They had not forgotten the tyrants and they had no intention of ever again being ruled by someone with such power. In fact, they were so afraid of a single ruler that some people thought that their most popular leader, Pericles, always wore his helmet because someone had told him that without it he resembled the tyrant Peisistratus.

So, to keep one power-hungry man from gaining too much control, an *archon* couldn’t serve more than one year.

ANCIENT LITTERBUGS

You might call clay jars the “plastic bags of the ancient world.” They were used for carrying and storing all sorts of things. You could reach down to the ground in any town in the Mediterranean and be reasonably sure of touching a part of a broken pot. Archaeologists use them to get dates and other information about archaeological sites. If you find a Greek pot in Italy, for example, you know that the Greeks were trading or living in that part of Europe.

THEMISTOCLES AND ARISTIDES

Aristides was an Athenian *archon* and general. Soon after the Battle of Marathon, a huge amount of silver was found near Athens. Aristides wanted to divide it evenly among all the citizens, but his rival Themistocles had a different idea. He wanted to use it to build ships for the Athenian navy. They couldn't agree or compromise, and finally the Athenians voted to exile him for ten years, so off he went.

When Xerxes attacked a few years later, Themistocles asked his fellow-citizens to allow Aristides to come back early. They agreed, which was a good thing for Athens—Aristides played an important role in the defeat of the Persians.

And to keep any person from persuading everyone to vote for him, the *archons* were chosen by a kind of lottery. The Athenians figured that it wasn't really important to choose the most capable person to do an *archon's* job, so choosing by lot was just fine. If an *archon* made a bad decision, it could always be changed. And most decisions were made by the people, voting in the assembly.

But if a general made a mistake, the consequences could be disastrous. What if Themistocles had decided to fight the Persians at some other place than Salamis? The Greeks might have lost. The very idea was terrifying. So generals were elected to increase the chances of having only competent people in the post. Generals also had a great deal of input into how the government was run during times of peace, too, and they were allowed to hold office as many times as they could get elected. Pericles served as general more than thirty times.

When any matter came up for a vote, the *ekklesia*, or assembly, met. All eligible citizens could come to the meetings and voice their opinions, and most important, they could all vote. The *stratego*i presented their ideas first and then anyone who wanted to add an opinion could speak. And they didn't just speak—they yelled, laughed, applauded, booed, cheered. It must have been very noisy and chaotic, especially since thousands of people might show up at a meeting. Athens had a direct democracy: all the eligible people voted on everything. *All* of them.

The orator Aeschines was enthusiastic about the way anyone who wanted to express himself was allowed, and even encouraged, to do so. He said in a speech that class and wealth distinctions make no difference and that the official running the assembly

does not exclude from the platform the man whose ancestors have not held a general's office, nor even the man who earns his daily bread by working at a trade; nay, these men he most heartily welcomes and for this reason he repeats again, and again the invitation, "Who wishes to address the assembly?"

“ Aeschines, *Against Timorchus*,
345 BCE

Some—actually, most—people were not allowed to participate. These included women, children, slaves, foreigners, men who had shown cowardice in war, and those who had wasted their inheritance. Athenians who were traveling or lived too far away couldn't make their voices heard either.

If a citizen had done something really bad—or if his political enemies just wanted to get rid of him—there was always ostracism. Ostracism meant sending someone into exile for ten years. Its name derives from the word for “broken pot”: *ostrakon*. In those days, paper was extremely expensive, but pieces of pottery were easy to come by. If an Athenian wanted to get rid of someone, he didn't even have to accuse his enemy of a crime. All he had to do was to wait for the next ostracism. Each April, the citizens were asked if they wanted to hold an ostracism that year. If the majority voted in favor, another meeting would be held, and everyone present would be given an *ostrakon*. On it he could write down the name of anyone he thought was a danger to the state. If enough pieces had the same name on it, that person would be kicked out of Athens. After ten years, he could return home and pick up his life where he had left off.

Democracy may not seem like that big a deal to many people today who have lived in democracies all their lives. It sometimes seems that every time the TV is on, someone's talking about an election in some part of the world. Even people with other forms of government have heard of the democratic system.

But for the people of the ancient world, this was a brand-new, exciting, and sometimes scary idea. Let regular, ordinary people decide things? How can you trust them? What if they choose the wrong way? Why not find one strong, smart man or at least a group of aristocrats and turn all the decisions over to them, as in most other *poleis*? No wonder most of the world rejected the idea of democracy for a long, long time. Many countries still do.

Pericles summed up a great deal of what it meant to be a citizen in a funeral oration, given after many of Athens' citizens were killed in the Peloponnesian War. Some of his statements include:

STUFFING THE BALLOT BOX

Most Athenians couldn't write, or it at least found it difficult. So the person who called for the ostracism would hire someone to write the name of his political enemy on many *ostraka*. Archaeologists have found a bunch of nearly 200 *ostraka* in a well on the Acropolis with the name “Themistocles” written on them in only a few different handwritings. Someone must have hung around outside the meeting, passing these out to the people on their way in to vote!



“ Thucydides, *The History of the Peloponnesian War*, 430 BCE

Our government does not copy that of our neighbors. Rather, we serve as an example to them.

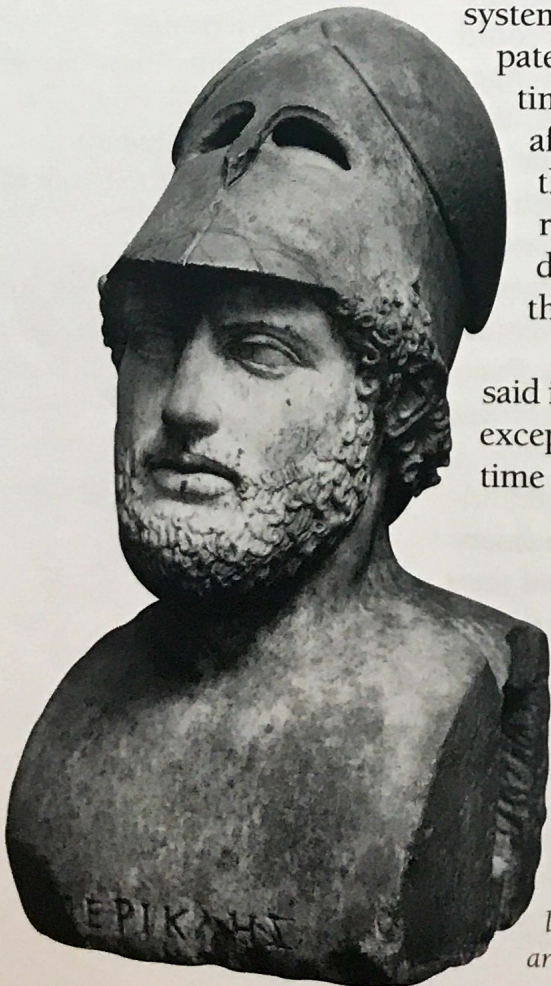
In our public life we are not exclusive, and in our private business we are not suspicious of one another. We do not get angry with our neighbor for doing what he likes or give him nasty looks which, though they would not cause physical harm, are still painful.

Even without the kind of laborious training they have in Sparta, we meet danger with peace of mind, and our courage is gained by habit, not enforced by law.

It is right that we consider those who have the clearest knowledge of pleasure and pain but do not shrink from danger because of it as the bravest men of all.

But there were certainly some problems with the Athenian system. First of all, most people in Athens couldn't participate. Also, there was a lot of bribery around election time. This meant that wealthier people, who could afford to buy votes, got what they wanted more often than was fair. And sometimes people would get carried away with the emotions of the moment and make decisions based on what everyone was saying, rather than on what they really believed would be best.

But as Britain's prime minister, Winston Churchill, said in 1947, "democracy is the worst form of Government except for all those other forms that have been tried from time to time."



Some people said that Pericles wore a helmet to hide his receding hairline. Others claimed that he was bothered by a resemblance to the unpopular tyrant Peisistratus and wore a helmet so they would look less like each other. This is a marble copy, made by a Roman artist, of a bronze statue that was destroyed long ago.