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It is no coincidence that so much is written about prominent leaders in isonomous (and soon to become democratic) Athens. Historians speak of a Cimonian era or of Periclean Athens because these leaders determined the future course of the city, as, in a different way, Themistocles had determined events in the years preceding Salamis. But contrary to appearances, these periods represent above all phases in the history of the Attic citizenry.

Athens had no appointed or elected government, and there were no parties or other organizations for anyone to head. Nor were there formal mechanisms to guarantee a leader's position. His status depended primarily on his persuasive powers and the respect he commanded—in a certain sense, on popularity. But it worked out in such a way that one individual continued to play the leading role over extended periods. During its isonomous period—and even more so in the later democratic era—Athens needed personalities whose authority could provide guidance for the majority (or the influential minority) of citizens. That was the case, at least, until the power structure changed. Except at times of violent disagreement and great perplexity, the Athenians were psychologically willing to commit themselves to their leaders. The most extreme degree of this was reached under Pericles, when Athens was, according to Thucydides, nominally a democracy but in reality ruled entirely by its foremost citizen.

Such power could, however, only be exercised by a leader who stuck closely to a course that reflected the will of the majority. No matter how much he had himself influenced and defined this will, he always had to align himself with popular sentiment if he wanted to maintain his exalted position. Moreover, forging majorities from the variety of interests existing in a pluralistic and apolitical society was out of the question because society as such did not exist. Rather, politicians who wanted to stay in power had to identify with important issues and definite policies for which they then bore responsibility, a fact of which they were constantly reminded.

The working of this system can be explained with reference to two





factors: the way a politician presented his position in speeches and proposals to the community, which then made up its own mind, and the special ability of the public to remember these speeches and proposals and not allow itself to be distracted by a multitude of other interests. However, these factors are only part of the story.

What counted even more were the people's concrete needs and their identification with their leader. They had to be able to trust a particular man to lead them well. They did not want to go back and forth from one man to another on important matters. In case of doubt, a vote on ostracism had to decide among competitors of equal power. For those who passed the test, it repeatedly reaffirmed not only their connection to, but also a certain identity with, the predominant tendencies among the people.

Cimon's complacency reflected the mood of the contemporary citizenry, which had just passed through the enormous exertion of the Persian Wars and wanted to enjoy and make the most of their successes. Only under these particular circumstances could Cimon have gotten along so well with the Areopagus of isonomous Athens.

Similarly Themistocles' reign would not have been conceivable without the citizens of his time, men who were able, with some persuasion perhaps, to judge the situation correctly and act on what they saw. Of course, what they did was necessary to preserve their city, but a great deal of intelligence and discipline are required to do what is necessary when it is inconvenient. Themistocles and the Attic citizens obviously spurred each other on.

It must be stressed, however, that the personalities that played a decisive role in Athens over many years represent only one side of Athens' history. After the Persian Wars and the city's astonishing expansion of power, the city's development was characterized more by a process of long and gradual change—for instance, in the way citizens participated in politics—than by specific situations or personalities. Where individuals did step forward, they articulated tendencies already present in the citizenry. It was probably those who were best at describing these broad popular tendencies who were needed the most. Themistocles did it in a way no one else could have, and Pericles was a genius at it. But one

must not overlook the huge opportunities and challenges to which they responded.

Anyone whose agenda was not in line with the inclinations of the citizenry would eventually fail. There is no indication that those who failed were less intelligent, but it is clear that their particular ways, their connections, their methods, or their goals did not conform to the mood of the time.

Ironically, the citizenry began to change significantly at just about the time when Themistocles set out on his flight from Greece. Cimon's era was a moratorium, during which the lowest social class, the *thetes*, acquired great importance.

The *thetes* had heretofore enjoyed little respect; they had virtually no land of their own and were not affluent enough to equip themselves for military service. In the traditional view of hoplite society, they were not proper citizens, no matter what rights had been granted to them or how they used them. The existence of the middle class went back practically to the beginning of the polis, and in a narrow political sense the polis owed its existence to it. The lower class, by contrast, owed whatever importance it had to the later development of the polis—to their military pay and, later on, to the per diem allowances paid them. In return for these they rendered the city invaluable services.

The *thetes* became increasingly indispensable to the city, first when Themistocles built up the navy, and especially later, when new and more ambitious expeditions were undertaken under Cimon. It was primarily the *thetes*—along with some metics, or resident aliens—who rowed the Attic ships, and thus they shared in the spoils and vastly expanded their horizons. Their self-image as a class rose dramatically, and that meant not only that they spoke up more in the popular assembly but that the entire assembly attained new importance, as did the city of Athens as a whole. The city's great new external power was accompanied by an expansion of the circle of those who functioned as citizens.

This transition happened gradually, however. Opposition to the aristocracy, which had been an element in Cleisthenes' restructuring of the





citizenry and in the creation of the Council of Five Hundred, was almost entirely absent in the early days of isonomous Athens.

Nor is there any evidence that the *thetes* were in opposition to the middle class; in fact, signs suggest the opposite. They were different, but that did not necessarily mean they had different goals. They wanted equality with the middle class, but that did not generate conflict between them. Even later on, nobody ever succeeded in pitting the primarily urban lower class against the more rural middle class.

Only one difference emerges clearly: mobility. While it was generally difficult for the farmers to participate in long military campaigns, many of the *thetes* were on extended duty. At home in Athens there was little need for their services, but on military expeditions they earned money and respect. Where the farmers hesitated to leave their lands untended, the *thetes* had few second thoughts. Where the farmers were more constrained by traditional thinking, the *thetes* were quick to decide (and do) what made sense in a given situation. They were willing to give their all to any endeavor that promised to increase the city's power.

The more self-confident and influential the *thetes* became in politics, the readier they were to support new policies. It was not simply that they imposed their will on the farmers by constituting a majority, but more likely that they were drawn into the general consensus. The balance within the popular assembly shifted somewhat, continuing a trend that probably began under Cimon. Cimon's bond with the Areopagus began to wear thin.

In 465 the island of Thasos in the north of the Aegean Sea defected from the Delian League. The island ruled several nearby sections of the mainland, as many Greek coastal islands did. But the areas on the mainland that Thasos controlled contained gold mines. That is why the city of Thasos was so rich and, thanks to its fleet, so powerful. It was also well fortified.

Athens in that period was focusing its attentions on the northern Aegean region, where, among other things, the best trees for shipbuilding grew. At the same time Athens tried to gain control of an area somewhat farther west, near the river Strymon. The Athenians wanted to establish a

colony somewhat inland from the city of Eion in a strategically advantageous spot called Enneahodoi, or Nine Ways (later the site of Amphipolis), where several routes crossed and from which it would be possible to dominate Mount Pangaeus, whose mines Pisistratus had previously owned and exploited. Athens sent out ten thousand settlers, Athenians, and anyone else who wanted to go along.

The quarrel with Thasos over the trade centers and mines on the mainland was in all likelihood deliberately initiated by Athens. And Thasos probably defected from the league less because it no longer wanted to belong than because it objected to Attic interference in the northern Aegean.

The Athenian colonists succeeded in taking Enneahodoi but were defeated in battle by the Thracian Edones, to whom the surrounding area belonged. The Attic losses were so great that the enterprise had to be abandoned. This was the first major defeat Athens had suffered in decades.

Thasos, however, was forced to capitulate after a long siege in 463–462. It handed over its fleet, ceded its possessions on the mainland, and was forced to raze its fortifications. It also agreed to pay reparations.

The herald in Aeschylus's *Agamemnon*, written a few years later, would use the following words, which might be based partly on the experience of the siege of Thasos, to describe the war against Troy:

> *Were I to tell you of the hard work done, the nights*
> *exposed, the huddled quarters, the foul beds—what part*
> *of day's disposal did we not cry out loud?*
> *Ashore, the horrors stayed with us and grew. We lay*
> *against the ramparts of our enemies, and from*
> *the sky, and from the ground, the meadow dews came out*
> *to soak our clothes and us, nor ever dry. And if*
> *I were to tell of wintertime, when all birds died*
> . . . . . .
> *or summer heat, when in the lazy noon the sea*
> *fell level and asleep under a windless sky—*
> *but why live such grief over again? That time is gone*
> *for us, and gone for those who died.*





The Thasians had been secretly assured of help from Sparta. This, too, was new. For the first time the Spartans were going to take sides openly against Athens, a move that could have serious consequences.

But things never came to that point. Sparta was rocked by a heavy earthquake. Reportedly only five houses were left standing, mountain peaks toppled in the Taygetus range, and numerous fissures opened in the earth. Multitudes of helots, the Spartans' quasi-slave serf population, came from the countryside to avenge themselves on their oppressors. The city could have been rendered impotent for years if not forever, but thanks to King Archidamus's presence of mind, this did not happen. The rebels retreated to a stronghold on Mount Ithome in Messenia, from which the Spartans were unable to dislodge them. Thus the Spartan fighting forces were detained there for some time.

When Cimon returned from the successful campaign against Thasos in 463–462, he found the political scene in Athens much changed. A new group of politicians had come to the fore. It was led by Ephialtes, son of Sophonides, of whom it was said that he "lacked wealth" and was "just and incorruptible," qualities that suggest passionate political convictions in a period of fundamental change. Ephialtes and his group, which included Pericles, were of a younger generation and undoubtedly thought in more modern terms.

For one thing, they had different ideas about foreign policy. This became immediately evident when the Spartans asked Athens for help in driving the helots from their stronghold on Mount Ithome. Cimon was of course in favor, but Ephialtes stood against the idea. Sparta, Ephialtes' side argued, should not be helped but left to suffer its plight and the corresponding blow to its pride. Cimon prevailed with difficulty and was sent to assist Sparta with four thousand hoplites, but Cimon's was a Pyrrhic victory.

In 462–461, during Cimon's absence, Ephialtes and his adherents mounted an all-out political attack on the Areopagus. They pushed through a motion that deprived the council of all functions except jurisdiction over blood feuds and supervision in some religious matters. All

its other functions were assigned to the Council of Five Hundred, the popular assembly, and the people's court. The aristocratic council would no longer play any political role.

Meanwhile, as the siege of the helots dragged on, the Spartans grew increasingly suspicious of the Attic troops, fearing they would join forces with the enemy. On top of it all, when they finally left Sparta, the Athenians were attacked by the Corinthians on their march home. Athens' relations with Sparta suffered lasting damage. Immediately after the troops' return, Athens terminated its alliance with Sparta against the Persians and entered into new agreements with Argos and Thessaly. Anti-Spartan feelings ran so high that Alcibiades (grandfather and namesake of the Alcibiades who became famous as a general, statesman, and associate of Socrates) was compelled to cancel a hospitality agreement with Sparta that dated back many decades. Cimon attempted to restore the powers of the Areopagus, but without success.

From then on, the only political bodies in charge of important decisions were to be a newly formed council, annually elected, of men primarily from the middle class, plus the popular assembly and the people's court. There were to be no more preliminary deliberations between the Areopagus and the popular assembly. Officials were no longer accountable to the Areopagus but directly to the people. This arrangement was bound to alter the expectations placed on the people. In short, the government was to be run exclusively by the people—though within the context of existing institutions, laws, and oaths.

Athens had never experienced such a radical political change. The transformations during the time of Cleisthenes paled by comparison. The Spartans' reaction at Ithome is just one illustration of how frightening the Athenians looked to the rest of Greece after they stripped the Areopagus of power. As far as we can tell, nowhere else in Greece did a city decide to do without the political input of an advisory council made up of the most experienced and influential citizens. (If a similar situation existed anywhere else, it could only have been in insignificant towns, whose political order would have concerned only immediate neighbors.)





Athens, however, was the dominant power of the Delian League. Its influence was broad, and the rest of Greece could only watch what the city did in amazement. No one could ignore its political organization and those who determined its policies.

And now this city was under what we would now call a revolutionary government. The general assumption among those of political importance in Greece was that things would come to a bad end (even though some may have been fascinated by the experiment). Most likely, the main question people wondered about was what would happen before things returned to normal.

To understand what the Athenians themselves were thinking before the demotion of the Areopagus and, above all, afterward, we must examine how this revolutionary event came to take place.

Men like Pericles, who at the time of Salamis was still a child, along with certain ambitious older men, who for whatever reason had had practically no say up to now, saw the relationship with Sparta in a very different light from Cimon and his allies. What the latter group saw from the inside, from the political center, the former looked at from without. Cimon had proceeded step by step after the Persians' retreat, adjusting to circumstances as they evolved. The new men saw the situation as it was now. Cimon thought he had things under control, relying at least partly on his personal connections and especially on his friendship with Sparta. He felt perfectly secure. But Pericles and the other political outsiders realized the full riskiness of Athens' position. They thought more in political terms. Also, where Cimon was rather guileless, they were more clever.

The defeat at Enneahodoi had been the first time a large Athenian army was annihilated and the first time the Spartans threatened to side with a defecting city. Could this mean that the entire Delian League might be coming apart? It must have seemed evident to anyone looking at things from the outside that Athens was engaged in a risky venture. The city, which had only about 35,000 citizens (counting, according to Greek custom, only adult males), headed an alliance of many cities totaling well over 200,000 citizens. The reliability of the Delian League,

which extended from one end of the Aegean Sea to the other and beyond, had now, after the defection of Naxos, come into question a second time. It had been a long time since the original purpose of the alliance, the struggle against Persia, had been invoked. Although it is true that the Persians might return, many of the allies must have been asking themselves whether it was really necessary to maintain this huge military apparatus. What if Sparta were to support the next city that decided to withdraw? The Athenians could not expect an earthquake to come to their aid every time.

So, if Cimon was accused of irresponsibility, there may have been good reasons for it. If Ephialtes argued that Athens should conserve its energies and eschew pro-Spartan policies, he could cite much to support his position. In this situation, Ephialtes saw the best chance of success in an alliance with Sparta's enemies. He and his friends may have been influenced by Themistocles' opinions.

Ephialtes and his allies may also have considered Cimon's domestic policies to be wrong. Their own ambition undoubtedly combined with their criticism of those in power and the rousing effect of political slogans to create a complex tangle of motives that it would be vain to trace in detail.

In order for the new generation to oppose Cimon, to initiate new foreign policy, and to dominate Athenian politics, they had to take on the Areopagus, whether they had originally intended to do it or not. As long as the old elite was in charge it blocked access to the popular assembly, whose majority support the usurpers had to win.

How were the upstarts able to succeed against such powerful, successful, respected, and influential men? Historians often suggest that Ephialtes relied on the *thetes* for support, who surely were an important factor in his plans. Historical sources give us some clues about how Ephialtes and his adherents accomplished this.

Ephialtes is said to have raised charges against several members of the Areopagus, accusing them among other things of taking bribes. These charges were easy to substantiate because it was still customary among the aristocrats to exchange gifts, as between guests and hosts; the line between such a custom and corruption is never very clear. At first Ephialtes may





have accused only a few of the lords who really were guilty or whom he wanted to bring into disrepute. But at some point his goal must have become to discredit the Areopagus as a whole.

Pericles accused Cimon himself, claiming that Cimon could have invaded Macedonia from Thasos but had been bribed not to. Cimon was eventually declared innocent of the charges, perhaps by the Areopagus. The main purpose of Pericles' accusation may well have been to agitate in favor of expanding military activity in the northern Aegean.

Ephialtes also agitated to create general dissatisfaction with the Areopagus. He claimed, for example, that the Areopagus had acquired some of its authority improperly. They were "added on" by its members at a later date, according to Ephialtes, as though only the body's original powers, which he apparently took to be primarily the judicial functions, had validity. This was a clever strategy, because even at that time reference to tradition had popular appeal, and Ephialtes probably used this argument to counter accusations that he himself was a usurper.

Several phrases drawn from Aeschylus's tragedy *The Suppliants*, which was most likely produced in 463, supply insight into Ephialtes' conspiratorial activities. In the play prominent mention is made of the "rule of the people." This is the first time in recorded history that the word *people* is linked to the verb *to rule*. There is good reason to believe that the concept of democracy first came into use at this time. The popular assembly had long been the body of highest authority in matters of legislation and in decisions about war and peace, but initially that had not meant much. Beginning in the period of Cleisthenes, the assembly became increasingly involved in practical politics as well, but it continued to follow the recommendations of the Areopagus. It is not just by chance that well into the 460s the popular assembly is described as a "ruling" body. It was difficult to modify the idea of "ruling" (or "governing"), which had up to now been associated exclusively with holders of political office and tyrants, to such an extent that it could be applied to the people. A sense of the people as the governing body seems not yet to have existed. Initially all anybody had in mind was that the broader segments of the citizenry

should in fact have equal political rights. This was what isonomy was all about. The actual governing was done by officials and the Areopagus; the Council of Five Hundred had a say in it, and the popular assembly made the final decisions, which amounted, in the thinking of the time, to a distribution of powers among the various governing bodies.

Thus, it was a considerable innovation when Ephialtes stressed government by the people. The intent of his choice is best revealed in the negative demand that followed his positive one: It was the people who were to rule, *not* the aristocracy; that is, not the Areopagus. The authority of this body was bound now to appear as paternalistic, so that it seemed essential to defend the rights of the people against the Areopagus, the institution that was supposed to act as the guardian of those rights.

Another clue is provided by some strange words, which scholars have generally failed to take seriously, Aeschylus put into the mouths of the Egyptian girls who form the chorus, the suppliants of the play's title. When they beseech the king of Argos to take them in, he declares that he cannot make the decision on his own but needs the approval of the popular assembly. Thus it seems in the play that in the legendary past a democracy existed in Argos. It is interesting to note that democracy is claimed for Argos in particular. The Egyptian girls refuse to believe—or fail to understand—the king's declaration. They insist that as king he must be able to do what he wants in Argos, but before that they address him in an odd way: They suggest that as king, he *is* the people.

Nowhere else among the Greeks do we encounter anything even vaguely resembling such an identification of an individual with the polis, an identification reminiscent of Louis XIV of France. On the contrary, the polis was so distinct from its leader that under a tyrant it appeared practically to be the ruler's property. He, not the polis, figured in political treaties. In documents, the polis appears at best alongside the ruler, not as represented by him. "What belongs to a single man is not the polis," wrote Sophocles in *Antigone*. The polis was, indeed, not a state. That abstract entity of the State was precisely the basis that had been lacking in the tyrants' claims to legitimation.





How, then, did the formulation "Aren't you the polis?" come about? Was this sentence meant to convey the chorus's Eastern view of the world, so shocking as it was to the Greek mind? Modern Egyptologists have said that the ancient Egyptians would have been most likely to translate *state* as "pharaoh." But the reason the ancient Egyptians had no word for *state* was that they had no state as such. And though the Greeks could use the word *polis* to refer to entire empires (such as the Persian), this does not imply that the king of such an empire was identified with the entire empire. It is hardly imaginable that the Greeks would ever have asked a question such as "Who is Egypt?" or "Who is the Persian Empire?" It seems Aeschylus was not satisfied with showing the strangeness of the Egyptian girls by having them assume that the king ruled the city with unlimited power like a despot; he also made them suggest that the king *was* the city and the people in their entirety.

The only way out of this confusion is to read the suppliants' question as an implied statement, as an allusion to something that might have been stated straightforwardly and emphatically about the polis of Athens; namely that "the city is all of us," meaning all of us as we stand here, the Attic people (or "demos") gathered in the popular assembly. This interpretation makes the most sense. The Attic aristocrats had never claimed to *be* the city, but surely their words and actions implied at least that they knew best what was good for it. That was, after all, the basis of the aristocratic claim to leadership. Cimon's suggestion that Cleisthenes' aristocracy should be reinstated advocated the same principle: rule by the most qualified. Perhaps the late source from which we know of Cimon's reference to Cleisthenes even retains Cimon's original phrasing, suggesting that he was responding directly to the claim that the people themselves should govern.

The people had few arguments to support their claim, except that they *were* the people. Granted, they were not as educated or as "wise" as the aristocrats, but as they pointed out, it was *their* well-being that was at stake. The aristocrats might think they knew what was best for the polis as an entity, but the people could argue that since they were the ones affected by whatever actions were taken, they should be the ones to

decide on policy, and be able to decide freely. Thus the polis became the people's subject rather than the object of the aristocracy. What was called the polis was now constituted by the citizenry in its entirety, and that is exactly how the broader classes, in their new sense of entitlement, would have expressed their claim to government by the people.

The emergence of such a conflict and its subsequent propagandistic exploitation is also reflected in Aeschylus's *Suppliants* by the king's declaration that those who are to be affected by a decision must be the ones to make it. The whole development of the play suggests this. A long, somewhat agonized section is taken up by an exchange between the king and the suppliants. The Egyptian girls present their demand for asylum more and more insistently as the king writhes under the pressure of having to come to a decision.

To be sure the Greeks had encountered such dilemmas before. Here the problem is how to decide between expediency—refusing asylum because of the possibility of war if the girls were allowed to stay—and divine commands that insist on the granting of asylum. But in this tragedy the sense of *aporia*, or perplexity, is so great that it suggests an entirely new consciousness of the difficulty of decision-making. The king is unable to resolve the problem; the decision, to grant asylum, is forced on him.

By contrast, the popular vote taken after the king decides is clear in its intent. By the end of the play it turns out that the asylum seekers brought the country bad luck. The war against the girls' pursuers resulted in great losses and the fall of the king. The audience was meant to draw the conclusion that the democratic process was appropriate, but that there was no guarantee it would yield the right decision. The point was not *what* the decision would be, but *how* it was to be arrived at.

It is hard to imagine that this preoccupation with the problems of decision-making did not arise from contemporary reality. This does not mean that the play should be read as a statement of a political position, but rather that Aeschylus presented contemporary issues and experiences in the shape of drama. Behind it all, there is obviously the question of how and by whom the right decisions are to be reached and whether one person can even make decisions for others. It was no longer possible for Athenians simply to accept decisions of the Areopagus.





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Cimon's reputation had long since ceased to impress the *thetes*. His reported irresponsibility presumably became worse once he thought his position was secure. His defeat in the north at Enneahodoi and the rumors (which may have been accurate) about the danger Sparta posed to Athens must have cast his alliances, his friendships, and his most cherished assumptions in a suspicious light. And with the gulf that was opening up between this leading politician and the *thetes*, many may have come to suspect that the high lords looked with contempt upon "the men from the lowest bench of oars." The mystery surrounding the deliberations of the Areopagus added to that suspicion. The *thetes* may have rebelled against these insults to their self-respect. They were convinced of the necessity of pursuing a new, more aggressive foreign policy. After all, such a policy would benefit them. The possibilities of further gains in power suggested by Pericles made that clear. Furthermore, it was flattering to the *thetes* when Ephialtes and his associates tried to win them over with arguments and otherwise took them seriously.

Events then developed a momentum of their own. The more the members of the Areopagus felt attacked, the more uncooperative they became, so that the attackers, even when their criticisms were not initially meant to be sweeping, found all their suspicions justified. Each side saw the other act exactly as feared. The Areopagus members at first refused to take the attacks seriously because they could not imagine Athens surviving politically without them, an attitude that must have further fueled their opponents' rage. But they had little choice. It was not so much that they lacked imagination as that their very existence demanded they think a certain way. They made reference to the old, time-honored tradition and charged Ephialtes with being an innovator. (Innovation in those days did not suggest improvement or alternatives but revolution and destruction.) Ultimately, Ephialtes' counterargument that the Areopagus had usurped most of its authority may have carried the day simply because he already had a greater following behind him.

The composition of the Areopagus had changed in the meantime. For some twenty-five years leading up to this period, the archons had been

chosen by lot—and the longer this was the case, the greater a role chance played in the composition of the council. Over the course of time, those who became the most important politicians might have become archons anyway. Normally this expectation would have been enough, especially under favorable conditions, when the mere possibility of attaining that office enhanced a politician's power. But the situation became critical when too many ambitious men were excluded. The fact that Ephialtes and many of his friends had found themselves in this situation seems to have made the crucial difference.

Thus many factors converged, and the violent clashes between the two sides added to the crisis. It is debatable whether Ephialtes had political reason on his side. What is certain is that the new generation of Athenians prevailed. They knew about the Persian Wars only through stories and had no memory of how things had been before or how narrow the sphere of Attica's importance had been. The new class of *thetes* also came into prominence, and once empowered and roused to action they were more than ready to embrace a new aggressive policy. Out of all this developed the immense increase in power and mobility that was to characterize Athens from then on, leading to ever more successes and finally bringing forth the flowering of Athenian culture.

It was a legal revolution—legal because the popular assembly had the right to pass the resolution that deflated the Areopagus, but a revolution nevertheless because it completely and fundamentally overturned the political order. Where before there had been a splintering of power among the Areopagus, the Council of Five Hundred, and the popular assembly, there was now a true government by the people. The old Areopagus was replaced by the Five Hundred, who, though no longer subject to the former's control were nevertheless not invested with independent authority. They had to pass on to the popular assembly all the motions that had been proposed to them. Decisions were now actually made by the mass of citizens. The experienced helmsmen were no longer in command; the "man from the lowest bench of oars" was now in charge.

Stability depended on whether the cooperation between the people



and their advisers, including the elected *strategoi*, worked well enough to guide politics along a proper and reasonable course. The help of the aristocrats remained indispensable for this work, but the aristocracy as a whole no longer dominated a governing organization, much less the organization in which the city-state's power was concentrated. As the farmers had done in Solon's time, now the *thetes*, the lowest social and economic class, assumed the power that had historically belonged to the aristocracy. This time there was no chance that Sparta or anyone else might intervene.

It had taken centuries after the introduction of the military phalanges in which farmers fought before those farmers were granted a regular voice in political matters. By comparison, the *thetes* were quickly granted political rights commensurate with their military functions. On the one hand, the stage for including the broader population in the political process was set (though the *thetes* had previously made little use of the political rights they already had); and on the other, the military had much greater need for the *thetes* now. Their role at Salamis would soon be forgotten, but their participation in the wars of the Delian League was essential.

Cimon was ostracized. Themistocles, the engineer of the victory over the Persians, was followed into exile by the man who had laid the foundation of Athens' power as the leader of the Delian League. Cimon, like Themistocles, had rendered the city immense services. The aristocrats who, along with Cimon, committed themselves totally to politics must have been a remarkable group. Their devotion was most unusual in the context of their times. These were the men who made it possible for Athens to bridge the gap between what it had been and what it now was, between its origins and its horizon. These men had not only filled the political vacuum that had existed in the Aegean region but they filled it with entirely novel power structures. Their policies had certainly not been bad ones, and their contribution to Athens' greatness was considerable, even if they failed to perceive some important developments and despite the fact that they based the city's relationship with Sparta on the unreliable foundation of amicable personal connections.

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Ephialtes was murdered soon after the change in government. It was never discovered who killed him, but his murder can be viewed as a sign of the turmoil into which so much political upheaval had plunged Athens.

The veil that had long kept Cimon and his associates from perceiving the new reality was finally lifted. At last Athens was ready to accept the consequences of its new preeminence. Now it was a question of who would prevail: Athens or Sparta. And at this time, democracy was born.

The old concepts whose names ended in *-nomy* were joined or replaced by new ones whose suffixes were *-cracy* and *-archy*. Besides democracy they included oligarchy (which could be termed "rule of the few" only when the alternative of government by the people existed) and aristocracy. These terms expressed that there was no longer just one preordained order or law *(nomos)*, which could be well constituted *(eunomia)*, or badly constituted *(dysnomia)*, or modified by the principle of equality *(isonomy)*. Instead there were several possible political orders that differed from each other fundamentally, depending on who was in power *(kratia)*. For the first time, that which did not correspond to the old order, whether isonomous or aristocratic in nature, was not necessarily perceived as disorder or chaos but rather as an alternative order—namely, government by the people. This may not have been apparent at first to the aristocrats, and they may well have doubted that such a new order could last. But to the people it was clear, and soon others could no longer deny it.

This is how the strange, important, and uniquely Greek distinction between oligarchy and democracy came about. Because the men *were* the polis, it was crucial to know how many men actually formed the polis. Political involvement was not just a theoretical possibility but a fact. Herodotus reports that a short time later, in the debate over Athens' constitution, an argument never heard before was voiced in favor of democracy: Democracy is characterized by certain institutions, not by





individuals. Institutions, it seemed, could hold the key to solving the problems of the polis.

This turned out to be an illusion, for important as the institutions were, they were soon overwhelmed by Athens' problems. The one fixed characteristic of the epoch that now began was that the very center, the foundation of the political order, had been called into question. Long-standing assumptions were quickly becoming superannuated. The Greeks had reached the limit of their ability to be fully in control of their world.

The age of *nomos*, or law, had given way to an age of *kratia*, or rule. And this affected all areas of life, politics as well as philosophy and art, internal as well as external matters.

We assign the beginning of democracy in Athens and in Greece to the year 462–461, and that beginning resulted from a negative act, the demotion of the Areopagus. But the conditions for democracy's emergence had existed for some time. Cleisthenes had laid the foundation, which in time fostered a strong sense of self-confidence and political aptitude among the citizenry. "The people" had only needed to be freed of the aristocratic council's authority to govern on their own. Only a few practical arrangements, in essence just the consequences of the change, were still lacking. Whatever Ephialtes originally intended to accomplish, he first had to help the people gain power if he were to succeed.

It was during this period that Athens began to develop the particular dynamic character that exceeded its military strength and enabled the city to win enough power to dominate the entire Greek world. Thucydides described a later phase of Athens' dynamism in words he ascribes to the Corinthians. The passage is addressed to the Spartans, whom the Corinthians compare unfavorably with the Athenians: "The Athenians are addicted to innovation, and their designs are characterized by swiftness alike in conception and execution. . . . They are adventurous beyond their power, and daring beyond their judgment, and in danger they are sanguine. . . . Their unwavering determination is matched on your side by procrastination; they are never at home, you are never away from

it. . . . They are swift to follow up a success, and slow to recoil from a reverse."

The Corinthians go on to say:

> Their bodies they spend ungrudgingly in their country's cause; their intellect they jealously husband to be employed in her service. A scheme unexecuted is with them a positive loss, a successful enterprise, a comparative failure. The deficiency created by the miscarriage of an undertaking is soon filled up by fresh hopes; for they alone are enabled to call a thing hoped for a thing got, by the speed with which they act upon their resolutions. Thus they toil on in trouble and danger all the days of their life, with little opportunity for enjoying, being ever engaged in getting: their only idea of a holiday is to do what the occasion demands, and to them laborious occupation is less of a misfortune than the peace of a quiet life.

Thucydides concludes the passage with his famous remark that the Athenians were "born into the world to take no rest themselves and to give none to others."

It was precisely at the time following the fall of the Areopagus that Athens began to develop these qualities. Even if it was Ephialtes who set the process in motion and even if much of the support for the process came from the *thetes*, all Athenians were somehow involved in what was taking shape. Now, approximately one generation after the victories of Marathon, Salamis, Plataea, and Mycale, Athens was completely oriented to the new situation. The moratorium on innovation under Cimon was over. Athens was no longer content to take advantage of opportunities as they presented themselves. It began to create new ones for itself.



# 7

# "Adventurous Beyond Their Power": Athens at Midcentury

> In love as in business, in science as in the broad jump, we have to believe before we can succeed. Why should that not hold true for life in general?
>
> —ROBERT MUSIL

"Is there anything the Athenians cannot accomplish?" asks a character in a play by the fifth-century comic poet, Eupolis, a contemporary and rival of Aristophanes. According to Aristophanes, older Athenians used to say: "What we decide foolishly and against all reason will in the end work out to our advantage." He was referring to a line in one of his comedies, in which the Athenians were shown as owing success more to luck than cleverness, but the dictum nevertheless applies to the years after 460 B.C. When a power is as strong as Athens was at that time, so far ahead of others, and so quick and daring that the surprise effect alone of its actions increases its capabilities, then such a power can afford to make quite a few mistakes, and even its mistakes may indeed bring about desired results.

No other power could hope to equal Athens in any respect but particularly not when it came to Athens' foremost military asset, its navy. Athenian naval superiority was based not only on money, which Athens had to spare, but also on experience at sea. "If there is anything that depends on a methodical approach," Pericles said, "it is sea power. Naval prowess cannot be attained quickly and practiced on the side, as it were, whenever one happens to be in the mood. One has to make it one's primary goal." The Athenians had been working to improve their skills at naval warfare ever since the Persian Wars, but though short of perfection, no one else could expect to catch up with them.