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The Athenian Democracy
A User's Guide

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The Athenian Democracy
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Chiara Lasagni [*]

Athenian democracy, with its emphasis on direct citizen participation and the practice of lottery-based selection, is often idealised as an innovative and counter-democratic model, offering alternatives to modern systems shaped by economic monopolies and global information networks. Ancient historians play a pivotal role in this discourse, not merely as observers but as active participants, tasked with providing historically informed insights to enhance public understanding. The reception of Athenian democracy has undergone significant evolution over centuries, adapting to meet the shifting needs of political ideologies and discourses. The article challenges the mythologization of iconic symbols such as Pericles' Funeral Oration and the kleroterion, *emphasising the importance of contextualising these within their true historical settings. Rather than a static or idealised system, Athenian democracy is better understood as a historically evolving process, comprising complex structures, procedures, and networks of social groupings that facilitated democratic engagement. It is in these elements—multiple, intersecting groups enabling collective governance—that Athenian democracy holds potential lessons for modern political systems.*

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RUTH—-But Iowans are savvy voters. If we lost some votes, this is our shot to get them back, right here on the caucus floor.

GRACE—-Oh, wow. I did not expect it to be this crazy.

RUTH—-Unlike the GOP, Democrats don't do secret ballots. *This is old-style Athenian democracy.*

ZACK: A what?

RUTH: *Athenian democracy. Literally, a gathering of neighbors* trying to convince each other to support their candidate.

(*The Good Wife*, Season 7, Ep. 11: "Iowa")

1. The Use of Athenian Democracy: A Public Engagement Challenge for Ancient Historians

In a world where traditional Western cultural landmarks are increasingly challenged by the evolving discourse of globalisation, Athenian Democracy stands out as one of the few enduring shared cultural icons from ancient Greece that continues to captivate, underscoring its relevance even amid growing cultural diversity and a critical reassessment of classical traditions. Indeed, it appears as a widely used common tool in the toolkit of contemporary public discourse, serving as an archetypal reference point—- whether rigorously analysed or merely invoked—-in debates seeking solutions and alternative models to the current democratic framework. In these discussions, Athenian democracy is often distilled to its most distinctive features in comparison with modern systems—-especially, direct citizen participation and the selection of public officials by lot—-and is thus 'used' as a form of counter-democracy, paradoxically innovative and in contrast with contemporary representative democracies, which are now perceived as exhausted and viewed with scepticism or indifference by the very citizens they are supposed to serve. In this respect, the criticism typically levelled is not so much against the theoretical foundations of representative democracy, but rather against its concrete manifestations: a

historical reality in which a significant proportion of decision-making seems to take place outside the healthy dynamic between representatives and their constituents, increasingly driven by economic monopolies and influenced by the informational and algorithmic dominance of the globalised world. In this context, Athenian democracy, with its founding principles and original structure, emerges as a beacon suggesting remedies to the oligarchic and epistocratic tendencies emerging in contemporary democratic practices.

Facing the use of ancient models as benchmarks for political discourse, the challenge for Ancient historians is both significant and delicate. It compels them not to remain merely expert observers, but to become active participants in the discourse and to develop appropriate tools for employing the tradition of ancient Athenian democracy as a powerful means of fostering an informed citizenry—a citizenry capable of proactively working to enhance the foundations of a more participatory and equitable political practice. Within the field of Ancient Studies, numerous works have enriched the dialogue between ancient and modern democracies, starting from a specific analysis of the functioning of Athenian democracy, by studying points of contact and comparable phenomena, *mutatis mutandis*; or by applying concepts from modern Political Science or Sociology to test their effectiveness as heuristic tools for understanding ancient political systems; finally, by highlighting and evaluating those elements that are most suitable for formulating proposals and responses to the current crisis of representative democracies. The literature on this last point is also extensive, with scholars such as Moses Finley, Mogens H. Hansen, and especially Josiah Ober among the most prominent, although the list could certainly be extended.

Although the involvement of Ancient historians in engaging with modern democratic debates is not a new phenomenon and has produced a substantial body of literature, these more advanced contributions often remain confined to specialist academic discourse. Today, there is a pressing need to broaden the scope of this engagement, exploring best practices for how Greek historians can more effectively connect with contemporary society on such topics, from university teaching to public history initiatives and broader public engagement efforts. Certainly, there remains a wide field to explore and develop within our discipline concerning which aspects of Athenian democracy should be emphasised for a critical and historically grounded use that is genuinely beneficial for

public discourse on the current crisis of democracy. If we consider it legitimate to 'use' Athenian democracy to inform contemporary debates—and I personally believe this to be the case—it is nevertheless essential to restrain the tendency to proliferate—or, at times, just replicate—oversimplified or partial interpretations of this ancient historical-institutional context. This involves not only correcting reductive perspectives but, more importantly, incorporating new insights and approaches into the current reception of Athenian democracy. Such efforts can primarily serve as a 'wake-up call' and provide a user's guide for those who wish to draw on Athenian democracy as a source of political inspiration, encouraging them to remain cautious of hagiographic and ahistorical representations of democratic Athens.

The predominantly idealised approach with which Athenian democracy is often invoked as a common cultural touchstone in public discourse is not only grounded in a simplified and overly reductive version of Athens' political system—a phenomenon entirely understandable within non-specialist contexts—but, more critically, it overlooks a fundamental aspect that should underpin any effort to promote the 'proper use' of Athenian democracy in contemporary debate. What compels us to regard it today as a foundational myth from which our democratic sensibilities derive, and as a model to address the current crisis of representative democracy, is in fact a construct of our time—a cultural product shaped by centuries of evolving appraisal of Athenian political system, now adapted to meet the demands of the modern world. The primary awareness that needs to be fostered among the public is not so much an understanding of the Athenian constitution "wie es eigentlich gewesen" but rather a reflection on our current stance in relation to the reception of Athenian democracy. This is a matter of paramount importance—indeed, the theme of a first entry in our User's Guide—which represents a preliminary awakening to the issue and must always be borne in mind to cultivate, especially among a non-specialist audience, a critically engaged approach to the 'use' of Athenian democracy.

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2. Instruction 1: Building Awareness of the Reception of Athenian Democracy

The reception of Classical Athenian democracy has a long and complex history, originating in the early Hellenistic period.[1] This phenomenon was initially developed within the same Athenian cultural environment itself, as a response produced in the face of threats to democratic freedom and the perception of a present marked by decay, necessitating moral and institutional restoration.[2] In the period after the Battle of Chaeronea, during the age of Lycurgus (c. 330-320 BCE), Athens transformed itself into a Hellenistic city, while at the same time initiating an extensive and systematic dialogue with its past: "it was also arguably at this period that fifth-century Athens became 'classical' Athens" (S.D. Lambert).[3] It was in the encounter with the 'Hellenistic democracies' that the

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[1] For the early reception of Classical Athenian democracy from the late 4th century to the early Imperial period, see especially Mirko Canevaro and Benjamin Gray, eds., *The Hellenistic Reception of Classical Athenian Democracy and Political Thought* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018). Evidence of Greek thought on Athenian democracy—largely dominated by its critics, who significantly influenced modern evaluations of ancient democratic institutions—can be traced back to the 5th century BCE. This reflection developed further in the following century, encompassing broader theoretical and philosophical issues; see Roberts Jennifer T., *Athens on Trial: The Antidemocratic Tradition in Western Thought* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994): 3-96. Within this chronological framework, distinguishing what can be defined as the 'reception' of Classical Athenian democracy from the broader political and philosophical reflection on the democratic system is a challenging and sometimes arbitrary task; these two aspects, for example, are not distinctly separated in Dino Piovan and Giovanni Giorgini, *Introduction*, in *Brill's Companion to the Reception of Athenian Democracy. Brill's Companions to Philosophy. Vol. 7*, ed. Dino Piovan and Giovanni Giorgini (Leiden, Boston, and New York: Brill, 2019), 2-7.

[2] On the reception of Classical Athenian democracy as an originally Athenian product, see in particular Nino Luraghi, "The Politics of Memory in Early Hellenistic Athens", in *The Hellenistic Reception of Classical Athenian Democracy and Political Thought*, ed. Mirko Canevaro and Benjamin Gray (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 22-41. The roots of this phenomenon are traced to the period between the Lamian War, the Chremonidean War, and the posthumous honours proposed by Demochares for Demosthenes. In this context, Athens itself shaped the crystallised memory of its glorious past and democratic culture, thereby laying the foundations for its identity as the 'school of Hellas', which was further developed within the framework of Roman cultural reception from the Augustan age onwards.

[3] Stephen D. Lambert, "Some Political Shifts in Lycourgan Athens", in *Clisthène et Lycurgue d'Athènes. Autour du politique dans la cité classique*, ed. Vincent Azoulay and Paulin Ismard (Paris: Publications de la Sorbonne, 2011), 175-90 (quotation on p. 190).

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idea of a 'Classical Athenian Democracy' began to take shape, with its reper-
toire of myths (both positive and negative), heroes, and languages.[1]

The theme of the reception of Athenian democracy is complex and multi-
faceted, encompassing a wide range of aspects, historical contexts, sources, and
both specialised and general bibliographies.[2] This complexity is not only due to
the vast scope of elements that can be examined, nor to the way its history can
intersect with other concepts, such as those of 'tradition' or even 'intentional
history.'[3] More importantly, however, the challenge lies in the fact that, from its
earliest manifestations, we observe a dialectic or, at times, an ambiguous over-
lap between the idea of 'Greek democracy' and 'Athenian democracy', as well
as between democracy as a system of government and democracy as a political
ideology. Throughout much of its historical evolution, moreover, there has been
a tension between the admiration for democratic Athens as a cultural model and

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[1] On the role of Athens as a model for 'Hellenistic democracies,' see John Ma, "Whatever Hap-
pened to Athens ? Thoughts on the Great Convergence and Beyond", in *The Hellenistic Reception of
Classical Athenian Democracy and Political Thought*, ed. Mirko Canevaro and Benjamin Gray (Ox-
ford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 277-97, which discusses 'the great convergence' of Hellenistic
poleis towards moderate democracy and polis ideology shaped by the Athenian cultural model.
For a more cautious perspective on this totalising view of the phenomenon, see Mirko Canevaro,
"Demosthenic Influences in Early Rhetorical Education. Hellenistic Rhetores and Athenian Imagi-
nation", in *The Hellenistic Reception of Classical Athenian Democracy and Political Thought*, ed. Mirko
Canevaro and Benjamin Gray (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 90-1, which argues that Athenian
democracy should be seen not as a common ground of convergence but as an authoritative compar-
ative model—largely influenced by oratory and rhetoric—to which citizens of the Hellenistic *poleis*
could turn to affirm the 'democratic' quality of their constitutions and public life.
[2] For an overview of the topic, see Piovan and Giorgini, *Introduction*: 1-24 and Paolo Butti de
Lima, "La democrazia ateniese e la ricezione politica dell'antichità". *Storia del Pensiero Politico*
1 (2022): 139-52. He identifies three 'paths of reception' of Athenian democracy: the 'historical-
antiquarian', the 'publicist', and the 'theoretical-political'(142) He emphasises that the history of
the reception of Athenian democracy must take into account both the 'plurality of Athens' (includ-
ing non-democratic forms) and the 'plurality of democracies' (including non-Athenian forms) that
emerged in different periods and contexts.
[3] On the concept of 'intentional history', see Hans-Johackim Gehrke, "Myth, History, and Collec-
tive Identity: Uses of the Past in Ancient Greece and Beyond", in *The Historian's Craft in the Age
of Herodotus*, ed. Nino Luraghi (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 286-313; with reference to
early Hellenistic Athens see in part. the idea of a 'Demos as a narrator' of its own democratic past
developed by Nino Luraghi, "The Demos as Narrator: Public Honors and the Construction of Fu-
ture and Past", in *Intentional History: Spinning Time in Ancient Greece*, ed. Lin Foxhall, Hans-Joachim
Gehrke, and Nino Luraghi (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag 2010), 247-63.

the discrediting of its democratic institutions, often criticised for the worst excesses of ochlocracy—an unstable, irrational, and chaotic 'rule by the masses', seen as unfit for any state aspiring to be well-structured and functional. An important example of the ambivalent perception of Athens is found in the work of the Roman-era Greek historian Polybius, who, as is well known, significantly influenced the reception of the ancient world in modern political thought. According to Craige B. Champion's analysis, Polybius presents a nuanced view that simultaneously rejects the political system of fifth-century Athens (the 'Classical Imperial Athenian Democracy') while acknowledging its illustrious tradition and ongoing cultural and diplomatic significance.[1] Champion observes, "It is both the gold-standard as an effective and valiant champion of Greece, in its performance during the Persian Wars, and a state reeling out of control, with an unruly populace driven on to frenzy by unscrupulous demagogues; the epitome of nightmarish ochlocracy". It is worth noting that in *Book 6* of his *Histories*, where Polybius critiques the Athenian constitution—describing the Demos as "a ship without a commander" and stating that the constitution reached its peak under Themistocles, only to decline rapidly afterward—the word *demokratia* is never used to refer to it. Instead, Polybius employs this term throughout his work with a broader meaning, aligned with the political framework of his own time, to describe states characterised by autonomy, freedom, and constitutional integrity, such as the Achaean League. In *Book* 6 of his *Histories*, Polybius advocates for the Aristotelian model of the 'mixed constitution' (*politeia*), which finds its concrete embodiment in the Roman Republic. The later influence of Polybius's vision on the role of democracy is well documented—though perhaps less frequently examined than that of Aristotle or Plato. It has significantly impacted modern republican political thought and can be traced in the development of modern liberal democracies, which are based on the rule of law and the separation of powers.[2] In the theory of the mixed constitution, democracy tends to deteriorate into its negative counterpart, called ochlocracy, just as monar-

[1] Craige B. Champion, "Polybius on 'Classical Athenian Imperial Democracy'", in *The Hellenistic Reception of Classical Athenian Democracy and Political Thought*, ed. Mirko Canevaro and Benjamin Gray (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 123-38.
[2] For an outline of Polybius' reception in modern and contemporary political thought, see Brian C. McGing. *Polybius' Histories, Oxford Approaches to Classical Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 212-22.

chy and aristocracy, when not balanced by other forms of government, evolve into tyranny and oligarchy, respectively. For democracy to be acceptable, it can only exist in a 'defused' form, as a component within a constitutional system composed of other modes of governance, namely monarchical and aristocratic elements.

As Mogens H. Hansen has aptly pointed out, to understand the actual role of ancient *demokratia* in modern democracies, it is crucial to distinguish between 'Greek democracy' and 'Athenian democracy.'[1] The concept that informed political thought from the 13th to the 19th century is, in fact, a generalised and theoretical idea of democracy—rather than a historical one—found in Plato's *Dialogues*, Aristotle's *Politics*, and Polybius's *Book 6*. In this context, democracy is often viewed as a form of government to be opposed, seen as negative, impractical, or at least imperfect. Consequently, the Athenian democratic system—despite Athens's enduring cultural primacy as the 'school of Hellas'—occupies a secondary position in ancient philosophical discourse and its subsequent reception. Within this framework, the few positive references to Athens typically highlight the archaic lawgiver Solon as the founding father of an original (mixed and moderate) democracy (δημοκρατίαν τὴν πάτριον, Arist. *Pol.* 1273b 38),[2] while Classical Athenian democracy is largely viewed as a paradigm of the dangers inherent in governance 'by the poor.'[3] Until the late 19th century, the positive Greek political paradigm was represented by Sparta, and up to that point, the influence of Athenian democracy as an ideology on political thought was, to say the least, marginal.

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[1] Mogens H. Hansen, "The Tradition of the Athenian Democracy A.D. 1750-1990", *Greece&Rome* 29.1 (1992): 14-30.

[2] For the genesis of the 'myth' of Solon as the founding father of Athenian democracy in the 4th century, see Claude Mossé, "Comment s'élabore un mythe politique: Solon, 'père fondateur' de la démocratie athénienne", *Annales ESC* 34 (1979): 425-37, and Mogens H. Hansen, "Solonian Democracy in Fourth-Century Athens", *C&M* 40 (1989): 71-99; for a detailed analysis of both the reception of Solon's reforms (from late 5th century) and the elements of reality behind the creation of the image of a Solon *demotikotatos* (Isocr. *Areop.* 7.16), see Laura Loddo, *Solone Demotikotatos: il legislatore e il politico nella cultura democratica ateniese*, *Quaderni di Erga-Logoi 9*, (Milano: L.E.D, 2018).

[3] Arist. *Pol.* III, 1279b 18-30. According to Aristotle, democracy is characterised by the rule of the poor, while oligarchy is dominated by the wealthy, challenging the notion that the distinction between forms of government lies solely in the number of those who hold power.

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Against this backdrop, a reappraisal of Athenian democracy emerged gradually during the 19th century, paralleling advancements in the scientific understanding of the ancient world through the methods of the *Altertumswissenschaft*, as well as insights into the Athenian political system, particularly with the discovery and publication of the Aristotelian *Constitution of the Athenians*.[1] References shifted from a 'philosophical' to a historically grounded concept of democracy, gradually evolving from the negative 'rule of the masses' to the Periclean democracy as a positive paradigm. Hansen observes: "The change from the philosophical to the historical analysis of ancient democracy and from the critical view of the general type to the more positive account of the Athenian form took place gradually during the first half of the 19th century. The principal sources referred to were no longer Plato and Aristotle, but rather Herodotus, Thucydides, Demosthenes, and, after 1890, the Aristotelian *Constitution of Athens*. Solon was eclipsed by Perikles as the central figure and the negative view of Greek democracy was supplanted by a more favourable description of the classical Athenian democracy".

This forms the foundation upon which our current understanding of Athenian democracy is grounded. With the rise of totalitarian regimes in the 20th century, idealised views of the Athenian democratic system emerged, with Periclean Athens frequently serving as a foundational myth for democratic liberty in opposition to illiberal regimes. Thinkers such as Karl Popper or Hannah Arendt have significantly contributed to this re-evaluation, emphasising the democratic values of ancient Athens as a counterpoint to the authoritarianism of their times.[2] This perspective was not confined solely to the reception

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[1] A turning point in this positive reassessment of the Athenian political system is represented by *A History of Greece: From the Earliest Period to the Close of the Generation Contemporary with Alexander the Great* (1846-1856), by George Grote, which had a profound and pervasive influence on subsequent debate, despite the widespread criticisms raised about many of his reconstructions, particularly for his apologetic and moralistic view of Athenian democracy, based on the parallel between the Athenian Empire and the British Empire. See Carlo Marcaccini "Democrazia e impero ad Atene nella History of Greece di George Grote", *Gerión* 7.2 (2019): 489-514; James C. Kierstead, "The Character of Democracy. Grote's Athens and Its Legacy". in *Brill's Companion to the Reception of Athenian Democracy, Brill's Companions to Philosophy. Vol. 7*, ed. Dino Piovan and Giovanni Giorgini (Leiden, Boston, and New York: Brill, 2020), 220-70, esp. 256 ff.

[2] On the 'anti-totalitarian' identity of Athenian democracy in its 20th century reception, and particularly in post-war era, see John R. Wallach, "Democracy in Ancient Greek Political Theory: 1906-

of Athenian democracy in political philosophy but also inspired scholarly reflection among historians of antiquity, as evidenced by the debate on freedom and democracy in the Greek world that arose among Italian classicists—most notably, Gaetano De Sanctis, Arnaldo Momigliano, and Piero Treves—during the Fascist period[1].

In this context, the question is no longer whether democracy, 'invented' in Athens in the 6th century BCE, is a desirable form of government for the proper organisation of a state, but rather whether, from an ideological perspective, affinities or even continuities between Athenian democracy and modern ones

2006", *Polis* 23.2 (2006): 357-64. In *The Open Society and Its Enemies* (1945), Popper considers the Athenian democratic system as an original exemplar of an 'open society,' where decisions are made through rational debate, free consensus-building, and criticism of institutions, in contrast to the 'closed,' historicist, and dogmatic societies envisioned by totalitarian thought, a realm in which Popper firmly places Platonic philosophy; see James C. Kierstead, "Karl Popper's Open Society and its Enemies, and its Enemies", *Journal of New Zealand Studies* 28 (2019): 2-28, which emphasises how Popper's critique of Plato, as an enemy of the open society, outweighs his positive assessment of the Athenian democratic system, whose limitations and potential pitfalls Popper nonetheless acknowledges. Hannah Arendt—-especially in *The Human Condition* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press 1958)1958)—-views Athenian democracy as the ideal model of political participation: the polis is the 'public space' where the *vita activa* is realised, the true sphere of freedom and human fulfilment, contrasted with the 'private space' of the *oikos*, limited to mere life necessities. Her vision of the polis and Athenian democracy is entirely conceptual, devoid of specific spatial-temporal coordinates: the recovery of the ancient world is framed as an urgent reclaiming of humanity and serves as a prism through which to highlight the shortcomings of increasingly depoliticised modern democracies; see Peter J. Euben, "Arendt's Hellenism", in *The Cambridge Companion to Hannah Arendt*, ed. Dana Villa (Cambridge MA: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 151-64; Olivia Guaraldo, " 'The Political Sphere of Life, Where Speech Rules Supreme'. Hannah Arendt's Imaginative Reception of Athenian Democracy". in *Brill's Companion to the Reception of Athenian Democracy. Brill's Companions to Philosophy. Vol. 7*, ed. Dino Piovan and Giovanni Giorgini (Leiden, Boston, and New York: Brill, 2000), 399-420; the pervasive influence of classical reception in Arendt's thought has been thoroughly explored by Silvia Giorcelli Bersani, *L'auctoritas degli antichi. Hannah Arendt tra Grecia e Roma* (Firenze: Le Monnier, 2010), esp. Chapter IV on the Greek polis.

[1] On this debate, as "the most outstanding example of intellectual resistance to the authoritarian or totalitarian regime from classical scholarship, see Dino Piovan, "Ancient Historians and Fascism: How to React Intellectually to Totalitarianism (or Not)", in *Brill's Companion to the Classics, Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany, Brill's Companions to Classical Reception 12*, ed. Helen Roche and Kyriakos Demetriou (Leiden, Boston, and New York: Brill, 2018), 83-105 (quotation on page 99); Dino Piovan, "Ancient and Modern in Twentieth-Century Italy", in *Brill's Companion to the Reception of Athenian Democracy, Brill's Companions to Philosophy. Vol. 7*, ed. Dino Piovan and Giovanni Giorgini (Leiden, Boston, and New York: Brill, 2020), 298-329.

can be detected. Moreover, from a pragmatic standpoint, the inquiry shifts to whether aspects of the ancient democratic system can be reclaimed or valued either as a warning or as a method for improving modern democracy—a perspective widely reflected in the thought of the aforementioned Hannah Arendt, particularly regarding the public dimension of the polis as a high example of *vita activa.*

The comparison between the 'democracy of the Ancients' and the 'democracy of the Moderns'—beginning with Finley's American lectures of the same title—has evolved into a persistent and richly documented field of scholarly debate. It serves not only as a theoretical framework but also as a catalyst for proposals aimed at reforming contemporary political life. Within this discourse, Athenian democracy paradoxically appears both near and distant. The idea of a profound divide between the democracy practised in the polis and that developed by modern societies is widely accepted,[1] yet it coexists with efforts to identify commonalities, beyond the mere name, to frame the potential contributions of Athenian democracy to modern democratic systems.

The inapplicability of direct (and physical) participation in political decision-making to large and complex societies, or the risks of a 'tyranny of the majority' that such form of participation can generate in the modern world, position Athenian democracy as a unique and unrepeatable experiment. Simultaneously, it is precisely the concept of direct participation in governance that remains the key reason why the ancient experience is invoked as a means to improve and revitalise the political life of representative democracies. Even more prominent is the perception of an unbridgeable gap in terms of individual liberty and inclusivity—a concern deeply rooted in liberal thought[2] and increasingly significant in today's discourse, where equality and inclusion are emphasised as fundamental components of democracy. On one hand, the substantial non-

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[1] See for example Ellen Meiksins Wood, "Demos versus 'We, the People': Freedom and Democracy Ancient and Modern", in *Dēmokratia. A Conversation on Democracies, Ancient and Modern*, ed. Josiah Ober and Charles Hedrick (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), 121-37.

[2] See Dino Piovan, "Criticism Ancient and Modern. Observations on the Critical Tradition of Athenian Democracy", *Polis* 25.2(2008): 318-21; Wilfried Nippel, *Ancient and Modern Democracy. Two Concepts of Liberty?*, transl. Keith Tribe (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016): 348-9. Of particular importance in this debate is Isaiah Berlin's reflection on Athenian democracy, which he interprets through the lens of 'positive' and 'negative' liberty.

inclusivity of Athenian democracy, which excluded women and metics and was practised within a slave-holding society,[1] offers a basis for reflecting on the persistent inequalities and limitations to individual freedoms in our own democracies, despite the formal recognition of universal rights.[2]

The extensive debate on freedom of the Ancients and the Moderns often highlights how Athenian society essentially lacked the concept of freedom as a right and as 'negative liberty', while it was endowed with a form of 'positive liberty', understood more as power than as a right, and deeply connected to democratic participation.[3] Despite this, the concept of ancient democratic liberty can exert a profound ideal influence. The terms *demokratia*, *eleutheria*, and *isonomia* indeed bear a striking resemblance to the modern trio of *democracy*, *liberty*, and *equality*, even though, as Mogens H. Hansen notes, "no direct tradition connects (them)".[4] While cautioning against the temptation to draw a direct affiliation between ancient and modern notions of liberty, Hansen nonetheless narrows the perceived distance between them, challenging the more frequent interpretation associated with Isaiah Berlin; he suggests that democratic freedom, understood as the ability to "live as one wishes", encapsulates both a form of positive liberty in the public sphere and a form of negative liberty in the private sphere.[5] Despite

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[1] For an overview on the problem of the limits of Athenian democracy in this respect, see Piovan "Criticism Ancient and Modern": 322-26; Nippel *Ancient and Modern Democracy*: 359-63.

[2] See for example Valentina Pazè, "La diseguaglianza degli antichi e dei moderni. Da Aristotele ai nuovi meteci", *Teoria Politica* 9 (2019): 265-82.

[3] See Robert W. Wallace, "Personal Freedom in Greek Democracies, Republican Rome, and Modern Liberal States", in *A Companion to Greek and Roman Political Thought*, ed. Ryan K. Balot (Malden MA, Oxford, and Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 164-77, esp. 170-4.

[4] Hansen *The Tradition*: 27. But see Meiksins Wood "Demos versus 'We, the People",: 132: "There are major differences, but the ancient democracy *was* of some importance to the development of modem democratic ideas, because the ancient democracy served above all as a negative example". The term *isonomia* is widely referenced by the historians in relation to the notion of 'equality' in ancient democratic ideology, but Mogen H. Hansen, "The Ancient Athenian and the Modern Liberal View of Liberty as a Democratic Ideal", in *Dēmokratia. A Conversation on Democracies, Ancient and Modern*, ed. Josiah Ober and Charles Hedrick (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), 92-3, notes that this word is scarcely used in the Athenian context. He prefers the term *isotes* to define the 'democratic triads' of *demokratia*, *isotes*, and *eleutheria*.

[5] Mogens H. Hansen, *Democracy in The Age Of Demosthenes. The Athenian Structure, Principles and Ideology*. Transl. A. Crook. (Oxford and Cambridge MA: Blackwell, 1991), 74-81; Hansen *The Ancient Athenian*: 91-104; Mogens H. Hansen Hansen, "Ancient Democratic Eleutheria and Modern Liberal Democrats' Conception of Freedom", in *Démocratie athénienne - démocratie moderne: Tradi-*

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the distinctions between the freedom of the ancients and that of the moderns, the ideal appeal of Athenian democratic liberty remains potent, so much so that Greek terms related to political freedom are still employed as foundational concepts in contemporary political thought. Consider *parrhesia*, a crucial element of Athenian democracy, extensively discussed by Michel Foucault in his lectures at the Collège de France. He identified it as a notion embodying not merely the right of free speech, but the act of speaking the truth freely as a moral commitment.[1] Similarly, we can highlight the centrality of *isonomia* in the thought of Hannah Arendt, who viewed it as an original form of political freedom—characterised by political participation among equals, without rulers or ruled; this concept, in Arendt's view, stands as a positive counterpart even to *demokratia* itself, which she saw as a form of governance inherently involving the rule of the majority.[2]

The reflections presented thus far have offered only a few glimpses into an exceptionally broad and complex issue, highlighting select references within a vast body of literature. However, what is crucial to emphasise here is that, as previously noted, to foster the 'proper use' of the theme of Athenian democracy, it is vital to start by cultivating an understanding of how its myth—both positive and negative—has been constructed and evolved throughout the history of political thought. Such awareness, which we as Ancient historians should cultivate when disseminating knowledge about Athenian democracy to non-specialist audiences or within interdisciplinary contexts, holds particular significance in our current era. The 'triumph' of liberal democracies since the 1990s undoubt-

edly elevated Classical Athenian democracy to the status of an identity myth for our contemporary notions of democracy, liberty, and equality. However, today, we find ourselves far removed from Fukuyama's belief in the 'end of history', as the resilience of our democracies is continually tested by the flux of historical events, as starkly illustrated by the recent pandemic. There is no longer any certainty that liberal representative democracy is the predetermined endpoint towards which all political systems will inevitably evolve.

The ongoing crisis of democracies has brought to the forefront the idea that within the 'symbol of democracy', there can emerge realities perceived as not fully democratic, even within our own political frameworks. The reception of Athenian democracy and our choices in what to select, valorise, or reject from this context, reflect not only our understanding of historical and institutional realities (which, of course, is also the task of the Ancient historian to improve in the public), but also our views on what aspects should be defended and what distortions corrected in our own democracies. Herein lies the paradox of a democracy that is at once familiar and alien, capable of providing 'programmatic' inspiration or serving as an unattainable ideal to aspire to. Thus, what is most valued in the current discourse on Athenian democracy reflects our reservations and expectations about our democratic systems. In a sense, we are replicating what happened in early Hellenistic Athens—an internal dialogue between different forms of democracy, with the most valued elements being those that are perceived to be lacking.

3. Instruction 2: Demythologizing the Symbols of Athenian Democracy

As mentioned earlier, the use of Athenian democracy in much of contemporary political discourse often highlights those aspects that most sharply contrast with our representative systems. The invocation of the ancient model sometimes serves even as a 'crowbar,' used to dislodge the now entrenched association between democracy and universal suffrage, thereby paving the way for the formulation of alternative models.[1] The direct participation of citizens

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[1] See for instance the role of the Athenian model in David Van Reybrouck, *Against Elections. A Case*

in the ancient polis is what is most emphasized, in contrast with the elitist dimension of representative democracy and, especially, its 'oligarchic' and 'episto-cratic' tendencies.[1] Within this framework, two Athenian institutions are most frequently evoked in critiques of today's representative democracies—-the Assembly of the Demos, as a primary assembly open to all citizens, and sortition as a system for selecting public officials. The existence of a political body with decision-making power, in which approximately 6,000-8,000 citizens[2] from all social strata participated spontaneously and without mediation—each potentially able to propose or discuss motions—is often regarded as a major paradigm by those who advocate the implementation of 'direct democracy' as a solution to the current democratic fatigue. Another widespread *topos* present in public discourse is that of the *agora* as a powerful symbol of democratic participation, through the ability of citizens to engage in discussions without intermediaries and on an equal footing (*isegoria*).[3] On the other hand, the establishment in

for Democracy*, transl. Liz Waters (London: The Bodley Head, 2016), in relation to his critique of electoral-representative democracy—-grounded primarily in the ideas of Bernard Manin, *Principes du gouvernement représentatif* (Paris: Calmann-Lévy, 1995), see *infra*—-and his proposal for incorporating sortition mechanisms and bodies selected by lot to enhance democratic participation.
[1] See especially Manin *Principes* for a discussion on the inherently non-egalitarian and aristocratic nature of political representation as it was originally conceived; for his argument, Manin takes as his starting point an analysis of the Athenian system (19-61), highlighting that the primary distinction between direct and representative democracy lies not so much in the number of participants involved in political decision-making but in the almost exclusive use of sortition for the appointment of public officials. For the coining of the term 'epistocracy', see David M. Estlund, *Democratic Authority: A Philosophical Framework* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008), esp. 207-9, for a comparative discussion of the epistocratic thought of Plato and Aristotle. In the debate on the crisis of democracy, epistocracy is proposed as an alternative and superior system in Jason Brennan, *Against Democracy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016)—-where his proposal does not translate into a rule by a minority. Against the 'epistocratic' ('meritocratic', 'technocratic') solution, see the critical assessments by Hélène Landemore, "Let's Try Real Democracy", in Jason Brennan and Hélène Landemore "Debating Democracy: Do We Need More or Less? A Reader", in *Democratic Reason: Politics, Collective Intelligence, and the Rule of the Many* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2022): 135 ff., esp. 180-210 ("Epistocracies are poorly suited to handle political uncertainty because they unduly restrict the set of decision-makers and the resulting cognitive diversity of the decision-making group", *ibid.* 185).
[2] Mogens H. Hansen, "How Many Athenians Attendend the Ecclesia?" in Id., *The Athenian Ecclesia: A Collection of Articles, 1976-1983* (Copenhagen: Museum Tusculanum Press, 1983), 1-23.
[3] Costas Douzinas, "Athens rising", *European Urban and Regional Studies* 20.1 (2013):134-8 and part. 135.

Athens of a system for selecting public offices primarily through sortition—-within what is considered an 'authentically democratic' regime—-has served as a profound intellectual stimulus and a powerful source of legitimation for the exploration of alternatives to pure electoral systems.[1] In this respect, the *kleroterion*—a device for sortition, whose functioning is detailed in the *Constitution of the Athenians* and whose shape is reconstructed from a limited number of surviving stone fragments—is, much like the agora, equally emblematic of democratic principles.[2] The very existence of such specialized apparatuses for implementing sortition in Athens is often invoked as a powerful symbol advocating for the possibility of severing the appointment of political offices, even within parliamentary contexts, from electoral mechanisms and liberating these processes from the immediate pressures of electoral competition, thereby restoring a more impartial, anti-elitist, and 'differently representative' democratic practice.[3]

It would be remiss not to include a mention of Pericles' funeral oration for the war dead of the first year of the Peloponnesian War (Thuc. 2.34.8–42.1) in this overview of Athenian democracy 'tools.' This is undoubtedly the most frequently cited, invoked, and popular ancient source when referring to the democratic ideal in its original purity, as well as the ancestral roots of our democracies. The exemplary and identity-forming power of this text led to the passage in which the Thucydidean Pericles defines *demokratia* (Thuc. 2.37.1) being initially included as a preamble inscription in the draft of the European Convention of July 2003: "χρώμεθα γὰρ πολιτείᾳ ... καὶ ὄνομα μὲν διὰ τὸ μὴ ἐς ὀλίγους ἀλλ᾽ ἐς πλείωνας οἰκεῖν δημοκρατία κέκληται· Our Constitution ... is called a democracy because power is in the hands not of a minority but of the greater

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[1] The analysis of the Athenian model is a crucial focal point in these discussions: see Terrill G. Bouricius, "Democracy Through Multi-Body Sortition: Athenian Lessons for the Modern Day", *Journal of Public Deliberation* 9.1 (2013): https://delibdemjournal.org/article/id/428/; Alexander A. Guerrero, "Against Elections: The Lottocratic Alternative", *Philosophy & Public Affairs*, 42.2 (2014): 135-78; Hélène Landemore, *Open Democracy: Reinventing Popular Rule for the Twenty-First Century* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2020), 89-93; Yves Sintomer, *The Government of Chance: Sortition and Democracy from Athens to the Present* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023).

[2] See further.

[3] An informal group of political scientists interested in applying sortition for improving modern democratic systems called itself "Kleroterians" (see https://equalitybylot.com/about/).

number".[1] On further consideration, this reference (which was the subject of internal and external debate and ultimately omitted from the subsequent draft) could be perceived as somewhat ironic in light of the frequent accusations levelled at the European Union's institutions concerning their technocratic and 'oligarchic' nature. It is no coincidence, then, that a much more intensive popular engagement with these ancient democratic paradigms—such as Pericles' funeral oration, the Athenian model of direct democracy, and the participatory ethos of citizens assembled in the agora—emerged notably from 2010 onwards during the anti-austerity movements in Greece and across Europe. Activists associated with Ἄμεση Δημοκρατία Τώρα! (*Direct Democracy Now!*) at Syntagma Square, strategically invoked the symbols of Athenian democracy to articulate a powerful critique of the perceived democratic deficit within the EU, advocating for a revival of 'true democracy' modelled on Athenian-style decision-making.[2]

In this context, the factor that has most significantly fuelled the contemporary interest in Athenian democracy—its paradigms (direct democracy, sortition) and its symbols (Pericles' funeral oration, the agora as a political space, the *kleroterion*)—has been the digital turn, and even more so, the advent of Web 2.0 in 2004. This technological shift has enabled and amplified the use of user-generated content, interactivity, and social connectivity, particularly with the rise of social media. This development has thus facilitated a transition from viewing Athenian democracy as an ideal model to considering the tangible possibilities of its application as 'Athenian democracy in action', beyond limited contexts. By eliminating the constraints of physical space, these digital advancements have unveiled the practical potential for revitalising the decision-making practices of Athenian democracy, which were previously hindered by logistical obstacles.[3] While doubts about the efficacy of collective intelligence behind citi-

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[1] See Mogens H. Hansen, "Thucydides' Description of Democracy (2.37. 1) and the EU-Convention of 2003", *GRBS* 48.1 (2008): 15-26.

[2] See Luca Asmonti, "From Giscard d'Estaing to Syntagma Square: The Use and Abuse of Ancient Greece in the Debate on Greece's eu Membership", in *The Reception of Ancient Virtues and Vices in Modern Popular Culture. Beauty, Bravery, Blood and Glory*, ed. Eran Almagor and Lisa Maurice (Leiden and Boston: Brill 2017), 292-8.

[3] For an overview of the connection between Athenian democracy and electronic democracy, including further references to its history and developments, see Carlo Pelloso, "Along the Path Towards E-Democracy: The Digital Age and Its 'Models'", *Pólemos* 14.2 (2020): 371-8.

zen participation in decision-making may not be alleviated—and indeed can be even accentuated by phenomena associated with the web—in the infosphere, the spatial limitations of democratic discussion and decision-making are effectively overcome:

With modern technology, the original principles of democracy can be restored. If people can vote electronically on Big Brother, they can equally do so on critical issues of national interest as the citizens of Athens did. For instance: peace or war, the national budget, taxation.[1]

Within the reflections that have rapidly developed regarding the opportunities offered by 'electronic democracy' (or 'e-democracy' or 'electronic direct democracy') the reference to Athens' direct democracy and the Assembly of the Demos maintains a constant presence as a source of inspiration and in the adoption of Greek-style terminology. This enduring influence is evident from the early days of the Internet, when the concept of the 'electronic agora' as 'Athens without slaves' embodied the spirit of democratic renewal inspired by technologies and the construction of 'virtual communities' as envisioned by Cyberutopian ideology,[2] to more recent proposals and applications aimed at revitalising democratic practices in the digital age, with evocative definitions such as 'e-*ekklesia.*'[3] Following the ideas of 'direct democracy' and 'rule of the People', the themes of Athenian democracy—-often simplified into stereotypes and in this form 'viralized' through the Internet—-remain present in the ideal references and rhetorical languages of groups seeking to offer alternatives to pure representative democracy, ranging from organisations that design and study the application of deliberative and participative procedures[4] to techno-populist

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[1] From the speech delivered by the computer scientist and marxist economist Paul Cockshott at the *Workshop of e-Voting and e-Government in UK*, held in Edimbourgh on 27th-28th February 2006 (pdf available at `https://www.dcs.gla.ac.uk/~wpc/reports/votingmachines.pdf`).

[2] See Howard Rheingold, *The Virtual Community. Homesteading on the Electronic Frontier* (Reading, MA *et al.*: Addison Wesley Pub. Co., 1993), 278-9.

[3] Ioannis Mpoitsis and Nikos Koutsoupias, "E-ekklesia: The Challenge of Direct Democracy and the Ancient Athenian Model", in *E-Democracy, Security, Privacy and Trust in a Digital World. 5th International Conference, E-Democracy 2013, Athens, Greece, December 5-6, 2013, Revised Selected Papers*, ed. Alexander B. Sideridis, Zoe Kardasiadou, Constantine P. Yialouris, and Vasilios Zorkadis (Switzerland: Springer Pub. Co., 2013), 52-63.

[4] Consider, for example, the *Solonian Democracy Institute* (Dublin), founded in 2017 by Roslyn

movements.[1] Thus, Athenian democracy and its popular symbols are widely used as rhetorical arguments in many different contexts that aim to revitalise the role of citizens in political decision-making processes, either through deliberative mechanisms that promote renewed engagement and empowerment,

Fuller with the aim of exploring and deepening understanding of "alternative democratic practices" (particularly through digital direct democracy). The guiding principle of their work is a critique of modern democratic practices, which they argue have strayed from their original purpose, and a call for a return to a true form of democracy, the Athenian *demokratia*—-on this perspective, see Roslyn Fuller, *Beasts and Gods. How Democracy Changed its Meaning and Lost its Purpose* (London: Zed Books, 2015). The Institute's website (https://www.solonian-institute.com/) introduces its mission as follows: "The Institute takes its name from Solon, the statesman who introduced reforms that laid the foundations for the development of democracy in ancient Athens. Solon is also credited with many wise sayings, including our slogan: 'Justice, though slow, is certain'. [...] The Institute places a strong emphasis on the history of alternative democratic practices. What sets the Institute apart is our understanding of the term 'democracy', derived from the ancient Greek word *demokratia*, itself composed of *demos* (people) and *kratos* (power)". The somewhat unconventional concept of 'Solonian democracy' conjures the idea of a primordial form of democracy, representing the earliest steps in the evolution of democratic thought. Rather than being grounded in the historical figure of Solon, this notion fully embraces the ancient tradition that depicts Solon as the founding father of Athenian democracy. This ideological narrative began to take shape in the late 5th century BCE as a democratic reappropriation of the concept of *patrios politeia* (Athens' ancestral constitution), which had until recently been employed by Athenian oligarchs to advance their own political agenda, see Julia L. Shear, *Polis and Revolution. Responding to Oligarchy in Classical Athens* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 320-1.

[1] See, for example, the manifesto-dialogue of the *Five Stars Movement (M5S)*, Beppe Grillo, Gianroberto Casaleggio and Dario Fo, *Il grillo canta sempre al tramonto: Dialogo sull'Italia e il Movimento 5 Stelle* (Milano: Chiarelettere, 2013); the themes unfold along an ideal journey from the Piraeus to the final stop at the Acropolis in Athens (*ibid.* 198-200), featuring the Propylaea, the Parthenon, and, at its foot, the Theatre of Dionysus, where Dario Fo suggests listening to Pericles' famous speech "Yes, I know you are familiar with it, but probably only in fragments... I offer it to you *in its entirety*. Only by listening to it in full can one truly understand that this is the greatest political and civil foundation of humanity. Listen carefully, for it is *Pericles himself* who is speaking. [My translation, my italics]". This is followed by a short text entitled "Noi ad Atene facciamo così" ("We in Athens do things this way"), effectively a theatrical and modernised paraphrase of a portion of Thucydides' passage. Aside from the exaggerated judgement (which speaks of 'humanity' from a wholly Western perspective) on the speech's universal value, the introduction leads the reader to believe that the following text consists of Pericles' original words in full fidelity, thus glorifying democratic roots through a falsification. The text "Noi ad Atene facciamo così" is now widely available online, spread as if it were Pericles' authentic speech, and not a *M5S'* version of it, and as a foundation of democracy. For the extensive use of Athenian rhetoric in the references and communication of the *M5S*, see Lorenzo Mosca, "Democratic vision and online participatory spaces in the Italian Movimento 5 Stelle", *Acta Politica* 55 (2020): 9.

or, on the other hand, through plebiscitary mechanisms that risk transforming into Carl Schmitt's 'democracy of acclamation', which ultimately represents an implosion of the democratic ideal.[1]

In the context described above, one of the primary tasks—-and an essential guideline—-for Ancient historians engaged in teaching and dissemination is to 'demythologize' Athenian democracy, which, as we have seen, is often (mis)used in contemporary political debate through its reduction to a set of popular symbols. Such usage tends to obscure a proper understanding of the historical dimension and even the praxeological aspects of ancient *demokratia*. The objective is not simply to correct interpretive errors or contribute additional specialist information to the public's knowledge. Rather, it is to encourage critical thinking and foster a historical approach that facilitates dialogue between past and present phenomena. This involves challenging oversimplified views of Athenian democracy, while also engaging in targeted debunking where necessary. Precisely because the symbols of Athenian democracy are frequently invoked in current political discourse, this effort is not only aimed at enhancing the understanding of Greek history but, more importantly, at promoting critical thinking through the historical method. This ultimately contributes to the cultivation of an informed citizenry—the cornerstone of any democratic society. While Athenian democracy can indeed offer valuable lessons for the present, its application through reductive slogans and impressionistic evaluations is a misuse that risks distorting its fascinating complexity and real relevance. A more nuanced appreciation of the intricacies and particularities of this form of democracy (which represents an alternative version, far removed in time from the democracy we are accustomed to and whose principles we have deeply internalised), on the contrary, can help us confront and overcome our own cognitive biases, making the study of Ancient history not merely an intellectual exercise but a practical tool for better understanding contemporary democratic systems.

Even when Athenian democracy is not employed in political discourse as an

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[1] See Nadia Urbinati, *Democracy Disfigured. Opinion, Truth, and the People* (Cambridge MA and London: Harvard University Press, 2014): part. 173-80; Lars Vinx, "Carl Schmitt and the Political Theology of Populism", in *Between Theory and Practice: Essays on Criticism and Crises of Democracy*, ed. Eerik Lagerspetz and Oili Pulkkinen (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2023): 108-26 ("Populist political theology is anti-democratic and not merely anti-liberal").

abstract cultural reference but is explicitly framed in the Classical period – frequently the Periclean era – its narrative is still often enveloped in an ahistorical aura, reinforcing the idealised myth of a pure and original form of 'direct democracy.' In many instances, merely situating these symbols within their appropriate context of *time* and *space* is sufficient to demythologize them. Such recontextualization can be proposed as a stimulating exercise of historical methodology and a catalyst for a renewed reception of Athenian democracy, which could illuminate it in a new light and facilitate the exploration of fresh and unbiased perspectives on the relationship between ancient and modern democratic systems.

Take, for example, Pericles' *Funeral Oration*, of which perhaps the most widely circulated online visual representation is Philipp von Foltz's oil painting *Perikles hält die Leichenrede* (1853).[1] The scene is set on the hill of the Pnyx, with the Acropolis in the background. The heterogeneous crowd of citizens is arranged among scattered archaeological fragments, as if staged in a capriccio. On the right, Pericles stands on the monumental stone *bema*—a structure known in von Foltz's time but not built during Pericles' lifetime, as it was only added a century later during the monumentalization of the *ekklesia*.[2] Dressed in civilian clothes (but curiously wearing a Corinthian helmet to make his character recog-

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[1] Image available as public domain: `https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Discurso_fun ebre_pericles.PNG`.

[2] The most evident archaeological remains of the assembly area on the hill of the Pnyx, including the monumental podium, correspond to the third phase of the area's construction, dating to the second half of the 4th century BCE, and variously attributed either to the age of Eubulus (around 340 BCE) or to that of Lycurgus (338-326 BCE). In the time of Pericles, the layout of the assembly area, which held around 5,000-6,000 seats, was diametrically opposed to what is visible today in the archaeological area—as reproduced in von Foltz's painting: the cavea had exploited the natural slope of the hill, and the citizens gathered there thus faced the Acropolis and the market. A new construction phase in the area, with the building of an embankment and a complete reversal of the assembly's orientation (which now turned its back on the city), took place at the end of the 5th century BC. This phase can be attributed (as demonstrated by the convergence of literary sources and archaeological evidence) not to the democratic government, but to the oligarchic regime of the Thirty Tyrants (404/403 BC): the new *bema*, probably a wooden structure, no longer faced the sea and, ideally, the Athenian maritime power, but, in line with an idea of political closure and conservatism, towards the land. See Maria Chiara Monaco, "4.6: L'edificio assembleare e le *stoai*", in *Topografia di Atene. Sviluppo urbano e monumenti dalle origini al III sec. d.C. Tomo 2: Colline sud-occidentali - Valle dell'Ilisso*, Ed. Emanuele Greco, Fausto Longo, Daniela Marchiandi and Maria Chiara Monaco (Atene-Paestum: Pandemos, 2011), 337-41.

nisable), Pericles delivers his speech to the citizens in a grand, theatrical gesture. Von Foltz's neoclassical depiction has become emblematic of Athenian democracy at its height, and in some ways contributes to the widespread interpretation of Thucydides' speech of Pericles as a universal manifesto for democracy. Its widespread use also arguably reinforces the idea of a direct, spatial connection between the content of the oration and the political power of the Demos gathered in the Pnyx. However, the actual setting of Pericles' speech was quite different, and simply re-contextualizing the episode within its true location and historical context can significantly alter its perception. Pericles, in fact, delivered his speech from a different *bema*, the one constructed at the *Demosion Sema* (Athens' state cemetery) for housing the funeral oration (*epitaphios logos*) traditionally held each winter at the close of the military campaign season, during the public funerals for the fallen Athenian soldiers of the year.[1]

The audience for Pericles' speech in 430 was particularly large (necessitating the construction of a high podium), and was composed as usual of citizens and foreigners (Thuc. 2.36.4), men and women, war survivors, grieving families, widows and orphans. At the heart of the ceremony, held at the expense of the polis, were ten coffins, one for each of the ten tribes of Athens, containing the cremated remains of soldiers who had fallen in battle (Thuc 2.34), as well as an empty *kline* to remember those whose bodies could not be recovered. Unlike typical battlefield burials, their ashes were returned to Attica—a practice unique to Athens, grounded in the Athenians' claim to autochthony, a distinction they

[1] On the archaeological and topographical problems related to the *Demosion Sema* of Athens and the annual public burial ceremony of the fallen Athenian soldiers, see the extensive analysis by Daniela F. Marchiandi "F.92 - Il *Demosion Sema*. F.93: La cerimonia funebre per i caduti e l'*epitaphios agon*", in *Topografia di Atene. Sviluppo urbano e monumenti dalle origini al III sec. d.C.. Tomo 34: Ceramico, Dipylon, Accademia.* Ed. Emanuele Greco, Fausto Longo, Daniela Marchiandi and Maria Chiara Monaco (Atene-Paestum: Pandemos, 2014), 1441-57.

asserted over all other Greek peoples. These funeral rites closely mirrored private ceremonies, but in this instance, the polis itself symbolically assumed the role of the grieving family; individual identities were deliberately downplayed in favour of a collective identity, as the city honoured its dead as one unified community. Pericles' speech in its entirety thus continues an ancestral tradition of strong identity value, in which the orator faithfully reproduces a traditional schema, including praise for the fallen and for the city, the remembrance of the glorious past, and a consolatory appeal to the survivors and mourning families.[1] Pericles' eulogy of Athenian democracy, indeed, proceeds from a tribute to the ancestors and forefathers whose wisdom and courage laid the foundations of the Athenian empire (*arche*). The political system (*politeia*) that Pericles extolled—-*demokratia*—-is presented as one component of a wider civic ethos that enabled Athens to emerge as a model city-state and the most powerful force in the Greek world. The soldiers had sacrificed their lives to uphold this kind of polis, and Pericles urged the survivors to endure further hardship in order to preserve it (Thuc. 2.41.5). While Pericles' words on democracy initially focuses on Athens' specific political system (*politeia*), they gradually expand their scope to praise a comprehensive way of life that transcends the structures of government and permeates both the public and private spheres. By situating Pericles' speech in its original setting at the *Demotion Sema* and in its historical context, one is encouraged to shift his view of Athenian democracy not just as a decision-making framework but as a fully integrated way of life in which government, society and individual responsibility and life opportunities were inseparable. Shifting the focus beyond a purely institutional-political ground allows us to appreciate the complex, interrelated dimensions that constituted democracy as a lived experience—far more complex than the mere mechanisms of voting and decision-making—inviting new perspectives in the ongoing dialogue between ancient and modern democratic systems.

As the correct positioning of Pericles' oration within its topographical context prompts a re-evaluation of its status as a universal manifesto of democracy, so too can the proper temporal placement of the *kleroterion*—another symbol of Athenian democracy—help us move beyond simplified or mythologised views of the practice of selection by lot. In this regard, we con again begin by con-

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[1]   Marchiandi *Demosion Sema*: 1456.

sidering some widely circulated images online, that is the photographs of two fragmentary stone *kleroteria* displayed at the Epigraphical Museum and the Museum of the Agora in Athens,[1] as well as the reconstructed images of the allotting machine.[2] These images are often employed as sources of inspiration or referred to as historical proof (and occasionally even as subversive 'truths') in the service of anti-elitist narratives or utopian visions of direct democracy.

The selection of public officials by lot can undoubtedly be described as a democratic practice, one which Aristotle himself includes among the classificatory criteria for defining democratic constitutions.[3] It could even be considered an expression of radical democracy, provided it is applied to the broadest and most egalitarian base of candidates, and used for the large majority of public offices, as occurred in Athens from 461/0 BCE onwards, with the democratic reforms by Ephialtes and Pericles.[4] The process of selection by lot could be conducted in various ways, using different tools attested in both literary sources and archaeological evidence; the introduction of the *kleroterion* in 5th century Athens,[5] nonetheless, marked a turning point in this field, as it represented the systematization and 'technicization' of sortition as a component of the democratic machinery.[6] The most detailed reference to *kleroteria* in the lit-

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[1] Epigraphical Museum: inv. EM 8984, dated to 162/1 BCE (bearing the inscription: "[- - - -] in the archoship of Posidonius dedicated (this)", *IG* II³ 4 109); CC license image available (https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Kleroterion_or_allotment_machine_for_the_appointment_of_officials_by_lot_162_BC.jpg). Athenian Agora Museum, inv. I 3967; CC licensed images available (e.g. https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?search=kleroterion&title=Special:MediaSearch&go=Go&type=image).

[2] Especially the drawing created by Sterling Dow, based on the findings from the Agora and the description of the procedure in *Athenaion Politeia* 63–9: see Agora Image 2007.10.0031 (82-268), available at: https://agora.ascsa.net/id/agora/image/2007.10.0031?q=klerōtērion&t=image&v=list&sort=&s=84.

[3] Arist. *Pol.* 1317b: This passage, which lists the characteristics of a democratic constitution, does not refer to the use of lotteries in itself, but rather to the application of lotteries to all offices, or at least to those for which no specific skills were required (as in Athens, where military and financial offices were appointed based on competence).

[4] See Josine H. Blok, and Irad Malkin, *Drawing Lots. From Egalitarism to Democracy in Ancient Gree*ce (New York: Oxford University Press, 2024), 355-63.

[5] The earliest occurrences of the term *kleroterion* are in Aristoph. *V.* 680; *Ec.* 681-3.

[6] Liliane López-Rabatel, "Mots et outils du tirage au sort en Grèce ancienne", in *Tirage au sort et démocratie. Histoire, instruments, théorie*, ed. by Yves Sintomer, *Participations* (2019/hors-série), 35-80, esp. 48ff.

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erary source is provided by the 4th century *Constitution of the Athenians*, in the paragraphs describing the allotting procedures for jurors in Popular Courts.[1] The actual shape of a *kleroterion*, nonetheless, was unknown until the publication by Sterling Dow of two fragments of prytanic decrees inscribed on the reverse of peculiar *stelai* that featured regular rows of slots along the opposite side; in both these decrees the epigraphic publication formula reads: "the annual secretary shall inscribe this decree on the stone *kleroterion* and erect it in the precinct where the lots are drawn".[2] This allowed Dow to connect the literary *kleroterion* with a specific type of object, as well as to classify a series of other fragments with similar features unearthed during the Agora excavations as originally belonging to allotting machines.[3]

It must be noted, however, that none of the *kleroteria* fragments known today date to the 5th or 4th centuries BCE, the period of Classical Athenian democracy. Instead, they all belong to the Hellenistic period, with the majority concentrated around the mid-2nd century BCE. This dating includes the two allotting machines mentioned earlier, whose images have significantly fuelled anti-elitist narratives about Athenian direct democracy. The *kleroterion* displayed at the Epigraphical Museum (*IG* II³ 4,1 106), which preserves the top section of the device, belongs to a group of five similar *kleroteria*; four of them bear the name of the Treasurer in charge of the *prytaneia*, Habron of the deme of Bate, a prominent figure in late Hellenistic Athens;[4] one refers to the year of the archon Poseidonios, 162/1 BCE. Faint traces of letters on some of the *kleroteria* suggest they may have been dedicated by the Athenian Councillors. With the exception of *IG* II³ 4,1 106, all the other fragments were found in the area north of the Acropolis.[5] During the Hellenistic period, this area, with its public buildings,

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[1]   *Ath. Pol.* 63-9 and especially 63-4.

[2]   *Agora* XV no. 220, lines 26-9; *ibid.* no. 221, lines 10-2, both dated to the same year: 164/3 BCE.

[3]   Sterling Dow, *Prytaneis: A Study of the Inscriptions Honoring the Athenian Councillors, Hesperia: Supplement I* (Athens: American School of Classical Studies, 1937), 142-7 (nos. 79 and 80), 198-215.

[4]   *IG* II³ 4,1 106, 107, 108; new fragment (inv. no. ΠΛ 2176): Nikolaos Papazarkadas, "Courts, Magistrates and Allotment Procedures: A New Inscribed *Klērōtērion* from Hellenistic Athens", in *Symposion 2019. Vorträge zur griechischen und hellenistischen Rechtsgeschichte. Hamburg, 26–28 August 2019. Akten der Gesellschaft für Griechische und Hellenistische Rechtsgeschichte 28*, Ed. Kaja Harter-Uibopuu, and Werner Riess (Vienna: Verlag der OAW, 2019). 105-18. On Habron, whose wealth and prominent family is known from the Late Archaic to Roman times: Davies, *APF*: no. 7856, 270-71.

[5]   However, it is possible that *IG* II³ 4,1 106 was relocated on the Acropolis at a later time, possibly as

gymnasiums and sanctuaries, had gradually been reconfigured as a vital centre and a strong semantic place for the preservation of the identity and historical memory of the polis, but it was also a key site for significant judicial activity. It was here that the Theseion, the temple of the heroic founder of Attica and a traditional site for the drawing of lots, was located.[1]

Beyond the possibility that some of the *kleroteria* preserved today may have actually served for sortitions, they all functioned as symbols of the ritual perpetuation of democracy in an Athens that was no longer genuinely democratic. Merely placing these artefacts in their correct chronological context reshapes our understanding of their significance, challenging the ahistorical perception of them as symbols of radical democracy. It encourages a reframing of common perceptions of selection by lot, placing it in a more nuanced and less schematic perspective. Undoubtedly, the monumental nature of these *kleroteria* elevated them beyond mere functional devices—-they became symbols of the transparency and egalitarianism central to democratic practices. However, this development was not a direct product of Classical Athenian democracy but rather a reflection of the substantially transformed political and institutional context of Hellenistic Athens. During this period, although key polis institutions remained (despite the Athenian constitution being repeatedly undermined during periods of oligarchic government), a deeply rooted democratic ideology continued to be nurtured as a central facet of Athenian cultural identity. The idea that Athenian democracy came to a definitive end with the Classical era oversimplifies the complexity of the situation. But 'Hellenistic Athenian democracy,' while still retaining the name, had to make significant compromises due to the city's diminished autonomy and freedom in a political landscape dominated by Hellenistic kingdoms and, later, by Rome.[2] This period also

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a *pierre errante*, originally coming from the same area as the others, as suggested by Papazarkadas "Courts, Magistrates and Allotment Procedures": 107. See below for further details on the provenance of this group of allotting machines.

[1] As attested by 4th-century sources (*Ath. Pol.* 61.1; Aesch. 3 [*C.Ctes.*], 13); see López-Rabatel "Mots et outils du tirage au sort": 71. As far as the 2nd century, according to Papazarkadas "Courts, Magistrates and Allotment Procedures": 117, "the precinct (*temenos*) where the lots are drawn", referred to in *Agora* XV 220 and 221, likely corresponded to the Theseion.

[2] See Gianluca Cuniberti, *La polis dimezzata. Immagini storiografiche di Atene ellenistica* (Alessandria: Dell'Orso 2006), 147: "il funzionamento delle istituzioni appare addirittura secondario rispetto a una *polis* che accentua la pratica esteriore della democrazia come fatto anch'esso culturale piut-

saw the gradual disengagement of the popular classes, which had once formed the backbone of radical democracy (partly due to the dismantling of the navy), the abolition of payment for certain public offices, the replacement of liturgies (a system where wealthy citizens were required to fund public services) with euergetism (a voluntary form of elite gift-giving aimed at enhancing personal prestige). This shift coincided with the widening of wealth disparities and the rise of wealthy elites at the forefront of political life.[1] In this changed framework, being a democratic polis no longer implied the rule of the Demos, but rather the maintenance of (a relative) freedom from the interference of external powers and internal prosperity. According to Nikolaos Papazarkadas, the five similar *kleroteria* mentioned above should be dated to the 160s BCE and possibly seen as a direct consequence of Athens' reacquisition of control over Delos, granted by Rome in 167/6 BCE.[2] The creation of marble allotting machines during these years, on one hand, points to a 'resurgence' of selection by lot and, apparently, a renewed enthusiasm for a democratic practice that had never entirely disappeared. On the other hand, these devices were likely linked to the economic and commercial revival following Athens' recovery of the Delian market, making the efficiency of Athenian courts—now tasked with adjudicating numerous financial and commercial disputes—crucial for the city's prosperity.

This brief recontextualization highlights that the relationship between selection by lot and direct democracy is far from exclusive (nor are the surviving stone *kleroteria* the most credible symbols of anti-elitist democratic practices). As Blok and Malkin emphasised in their comprehensive study of selection practices in the Greek world, the use of lotteries was not primarily a hallmark of radical democracy but rather a practice rooted in egalitarian and distributive values, deeply integrated into all aspects of Greek society, from religion to warfare and property rights.[3] Moreover, Athenian *kleroteria* were not unique to

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tosto che essenziale per i processi decisionali della comunità civica, processi decisionali sempre più vanificati dalla progressiva perdita di autonomia e anche, potremmo dire, di esigenza di autonomia".

[1] See Phillip E. Harding, *Athens Transformed. From Popular Sovereignty to the Dominion of the Elite* (New York and London: Routledge, 2015).

[2] *IDélos* 2589.

[3] Blok and Malkin *Drawing Lots*. For a reassessment of the relationship between sortition and radical democracy, see also Paul Demont, "Le tirage au sort des magistrats à Athènes : un problème historique et historiographique", in *Sorteggio pubblico e cleromanzia dall'antichità all'età moderna.*

Athens or that specific period; other Greek cities used similar devices, and lot-teries for public offices were also employed—-though with different criteria—-even in oligarchic constitutions, based on the same egalitarian and distributive rationale.

This does not diminish the significance of studying lotteries as an alternative democratic practice; rather, it makes their study even more compelling for their potential integration into representative systems.

4. Instruction 3: Shifting from a One-Dimensional to a Multidimensional Understanding of Athenian Democracy

What we have observed so far leads us to formulate a final general instruction for promoting a fair use of Athenian democracy: beyond raising awareness of its reception and demystifying its symbols by placing them in their proper histor-ical and spatial contexts, it is crucial to move away from the one-dimensional perspective often adopted in public discourse and to embrace a multidimen-sional vision of this ancient system.

The first element of this multidimensionality is the emphasis on a *diachronic perspective*, which sees Athenian democracy not as a crystallised, ahistorical ideal or a 'brilliant invention' fully realised in the Classical period, but as an evolving process. This evolution applies not only to the institutional and norma-tive changes that Athens underwent from the Archaic to the Hellenistic period, but also to how the same institutional structures reflected shifts in the values of political participation over time. Throughout the history of the polis, the same decision-making bodies witnessed the alternation of old and new political lead-ers and elites representing the demands of the Demos; similarly, even during pe-riods when democratic participation and the sovereignty of the Demos waned,

Atti della tavola rotonda, ed. Federica Cordano and Cristiano Grottanelli (Milano: ET, 2001), 63-81.

Athens continued to perform the language of democracy. One example of this is Eukrates' law against tyranny, passed the year after the defeat at Chaeronea, 337/6 BCE, which established penalties for those who might attempt to set up a tyranny or overthrow "the *demos* of the Athenians or *demokratia* at Athens". [1] The phrase is used emphatically here and is echoed in the relief atop the stele, which features the rare image of Demokratia crowning a bearded man, the personification of the Demos. [2] This expression, nonetheless, also indirectly suggests the possibility that nominally democratic structures could be maintained even in the face of a significant weakening of the Demos. This implies that while democratic institutions may have persisted, they may not have retained their original democratic weight, reflecting the gradual erosion of genuine popular sovereignty. Similarly, the reference to "the democracy of all Athenians" in the decree awarding the highest honours to the Athenian Kallias of Sphettos, who had contributed to the liberation of Athens from Antigonid rule in 287 BCE, suggests that Athenian democracy had become, and maybe was at risk of becoming again, a democracy 'not of all Athenians.' [3]

Athenian democracy should not be viewed as monolithic, as it functioned both as a system of government and as a political ideology, simultaneously serving as an organisational structure and a cultural benchmark. The evolution of its democratic institutions and discourse often followed separate trajectories. In the Hellenistic period, the ideological aspect of democracy—such as the appeal to popular sovereignty—became more prominent, even as its institutional manifestations weakened.

[1] *IG* II³ 1, 320 (lines 8-9).
[2] For a reflection on the political allegory in the relief, see Alastair J.L. Blanchard, "Depicting Democracy: An Exploration of Art and Text in the Law of Eukrates", *JHS* 124 (2004): 1-15. Demos and Demokratia are depicted as intertwined, but "it was democratic fiction that these two entities were indissoluble (ʽτὸν δῆμον ἢ τὴν δημοκρατίαν). Driving wedges between these two was largely an oligarchic project. By binding these two figures in an affectionate relationship of honour-exchange, such splitting is avoided" (*ibid.* 11).
[3] The decree (*IG* II³ 1, 911, 270/69 BCE) explains that Kallias "never submitted to the... in his fatherland... when the People were overthrown [i.e. under the Antigonid rule over Athens], but abandoned his very property to be confiscated by the oligarchy rather than do anything contrary either to the laws or to *the democracy of all Athenians*" (lines 78-83, translation by Sean Byrne, Antonio Iacoviello, AIO_389). For an historical analysis of this inscription as a source for the liberation of Athens from the regime of Demetrios Poliorketes, Leslie T., Jr., Shear, *Callias of Sphettos and the Revolt of Athens in 286 BC* (Princeton NJ: American School of Classical Studies at Athens, 1978).

The monumental work *The Learned Banqueters* by Athenaeus of Naukratis, in a section dedicated to 'bad teachers', preserves a lengthy passage by Posidonius of Apamea (135-50 BCE), recounting the rise of Athenion, a Peripatetic philosopher of obscure origins, who came to power in Athens during the First Mithridatic War.[1] This occurred at a moment of institutional crisis when the functioning of the last surviving structures of the democratic constitution had likely been suspended by Rome, an ally at the time. The words attributed to Athenion by Posidonius are among the most emblematic of the persistence of references to classical democracy and their transfiguration within a completely altered institutional framework. While serving as the Athenian ambassador to Mithridates, Athenion wrote to the Athenians, promising that the new alliance would bring them many benefits, including the restoration of democracy.

"He (Athenion) accordingly began to write to the Athenians and encourage them to believe that he had enormous influence with the Cappadocian and that they could not only escape the debts that were pressing them and live in harmony, but *also recover their democracy* and get huge gifts privately and as a people".

However, upon his extravagant return to Athens—described by Posidonius with grotesque details of flattery and Athenion's growing megalomania—his true intentions became clearer. In his address to the Athenian citizens, he not only appealed to the demos, but also laid the groundwork for his own rise to tyrannical power:

"So what do I advise? That you not put up with the anarchy the Roman Senate has caused to continue until it decides how we ought to be governed! And let us not ignore the fact that our temples are locked, our gymnasia filthy, our theater deserted by the Assembly, our lawcourts mute, and the Pnyx, although consecrated by divine oracles, taken away from the people! […] Now *you are generals over yourselves, and I am your representative* (διότι νῦν ὑμεῖς ἑαυτῶν στρατηγεῖτε, προέστηκα δ' ἐγώ). If you lend me your strength, I will be as powerful as all of you combined".[2]

What began as promises of democratic revival subtly transitioned into a call

[1] Athen. *Deipn.* V 210e–215b = Poseid. *FGrHist* 87 F 36.
[2] Transl. Douglas S. Olson, *Athenaeus. The Learned Banqueters. Books III.106e-V* (Cambridge MA and London: Harvard University Press, 2006).

for absolute power, setting the stage for Athenion to establish a harsh and authoritarian regime. In the recount of Posidonius, what is particularly revealing in Athenion's rhetoric is his manipulation of both Classical and Hellenistic ideals to appeal to the Athenians' sense of democracy. His vision blended classical imagery of the polis—its civic, judicial, cultural, and religious institutions—with the Hellenistic emphasis on independence and prosperity. However, his appeal to the rule of the people was more performative than substantive: the democracy he promised was a democracy of acclamation, where citizens, ostensibly commanding themselves, simply exalted a leader who claimed to embody their collective power.[1]

This historical episode reflects a broader pattern that resonates in the modern world. The appeal of democracy is so powerful that it can confer legitimacy even in contexts where political practices or organisational structures are far less democratic than their narratives suggest. This phenomenon is not limited to authoritarian regimes that claim to be democracies simply because they hold elections. More significantly, it applies to contexts where democratic ideals and institutions are deeply entrenched, and the language of democracy becomes a symbolic marker of identity.[2] Through its mimetic qualities, this language offers legitimacy to practices that ultimately deviate from democratic principles, as seen in the well-worn rhetoric of 'exporting democracy' that has fuelled the conflicts of this millennium or in the counter-democratic narratives accompanying the rise of populist movements in the Western world.

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[1] For a reflection on this episode in the context of the contemporary debate on classical democracy in the frame of the relationship between Greece and Rome, see Benjamin Gray, "A Later Hellenistic Debate about the Value of Classical Athenian Civic Ideals? The Evidence of Epigraphy, Historiography, and Philosophy", in *The Hellenistic Reception of Classical Athenian Democracy and Political Thought*, ed. Mirko Canevaro and Benjamin Gray (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 168-76: "By making Athenion appear ridiculous in his attempts to yoke together Classical Athenian radical democracy and Classical Athenian culture as an indissoluble pair, Posidonius contributed to detaching Classical Athens' cultural, intellectual, and even ethical legacy from its radical democratic legacy. The resulting more cultural ideal of Athens was crucial to subsequent Roman Athenocentric philhellenism" (*ibid.* 175).
[2] See Hans Kelsen, "Foundations of Democracy", *Ethics* 66.1.II (1955): 2 "It seems that the symbol of democracy has assumed such a generally recognized value that the substance of democracy cannot be abandoned without maintaining the symbol. Well-known is the cynical statement: If fascism should come to the United States it would be called democracy".

Posidonius's account of Athenion offers an intriguing parallel to these modern issues. It suggests that the true point of comparison should not be between our debased modern democracies and an idealised 'authentic' Athenian model. Rather, the focus should be on the parallel developments observable in both ancient and modern contexts. Framing the discussion this way can provide valuable insights, steering us away from abstract models towards a more nuanced understanding of 'how history works' (and how democracy works in history).

Multidimensionality must also extend to the *structure* and *functioning* of Athenian democracy itself. Perspectives that focus exclusively on the direct participation of citizens in the Assembly often present a spontaneistic view of decision-making processes, as well as the sortition of offices as a 'citizen's lottery', where all were equally eligible to participate. But even in a direct democracy like that of Athens—if we still want to consider this definition appropriate—the system could not function without highly organised structures ensuring the representation of the entire citizenry. Nor could it function without procedures to regulate and balance direct participation; nor, finally, could it rely solely on the strength of the majority tout court.

Democracy is based on structures and procedures that, while often intricate or lengthy, are nonetheless fundamental to preventing distortions—acting like a form of homeostasis that defends democracy itself from internal imbalances. Athenian democracy was no exception. The development and continuous refinement of its political and judicial mechanisms deserve as much attention as the citizens' direct participation in the Assembly or their selection by sortition for public offices. Rather than delving into complex specifics, it is enough to recall simple examples to add depth to a one-dimensional view of such institutions (and symbols!) within the broader framework of Athenian democratic machinery.

The expression *meden aprobouleuton* signified the principle that no political decision could be discussed or approved by the Demos unless it was first defined by the Boule.[1] While the sovereignty of the Demos gathered in the *ekklesia* symbolised the force (*kratos*) of the people, the Boule of Five Hundred, estab-

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[1] On check and balances among decision-making bodies, see Pierre Frölich, "Governmental Checks and Balances", in *A Companion to Ancient Greek Government*, ed. by Hans Beck (Malden MA: Wiley Blackwell, 2013), 255-7.

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lished by Kleisthenes' reforms, served as the organ of democratic cohesion for the entire Athenian state. The functioning of the system relied on the total interdependence between the Assembly, the direct and spontaneous body of the people, and the Boule, which provided a structured and representative framework for decision-making.[1] This relationship ensured that no decision could be made without the prior drafting and definition of proposals, aligning the raw will of the people with a structured institutional process. A crucial aspect of this interdependence was the Kleisthenic Boule's structure as a faithful mirror of the Athenian citizen body and the different instances of the Demos, ensuring balanced representation from across coastal, inland, and urban regions of Attica. Epigraphic documentation reveals that the number of councillors sent by each of the 139 demes was strictly regulated by law. Studies of bouleutic quotas show that these numbers were periodically adjusted to reflect changes in local democratic balances, ensuring that the Boule remained a true reflection of the broader citizenry.[2]

As we have already noted, most Athenian magistracies (*archai*) were chosen by lot, largely through sortition *ex hapanton* (from among all citizens).[3] This radical practice, nonetheless, can only be fully understood within the complex legal procedures designed to guarantee the accountability of magistrates before, during, and after their tenure.[4] Each official selected by lot was subject to preliminary scrutiny (*dokimasia*), monthly reporting (over the ten months of the legislative year), and a final accountability process (*euthyna*). As it is recounted in the *Constitution of the Athenians* (48.3-5):

The Council also elect by lot ten of their own body as accountants (*logistai*), to keep the

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[1] On the Athenian Boule as a form of representative body, Jacob A.O. Larsen, *Representative Government in Greek and Roman History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1955), 7-13.
[2] See John S. Traill, *The Political Organization of Attica: A Study of the Demes, Trittyes, and Phylai, and their Representation in the Athenian Council, Hesperia Supplements 14* (Princeton NJ: American School of Classical Studies at Athens, 1975).
[3] There were approximately 800 annual magistracies, to which we must add the 6,000 citizens drawn by lot for the popular court of the Heliaia. Cf. Demont "Le tirage au sort": 63-4; see also *ibid.* 81 on the issue of whether the lot was drawn 'from all citizens' or from groups of volunteers.
[4] See Frölich "Governmental Checks and Balances": 260-4. On the subject of procedures and figures designated for the oversight and balancing of the powers of magistrates, see in general Pierre Frölich, *Les Cités grecques et le contrôle des magistrats (IVe-Ier siècle avant J.-C.), École pratique des Hautes Études: Hautes Études du monde gréco-romain, 33* (Genève: Droz, 2004).

accounts of the officials for each presidency. Also they elect by lot auditors (*euthynoi*), one for each tribe, and two assistant (*paredroi*) for each auditor, who are required to sit at the tribal meetings according to the Eponymous Hero after whom each tribe is named, and if anyone wishes (*ho boulomenos*) to prefer a charge, of either a private or a public nature, against any magistrate who has rendered his accounts before the jury-court, within three days from the day on which he rendered his accounts, he writes on a tablet his own name and that of the defendant, and the offence of which he accuses him, adding whatever fine he thinks suitable, and gives it to the auditor; and the Auditor takes it and reads it, and if he considers the charge proved, he hands it over, if a private case, to those jurymen in the demes who introduced this tribe, and if a public suit, he marks it to the legislators (*nomothetai*). And the legislators, if they receive it, introduce this audit again before the jury-court, and the verdict of the jurymen holds good.[1]

In this elaborate system, citizens chosen by lot as *archai* were responsible for ensuring the accountability of other citizens selected by the same method. Direct participation was balanced by personal responsibility. This process underscores not only the importance of transparency and accountability but also the power of individual citizens (*ho boulomenos*) to access public information, audit accounts, and file complaints.

Democracy, both in ancient Athens and today, expresses itself as a process that becomes increasingly refined over time and takes place both within and outside decision-making bodies. Although the *ekklesia* is often imagined as a mass of citizens voting directly on decisions, where the majority prevails, studies suggest that Athenian decision-making frequently sought consensus or even unanimity, emphasizing a consensus-building process over simple majority rule, thus highlighting the deliberative dimension of Athenian democracy.[2] This consensus-building extended beyond the Assembly, occurring in public discourse and within various forms of associations, nurtured by an intense exchange of information and knowledge between citizens, making Athenian democracy—-in some sense—-less based on the *kratos* of the Demos and more

[1] Transl. H. Rackham 1952.
[2] See Mirko Canevaro, "Majority Rule vs. Consensus: The Practice of Democratic Deliberation in the Greek Poleis", in *Ancient Greek History and Contemporary Social Science*, *Edimburgh Leventis Studies* 9, ed. Mirko Canevaro, Andrew Erskine, Benjamin Gray and Josiah Ober (Edimburgh: Edimburgh University Press 2018), 101-56.

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on its collective intelligence, as an 'epistemic democracy' (Josiah Ober). In this respect, these words by Nadia Urbinati could easily be used *mutatis mutandis* to express the multidimensionality of democratic life in the ancient polis:

Questo sistema è ciò che chiamiamo democrazia, un processo nel quale le regole del gioco e le istituzioni sono incorporate nel vivere civile – il dialogo casuale con gli altri in un qualunque luogo pubblico o quello organizzato nei luoghi di lavoro o nelle associazioni politiche e sindacali, sono senza premeditazione come 'scuole' di cittadinanza.[1]

This brings us to the last multidimensional feature of Athenian democracy: its integration of various components of the polis, both as a 'state' and as 'society'. In common discourse, there is often a focus on a simplified binary relationship between the 'citizen' and the polis, with the agora as the central hub of political life. However, this image oversimplifies the intricate complexity of ancient Greek society. Political participation was deeply embedded within a network of associations that structured citizens' involvement in social, political, religious, military, and economic spheres. A citizen's identity was expressed through multiple groupings or, as it were, multiple layers of belonging, from the family unit (*oikos*) to the broader state level (*polis*), forming an inseparable whole that modern historiography increasingly recognises as fundamental. Understanding the nature of direct participation in Athenian democracy is impossible without acknowledging the plurality of structures in which citizens were immersed, and through which the transmission of democratic knowledge transcended the blurred boundaries between private and public, as well as the political, cultural, religious, and social dimensions. Borrowing the words of Paulin Ismard in the resume of his book *La cité des réseaux* (2010):

La démocratie athénienne ne fut pas seulement affaire d'institutions politiques. Sa pérennité, depuis la fin de la période archaïque jusqu'au Ier siècle avant notre ère, tient en grande partie à l'existence d'une vie communautaire particulièrement dense qui, entre la sphère de la famille et celle de la cité, participait à la construction du lien social. Qu'il s'agisse de subdivisions civiques (dèmes, phratries), de communautés sacerdotales (genê) ou d'associations cultuelles (thiases, orgéons, synodes, eranoi), c'est au sein de ces différents groupes que chaque citoyen prenait part à la vie démocratique.

[1] Nadia Urbinati, "Pensare facendo. Agire pubblico e decisione politica nella società democratica", *Scuola democratica* (*fascicolo speciale*) 2021: 60.

5. Rediscovering Old-Style Athenian Democracy: A Gathering of Neighbours...

In the light of these final considerations, it seems that Athenian democracy offers a particularly compelling source of inspiration, especially with regard to this last aspect. A thoughtful 'use' of Athenian democracy prompts us to reflect on the scale at which democratic engagement takes place. The Athenian model, with its intricate network of civic, social, religious, and familial associations, fostered a form of democratic intelligence deeply rooted in everyday participation and collective deliberation. This historical benchmark encourages us to consider whether the vitality of democracy might, in fact, be strengthened by revitalizing and re-engaging with the smaller structures that form the backbone of societal life. Rather than seeking solutions solely through large-scale institutional reforms, the Athenian experience suggests that the robustness of democratic systems can emerge from interactions and practices taking place within more immediate, localized settings, within the framework of a face-to-face society. This society was sustained by the ever-present voluntarism of *ho boulomenos*, confronting the everyday challenges of democratic shortcomings. In this regard, Athenian democracy—illuminated anew and reinterpreted through the specialized insights of Ancient historians—provides a valuable lens through which to explore potential pathways for addressing the complexities of contemporary democratic crises.
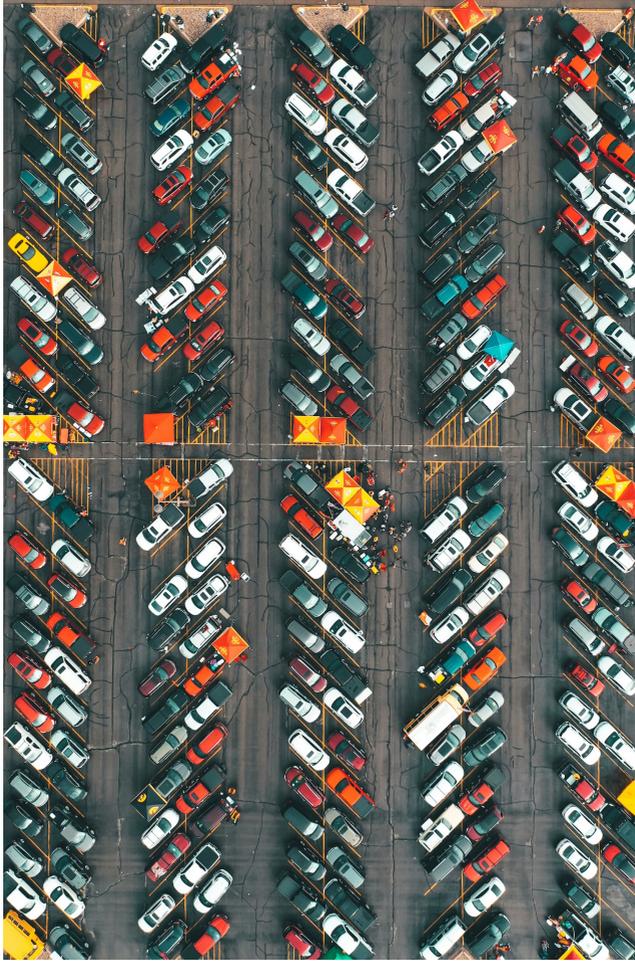
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