Empire, Autochthony, and Identity in Fifth-Century Athens

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Most of the scholarship on fifth-century Athens is explicitly or implicitly concerned with the Athenian political system, *demokratia*[1]. It is hard to find work on Athens that does not insinuate that the cultural flourishing and development seen in the fifth-century was inherently a result or expression of democracy. All modes of cultural expression, including visual art, oratory, and drama are seen as being intrinsically democratic in nature. However, when Athenians portrayed themselves and Athens in the abstract, democracy was not commonly evoked. Instead, it was their autochthony, military power, and empire that both the Athenians and others most readily associated with Athens. The importance of Athenian *demokratia* gets over inflated because it has been seen by moderns as the birthplace of modern democracy. Because we associate our modern liberal democracies with Athens, the Classical Athenian definition of *demokratia* gets lost in assumptions and modern bias. Scholars often reduce Classical Athens and their political development to nothing more than the birthplace of democracy even though it is nearly certain that they did not (or would not) see it as so.[2] The ancient cultural expressions that allegedly represent democracy cannot actually be directly connected to the institution, nor did Athenians in the fifth-century state that they would be remembered because of their democracy. This is not to say that democracy was unimportant to the Athenians, but it is clear that their political system was not the trait to which they would attribute their success or uniqueness to. When we remove presentist ideas and accept what the sources explicitly say, it becomes clear that, rather than their political system, the Athenians believed that it was their autochthony, military power, and empire that led to their successes and defined the identity of Athenians.

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[1] All dates in BCE unless otherwise noted.

[2] L. J. Samons II, "Democracy, Empire and the Search for the Athenian Character," Review of Democracy, Empire, and the Arts in Fifth-Century Athens, by Deborah Boedeker and Kurt Raaflaub, *Arion* 8, no. 3 (Winter 2001): 129, https://www.jstor.org/stable/20163818.

When trying to explain the significance of democracy, one of the immediate problems that modern scholars face is defining what *demokratia* means; even when it is given a definition, it is often hard to distinguish democratic values from typical *polis* values and behaviors. For example, *isonomia* (equality before the law/in speech) and *eleutheria* (freedom from tyranny) were seen across Hellas regardless of if the *polis* was democratic. Democracy has been defined in hundreds of different ways, and often historians will have their own opinion on what does and does not constitute democracy. Some of the criteria that most historians agree upon are "divisive power in the hands of the people as a whole; a community that promotes the ideas of political freedom and equality, [and an] inclusive citizen body." Robinson argues that these characteristics combined with the label of democracy given to the *polis,* either by itself or by others, are what constitute the existence of a democratic regime. By his definition, there were at least fifty-four other democratic *poleis* outside of Athens.[3] Rather than an institution that was born in (or spread by) Athens, democracy was a pan-Hellenic phenomenon that affected much of Hellas. The degree to which *demokratia* distinguished Athens from the rest of Hellas is arguable, but it is undeniable that democracy was not an explicitly Athenian institution. Scholars such as Ober and Raaflaub[4] insist that although the criteria of democracy may have been met by other *poleis*, Athens was the only "true" democracy because of the circumstances of its creation. However, there is absolutely no primary source basis in the label of "true" or "complete" democracies. Athens was never once referred to as the only democracy in Greece, nor was it ever seen as the

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[3] Eric W. Robinson, *Democracy Beyond Athens* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 3.
[4] Josiah Ober, *The Athenian Revolution: Essays on Ancient Greek Democracy and Political Theory* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996), 29.; Kurt Raaflaub, "The Transformation of Athens in the Fifth Century," in *Democracy, Empire, and the Arts in Fifth Century Athens*, ed. Deborah Boedeker and Kurt Raaflaub (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), 25.

most radical of the many democracies.[5] Already, there is an obvious flaw in the way that prominent historians conceptualize and define democracy.

The problem of defining democracy seems so daunting that many historians will simply avoid doing so at all. In fact, as noted by Samons, historians will attempt to deflect this problem by equating democracy simply with being a member of a *polis* or with the culture of Hellas as a whole.[6] By refusing to define democracy, they allow themselves the ability to say that every part of Athenian culture and cultural expression was inherently democratic, which as I will demonstrate, is simply untrue. This is often expressed through scholars attempting to equate *isonomia* and *eleutheria* with *demokratia.* While it is true that the Athenians used these terms to describe their system of government, they cannot be tied strictly to *demokratia*. In fact, the ideas of *eleutheria* and *isonomia* as well as the power and equality of the citizen body were as prominent in Sparta and Argos as in Athens. If only given those characteristics, it would be nearly impossible to guess which *polis* was being described, as these are qualities of most Hellenic *poleis*, rather than distinct characteristics of Athens. There is little about generic *polis* identity that differs from the *demokratia* of the Athenians, especially if *demokratia* is defined only as *eleutheria, isonomia,* and the practice of voting.

Even if Athens did have a democratic government, this does not mean that the structure of their society upheld the ideology commonly associated with liberal democracies. Many modern scholars argue that the democratic ideology of freedom and equality were centrally important for the Athenians and were the basis of their society. They will portray Athens as an egalitarian society that valued *isonomia* above all other values. This is a mistaken view, for the daily lives of Athenians and the reality of their society do not seem to be based on "freedom and

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[5] Eric W. Robinson, *Democracy Beyond Athens,* 220.
[6] Samons, "Democracy, Empire and the Search for the Athenian Character," 139

equality" in almost any sense. The idea that their way of life was "progressive" or egalitarian is almost inconceivable in the face of Athenian lived experience. Athenian society was fundamentally inegalitarian and there were large divides between not only citizens and non-citizens, but between citizens themselves. It is true that each male citizen's vote counted the same and Athens did not have any sort of direct leader be it a king or prime minster; however, this should not be taken to mean that the Athenians all held the same amount of power within politics. During the actual assembly meetings at the *ekklesia*, where all issues were voted upon by simple majority, most of the speaking was done by *rhetores,* "individuals who volunteered to 'advise' the *demos* by proposing specific lines of action."[7] Almost all *rhetores* were hyper-wealthy and had the luxury of formal educations often in the art of oratory and rhetoric which, in turn, gave them a significant influence within the assembly. Given the enormous wealth gap that separated elites and the masses, non-elites were essentially reduced to a supporting role within politics, despite all votes technically counting the same. The wealthy still held a large amount of political influence and shaped politics through rhetoric and persuasion. The voice of the *rhetores* was a more powerful force within the assembly, and often unpracticed speakers would be forced down ensuring that only those skilled in the art of oratory (and likely wealthy) would be allowed to speak. Some scholars will often attempt to explain away inegalitarian practices such as this as being exceptions to democracy or they will state that the Athenians were simply selectively egalitarian among the citizen body. However, this is untrue as not all Athenians were allowed to participate in the assembly in the same manner and capacity.

Another one of the most obvious examples of inequality among citizens in Athens can be seen in the roles of women. Women were considered citizens in their own right, yet they were

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[7] Greg Anderson, *The Realness of Things Past: Ancient Greece and Ontological History* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2018), 13.

completely excluded from formal political participation such as decision making in the

assembly.[8] Although it is debated if women were considered citizens by fifth-century Athenians,

the word that we translate as citizen had both a male and female form (*polites* for men and *politis*

for women), and women were referred to as citizens. This is because they played a critical role in

polis life. In many ways, women were the economic engine of the household; they controlled the

family's finances and generally were in charge of the functioning and success of the *oikos*

(family and household). They were also religious leaders and had one of the most important jobs

a citizen could have – they raised the next generation of Athenians. Women were also

instrumental in determining who could be a citizen, as after the citizenship laws of Perikles in

451, to be a citizen one had to be born of a citizen mother and father. While women were

excluded from politics and war, it is clear that they were in no way excluded from citizenship.

This is important to understand as it demonstrates that there is a distinction between the ideology

of the *polis* and democracy. It shows that citizen ideology and democratic ideology were not the

same within Classical Athens, as women did not occupy the same roles as men. Therefore, the

argument that Athenians were egalitarian specifically within their citizen body is incorrect.

Although this has been written off as an exception to democracy because women were not seen

as equals to men in any way, it is important to understand that women were considered to be full

members of the *polis*.[9] As such, it is a contradiction to the alleged ideology that many moderns

insist Athens was devoted to. In fact, much of Athenian life runs counter to the very ideology

that many historians insist controlled their every decision.

  The reality of Athenian life was comprised of obvious class and ethnic distinctions and

discrepancies. The majority of people who lived within Attica were not citizens because of their

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[8] Josine Blok, *Citizenship in Classical Athens* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 157.
[9] Anderson, *The Realness of Things Past,* 27.

status as either *metic* (foreign resident) or slave. Athenians owned tens of thousands of slaves and the functioning of their political decision-making process was dependent on the use of slave labor. Historian A. H. M. Jones provides a compelling argument against this idea, stating instead that most of Athens' slaves worked in their silver mines and that there were only a small number of slaves that would have been performing the jobs of everyday Athenians.[10] Although part of his argument is accurate, Jones' argument is much too narrow. He is arguing directly against the idea that Athenians were lazy and had slaves perform all of their jobs while they spent time at the assembly. The simple fact that most Athenians did not use their slaves in this way, nor did the majority even own slaves, does not mean that slave labor was unimportant to the economy. On the contrary, Jones himself admits that Athens depended quite heavily upon the silver mines and the massive amount of money that they made for the *polis*. Without the slave labor in the silver mines, Athens would have either been less prosperous or the mines would have to employ citizens, meaning that those citizens would have lost their ability to choose how they spend their time. This is important as the ability to attend the assembly was absolute crucial to the decision-making processes of Athenian democracy.[11] In either case, the institution of democracy would have been threatened by these changes, meaning that the democracy itself was reliant upon the use of slave labor.

Athens also excluded *metics* from the citizen body. *Metics* were a crucial part of creating a citizen identity in Athens as they gave a necessary "out-group" that would strengthen the reputation of holding full citizenship. They paid a tax in order to reside in Athens and had to

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[10] A. H. M. Jones, *Athenian Democracy* (New York, NY: Frederick A. Praeger, Inc., 1958), 14-17.

[11] C. Webb, "The Economic Basis of Fifth Century Athenian Democracy," *Theoria: A Journal of Social and Political Theory,* no. 13 (1959), https://www.jstor.org/stable/41801134

maintain a citizen as a guardian or else they could be sold into slavery.[12] *Metics* were an integral part of the Athenian economy and were required to fight wars for the *polis,* but they were barred from owning land, holding political office, and speaking and voting within the assembly.[13] They were often extremely wealthy and contributed to the economy not only from their personal wealth, but through their important roles in trade and commerce. However, because they were not ethnically Athenian, they were not seen as being worthy of citizenship. This exclusion of foreigners mostly stemmed from a fundamental belief that Athenians were ethnically superior to all foreigners and shows that the society was inherently inegalitarian even to people who were contributing to the success and protection of the *polis*.

For modern scholars, however, the most obvious and uncomfortable contradiction by far is that the Athenians were imperialists who controlled over 150 other Greek *poleis.* The very act of holding dominion over other *poleis* is counter to the idea of equality and autonomy, yet the Athenians maintained both their democracy and their empire. This must mean that the democratic order of Athens did not see empire as an inherent contradiction to democracy. Rather than contradicting Athenian democracy, the empire supported and shaped the institution. As Athens was one of a multitude of Hellenic democracies, it is important to talk about the qualities of the Athenian democracy that were distinctive. The two characteristics that set them apart from the others are the lowered property requirements for voting and holding public office as well as the shift in control of the judicial courts from the aristocratic Areopagus council to the citizenry at large. These characteristics were made necessary by the rapid increase in the number of positions needed to organize and maintain control over an empire; as the Athenians needed more

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[12] Susan Lape, *Race and Citizen Identity in the Classical Athenian Democracy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 48

[13] Anderson, *The Realness of Things Past,* 16

people in positions of power, it was logical to make them available to a larger number of people. The empire required a large number of officials, and Pseudo-Aristotle states that over 20,000 people were employed by the empire. These changes were also made possible by the use of imperial revenue gained from tribute, which was used to pay for many of the operations of the *polis,* including the payments for six thousand jurymen and as many as fourteen hundred officials in Athens and within the other parts of the empire.[14] The empire allowed Athens to shift judicial power into the hands of the *demos,* a fact that they are not ashamed to admit. In Aristophanes' *Wasps*, Philocleon admits openly that the benefits he gets from empire are wealth and the ability to serve as a juror.[15] The empire contributed to the democratic functioning of Athens through revenue gained by tribute and by creating an abundance of positions needing to be filled by Athenian officials. This environment necessitated the Athenians to both lower the property requirements for holding office and allowed judicial power to shift into the hands of the *demos.*

The imperial and naval power of Athens was also instrumental in the creation of the democratic reforms that made Athenian democracy into the institution that we recognize. Raaflaub states that "had the [Persian] war ended in 479 … constitutional development probably would not have moved much beyond Kleisthenes' system. But the continuation of the Persian War and the creation of the *archē* transformed the dynamics of Athenian … life."[16] Some historians, such as Jones, argue that democracy was a completely separate entity from the empire and was not reliant on the economic benefits of imperial status. Despite this, he later concedes

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[14] Athenian Constitution, Psuedo-Aristotle, 24.3

[15] Aristophanes, *Wasps*, 548; Polly Low, *The Athenian Empire* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2008), 205.

[16] Kurt A. Raaflaub, "Why Greek Democracy? Its Emergence and Nature in Context," in *A Companion to Greek Democracy and the Roman Republic*, ed. Dean Hammer (Sussex: Wiley, 2015), 34.

that the empire led to a much higher population and standard of living.[17] This is a confession that

democracy was at least partially parasitic upon empire, as with a lower population or standard of

living, democracy would have struggled because citizens would not have been able to spend as

much time in the assembly.[18] The empire allowed Athenians to maintain a higher standard of

living through money gained through tribute. The Athenians received around talents 460 from

tribute (which does not reflect the value of the ships provided by allies), and this money helped

to further the prosperity of Athens.[19] This prosperity allowed citizens to live above subsistence

level and contributed to the economic stability of Athens; this stability allowed poorer citizens

more time to participate in civic affairs and gave them the opportunity to spend their time out of

mines and farms. Furthermore, imperial revenue paid thousands of citizens and was used to

maintain the Athenian navy, which was a crucial key to the development of democracy within

Athens.[20]

Military service had long been a prerequisite for political power in Greece since the

institution of hoplite warfare. Because the elite class fought on the front lines, they were able to

claim that they were personally responsible for the successes of the *polis,* and therefore

legitimized their political power. The Athenian navy, rather than depending on elite manpower,

used the lower-classes and *metics* to row the ships. The use of the lower-class as rowers for the

imperial navy gave the poor an important military position within the *polis* that they had not

possessed earlier in Athenian history. It gave them importance within the community and also

placed the majority of military responsibility in the hands of the lower-class, rather than elite

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[17] A. H. M. Jones, *Athenian Democracy* (New York, NY: Frederick A. Praeger, Inc., 1958).

[18] C. Webb, "The Economic Basis of Fifth Century Athenian Democracy," 14.

[19] Thucydides, 1.96.2; it has long been debated if the sum provided by Thucydides reflected the amount of revenue contributed by ships. A detailed defense on why Thucydides only meant cash in talents can be found in Loren J. Samons II, "Empire of the Owl: Athenian Imperial Finance," *Historia: Einzelschriften* 142 (2002).

[20] Pseudo-Aristotle, Athenian Constitution, 24.3

hoplites. Without an empire, there would be no need for such an expansive naval fleet, without the fleet there would be no need for rowers and sailors, and therefore no claim to political power for the *demos.* The empire made it necessary for the citizens to participate in politics because the politics of the *polis* was pulled in so many directions.[21] The empire, therefore, provided the basis for the political engagement of the *demos,* and imperial revenue was used to pay these newly-appointed officials, making it possible for even poor Athenians to participate in politics.

Many scholars have attempted to explain the complex relationship between the Athenian democracy and empire. Some historians attempt to explain this ideological "contradiction" by insisting that the empire was not oppressive or that the Athenian empire simply was not an empire at all.[22] Because the Athenian empire began as the Delian League, which was voluntary and mutually beneficial for both Athens and the other *poleis,* many insist that what the Athenians referred to as *archē* would be best translated as a "hegemony" rather than an empire in the traditional sense. However, it can be asserted that the Athenian *archē* was most definitely an empire; the Athenians presided over the other *poleis*, taxed them in the same manner as any imperial province, required tribute from them, and they were not allowed to leave the arrangement. The inability to leave is particularly important as it implies that they had lost part of their autonomy and were undeniably under the direct control of Athens. Although many people were highly critical of the empire, the Athenians themselves did not see any contradiction between empire and democracy. Modern historians often experience discomfort when trying to understand how Athens could be both imperialist and democratic. This is simply an extension of modern bias and misunderstanding. Although some Athenians did not agree with imperialism, it

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[21] Raaflaub, "Why Greek Democracy? Its Emergence and Nature in Context," 36.
[22] For the empire not being oppressive, G. E. M. de Ste. Croix, "The Character of the Athenian Empire," *Historia: Zeitschrift für Alte Geschichte* 3, no. 1 (1954).

was never because it was fundamentally undemocratic.[23] As P.J. Rhodes states, "The foundation of democracy was not human rights but citizens' rights, and, just as a democracy felt no obligation to grant equal rights within the state to metics and slaves, it felt no obligation to treat as equals the allies which it gained in the wider Greek world."[24] The fact that Athens was an imperialist slave state that limited the political participation of women, *metics,* and the poor are not contradictions to their political ideology; it is much more logical to question if the ideology of democratic egalitarianism was as important to the Athenians as historians seem so determined to insist it was.

This practice of explaining historical reality as "contradictions" is fundamentally flawed. As Anderson states, "if the 'ideology of democratic equality' was so consistently violated by Athenian 'reality,' what exactly is causing us to believe that any such proto-liberal ideology" existed in Athens at all?[25] The ideology of democracy was clearly not as crucial to Athens as modern "defenders of democracy" insist that it was, which is evident in the extremely large number of realities that have to be written away as exceptions or contradictions. Most Athenian life, including familial structure, workplaces, militaries, religious events, and their relations with other *poleis* were all fundamentally inegalitarian. In fact, Anderson asserts that the democratic practices that were evident in Athens are so few that they should actually be considered the exception rather than the rule.[26] This is also evident in the almost complete lack of representation of democracy in Athenian art and literature. This lack of representation is often explained away by the argument that the Athenians did not feel the need to portray democracy because it was an

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[23] Anderson, *The Realness of Things Past,* 30
[24] P. J. Rhodes, "Democracy and Empire," in *The Cambridge Companion to the Age of Pericles,* ed. Loren J. Samons II (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 33.
[25] Anderson, *The Realness of Things Past,* 50
[26] Anderson, *The Realness of Things Past,* 30

inherent condition of being an Athenian.[27] However, this argument is not very strong; as Samons states, the absence of evidence should not – and cannot – be used to prove that something exists.[28] Athenians did manage to portray democracy in some of their plays, however it is notably absent in almost all works of art or architecture. Samons states that "it is not too hard to imagine ways in which property-less *thetes* or payment for court service might have been portrayed or reflected."[29] The Athenians obviously did not lack the ability to portray complex ideologies in their art. In fact, they portrayed autochthony and imperial and military power in multiple ways.

None of the art from fifth-century Athens directly portrays, personifies, or demonstrates democratic practices or ideology. It was not until the fourth century that Athenians began to portray a personified Demokratia in monuments and vase paintings. Some scholars will often twist the statue pairing of Harmodius and Aristegeiton into a depiction of democracy, however this was fundamentally not the function of the statues. In the same manner, historians will imply that democracy should be read into political monuments. Because many political monuments celebrate victory in the Persian Wars, historians will sometimes assert that democracy should be read into them because the Athenians believed that it was their democracy that helped them to win.[30] This argument comes from a misunderstanding of Herodotus, who uses the difference between freedom and tyranny as an explanation for the Greek victory. They will often take this to mean that Herodotus thought that the Greeks won because Athens was democratic, and as such, political monuments commemorating the victory are a representation of democracy. This is

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[27] Boedeker and Raaflaub, 325 (cf. 325-331), citing D. Castriota, "Democracy and Art in Late Sixth- and Fifth-Century Athens," in I. Morris and K. A. Raaflaub, eds., *Democracy 2500? Questions and Challenges* (Dubuque, IA 1997), 197-216, at 201.

[28] Samons, "Democracy, Empire, and the Search for the Athenian Character," 142.

[29] Ibid., 141

[30] Tonio Hölscher, "Images and Political Identity: The Case of Athens," in *Democracy, Empire, and the Arts in Fifth Century Athens*, ed. Deborah Boedeker and Kurt Raaflaub (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), 163.

simply a reflection of how scholars misunderstand both the meaning of Herodotus as well as the

function of these monuments. Rather than speaking on behalf of the Athenians and insisting that

they wanted to reflect democracy, it seems more likely that these monuments were built to

commemorate the successes and expansions of the *polis*. If the Athenians wished to portray

democracy in their political monuments it would have been easy to include depictions of the

assembly or of a personified Demokratia. Also, while some Athenians did use the difference in

government as an explanation for why they won the Persian Wars, it was usually in the context

of freedom and tyranny rather than specifically democracy.

Herodotus describes the Persian Wars as an "issue [of] the freedom or the slavery of

Hellas," and his comparisons were almost always in the form of the free Hellenes against the

enslaved Persians.[31] It was not necessarily because Athens was democratic that the Greeks won

the Persian Wars, rather it was because they were free from tyranny while the Persians were

ruled by a tyrant. The absence of tyranny is not equal to democracy. As evident in Thucydides,

other Athenians did not point to their style of government to explain their victory in the Persian

Wars at all. In the Debate at Sparta in Book One of Thucydides' *History of the Peloponnesian

War,* the Athenian representative states that that they won because they stood against the

Persians at Marathon, had the strongest navy, had the most intelligent generals, and displayed

unflinching courage. He goes on to state that it is their "courage, resolution, and ability" that

needed to be repaid by the Spartans. The Athenians even draw direct comparison to Sparta,

stating that they fought harder and were always slighted by the Spartans, who did not want to

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[31] Herodotus, *Histories*, Book IX.60, Herodotus does use the word *demokratia* in a few places, but it is usually used as a rather crude way to describe the system of the Hellenes, and one of the only uses of the word comes from a tyrant rather than a supporter of democracy. Herodotus much prefers the name *isonomia*, which is simply equality rather than democracy. An interesting study of Herodotus' rare usage of the word *demokratia* can be found in Rafael Sealey, *Origins of "demokratia,"*

help protect other *poleis*.[32] This is the most detailed account of why the Athenians believe they won the Persian Wars found in Thucydides, and shows that Athens did not simply believe it was their democracy that saved them. The assessments presented in Thucydides and Herodotus do not support the claim that the monuments to the Persian Wars in some way represented the strength of the democracy; on the contrary, they displayed what most Athenians thought was their strongest asset: their imperial and military power.

One of the most common pieces of art that art historians attempt to use as a demonstration of democracy is the statue pairing of Harmodius and Aristogeiton, also known as the tyrannicides [fig. 1]. Harmodius and Aristogeiton were two lovers who in 514 assassinated Hipparchus, the son of the previous Athenian tyrant Peisistratus and the brother of the tyrant Hippias, who was controlling Athens at that time. Hipparchus had attempted to seduce Harmodius but was denied. In order to punish Harmodius, Hipparchus had his sister banned from a festival, which greatly dishonored his family. Harmodius and his lover Aristogeiton killed Hipparchus in retaliation. They planned to assassinate Hippias as well, but he survived and went on to become even more oppressive.

This act and the statues inspired by it have always been divisive; one group insists that Harmodios and Aristogeiton deserve credit for instituting democracy because they opened Athens up to be ruled by Kleisthenes, the man often credited with the creation of democracy. Others maintain that this act was not committed to protest Athens being under the control of a tyrant, rather this was a private issue that progressed because of aristocratic in-fighting and familial pride. While this act was later used as political propaganda to support the regime of

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[32] Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War,* 1.73-75.

Kleisthenes after he was already in power, no sources support the idea that that Harmodius and

Aristogeiton were ever attempting to place Kleisthenes in control.

The idea that the attack was not strictly political is not new. Both Thucydides and

Herodotus insist that Hipparchus (the true target of the attack) was not the tyrant of Athens;

Herodotus specifies that Hipparchus was both the son and brother of a tyrant, but never gives the

title to Hipparchus.[33] Thucydides goes even further than Herodotus stating that it is clear that

Hipparchus was not a tyrant because Hippias maintained his position even after the death of his

brother, which implies that it was Hippias who held the power all along.[34] Although the attack of

Hipparchus was political in the sense that he was a major political figure in Athens, Harmodius

and Aristogeiton attacked Hipparchus as a matter of personal retaliation. The original statues

were stolen by Xerxes when he sacked Athens in 480, but they were soon replaced in 477.[35]

They were placed in the Agora and were meant to "encourage [Athenians] to embrace the

ideology of the tyrannicides."[36] It is undeniable that these statues were used as a symbol of the

people's power and the end of tyranny, however neither of these things are inherently specific to

democracy. Simply because the Athenians celebrated the end of a particularly oppressive tyrant

and his brother does not mean that they were celebrating democracy. If the Athenians were

concerned with celebrating democracy outright, a statue or commemoration of Kleisthenes

would have been much more appropriate, however Kleisthenes was not depicted in any

monument from the fifth-century nor did most Athenians credit him with the creation of a new

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[33] Herodotus, 5.55
[34] Thucydides, 6.55.3
[35] Ernest Arthur Gardner, *A Handbook of Greek Sculpture* (London: Macmillan, 1920), 209.
[36] Hölscher, "Images and Political Identity," 160.

system of government.[37] The statue of the tyrannicides is therefore not inherently democratic, nor does it represent the "creation" of democracy.

Historians will often use drama as an example of the importance of democracy to the Athenians as well. N.T. Croally goes as far as to say that all Athenian "tragedy … must be viewed as reflecting the aims and methods of the democracy."[38] However, the statement that Athenian drama (specifically tragedy) is a reflection of democracy is quite a reach. While Athenian drama did occur within democracy and sometimes contained depictions of democratic practices, this does not mean that drama was a product or expression of democracy. P. J. Rhodes argues that Athenian festivals and drama were simply Athenian versions of institutions found across Hellas and that themes usually directly tied to democracy by historians are actually reflections of "concerns of *polis*-dwelling Greeks in general."[39] He goes on to state that the importance of drama was not seeing democracy in action, but rather the *polis*.[40] Viewing tragedy as a product of democracy overstates the significance of the institution to fifth-century Athenians and also distorts the way that we read and understand the plays; it is easy to fall into the trap of thinking that because the plays took place in a democratic society, any representations of the *polis* or its values are inherently tied to the political system of Athens. Some historians will even confuse *polis* identity with specifically democratic ideology, as Helene Foley does in her interpretation of *Antigone*. She mistakenly states that "obedience to the *polis* and its laws – just or unjust – was an important part of democratic ideology…" as if this were unique to democratic

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[37] Anderson, *The Realness of Things Past,* 10.

[38] N. T. Croally, *Euripidean Polemic: The Trojan Women and the Function of Tragedy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), quoted in P. J. Rhodes, "Nothing to Do with Democracy: Athenian Drama and the Polis," *Journal of Hellenic Studies* 123 (2003), 106.

[39] P. J. Rhodes, "Nothing to Do with Democracy: Athenian Drama and the Polis," *Journal of Hellenic Studies* 123 (2003), 105.

[40] Ibid., 113

poleis[41] What she associates directly with democracy would have been relevant values in all

poleis, democratic or otherwise. The use of tragedy as a portrayal of the importance of

democracy diminishes the importance of the *polis* itself and also implies that tragedy served no

purpose outside of a democratic society, which is fundamentally untrue. Leslie Kurke argues that

when we view tragedy (or any drama) as being a reflection of democracy, "the influence only

goes in one direction." She argues that ancient historians will insist that democracy is the key

factor in cultural production, but they will view it in a vacuum as if cultural production only

existed because of democracy.[42]

Athenian drama did deal with and represent democracy, however. Sophocles, for

example, uses his play *Ajax* as a metaphor for the particular tensions that arise within a

democratic state. Josh Beer states that in *Ajax,* Sophocles is attempting to reflect the clash

between the "traditional heroic code of individualism … [and] the new collective processes of

democratic procedure."[43] One way that Sophocles does this is through his portrayal of the

argument over who will possess the arms of Achilles after he died. Rather than simply giving the

armor to the next strongest warrior, Sophocles portrays the Greeks as voting on the person who

should receive the prize. The armor is given to Odysseus, rather than Ajax, as a result of the vote.

Voting is later used again to decide what will happen to the body of Ajax after his suicide.

However, if this play is to be taken as a representation of Athenian democracy, Sophocles does

not present it in the best light. The debate scenes that are included in the play are often full of

petty arguments. If it was, in fact, written in an attempt to demonstrate democratic debates,

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[41] Helene, Foley "Tragedy and Democratic Ideology: The Case of Sophocles' Antigone," In *History, Tragedy, Theory: Dialogues on Athenian Drama*, ed. Barbara Goff (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1995), 134.

[42] Leslie, Kirk, "The Cultural Impact of (on) Democracy: Decentering Tragedy," in *Democracy 2500: Questions and Challenges*, ed. I. Morris, K. Raaflaub, and D. Castriota (Dubuque, Iowa: Kendall/Hunt Pub. Co., 1998), 156.

[43] Josh Beer, *Sophocles and the Tragedy of Athenian Democracy (*Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 2004), 63.

Sophocles is showing that even within these debates, the Athenians were still focused on the elite status and ethnicity of individuals as this is what both Menelaus and Agamemnon attempt to use against Ajax and Teucer.[44] Furthermore, although Sophocles does pay much attention to the democratic process of voting, he strongly implies that the vote was actually rigged and unfair.[45] If Sophocles was attempting to represent the abandonment of traditional individualism in favor for democratic collectivism, the way he presents democracy is not flattering. Rather, Sophocles' representations of democratic practices are shown as being unfair or petty, while an emphasis is still placed upon the status and ethnicity of individuals seeking high honors. While democratic practices and ideals could be examined in Athenian drama, this does not mean that it was product of democracy, nor was democracy a characteristic of the medium.

The reality is that in the fifth-century, the Athenians did not associate themselves with democracy through their art, drama, or oratory. When the Athenians themselves articulate what made them unique, they provided responses such as

> [Athens] has never given in to adversity, but has spent more life and labor in warfare than any other state, thus winning the greatest power that has ever existed in history, … even if now … there should come a time when we were forced to yield: yet still it will be remembered that of all the Hellenic powers we ruled over more Hellenes, [and] that we stood firm in the greatest wars…[46]

This is not to say that the Athenians did not find pride in their system of government; it is clear that they valued democracy. Perikles speaks highly of democracy in his funeral oration stating that the Athenian democracy places power in the hands of the people and ensures that everyone is equal before the law. However, he still asserts later in his speech that it was their power and courage the Athenians would be remembered by.[47] When fifth-century Athenians described what

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[44] Sophocles, *Ajax,* 1075
[45] "[Ajax] hated you because you [Menelaus] had been caught fixing the votes in order to rob him." Sophocles, *Ajax,* 1135.
[46] Thucydides, 2.64.
[47] Thucydides, 2.37-41.

made them the greatest among the Hellenes, it was almost always their empire and military power, their autochthony, or their wealth (much of which came from empire). Most of modern scholarship on Athens pushes the importance of democracy, however this "represents a noble but quixotic effort, which at least partially reflects our own desire to make the Athenians see themselves as we see them."[48] When scholars refuse to fight against this presentist view and understand what the sources themselves say, it leads to a misunderstanding of how the Athenians identified themselves. As scholars, we are required to take the sources seriously and understand what is explicitly stated and depicted.

Classical Athenians themselves were extremely concerned with ethnic identity. The notion that Athenians were autochthonous was a crucial part of citizen identity in fifth-century Athens. The word literally translates as "born from the earth" or "living in the same land since the beginning of time."[49] Athenians believed that the god Hephaestus had ejaculated on the ground after attempting to rape the goddess Athena and that Erichthonios was born from the Earth because of this. According to myth, Athena favored the child and took care of him.[50] This helped to portray the Athenians as favored by the gods and provided a basis for their ethnic superiority. The Athenians believed that their lineage was pure and that this made them more noble than other Greeks. Isocrates voices this notion of purity and nobility in his *Panegyricus* stating,

> for [Athenians] did not become dwellers in this land by driving others out of it, nor by finding it uninhabited, nor by coming together here a motley horde composed of many races; but we are of a lineage so noble and so pure that throughout our history we have continued in possession of the very land which gave us birth, since we are sprung from its very soil…[51]

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[48] Samons, "Democracy, Empire, and the Search for the Athenian Character," 143-144.
[49] Jacquelyn Helene Clements, "Visualizing Autochthony: The Iconography of Athenian Identity in the Late Fifth Century BCE" (PhD. diss., John Hopkins University, 2015), ii.
[50] Apollodorus, *Library,* 3.14.6.; Euripides, *Medea,* 824.
[51] Isocrates, *Panegyricus,* 4.24

The date that this myth developed is highly contested within scholarship, but according to some scholars, it was most likely either created or popularized in the fifth-century when the Athenians were in direct conflict with the Spartans.[52] Scholars often use Isocrates' statement as a defense of this argument because much of his portrayal of autochthony directly challenges the Spartan myth of how their city was created by immigrants to the land. Susan Lape argues that the myth was not created to directly compete with Sparta, but that the myth gained and lost popularity throughout history. She states that the myth of autochthony was created in the wake of the Persian Wars, as it gave the Athenians "a way to conceptualize their identity as citizens that retrospectively explained their remarkable military successes."[53] The myth helped to explain and justify the successes of the *polis* while also helping to set up the basis for the *polis'* later imperial practices. She then goes on to argue that citizenship directly tied to ethnicity "emerged and became more intense from time to time … because it provided a rationale for preexisting practices and norms, … [as well as] inequalities…"[54] Athenians used autochthony and the idea of purity that it provided to explain why citizenship should be tied to ethnicity and why foreigners should not be granted citizenship in Athens. Athens allowed *metics* to be part of society as almost half-citizens, but they were never considered equal to Athenians. In Plato's *Menexenus,* it is stated that the Athenians believe they are superior to both the barbarians as well as all other Greeks as the Athenians are "purely Greek and without barbarian admixture." They continue by expressing that other Greeks do not deserve to live as Athenians because they are "by nature barbarians, and yet pass for Hellenes."[55] The Periklean Citizenship Law further

[52] Kathryn A. Morgan, "Autochthony and Identity in Greek Myth," in *A Companion to Greek Democracy and the Roman Republic,* ed. Dean Hammer (Sussex: John Wiley & Sons Ltd., 2015), 69; V.J. Rosivach, "Autochthony and the Athenians," *Classical Quarterly* 37 (1987).
[53] Lape, *Race and Citizen Identity in the Classical Athenian Democracy,* 18
[54] Ibid.
[55] Plato, *Menexenus*, 245c-d

tightened this exclusion of *metics* as Perikles required that both parents be Athenian citizens.[56] The use of the word autochthony closely coincides with the Citizenship Law; this is a logical connection as both "unify the city but also exclude that which is the 'other' or foreigners."[57] The Citizenship Law combined with the growth in autochthony created an environment in which the Athenian identity could hardly be removed from their ancestry in any capacity.

This myth of autochthony was crucial for Athenian orators. In his *Panegyricus,* Isocrates calls upon the autochthony of the Athenians as one of the main reasons Athens should be praised. It is their "noble origin" that sets the Athenians apart from the rest of Hellas and it is because of this noble origin that their claims of leadership were more authoritative and valid than those (such as Spartans) who cannot call their land "nurse and fatherland and mother."[58] Orators also wrapped this myth into funeral oration; in the early ffith-century, public funerals were common in order to honor the large numbers of men who died in battle. Thucydides portrays this tradition when he writes of Perikles' funeral oration; Perikles says that the Athenian ancestors "dwelt in the country without break in the succession from generation to generation, and handed it down free to the present time by their valour."[59] Although no original pieces of funeral oratory survived, through the writing of Thucydides and by studying fourth-century oratory it is clear that a large emphasis was placed on the autochthony of Athenians in their funeral orations.[60]

Outside of oration, autochthony was a major focus in tragedy. Many Athenian playwrights mention the myth in their work including Euripides and Aristophanes. Their portrayal of autochthony generally follows that of the orators and is used as a way to distinguish

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[56] Plutarch, *Pericles*, 37.3
[57] Clements, "Visualizing Autochthony," 17.
[58] Isocrates, *Panegyricus,* 4.25
[59] Thuc., 2.36.
[60] Lape, *Race and Citizen Identity in the Classical Athenian Democracy* 18. Lape uses Herodotus to provide the evidence that the fourth-century funeral orations were very similar to the fifth-century.

the Athenians. In *Medea*, Euripides uses the Chorus to explain how the noble birth of the

Athenians made them favored by the gods, writing that the Athenians "are children of the blessed

gods sprung from a holy land never pillaged by the enemy." In Aristophanes' *Wasps,* the Leader

of the First Semi-Chorus states that the true Attic men "who alone are noble and native to the

soil" are the "bravest of all people."[61] This holds with the common portrayal of Athenians and

emphasizes the importance of their autochthony to their personal identity. More than anything,

Euripides' *Ion* is a representation of how important it was to Athenians to preserve their

autochthony.[62] However, it provides more than just proof that the Athenians thought that they

were ethically superior. This work helps to provide a glimpse into how the Athenian noble class

viewed foreigners. The character Ion states, "it is said that the famous Athenians are natives of

the land, not a foreign race, so that I shall burst upon in on them with two ailments, my father a

foreigner, and myself of bastard birth."[63] He goes on to speak of how he would be hated and

prevented from becoming anyone of mention within Athens. The anxieties of Ion help provide a

glimpse into what Athenians thought about foreigners in Athens that claimed noble blood.[64] It

also demonstrates the relationship between autochthony and democracy as Ion states that "if I

attain the reputation of those who are … useful in the city, the more I will be guarded against, in

the votes… those who hold cities and high rank are most hostile to their rivals."[65] *Ion*

demonstrates how the idea of autochthony functioned in actual practice and also gives an

example of how the myth interacted with the institution of democracy.

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[61] Aristophanes, *Wasps,* 1076.
[62] Lape, *Race and Citizen Identity in the Classical Athenian Democracy,* 100
[63] Euripides, *Ion,* 589.
[64] In the play, Ion is traveling to Athens in order to meet his mother, who is of noble Athenian blood.
[65] Euripides, *Ion,* 600-605.

Autochthony is also featured prominently in countless works of art. After the end of the Persian Wars in 479, autochthony was extremely popular in the iconography of many Athenian red-figure vases and in the frieze of the Erechtheion.[66] The portrayal of autochthony in vase paintings began in the sixth century but became more prominent after the Persian Wars and directly before the Peloponnesian War as Sparta threatened the land of Athens.[67] Myths relating to autochthony including the birth, conception, or early life of Erichthonios were featured prominently. Jacquelyn Clements argues that as the portrayal of the birth of Erichthonios increased during the Persian War, this specific imagery reflects the anxiety that the Athenians would lose their identity and sense of belonging if they lost land in the war.[68] Many vase paintings focused not on the moment that Erichthonios was physically born, but the moment in which he was presented to Athena. [fig. 2] Athena's care of Erichthonios was crucial to Athenian ideology, as it supported their notion of divine favor. Erichthonios is often depicted alongside deities, specifically Athena and Hephaestus. The inclusion of these gods is meant to reflect the fact that he was born from the divine and is directly tied to two of the gods most prominent in Athenian culture and religion. The Erechtheion [fig. 3] was the last monument to be built on the Athenian Acropolis in the Classical Age, and much of its imagery and iconography was a reflection of the *polis'* autochthony and identity. Clements argues that both the temple and the iconography found within was built to be an "embodiment of the concept of autochthony in physical and monumental form."[69]

In the fifth-century, autochthony was central to the Athenian identity. Athenians emphasized it in their monumental art and temples, tragedies, oratory, and funeral speeches. The

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[66] Clements, "Visualizing Autochthony," ii.
[67] Ibid., iii.
[68] Ibid., 86
[69] Clements, "Visualizing Autochthony," 138

myth gained popularity over time and is seen more frequently as Athens is threatened. The

Athenians also emphasize autochthony when attempting to explain their military successes or to

justify their treatment of foreigners. The myth was closely connected with Athenian identity and

it is seen continuously when Athenians are attempting to explain what distinguishes them from

the rest of Hellas. Unlike democracy, autochthony is certainly a self-ascribed trait and is crucial

to what it meant to be an Athenian. This is evident in its appearance in almost all forms of

cultural expression.

Another clearly self-ascribed trait of the Athenians was their imperial power and strength.

The label of empire is complex, as the empire in question actually refers to the alliance between

Athens and multiple other city states established in 478. The Athenians themselves referred to

this empire as an *archê* (simply meaning rule), a *summachia* (an alliance), or a *hegemonia*

(hegemony).[70] Regardless of the lack of linguistic specificity, the Athenian hegemony over other

poleis was absolutely an empire. Specifically, I consider the existence of the Athenian military

and naval superiority combined with the requirements of tribute to constitute as an imperial rule.

The literary record is scattered and incomplete, so each name for the empire depended on the

context and intentions of the author; however, it is unproductive to argue the existence of the

empire, as almost all of the evidence shows that the Athenians held imperial rule of the other

members. In some instances, other *poleis* drew direct comparisons to the Persian and Athenian

rules, stating that being ruled by Athens was similar to the experience of being ruled by the

Persians. Furthermore, Athens is frequently referred to as ruling the alliance in the same manner

as a tyrant would rule a *polis*. Even Perikles himself admits that the Athenian empire was "now

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[70] Polly Low, *The Athenian Empire,* 9.

like a tyranny."[71] The fact that the Athenians did not have a single word to describe imperial

power reflects that it was one of the very first empires to be created in Greece, not that they

avoided putting a name to it.

      The Athenian empire was born out of the Delian League, an alliance of Greek *poleis* led

by Athens that was created to fight the Persian navy.[72] The League did not begin as an explicit

empire, and its constitution is outlined by Thucydides. The constitution told which cities were

expected to furnish money and ships, established the leadership of the Athenians, established

Delos as the location of the treasury, stated that the members were autonomous, and the policy of

the League would be decided by an assembly.[73] There are different estimations for when the

alliance became an empire, however one of the turning points occurred around 465 when the

Athenians brutally suppressed the secession of Thasos from the alliance. Thucydides tells us that

the Athenians razed the city, forced their navy to surrender, ordered them to pay an indemnity

and to continue to pay tribute in the future, and they had to surrender their autonomy and the

control of their mines. From this point on, seceding from the alliance was prohibited, and revolts

were often as brutally suppressed by the Athenians as Thasos' was. The so-called "allies" of

Athens were no longer considered to be completely autonomous, and in fact, this lack of

autonomy was a catalyst for the Peloponnesian War. The Spartans claimed to be fighting for the

liberation of all of Hellas, and many Greeks sided with the Spartans because they wanted to be

free from Athenian rule.[74] Although there is no exact year that the League became the empire, it

is clear that by 425, the Athenians were treating the allied cities as imperial subjects. This is

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[71] For parallels between the Persian and Athenian rules see Thuc., 3.10, 6.33; for Athens being tyrannical see Thuc., 2.63, 1.122.2

[72] The origin of the Delian League and its original purpose is contested, but this understanding comes from Thucydides and is expressed in J. A. O. Larsen, "The Constitution and Original Purpose of the Delian League," *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology* 51 (1940).

[73] Thucydides, VI, 85

[74] Thucydides, 2.8

evident in the inscriptions and decrees left by the Athenians. They frequently placed decrees in

the *poleis* under their control, and in the case of the Standards Decree of c. 425, they required

each *polis* to place the decree in the agora of their city.[75] This decree required that all members

of the empire used the same currency as the Athenians and read, "let the Alliance (*symmachia*)

execute these [orders]… let the secretary of the Council and of the People add this to the oath of

the Council: 'if anybody mint silver coinage in the cities or use coins other than those of the

Athenians or weights or measures others than those of the Athenians'," they will face severe

punishment.[76] By this point, the allied *poleis* had lost almost any sense of autonomy and were the

subjects of an imperialist Athens.

Imperial and military power was clearly important to the Athenians. One way that this is

evident is the way in which the Athenians decided to portray themselves in their art. One

example that is particularly compelling is the Panathenaic prize amphoras. The Panathenaea was

one of the most important festivals in Athens and visiting athletes and musicians would travel to

participate in the games and competitions. The winners would be given sacred oil held in

amphoras as a prize.[77] Given the importance of this festival, the amphoras were representative of

what the Athenians wanted their *polis* to be associated with both by Athenians and the rest of

Hellas. In the mid-sixth century, the Athenians changed and added to the iconography of these

amphoras. They standardized the amphoras, and the iconography that was on them after 540

"includes an image of an armed Athena rendered in profile, flanked by two Doric columns

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[75] Peter Liddel, "Epigraphy, Legislation, and Power Within the Athenian Empire," *Bulletin of the Institute of Classical Studies* 53, no. 1 (2010), 104.

[76] Miltiades B. Hatzopoulos, "The Athenian Standards Decree: The Aphytis Fragments," *Tekmeria* 12 (2013-2014), 243.

[77] Maggie L. Popkin, "Roosters, Columns, and Athena on Early Panathenaic Prize Amphoras: Symbols of a New Athenian Identity," *Hesperia: The Journal of the American School of Classical Studies at Athens* 81, no. 2 (April-June 2012), 209.

surmounted by roosters."[78] [fig. 4] Although each amphora might be slightly different, these four

images were included on all Panathenaic prize amphoras until 400. Maggie L. Popkin argues that

the four elements together "convey a definite message, formulated around the middle of the sixth

century, that Athens was the emerging, self-proclaimed leader of the Greek world."[79] She then

goes on to argue that the iconography represents the military strength of Athens. The use of an

armed Athena represented that she was a protector of Athens as well as building upon the idea

that Athena would support the Athenians in battle. The roosters, animals that were known for

fighting and competition, are thought to either represent the "fighting spirit" of both the animals

and the Athenians themselves, or to build upon the emphasis on military power.[80] These prize

amphoras were a crucial piece of propaganda for the Athenians, and the way that they chose to

represent themselves on them demonstrates the importance of reminding other Greeks that they

were powerful leaders within Hellas with a strong military presence and ability.

Outside of prize amphoras, there was no small amount of Athenian art relating to military

conquest or successes. In fact, there is a vast number of portrayals of "mythical victories … over

non-Greeks, such as Giants, Centaurs, Amazons, and Trojans, as well as … victories over the

Persians … and eventually even victories over other Greeks."[81] Boedecker and Raaflaub argue

that this demonstrates that the Athenians felt the need to remind themselves and others of their

military superiority. There is an overwhelming amount of Athenian art that represents military

successes, including monuments, vase paintings, and sculpture. However, the most memorable

are the Parthenon friezes, which portray battles with Persians as well as Greeks and serve as a

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[78] Ibid.
[79] Ibid., 207-208.
[80] Ibid., 216-219.
[81] Democracy, Empire, and the Arts, 325

"hymn to Athenian superiority."[82] Jenifer Neils argues that the Parthenon friezes often function

as a reminder of the military power of the Athenians because of the groupings of the gods. She

points out that gods relating to land (Dionysus, Demeter, Hermes, and Ares) are all grouped

together on one side, [fig. 5] while gods associated with Theseus and water (Poseidon, Apollo,

Artemis, and Aphrodite) are all placed on the other. [fig. 6] She argues that these groupings are

significant because they reflect the Athenian control over and military success on both land and

sea. This becomes even more evident when one considers the inclusion of Ares, who was very

rarely portrayed in monuments such as this.[83] Also, the Athenians rebuilt the temple to Athena

Nike under the orders of Perikles and later in 425 built a monument in Nike's honor to

commemorate their victory over the Spartans.[84] These monuments represented the imperialist

and triumphalist atmosphere of fifth-century Athens.

The Athenians also commemorated their empire in their art and public monuments. In

450, the statue of Athena Lemnia was constructed in order to celebrate the Athenians settling on

land that had been recently conquered through the Delian League. Tonio Hölscher refers to the

building of this statue as the, "first aggressive monument of Periklean policy against Athens'

allies," and it was most definitely a commemoration of the imperial growth of the Athenians.[85]

The statue was also placed at the entrance to the Akropolis, which leads some scholars to believe

that this was the beginning of Perikles' attempts to use the Akropolis as a symbol of Athens'

imperial power. As Hölscher points out, each representative of the "allies" of Athens would be

forced to walk past the image of their imperial rulers as they entered the Akropolis to participate

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[82] Tonio Hölscher, "Images and Political Identity: The Case of Athens," 176
[83] Jenifer Neils, "Reconfiguring the Gods on the Parthenon Friezes," *The Art Bulletin* 81, vo. 1 (March 1999), 12.
[84] Ibid.
[85] Tonio Hölscher, "Images and Political Identity," 169-170.

in the Panathenaea.[86] The statue combined with the iconography used on the Panathenaic prize

amphoras meant that people from visiting *poleis* would not be able to overlook the importance of

empire to the Athenians. They also built statues in allied cities as a representation of their

superiority and power over their allies. Their public monuments featured a large amount of

imperial iconography, and served to constantly remind the Athenians, and the rest of Hellas, that

they were an imperial power.

      One of the most obvious places that the importance of Athenian empire is seen is in

oratory. In oratory, the Athenians often emphasized their military and imperial power above all

other traits that they possessed. This is clearly seen in the writings of Thucydides. The imperial

power of the Athenians is one of the main focuses of Thucydides' *History*, and it appears in most

of the speeches given by or about Athens. In Perikles' Funeral Oration, it is said that the

greatness of Athens has "[surpassed] what was imagined of her … Mighty indeed are the marks

and monuments of our empire (*archē*) which we have left. Future ages will wonder at us, as the

present age wonders at us now." He then goes on to state that although he has mentioned many

reasons for Athens' greatness, it "was the courage and gallantry of [Athenian] men … which

made [Athens] splendid."[87] In a later speech, Perikles states that it would be dangerous to lose

the empire and that anyone who says Athens should give their empire up "would very soon bring

the state to ruin" and that the Athenians should remember that it was the powerful military and

empire that made Athens great.[88] Around 396, Lysias describes Athens between the years of 476

to 405; he states that,

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[86] Ibid., 171
[87] Thuc. 2.41-42.
[88] Thuc. 2.63-64.

by means of countless toils, conspicuous struggles, and glorious perils they made Greece

free, while proving the supremacy of their native land … In that time no warships sailed

from Asia, no despot held sway among the Greeks, no city of Greece was forced into

serfdom by the barbarians; so great was the restraint and awe inspired in all mankind by

the valor of our people. And for this reason none but they should become the protectors

of the Greeks and leaders of the cities.[89]

Athenian orators clearly knew that reminders of the military and imperial strength of Athens was

an effective political tool. Even orators in Corinth seem to have used imperial expansion as a

way to define the Athenians. Thucydides has the Corinthians state that the Athenians were "born

into the world to take no rest themselves and to give none to others."[90] Oratory was used to

articulate the ideals, values, and attitudes of a community; as Athenian military power and

supremacy was a key factor in oration (specifically funeral oration), it is clear that this was a

crucial value and ideal of the fifth-century Athenians.[91]

The military and imperial power of Athens was by far the most common way that Greeks

outside of Athens would have experienced and understood Athenians. This is a fact that the

Athenians gladly accepted and portrayed in their art and oratory.[92] They clearly emphasized this

trait within Athens and in the monuments that they erected around Hellas. In addition to empire,

they commonly portrayed their autochthony as a reason for their superiority over other *poleis*.

These two traits show up consistently in oratory, drama, monuments, vase paintings, and

statuary, and are clearly crucial to the Athenian identity. In contrast, democracy is consistently

absent from the same media. The argument that democracy was so integral to Athens that it did

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[89] Lysias, *Funeral Oration,* 2.55-57.
[90] Thuc. 1.70.
[91] K.R. Walters, "Rhetoric as Ritual: The Semiotics of the Attic Funeral Oration," *Florilegium,* vol. 2 (1980), 2.
[92] Samons, "Democracy, Empire, and the Search for the Athenian Character," 136-137.

not need to be mentioned explicitly is inadequate. Rather, we must accept that when the Athenians described and portrayed themselves, democracy did not make the shortlist. For too long, historians have reflexively interpreted nearly every aspect of Athenian social and cultural life as reflections of democracy. This has long since crept into the popular imagination: it is practically second-nature for us all to refer to this ancient city as "democratic Athens." However, when we take the Athenians on their own terms and attempt to understand their world as they would have, we would not think first of 'democratic Athens', but rather 'pure-born, courageous, and imperial Athens.'

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Figures

Figure 1. Statue pairing of Harmodius and Aristogeiton, Kritios and Nesiotes. C. 477/6. 2nd century CE Roman copies. Marble. National Archaeological Museum in Naples.
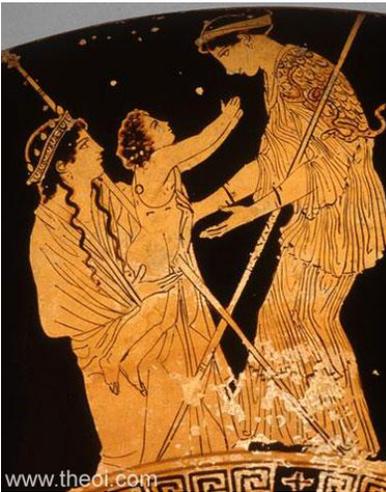

Figure 2. Codrus Painter, *The Birth of Erichthonius*, Attic Red Figure, ca. 440 BCE, 12.0 cm, Antikensammlung Berlin collection.

Figure 3. The Erechtheion, Acropolis, Athens, 421 BCE.

Figure 4. Euphiletos Painter, Panathenaic Prize amphora, black-figure terracotta, 62.2 cm, 530 BCE.
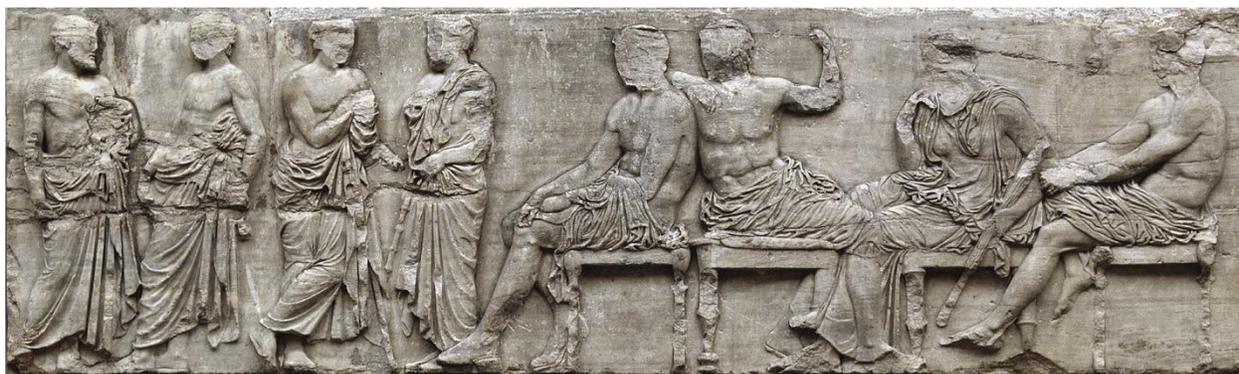
Figure 5. Parthenon, east frieze, slab IV, depicting Hermes, Dionysus, Demeter, and Ares.

Figure 6. Parthenon, east frieze, slab VI, depicting Poseidon, Apollo, Artemis, and Aphrodite.