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SENIOR THESIS APPROVAL

This Honors thesis entitled

**“An Analysis Of The Historiographical Treatment Of Athenian
Democracy”**

written by

John Thomas Ryan

and submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for completion of
the Carl Goodson Honors Program
meets the criteria for acceptance
and has been approved by the undersigned readers.

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An Analysis Of The Historiographical Treatment Of Athenian Democracy

John Thomas Ryan

The government of Athens has had an uncommon influence through time. This influence is revealed by historians and writers who have examined time and time again this single city. Athens has been critiqued and praised by these writers ever since the city-state gained a position of prominence in the Greek world. The writers were all writing from different viewpoints and backgrounds and these clearly affected the tone and purpose of their writings. The Athenian government developed as a democracy slowly over centuries. This included periods of domination by tyrants such as Cylon, Peisistratos, and Hippias. These periods were often followed by further reforms to the Athenian constitution and the progression of Athens into a democracy. Legendary Athenians Draco, Solon, and Cleisthenes were essential in the formation and application of these democratic reforms.¹ Athens was the first attempt of government by the people at that high of a level as the world had yet seen. This drew the attention of the first western historians, who were Athens' contemporaries, as well as later historians and politicians. These thinkers used Athens as an example for their own purposes, to support their own opinions or ideologies, from Herodotus to the 1800s.

The western discipline of history was introduced in the Greek world and has evolved significantly from that starting point. Herodotus is considered by many to be "the Father of History," and by others "the Father of Lies" due to the sometimes sensational nature of his histories. While there are certainly some aspects of his writings that can be easily dismissed as legend, even these give modern historians insight into the cultural views of the time.

Herodotus was born in Ionia in the 5th century B.C.E in the town of Halicarnassus on the southwestern coast of what is now Turkey. Herodotus grew up during the Persian Wars and

¹ Hornblower, Simon. *The Greek World: 479-323 BC*. London: Routledge, 2011.

recorded his *Histories*² during the Peloponnesian Wars. These wars had a massive impact on the Greek world. The Persian Wars had illustrated to the separate Greek city-states how powerful they could become due to the fact that they had been able to turn back the massive Persian armies and fleets and King Xerxes.³ The lack of a consistent outside threat to the Greeks following the Persian Wars, as well as the prominence that both Athens and Sparta had gained, led to an escalation of the rivalry among the Greek city-states. This rivalry turned into the Peloponnesian Wars, with the primary belligerents being Athens and Sparta. At this point Athens had solidified itself as one of the foremost powers in the Greek world and was a full fledged democracy. There was in Athens equality before the law and rule by the citizens through representatives.⁴

The writings of Herodotus were clearly influenced by the Homeric epics. The influence of the story driven epics is shown in the narrative structure of Herodotus's *Histories*. This structure made his works more entertaining for reading and more familiar to the people of the cities of Greece who were hearing sections of the book read aloud or reading it themselves.⁵ But this structure also received criticism from many of those historians that came after. The influence of the Homeric epics is also shown in the more unrealistic accounts and dialogues he included. There was of course no way he could have transcripts of private conversations. However, before his efforts there were no true historical works for him to rely on, therefore he had to conduct his own research. His methods were to visit the sites of the events he was writing on, to review what

² The *Histories* were an account of the Greco-Persian Wars.

³ Balcer, Jack Martin. "The Persian Wars against Greece: A Reassessment." *Historia: Zeitschrift Für Alte Geschichte* 38, no. 2 (1989): 127-43. <http://www.jstor.org.ezproxy.obu.edu:2048/stable/4436101>.

⁴ Hansen, Mogens Herman. "The Tradition of the Athenian Democracy A. D. 1750-1990." *Greece & Rome* 39, no. 1 (1992): 14-30. <http://www.jstor.org.ezproxy.obu.edu:2048/stable/643118>.

⁵ Flory, Stewart. "Who Read Herodotus' *Histories*?" *The American Journal of Philology* 101, no. 1 (1980): 12-28. doi:10.2307/294167.

stories were written on the events, and to talk to first-hand witnesses or the descendants of these men who had the stories of their ancestors. Herodotus had to rely on oral histories and traditions and on what he could observe from his own travels; what documents could be found he often could not even read himself and had to rely on others.⁶ Viewed in the face of these challenges the work of Herodotus is admirable though limited.

There were three common types of government in the known world when Herodotus was writing: democracy, oligarchy, and rule by a single person: a monarchy or tyranny. Herodotus points out the pros and cons of these forms in a dialogue from his third book. Herodotus was exposed to both Persian and Greek culture due to his Ionian hometown of Halicarnassus being under Persian control, and through the Persian Wars. Due to this exposure Herodotus is able to use a transitioning Persia to illustrate his views. He writes that some prominent Persians were debating what sort of government should be implemented following the death of King Cambyses who had left no heirs. Herodotus expounds that there were three Persians in particular who each supported one of the forms.

Otanes, Megabyzus, and Darius stood to advocate respectively for democracy, oligarchy, and monarchy. Otanes states that all monarchs eventually become arrogant and oppressive. In Otanes view, when the people rule there is universal accountability. ““For in the many is our strength.”⁷ Therefore a nation ruled by the people is stronger than a nation ruled one man or a few people. Megabyzus responds to this argument. He states that a democracy is putting the power into the hands of a mob, and ““there is nothing stupider or more arrogant than an idle

⁶ Momigliano, Arnaldo. "The Place of Herodotus in the History of Historiography." *History* 43, no. 147 (1958): 1-13. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24404038>.

⁷ Herodotus, et al. *Herodotus: the Histories: New Translation, Selections, Backgrounds, Commentaries*. Norton, 1992.

mob.”⁸ The mob is uneducated and does not know what it wants. The power should be put into the hands of the best men who will produce the best counsel. The final argument is made by Darius. In his view both a democracy and an oligarchy will lead to strife which will in turn lead to one man ending up on top. Therefore, they should all support a monarchy and save the people strife. A monarchy would avoid the hatred that arises from an oligarchy and the corruption that stems from democracy.

In the case of the Persians they chose monarchy and the persuasive arguments of Darius. The decision in favor of a monarchy made sense for the Persians due to their unique position compared to the Greeks. The Persian empire was massive, spanning multiple continents and including many diverse people groups. The absolute authority held by one man made sense in the face of the many challenges that any kind of representative government would have faced due to the sheer size and diversity of the Persian Empire. The difference between governing an empire and a city-state make it clear that the city-state was the more viable environment to attempt rule by the people. Even if the correct choice was made this did not make the Persians stronger than the Greeks. Darius desired to control Greece and invaded, but he was turned back by a decisive Greek victory at the battle of Marathon. Darius then died before he could attempt any more aggression, leaving his dream of conquering Greece for his son Xerxes.

Personally Herodotus was a supporter of democracy, and of Athens as a whole. The region of Ionia was heavily influenced by Athens and saw themselves as relatives. Herodotus was still open minded towards the ideas and designs of other cultures as well. This is shown by the dialogue above as well as the by how he treats other civilizations and cultures and records

⁸ Herodotus, et al. *Herodotus: the Histories: New Translation, Selections, Backgrounds, Commentaries*. Norton, 1992.

pieces of their history alongside that of Greece. He gives the other forms of government equal attention and recognizes the flaws and strengths of each. Herodotus's progressive nature towards government by the people is shown many times in his *Histories*, especially in book five. The democratic government of Athens was one of the first attempts of democracy and initially faced resistance just as most new ideas do, people are naturally resistant to change. When discussing the fall of the tyrants, Herodotus proclaims that "Athens really began to thrive now. It shows, not just in one way, but in every way, that equality before the law is a goodly thing."⁹ He continues to assert that this equality made them better workers and even superior than their neighbours in battle, as they were fighting for their rights and freedom as opposed to fighting for a despot.

Herodotus also criticizes tyrannies very heavily. While in the modern connotative sense a tyrant is very negative, this was not the case for Herodotus and his contemporaries. A tyrant was simply an absolute ruler of a city-state and there were many cases of benevolent tyrants who legitimately improved their cities and were considered great men. One of the most prominent benevolent tyrants was the Athenian Peisistratos. He ruled Athens through the use of force, but he made improvements to Athens' infrastructure and was a levelheaded and intelligent ruler who did not change the Athenian Constitution.¹⁰ For Herodotus however, these men were always a negative, as in his view they undermined the prosperity and safety of their own citizens as a way to keep themselves in power. This view is clearly shown by a quote from Herodotus when discussing ways that tyrants maintain their power. "These and others like them are the practices and means of preserving tyrannies, and they are wicked in every way."¹¹ Not only did Herodotus

⁹ Herodotus, et al. *Herodotus: the Histories: New Translation, Selections, Backgrounds, Commentaries*. Norton, 1992.

¹⁰ Zatta, Claudia. "Making History Mythical: The Golden Age Of Peisistratus." *Arethusa* 43, no. 1 (2010): 21-62. <http://www.jstor.org.ezproxy.obu.edu/2048/stable/44578317>.

¹¹ Ibid.

find a tyranny or a monarchy less effective but he went so far as to assign an extremely negative moral value onto this type of government.

Herodotus was to our current standards obviously flawed as a historian. He let his own personal views and what are almost assuredly tall tales influence his *Histories*. Due to these factors he has received significant criticism throughout the millennia. Among his critics is Plutarch who quite artfully, if slightly disingenuously, states “His book attracts and beguiles everyone, but like the beetle in the rose, blasphemy and slander lie beneath his smooth, delicate surface, and we must beware of unconsciously accepting his false and absurd ideas about the greatest and noblest cities and men of Greece.”¹² Plutarch wrote this critique in the first century C.E., therefore, he had centuries of progress in historiography to inform his own views. Plutarch was from Boeotia, a region which was not treated kindly by Herodotus, which was another reason for his negative view of Herodotus. The criticism of Herodotus continued with the 19th century British historian Thomas Macaulay who states in 1828 “The faults of Herodotus are the faults of a simple and imaginative mind.”¹³ This quote seems harsher than it was likely meant to be read, as Macaulay goes on to describe the complete lack of a precedent to follow when writing as a historian.

In spite of all the legitimate criticisms that he has received, I believe Herodotus is judged perhaps too harshly by modern critics. Herodotus was the first of his kind, did legitimate research, and endeavoured to convey the facts. These facts are clouded by time, exaggerations, and his personal bias. However, he established a precedent for those that came after him, and the great historians that we now recognise owe much to Herodotus’s efforts.

¹² Herodotus, et al. *Herodotus: the Histories: New Translation, Selections, Backgrounds, Commentaries*. Norton, 1992.

¹³ *Ibid.*

Where Herodotus primarily documented the events of the more distant past, specifically the Persian War, Thucydides focused on his personal experiences in the Peloponnesian War. They were contemporaries of each other and had a certain amount of rivalry between them. Thucydides wrote his History after Herodotus and there is one important distinction. Thucydides wrote about what he was living through and had witnessed first-hand. The Peloponnesian War pitted almost the entire Greek world against each other, with Athens and her allies on one side and Sparta and her allies on the other. The personal information on Thucydides is surprisingly scant considering how well known his history is. He was born and lived in the fifth century B.C.E. He was from a wealthy Athenian political family, possibly related to Cimon. Around 430 he fell victim to the plague that was devastating the embattled Athens. He survived and was able to later recount first-hand the effects and symptoms of this plague. Thucydides served for Athens during the war and was the general in charge of the Athenian defeat at Amphipolis. For this defeat he was exiled from Athens for twenty years, which was when he did the majority of his writing.¹⁴

As Thucydides came from an old and wealthy family, he naturally distrusted and did not approve of the continuing trend toward full democracy. This was because the more power that the average Athenian obtained the less power and influence the aristocracy had. Despite the widespread view of Thucydides as being anti-democracy and pro-oligarchy, that is too simple a view when more closely examined. For example, we never hear directly from Thucydides regarding his views. When discussions on the merits of political systems are brought up, they are done through speeches or dialogues of other characters, almost like a drama instead of a history.

¹⁴ Bowersock, G. W. "The Personality of Thucydides." *The Antioch Review* 25, no. 1 (1965): 135-46. doi:10.2307/4610668.

This is one way that Thucydides followed Herodotus's example by recounting a speech to convey information. It is highly unlikely that the writers would have had the speeches word for word. But they used them in such a way as to represent the views of the statesmen or of the states as a whole. Due to these mechanisms, we can only view the speeches and look for certain trends that could point us towards Thucydides actual views.

While his anti-democratic views can be observed, Thucydides can also be anti-oligarchic. His one consistent position seems to be against the division that occurred in cities between those in each camp. What Thucydides viewed as the correct course has been shown by Maurice Pope, who is one of the leading specialists in classical studies and antiquity. "Once a city was free its citizens could choose to govern themselves how they liked. In this of course the assumption is that they will agree, a city being by definition a community of citizens."¹⁵ In this view Thucydides is shown to be perhaps a bit naive, his assumption that the citizens would agree, much less that there would be a set definition of what a citizen is and that there is agreement on that concept is far fetched. Thucydides makes his stance on the divisions that were hindering the city-states clear when he states that "society became divided into camps in which no man trusted his fellow. To put an end to this, there was neither promise to be depended upon, nor oath that could command respect."¹⁵ There is also naivete apparent in Thucydides belief that the pursuit of one form of government or another is the sole source of division.

When judging Thucydides and his history it is important to view him in a similar way as Herodotus. There was no set methodology to historical writings or a board of readers to offer insights and criticisms. Thucydides did endeavor to be as clear and accurate as possible; he states

¹⁵ Pope, Maurice. "Thucydides and Democracy." *Historia: Zeitschrift Für Alte Geschichte*, vol. 37, no. 3, 1988, pp. 276–296. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/4436058.

this in the poem that starts his work, while at the same time very clearly calling out Herodotus. As the contemporary classical historian Lisa Hau describes in her book, “Thucydides insists that it is ‘Impossible’ to find reliable information to do what Herodotus did, namely write about earlier time periods.”¹⁶ Thucydides was clearly trying to set himself apart from Herodotus, the only other person who could be considered a “historian” and from the poets and prose writers of the time as well.

When looking closer at Thucydides’ views on government, it is difficult due to the lack of direct quotes from him in his writings. It is clear from certain quotes and criticisms that he dislikes extremes. In his writings Thucydides uses phrases such as “the many”¹⁷ and “the few”¹⁸ frequently. When examining the context of these phrases the tone is clearly condemnatory. Another example of Thucydides’s dislike for extremes is shown when he writes “for the blend of the few and the many proved moderate.”¹⁹ In this quote he is advocating for moderation and the way to get there. Thucydides also states that the lack of moderation was one of the chief causes of the conflict and crisis in the Greek city of Corcra. “Meanwhile the moderate part of the citizens perished between the two(extremes), either for not joining in the quarrel, or because envy would not suffer them to escape.”²⁰ Thucydides clearly values moderation and objectivity when it comes to government.

During the period Thucydides was writing, the extremes of government that he detests were to a degree represented by the two main agitators of the Peloponnesian War. Athens with its

¹⁶ Hau, Lisa Irene. "Thucydides." *In Moral History from Herodotus to Diodorus Siculus*, 194-215. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.3366/j.ctt1bh2hwv.10>.

¹⁷ Thucydides. *The History of the Peloponnesian War*. Accessed via Project Gutenberg.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

rapidly liberalising democracy and the much more conservative oligarchy and joint monarchy of Sparta show these extremes. Therefore Thucydides could be described as anti-democracy, though this was the case due to the view of how extreme Democracy was at this time. Rule of the people, as a concept, was only a few hundred years old, and it would have been even more limited throughout much of that time. The democracy of Athens had become even more liberal due to the war. Athens relied on its naval superiority in this war and this reliance had allowed for the growth in influence of the lower classes in Athens. The need for rowers on their ships had given them a position and value that they previously had not held. They used this value to gain for themselves more rights and influence. This liberalisation of Athenian democracy had further divided the political ideologies of the two sides.

Thucydides as a historian was a product of his time, but one to be admired all the same. The process of writing for historical purposes was still a very new proposition. Therefore there were of course ways which appear to the modern reader as inaccurate or ineffective. But just the same as Herodotus, he is to be admired for the efforts he made, and the precedence he established. Herodotus wrote for history, and Thucydides came after and improved on the methods.

The next historian to be observed is not necessarily a historian, and someone whose identity is not known. The importance of this writer is due solely to the nature of his one piece of writing. *The Constitution of the Athenians* was written anonymously around 420 B.C.E. This places the release of *The Constitution of the Athenians* early in the Peloponnesian War. It is important because it shows very clearly a view of the Athenian government in a time of strife when views would naturally be more severe, satirical or not. This author was for a significant

amount of time considered to be Xenophon, though most contemporary historians view this as impossible. Xenophon was a Greek writer of the 5th century B.C.E. but he was too young to realistically be considered the author. This work is still associated with Xenophon however.²¹

“The Old Oligarch” is commonly called pseudo-Xenophon due to the similar time frame and the fact that *The Constitution of the Athenians* was preserved with Xenophon’s works.

The Constitution of the Athenians was written from the viewpoint of a conservative older oligarch arguing against democracy. However, the background of the author and his actual views have been disputed. Some historians view the work as basically genuine. That it is an Oligarch that distrusts democracy and believes it an inefficient form of government, while also recognizing some merits from the individual Athenian democracy.

Other historians view the document as almost satirical. A young philosopher wrote this work as an intellectual exercise in viewing his government from another's point of view. I would take this a step further and say that the writer was attempting to undermine the conservatives in his city. This view is indicated by the fact that *The Constitution of the Athenians* was written from a conservatives point of view, yet is continually recognizing the merits of a democratic government. The writer is seemingly begrudging in this respect. The average Athenian could have read this document and taken it as proof that democracy is superior, as even an old oligarch supports it.

The writer is at face value arguing that democracies are a poor option for governing: “I do not think well of their constitution.”²² This point blank statement informs the tone of the rest of the document. However, the rest of the document is largely concerned with how well the

²¹ Mattingly, Harold B. "The Date and Purpose of the Pseudo-Xenophon Constitution of Athens." *The Classical Quarterly* 47, no. 2 (1997): 352-57. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/639672>.

²² The Old Oligarch. "The Constitution of the Athenians."

Athenians preserve and run their democracy, seemingly undermining the aforementioned statement. This seems to indicate that it was not truly a conservative that wrote the document.

Regardless of the author and his true views, he makes many arguments as to the success of the Athenian democracy. His first main point is that in the particular case of Athens, a democracy makes sense. The common people have such an important role in the wellbeing of the city due to their roles in the fleet. Whether this is as sailors in the merchant fleet or the navy, the massive amounts of dock workers, rowers, and boatswains needed means the common man has more responsibility in the wellbeing of the city. This added responsibility naturally leads to more rights and power for the common man than in other cities.

However, the wealthy classes and the aristocracy had a reason to support the continuation of the democracy. The immense sea power that Athens held had led to Athens being one of the wealthiest and most respected cities in the world. This means they needed to keep the fleets operational over everything else. Thus, as he puts it “Then there is a point which some find extraordinary, that they everywhere assign more to the worst persons, to the poor, and to the popular types than to the good men: in this very point they will be found manifestly preserving their democracy.”²³ The situation in Athens was mutually beneficial for the aristocracy and wealthy classes as well as for the common classes. The common man had more rights and freedoms in Athens than he would in any other city of the day. And the upper classes had comparable or greater wealth and prestige than those of the cities and countries near them.

The Athenians also supported democracy in those cities that they had control of or received tribute from. This support helped keep those cities in check due to the fact that the

²³ The Old Oligarch. “The Constitution of the Athenians.”

common person in those cities viewed Athens in a favourable light. They saw Athens involvement in their cities as the reason for their greater rights and freedoms. The upper classes were naturally hostile to Athens in many cases as they were the ones that paid the tribute and had to rule according to Athens' pleasure. This made the common people the natural ally for Athens. As the Oligarch puts it, "they disfranchise the aristocrats, take away their money, expel and kill them, whereas they promote the interests of the lower class."²⁴ This loyalty they gained from promoting the interests of the lower class helped keep the tribute pouring in.

What is known about the background of *The Constitution of the Athenians* is limited. It was written anonymously in the late fifth century B.C.E. from the viewpoint of an old conservative, but the document itself does not bare the typical views of someone from this group. The document operates as if it is a criticism of democracy that only begrudgingly admits that the Athenians do an excellent job of preserving and operating their democracy. However, the document reads like it supports democracy as an idea, just not the Athenian one in particular.

The end of the Peloponnesian War came with the razing of Athens' long walls and the triumphal entry into the port of Piraeus and Athens proper by the Spartan hero Lysander.²⁵ With this defeat, the Athenian democracy was also ended for a time. The Spartans set up an oligarchic council of thirty to govern Athens. However, the democrats began a civil war with the oligarchs and within a year the Spartan king Pausanias intervened and restored democracy to a much reduced Athens that would be under the sway of larger empires for the rest of its history.²⁶

²⁴ The Old Oligarch. "The Constitution of the Athenians."

²⁵ Munro, J. A. R. "The End of the Peloponnesian War." *The Classical Quarterly* 31, no. 1 (1937): 32-38. <http://www.jstor.org.ezproxy.obu.edu:2048/stable/637355>.

²⁶ Lendering, Jona. "Aftermath." *Livius*. Accessed April 21, 2019. <https://www.livius.org/articles/concept/peloponnesian-war/aftermath/>.

The next historian to concern himself heavily with Greek democracy was the Hellenistic Greek Polybius. While Polybius mainly concerned himself with Roman history, his views concerning Athenian Democracy can be gathered from his writings. His views on history itself are also worth discussing as they provide Polybius' motivations and can also be kept in mind when considering the motivations of other historians.

Polybius was born a Greek but had a consistent association with the Romans for the majority of his life. Like many of the ancient historians there is actually not much known about their own personal histories. Polybius was born into the Achaean League and it is believed that he served in their military. He ended up in Rome as a political detainee as a result of Roman expansion into the Greek territories. While in Rome he appeared to have made very positive connections with prominent Romans, including the general Scipio. This friendship allowed him to travel with the Roman military, and gave him a position to negotiate with the Romans for the Achaeans and other Greeks after their defeat at the hands of the Romans. This position allowed him to assume a sort of celebrity in Greece at the time, as they viewed him as the source of their salvation in the face of the victorious Romans.²⁷

Polybius did not have the highest view of the Athenian Constitution. He attributed the success of Athens to the leaders of the city and not to the structure of the government. To contrast, Polybius had a very high view of the constitutions of Sparta, Mantinea, Crete, and Carthage.²⁸ These cities all had varying levels of what would be considered limited republics. These governments and constitutions that Polybius was complimenting were much more similar in design to the Roman form of government at the time. This could be one of the reasons that

²⁷ Walbank, Frank W. "Polybius." *Encyclopædia Britannica*. December 16, 2016. Accessed April 21, 2019. <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Polybius>.

²⁸ Polybius, et al. *The Histories*. Pdf. William Heinemann Ltd, 1922.

Polybius was not as fond of the Athenian constitution and democracy. He had witnessed the superiority of Rome over his own city and over Carthage, therefore it stands to reason he would more highly value that form of government.

Polybius was very complimentary of individual Athenians. He compared the city and government of Athens to a ship without a commander.²⁹ Therefore, at a time when Athens had a man of extraordinary character and abilities to lead, they were very impressive. Polybius singled out Themistokles as one of these men. I find it ironic that the man that Polybius singles out as a hero of Athens was for a period exiled by his own people through the process of ostracism. This was a unique process of Athens in which a dangerous political leader could be exiled from Athens for a ten year period.³⁰ Themistokles' ostracism could be taken as an argument to support Polybius' description of Athens. Even when they had a capable commander they exiled him, only to be adrift again.³¹

Polybius had a very distinct view about the more democratic forms of governing that he made clear in his writings. He compared the Constitution of the Athenians to mob rule:

Therefore I need say no more about this constitution(that of Athens) or that of Thebes, states in which everything is managed by the uncurbed impulse of a mob in the one case exceptionally headstrong and ill-tempered and in the other brought up in an atmosphere of violence and passion.³²

Polybius seems to believe that the "high qualities of the people and their leaders" were the only thing keeping Athens from descending into chaos as a result of the "uncurbed impulse of a mob."

²⁹ Polybius, et al. *The Histories*. Pdf. William Heinemann Ltd, 1922.

³⁰ Raubitschek, Antony E. "OSTRACISM." *Archaeology* 1, no. 2 (1948): 79-82.
<http://www.jstor.org.ezproxy.obu.edu:2048/stable/41662491>.

³¹ Polybius, et al. *The Histories*. Pdf. William Heinemann Ltd, 1922

³² *Ibid.*

³³ Polybius has one of the more clearly ascertained views of Athenian democracy of the examined historians, and it's also one of the most severe criticisms.

Polybius is a relevant man to examine due to his views concerning history itself and the role that it should play. It is almost difficult to tell whether he even enjoys his pursuit of history at all. One of his more famous quotes certainly calls this into question, with him stating that others "have insisted that the soundest education and training for political activity is the study of history, and that the surest and indeed the only way to learn how to bear bravely the vicissitudes of fortune is to recall the disasters of others."³⁴ Polybius certainly took this view to heart and was a student of history his whole life and did seem to use it to his benefit professionally.

Following the Roman era there was a significant period where there was essentially no new histories written. The known world had descended into what was known as the Dark Ages or the Medieval Era; this lasted roughly from the fifth century to the fifteenth century C.E.³⁵ During this period there was a dearth of new historical works on the classical period. What new literature was produced during this time was primarily concerned with the church, which was also the prime source of literacy during this time.

The study of Greek history found a resurgence in the British Empire in the eighteenth century. The focus was due to the political situation that these historians found themselves in. The British Empire was at the height of its power and importance, and politics have always influenced what is studied. However, the monarchy was in a state of borderline bankruptcy.³⁶ The

³³ Polybius, et al. *The Histories*. Pdf. William Heinemann Ltd, 1922.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Nelson, Janet L. "The Dark Ages." *History Workshop Journal*, no. 63 (2007): 191-201. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25472909>.

³⁶ Goldstone, Jack A. "The Origins of the English Revolution: A Demographic Approach." *The Journal of Economic History* 45, no. 2 (1985): 454-58. <http://www.jstor.org.ezproxy.obu.edu:2048/stable/2121719>.

crown had been selling off royal land and land from the monasteries to raise capital. This led to a new set of British people becoming landowners, and they gained the prominence and prestige that came with it.³⁷ This helped lead to the English Revolution, which pitted the supporters of the Crown with those of the Parliament. The Parliament was able to succeed and would eventually implement a constitutional monarchy.³⁸ These British historians were dealing with the aftermath of this revolution and the debate on how much power the monarch should have. Therefore these historians were focusing on what could be gained from studying the Greek city-states, specifically Athens and Sparta. Athens was studied due to the fact that it was a massive and very wealthy empire based on naval superiority. When studying Athens, the clear rival in multiple ways is Sparta. Sparta gave these historians a government to compare Athen's radical democracy to. While these historians were for the most part critical of Athenian democracy due to their own monarchical context, they were complimentary of their ability to run an empire.

The first British historian of note is John Potter. In 1697 he released his book *Antiquities of Greece*. Potter held a prestigious position within British society; he was the Archbishop of Canterbury.³⁹ His book was not written as a criticism of anything the Greeks had done but as a purely expository work. Potter was able to maintain an admirably detached point of view in his tone. This detachment is what would have been expected from a clergyman. Despite this attempt at a clinical tone, I believe some of his views can be gleaned from his description of the founding of Athenian democracy.

³⁷ Hill, Christopher. "Land in the English Revolution." *Science & Society* 13, no. 1 (1948): 22-49. <http://www.jstor.org.ezproxy.obu.edu:2048/stable/40399929>.

³⁸ "Online Library of Liberty." *The English Revolution - Online Library of Liberty*. Accessed April 21, 2019. <https://oll.libertyfund.org/groups/68>.

³⁹ Ataç, C. Akça. "Imperial Lessons From Athens And Sparta: Eighteenth-century British Histories Of Ancient Greece." *History of Political Thought* 27, no. 4 (2006): 642-60. <http://www.jstor.org.ezproxy.obu.edu:2048/stable/26222113>.

Potter is very complimentary of the individual Athenians who helped to establish the Democracy. When describing Theseus he ascribes to him the status of being the first “who parted with the Regal power.”⁴⁰ Potter does in this case seem to be complimenting the move of Theseus to make Athens more democratic and less of a monarchy. However, in the context of the chapter, this move was done as perhaps the only option to maintain order and power in the midst of the large influx of foreigners that Theseus had invited in order to grow and better the state.

He also seems to have a high opinion of the legendary and possibly mythical Codrus, the final Athenian to carry the title of king. Codrus sacrificed himself during a war with the Spartans. He let himself be killed to fulfill the prophecy that the winner of the war would be the nation that lost a king.¹⁰ From this point on the Athenian rulers would be more heavily subject to the people. Potter writes this section in a rather complimentary tone as well, indicating that perhaps he was not as fervently in favor of a monarchy as some of his contemporaries. Potter still clearly had monarchical leanings though.

While he describes the structure and setup of the Athenian government matter of factly, Potter’s choice of words can be telling. He states that the power and decisions of Athens were placed in the hands of the people. Potter also describes the establishment of councils to keep the “dangerous” nature of the people in check. He explains this was in response to demagogues that could deceive the “giddy and unthinking multitude”¹⁰ into supporting things that were not in the actual best interests of the state. The ability to resist the fickle moods of the people was something that the constitutional monarchy of Great Britain had achieved.

⁴⁰ Potter, John. *Antiquities of Greece*. Accessed via Boston Public Library’s Internet Archive.

The most prominent writer after John Potter was Temple Stanyan. Stanyan wrote his *Grecian History* in 1707 and dominated the field for the first half of the century. Stanyan's methods and writing were not as professional as others and therefore he has received some criticism throughout the years.⁴¹ Stanyan has been labeled as pro-Spartan since he wrote *Grecian History*; however, this is too simple an explanation. He was only pro-Spartan because he was anti-Athenian. His stance on democracy becomes clear when reading his work.

Stanyan describes the temper of the Athenians as "delicate" and "capricious."⁴² Using this as the reason that Athens' laws were so different from those of other Greek states, specifically Sparta's. He then recounts the story of Pisistratus to illustrate his perception of the Athenian people. He describes how Pisistratus was able to manipulate the people into a stream of decisions that elevated himself into a position of massive power. Pisistratus faked an attack on himself and used this apparent victimization to gain for himself a bodyguard. Pisistratus continued to add to the number of men serving him and eventually took possession of the castle. He was then able to make himself tyrant over Athens.

At another point, Stanyan describes how the rise of the tyrant Cylon and his subsequent murder left Athens in a period of calamities and factions. He states that Athens was able to find that true liberty "consists in the due exercise of justice and reason."⁴³ Of course, the Athenians chose Draco to establish the laws which did not turn out so well for them. His laws and punishments have been immortalized by his name becoming the basis for the term draconian.

⁴¹ Ataç, C. Akça. "Imperial Lessons From Athens And Sparta: Eighteenth-century British Histories Of Ancient Greece." *History of Political Thought* 27, no. 4 (2006): 642-60. <http://www.jstor.org.ezproxy.obu.edu:2048/stable/26222113>.

⁴² Stanyan, Temple, 1677?-1752. *The Grecian History: From the Original of Greece ... [to the Death of Philip of Macedon]*. The 2d ed. rev. and enlarg'd. London: J. and R. Tonson, 1739. Accessed via the HathiTrust Digital Library

⁴³ *Ibid.*

Stanyan's reason for writing was also different from other historians. When discussing his own sources and the reasons these people had to attempt to record their doings, he makes it clear. He describes the chief and initial reason for recording history to be that of "Desire of Glory."⁴⁴ While Stanyan does not claim this desire for himself, his writing did gain him some fame in his own time and has kept his name spoken in certain circles to the present day. In his preface, Stanyan laments the lack of an order of scholars in the Greek world to more accurately record their history. He references the priests of Egypt, the Magi of Persia, and the pontiffs of Rome of which there was no corresponding group in the Greek world. The closest being the poets who were of course not reliable for historical accuracy. Stanyan explains that he does his best, especially in reference to numbers, to arrive at a reasonable figure.⁴⁵

In the latter part of the century one of the primary names in Greek history was William Mitford. Mitford was a gentleman scholar who wrote his *History of Greece* starting in 1784. He had inherited his wealth and used it to live a relaxed country life and served in the British Parliament.⁴⁶ Like Stanyan, Mitford also had a reputation of being unfair to the Athenians due to his background of strongly supporting a monarchical form of government and from his Tory political leanings.

One of the ways that Athens was able to maintain its hegemony over dependent cities was to promote democracy in them. Mitford described that the dependent cities would, with Athenian support, banish or otherwise demote the wealthy and the aristocrats. Mitford elaborates

⁴⁴ Stanyan, Temple, 1677?-1752. *The Grecian History: From the Original of Greece ... [to the Death of Philip of Macedon]*. The 2d ed. rev. and enlarg'd. London: J. and R. Tonson, 1739. Accessed via the HathiTrust Digital Library

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Cooper, Kenneth S. "Is Mitford's History That Bad?" *Social Science* 43, no. 2 (1968): 100-05. <http://www.jstor.org.ezproxy.obu.edu:2048/stable/41885283>.

that “the partisans of democracy, raised to power and riches under the patronage of Athens became thus, through interest, attached to Athens”⁴⁷ Why Mitford decries this process, calling it “wretched,”¹² I do not understand. When it compares to the relative amount of liberty left for the subjugated peoples, it must have been greater than those dependents of his British Empire, who appointed rulers or masters from Britain and not from the local populace.

When discussing the merits of democracy Mitford explicitly states that it is “not only the most capricious, but the most selfish”⁴⁸ form of government, which is not exactly a ringing endorsement. He even describes the Athenians as a people in a negative sense:

The Athenians were jealous in the highest degree of communicating the rights of Athenian citizens; and the policy employed, however in the existing circumstances necessary, to hold such extensive and populous territories under subjection to one little state, consisting of less than thirty thousand families, was execrable.⁴⁹

This strong language clearly illustrates that Mitford allowed his feelings to influence his writings. In his era this was more common than currently, or at the least it is more veiled in this century. This is not to say that his works are to be ignored as irrelevant. Just as Herodotus used dialogues and speeches, Mitford’s biases do not discount his works. The same can be said of Mitford’s and Stanyan’s personal views certainly affected their writings, but their works can still very instructive and useful.

John Gillies is the final writer from this region and time period to be examined. The Scottish historian first published his two volume work in 1786. Gillies was perhaps the most anti-democratic of the examined writers from this period. However, his actual arguments in the support of empire building and its maintenance seem to support Athens.

⁴⁷ Mitford, William. *History of Greece*. Accessed via Boston Public Library’s Internet Archive.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

The anti-Athenian sentiment from Gillies starts at the very beginning of his work, in the preface. In his opening address to his King he states very clearly his views:

The history of Greece exposes the dangerous turbulence of Democracy, and arraigns the despotism of tyrants. By describing the incurable evils inherent in every form of Republican policy, it evinces the inestimable benefits, resulting to liberty itself from the dominion of lawful hereditary Kings, and the steady operation of well-regulated Monarchy.⁵⁰

As already addressed with Mitford and Stanyan, this does not preclude Gillies' works from being helpful to study, but it does inform the reader to be aware of the historians' motives. He clearly believes that a Monarchy is the best option for a free people.

Gillies relates the example of the fate of the people of the city of Mitylene. Some of the leading men of the city, mainly aristocrats, had rebelled against Athenian rule. They were quickly subdued and the fate of these rebels was left for the people of Athens to decide. The demagogue Cleon within a day stirred up the Athenians and they sentenced all the citizens of Mitylene to death and the women and children to servitude. Just the next day the Athenians began to regret their judgement and brought the case again before the people where they decided only the rebels themselves should receive death.⁵¹ Gillies uses this occurrence to prove the unreliability of leaving decisions in the hands of a populace as a whole.

However, Gillies compliments Democracy several times in his work. One of these compliments comes when he was discussing the Greek people of Sicily, specifically in their resistance to the local powerhouse, Syracuse. He describes that their democratic backgrounds

⁵⁰ Gillies, John. *The history of ancient Greece : its colonies and conquests; from the earliest accounts till the division of the Macedonian empire in the East. Including the history of literature, philosophy, and the fine arts.* London : T. Cadell and W. Davies, 1820. Accessed via the HathiTrust Digital Library.

⁵¹ Gillies, John. *The history of ancient Greece : its colonies and conquests; from the earliest accounts till the division of the Macedonian empire in the East. Including the history of literature, philosophy, and the fine arts.* London : T. Cadell and W. Davies, 1820. Accessed via the HathiTrust Digital Library.

allowed them a “peculiar advantage.”⁵² Gillies describes how their form of government allows them the widest scope to exercise individual talents. He seems to indicate that great men are better able to show their greatness and hold a greater sway over the fates of their cities in a democracy. This a view that seems to be very common among these historians; they condemn the form of government, while admiring the great men that come from democracies.

Gillies also seems to contradict his negative stance on democracy when describing how Athens was able to achieve a position of greatness in the Greek world. He states that Athens “became incomparably greater after the re-establishment of democracy.”⁵³ Gillies recognizes that Athens was able to achieve a position of hegemony over a vast portion of the Greek world thanks to this change. He follows this admission by stating that the advantage that liberty granted the people of Athens was the distinguishing factor in their rise, even as Gillies refers to democracy as liberty in its “lowest form.”⁵⁴

The resurgence of Greek history in Great Britain in the 17th and 18th centuries cannot be laid solely at the feet of any one reason. However, the prime reasons for this revival of interest must be the comparisons that these historians were drawing between the empires of Athens and Great Britain as well as examining who held the power in these successful empires. Given that both of these empires were able to establish themselves largely on the superiority of their respective navies, these comparisons can be understood.

Athenian democracy has had an influence in more than just academic circles. The founding fathers of the United States of America had an awareness of the legacy of liberty and

⁵² Gillies, John. *The history of ancient Greece : its colonies and conquests; from the earliest accounts till the division of the Macedonian empire in the East. Including the history of literature, philosophy, and the fine arts.* London : T. Cadell and W. Davies, 1820. Accessed via the HathiTrust Digital Library.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

government left by the people of Athens. Though these men had perhaps a skewed or unrealistic picture of this democracy, Athens was referenced by these men as a model many times, both positively and negatively, sometimes from the same author. These men were operating from a drastically different point of view than the British historians; they were arguing against what they viewed as the unfair powers that a monarchy held over the people. This view is clearly visible in their writings.

James Madison and Alexander Hamilton were two of the heaviest referencers of Athens, especially in their Federalist Papers. These two men, along with John Jay, wrote a series of essays concurrent with the writing of the American Constitution and the forming of the United States form of government. These men wrote under the pseudonym Publius and were explaining their support for the ratification of the new Constitution.

Some of the issues the states had with the proposed constitution revolved around the amount of authority that the federal government would gain over the individual states. James Madison mentions the history of Athens and her membership in the Amphictyonic league as an example of the necessity of having a strong central authority with legitimate power for the States long term well being.⁵⁵

The Amphictyonic league was a natural example for these men to look towards in their quest for a strong nation. The membership of Athens, with her government of the people, must have drawn the attention of these men, given their more negative disposition towards anything resembling a monarchical government. The Amphictyonic league headquartered in Delphi was a rather loose confederation of Greek city states based primarily on religious similarities and was

⁵⁵ Bonner, Robert J., and Gertrude Smith. "Administration of Justice in the Delphic Amphictyony." *Classical Philology* 38, no. 1 (1943): 1-12. <http://www.jstor.org.ezproxy.obu.edu:2048/stable/264125>.

an attempt to promote peace within its members. The authority of this league was in action very limited. In smaller cases the member states seem to have respected the will of the league. For example, after the battle of Plataea, a monument was erected, and the Spartan general Pausanias had the inscription written so as to give all of the glory and responsibility to himself and his own state. The other members of the league of course protested and the inscription was redone to more equitably give credit to all the states involved in the battle.⁵⁶ However, the league was obviously limited in its power as both Athens and Sparta were members of the league heading into the Peloponnesian war.

When discussing the importance of the central government having significant power, Madison states “It happened but too often that the Deputies of the strongest Cities awed and corrupted those of the weaker, and that Judgment went in favor of the most powerful party.”⁵⁷ Madison is illustrating the dangers associated with a weak central government. He continues this argument by referencing how this weakness made Greece as a whole, not just the individual city states, vulnerable to domination. Madison gives two specific examples “Greece was the victim of Philip. If her confederation had been stricter, & been persevered in, she would never have yielded to Macedon, and might have proved a barrier to the vast projects of Rome.”⁵⁸ In Madison’s mind the safety and liberty of all the states was dependant on establishing a strong central government to protect the states from themselves and from outside threats. Madison further illustrates this argument when he states, “The Execution of the Amphictyonic powers was

⁵⁶ Bonner, Robert J., and Gertrude Smith. "Administration of Justice in the Delphic Amphictyony." *Classical Philology* 38, no. 1 (1943): 1-12. <http://www.jstor.org.ezproxy.obu.edu:2048/stable/264125>.

⁵⁷ Madison, James “Notes on Ancient and Modern Confederacies, [April–June?] 1786,” Founders Online, National Archives, version of January 18, 2019, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Madison/01-09-02-0001>. [Original source: *The Papers of James Madison*, vol. 9, 9 April 1786–24 May 1787 and supplement 1781–1784, ed. Robert A. Rutland and William M. E. Rachal. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1975, pp. 3–23.]

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

very different from the Theory. It did not restrain the parties from warring agst. each other. Athens & Sparta were members during their conflicts.”⁵⁹ Madison seems to be worried that a weaker central government would lead to the stronger American states warring with each other, much as the stronger Greek city states did, specifically Athens and Sparta.

James Madison also looks to the Greek world and Athens in particular to show how they had learned from the past. Madison describes how throughout the history of Athens there were individual citizens that were the primary lawmakers for the state. Madison references Draco, Solon, and also Lycurgus of Sparta. While he is not necessarily critical of these men, as he explains that to differing extents they were operating with the will of the people behind them, he explains that Draco was entrusted to reform the laws of Athens with absolute authority. And, Solon was almost compelled by the people to refine them further.⁶⁰

Madison states that “If these lessons teach us, on one hand, to admire the improvement made by America on the ancient mode of preparing and establishing regular plans of government; they serve not less on the other, to admonish us of the hazards and difficulties incident to such experiments, and of the great imprudence of unnecessarily multiplying them.”⁶¹ Madison makes it clear that having more than one person in charge of forming a government is a positive development over the methods employed in Athens. The influence that should be taken to the level of the people as a whole should be limited, as Madison writes in relation to Solon’s

⁵⁹ Madison, James “Notes on Ancient and Modern Confederacies, [April–June?] 1786,” Founders Online, National Archives, version of January 18, 2019, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Madison/01-09-02-0001>. [Original source: The Papers of James Madison, vol. 9, 9 April 1786–24 May 1787 and supplement 1781–1784, ed. Robert A. Rutland and William M. E. Rachal. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1975, pp. 3–23.]

⁶⁰ Madison, James. “The Federalist Number 38, [12 January] 1788,” Founders Online, National Archives, version of January 18, 2019, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Madison/01-10-02-0228>. [Original source: The Papers of James Madison, vol. 10, 27 May 1787–3 March 1788, ed. Robert A. Rutland, Charles F. Hobson, William M. E. Rachal, and Frederika J. Teute. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1977, pp. 365–372.]

⁶¹ Ibid.

reforms: “Solon... confessed that he had not given to his countrymen the government best suited to their happiness, but most tolerable to their prejudices.”⁶² Even in this case the volatile will of the people as a whole had kept Solon from forming the best form of government he could, but instead the best form that the people would accept.

The other primary writer of the Federalist Papers and claimant to the name of Publius was Alexander Hamilton. Hamilton also referenced the government of the Greeks in his analysis of and support for the new constitution of the United States. These two men were arguing for the same cause and therefore there are certainly many similarities in the writings of Hamilton and Madison, though there are differences as well.

Hamilton’s relevance also extends to essays he published, titled “The Continentalist.” These were written earlier in the decade than the Federalist Papers; the American Revolutionary War was being fought at the time of the release. These essays have many of the same arguments as the Federalist Papers but seem to be a less developed form of them. The differences are due to the time that Hamilton had to develop his ideas and arguments, and the more urgent tone due to the fact that “The Continentalist” was written during the war.

In “The Continentalist” Hamilton briefly mentions the Amphictyonic League and its relevance to the states and their Revolutionary War and its aftermath:

When the cities were not engaged in foreign wars, they were at perpetual variance among themselves. Sparta and Athens contended twenty-seven years for the precedence, or rather dominion of Greece, till the former made herself mistress of the whole; and till in subsequent struggles, having had recourse to the pernicious expedient of calling in the aid

⁶² Madison, James. “The Federalist Number 38, [12 January] 1788,” Founders Online, National Archives, version of January 18, 2019, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Madison/01-10-02-0228>. [Original source: The Papers of James Madison, vol. 10, 27 May 1787–3 March 1788, ed. Robert A. Rutland, Charles F. Hobson, William M. E. Rachal, and Frederika J. Teute. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1977, pp. 365–372.]

of foreign enemies; the Macedonians first, and afterwards the Romans became their masters.⁶³

The American colonies were at that time engaged in a foreign war. Here Hamilton shows himself either to be an optimist or at the least someone who is prepared for any outcome as he is preparing for the states in the scenario of a successful outcome to the Revolutionary War. Hamilton is clearly worried that in the case of victory the states will turn on each other. There would be continual strife between the states themselves, much as there was between the city states of Greece, even to the point of the states allying themselves with foreign powers to overcome their neighboring states.

One of the areas in the Federalist Papers that Hamilton and Madison are in very close agreement is in the form and function of the Amphictyonic League of the Greeks. Hamilton observes that the League should be used in an analogous way to the structure of the confederation of the states of the time of his writing. He comments on the role of the League and its stated powers when he states that:

In theory and upon paper, this apparatus of powers, seems amply sufficient for all general purposes. In several material instances, they exceed the powers enumerated in the articles of confederation. The Amphictyons had in their hands the superstition of the times, one of the principal engines by which government was then maintained; they had declared authority to use coercion against refractory cities, and were bound by oath to exert this authority on the necessary occasions.⁶⁴

⁶³ Hamilton, Alexander. "The Continentalist No. II, [19 July 1781]," Founders Online, National Archives, version of January 18, 2019, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Hamilton/01-02-02-1181>. [Original source: The Papers of Alexander Hamilton, vol. 2, 1779–1781, ed. Harold C. Syrett. New York: Columbia University Press, 1961, pp. 654–657.]

⁶⁴ Hamilton, Alexander. "The Federalist No. 18, [7 December 1787]," Founders Online, National Archives, version of January 18, 2019, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Hamilton/01-04-02-0175>. [Original source: The Papers of Alexander Hamilton, vol. 4, January 1787–May 1788, ed. Harold C. Syrett. New York: Columbia University Press, 1962, pp. 377–384.]

However, just like Madison, Hamilton had problems with the Amphictyonic League. The league in operation was continually dominated by the stronger members of the council. “The smaller members, though entitled by the theory of their system, to revolve in equal pride and majesty around the common center, had become in fact, satellites of the orbs of primary magnitude.”⁶⁵ Hamilton was worried about the possibility of this happening in the United States, one of the reasons he supported the new constitution.

Hamilton endeavored to keep the American colonies from encountering the same fate as one of the most celebrated governments in history, that of Athens. He makes his point that not only a strong central government is vital in keeping the peace of the states, but also that there should be checks to the will of the people. “Their mutual jealousies, fears, hatreds and injuries ended in the celebrated Peloponnesian war; which itself ended in the ruin and slavery of the Athenians, who had begun it.”⁶⁶ The rivalry between Athens and Sparta was based largely around their vastly different forms of government. Hamilton was desperate to keep anything resembling the strife and jealousy that was present in the Amphictyonic League from having a place in the United States.

When discussing the danger that the people could pose to themselves, Hamilton again references the example that Athens can offer. Specifically in times of distress or disagreement in the state, the will of the people should not be immediately trusted. Hamilton writes:

In these critical moments, how salutary will be the interference of some temperate and respectable body of citizens, in order to check the misguided career, and to suspend the blow meditated by the people against themselves, until reason, justice and truth, can regain their authority over the public mind? What bitter anguish would not the people of

⁶⁵ Hamilton, Alexander. “The Federalist No. 18, [7 December 1787],” Founders Online, National Archives, version of January 18, 2019, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Hamilton/01-04-02-0175>. [Original source: The Papers of Alexander Hamilton, vol. 4, January 1787–May 1788, ed. Harold C. Syrett. New York: Columbia University Press, 1962, pp. 377–384.]

⁶⁶ Ibid.

Athens have often escaped, if their government had contained so provident a safeguard against the tyranny of their own passions?⁶⁷

Hamilton clearly believes that having a more select group with authority over the people as a whole will be for the benefit of the state as a whole and for the people themselves. While this was to an extent already in place under The Articles of Confederation, the amount of authority possessed was not believed sufficient by many of the Founding Fathers.

The adversaries of those who supported a strong central government with some form of council to keep the will of the people in check claimed that such an institution must in time become a “tyrannical aristocracy.”⁶⁸ Hamilton of course had a response to this argument, and he referenced how even the more pure democracies of Greece had elected councils of some sort. He also states “that liberty may be endangered by the abuses of liberty, as well as by the abuses of power; that there are numerous instances of the former as well as of the latter; and that the former rather than the latter is apparently most to be apprehended by the United States.”⁶⁹ Hamilton is clearly afraid of the excesses and emotional response that would be the result of the people having too much power without any checks, and that the result would be akin to that which led to the demise of Athenian glory.

The Federalist Papers were not the only place that these early American leaders can be found to reference the governments of ancient Greece and Athens in particular, and their focus on the importance of liberty in a state. This subject also comes up in their personal letters. John

⁶⁷ Hamilton, Alexander. “The Federalist No. 63, [1 March 1788],” Founders Online, National Archives, version of January 18, 2019, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Hamilton/01-04-02-0213>. [Original source: The Papers of Alexander Hamilton, vol. 4, January 1787–May 1788, ed. Harold C. Syrett. New York: Columbia University Press, 1962, pp. 561–569.]

⁶⁸ Hamilton, Alexander. “The Federalist No. 63, [1 March 1788],” Founders Online, National Archives, version of January 18, 2019, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Hamilton/01-04-02-0213>. [Original source: The Papers of Alexander Hamilton, vol. 4, January 1787–May 1788, ed. Harold C. Syrett. New York: Columbia University Press, 1962, pp. 561–569.]

⁶⁹ Ibid.

Adams was especially prolific in such correspondence, with Thomas Jefferson also being relevant.

Jefferson in particular corresponded with Adamantios Coray, a prominent Greek writer and thinker. Coray was a major player in the Greek war of independence from the Ottomans. Jefferson was corresponding with him in relation to the process of setting up a new government in Greece, a process Jefferson had been through a few decades earlier in the United States.⁷⁰

Jefferson references the necessary differences between the ancient governments of the Greek city states and the governments of the United States and the new Greek government. He states that the people of the city of Athens made the laws for the entirety of the lands subject to Athens, and the “military monks” ruled over the laboring classes, subjecting them to “abject slavery.”⁷¹ Jefferson argues that those forms of government are unsuited to the modern age. He states that:

the equal rights of man, and the happiness of every individual are now acknowledged to be the only legitimate objects of government. modern times have the signal advantage too of having discovered the only device by which these rights can be secured, to wit, government by the people acting, not in person, but by representatives, chosen by themselves, that is to say, by every man of ripe years and sane mind, who either contributes by his purse or person, to the support of his country.⁷²

Jefferson clearly shows his views in multiple areas in this short section. Jefferson was clearly against the Athenian and Spartan forms of government. This sets him apart from those men previously examined and from John Adams as well in that Jefferson seemingly does not hold any affection for the legacy of Athens.

⁷⁰ Jefferson, Thomas. “From Thomas Jefferson to Adamantios Coray, 31 October 1823,” Founders Online, National Archives, version of January 18, 2019, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Jefferson/98-01-02-3837>.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Ibid.

Jefferson also reveals, though there was no doubt of anything else, that he holds a representative form of government to be much superior than any other kind. He further elaborates to Coray the dangers of power being given to those who have not been appointed by the people themselves. Jefferson states that “hereditary bodies, on the contrary, always existing, always on the watch for their own aggrandisement, profit of every opportunity of advancing the privileges of their order, and of encroaching on the rights of the people.”⁷³ He is clearly of the mind that the will of the people should be valued over any individual’s will or of any particular group. That the people as a whole are the only ones who will not eventually turn the procedures of the government to their own benefit. The final thought of Jefferson’s from the earlier quotation is an interesting point to observe. Those who are eligible to choose representatives are those “who either contributes by his purse or person, to the support of his country.”⁷⁴ He seemed very clear that those who should have the right to choose those who govern the people should be those who offer something to the state.

John Adams wrote even more letters than Jefferson concerning the state of his country and her government and frequently references the ancient states which are valuable to be examined. John Adams was particularly complimentary of Athens and Rome in multiple ways. Adams even wrote to Congress to recommend following the examples of Athens and Rome not only in government but in other facets as well. He describes them as “admirable models” that “shew the United States the Importance to their Liberty, Prosperity and Glory of an early Attention to the subject of Eloquence and Language.”⁷⁵ Here Adams was concerned with

⁷³ Jefferson, Thomas. “From Thomas Jefferson to Adamantios Coray, 31 October 1823,” Founders Online, National Archives, version of January 18, 2019, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Jefferson/98-01-02-3837>.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Adams, John. “From John Adams to the President of Congress, No. 6, 5 September 1780,” Founders Online, National Archives, version of January 18, 2019,

improving upon the handle of the English language that Americans would have, specifically those in leadership positions. Adams holds that the better speakers that are present in the state the better hold of liberty there will be. He states “The Constitutions of all the States in the Union are so democratical that Eloquence will become the Instrument for recommending Men to their fellow Citizens, and the principal means of Advancement, through the various Ranks and Offices of Society.”⁷⁶ Adams believed that this was one skill that could be fostered that would be available for all Americans and would enhance the unity of the States.

Adams also was very positive toward the governments of Athens and Rome. Adams was strongly in favor of the more republican forms of government, those forms which put the power in the hands of the people, and these were the two most successful examples of this. He made no qualms with proclaiming his belief in the superiority of republicanism; this is made clear in one of his letters. Adams corresponded with the Marquis De Lafayette, who was the leading French official in America, and he was very direct when he wrote:

I have the Honour, and the Consolation to be a Republican on Principle. That is to Say, I esteem that Form of Government, the best, of which human Nature is capable. Almost every Thing that is estimable in civil Life, has originated under Such Governments. Two Republican Towns, Athens and Rome, have done more honour to our Species, than all the rest of it. A new Country, can be planted only by Such a Government.⁷⁷

Adams was clear in his estimation of which form of government was the best, and Athens was one of his two examples. Adams was also aware who he was writing to, as he proclaimed his

<https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Adams/06-10-02-0067>. [Original source: The Adams Papers, Papers of John Adams, vol. 10, July 1780–December 1780, ed. Gregg L. Lint and Richard Alan Ryerson. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996, pp. 127–130.]

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Adams, John. “From John Adams to the Marquis de Lafayette, 21 May 1782,” Founders Online, National Archives, version of January 18, 2019, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Adams/06-13-02-0030>. [Original source: The Adams Papers, Papers of John Adams, vol. 13, May–October 1782, ed. Gregg L. Lint, C. James Taylor, Margaret A. Hogan, Jessie May Rodrique, Mary T. Claffey, and Hobson Woodward. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006, pp. 65–68.]

support for a few of the monarchs of Europe, specifically the King of France who was rendering aid to the states at the time.⁷⁸

Although Adams proclaimed the superiority of a republic, he was not unaware of the flaws of this form. Adams did attribute war solely to those ambitious monarchies which were of course receiving much criticism from the Americans of his day.²³ He recognized that historically and contemporaneously those republican forms of government were just as ambitious and apt for involvement in war as any other form of government. Adams shows this awareness when he states:

Does not the History of all the Republicks of the World shew, that they have been as ambitious, as Monarchies. Even the most democratical Republick of Antiquity, Athens, was a perfect Hotspur. Even our People in America, have been more inclined to a War, than their Government for these fifteen years past. There has been no year within that Period when they would not have gone to War with England with pleasure.⁷⁹

Adams is showing that he considers war as a necessity in certain situations, but that republics and more democratic forms of government are just as susceptible to unwisely entering into them. He references, in his opinion, the finest attempt at government from history and how they were constantly ready for war.

Adams attributes the willingness to pursue war to certain men within these states and the influence they are able to have in this more open and free form of government. Adams even goes so far as to reference two important men from the history of Athens and equate them with two of

⁷⁸ Adams, John. "From John Adams to the Marquis de Lafayette, 21 May 1782," Founders Online, National Archives, version of January 18, 2019, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Adams/06-13-02-0030>. [Original source: The Adams Papers, Papers of John Adams, vol. 13, May–October 1782, ed. Gregg L. Lint, C. James Taylor, Margaret A. Hogan, Jessie May Rodrique, Mary T. Claffey, and Hobson Woodward. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006, pp. 65–68.]

⁷⁹ Adams, John. "From John Adams to William Heath, 14 December 1807," Founders Online, National Archives, version of January 18, 2019, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Adams/99-02-02-5223>. [This is an Early Access document from The Adams Papers].

his contemporaries within the states. Adams writes that “There is always in a Democracy some Themistocles or Pericles, some Alexander Hamilton or Aaron Burr, weary of the dull pursuits of civil Life and impatient to be at the head of affairs.”⁸⁰ According to Adams these men are able to wield enough influence to bring a war into being, whether rightfully or not. Adams must have recognized the danger associated with men of such character, as Hamilton and Burr had been intense rivals and in fact Burr had murdered Hamilton in a duel earlier in the decade.

In an additional letter to John Taylor, a politician and writer from Virginia, John Adams delves deeper into the dangers that individual men can pose to the more democratic form of government. He describes how one man, backed by the people, ruined a country:

When Solons Ballance was destroyed, by Aristides, and the Preponderance given to the Multitude for which he was rewarded with the Title of Just when he ought to have been punished with the Ostracism; the Athenians grew more and more Warlike in proportion as the Commonwealth became more democratic. I need not enumerate to you, the foolish Wars into which the People forced their wisest Men and ablest Generals against their own Judgments, by which the State was finally ruined⁸¹

In this letter Adams further shows his awareness of the dangers of democracy and the possibility of one man playing an unnaturally large role in government due to his influence over the will of the people. He clearly valued the example that Athens had set, in both a positive sense and in the pitfalls Athens showed that are especially dangerous to a government by the people.

Adams further shows his appreciation for Athens, as well as other states, in a letter to the Boston Patriot, a popular partisan newspaper. He references how often the examples of Athens and Rome from antiquity, and Holland and Switzerland from his time, were quoted. These states

⁸⁰ Adams, John. “From John Adams to William Heath, 14 December 1807,” Founders Online, National Archives, version of January 18, 2019, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Adams/99-02-02-5223>. [This is an Early Access document from The Adams Papers].

⁸¹ Adams, John. “From John Adams to John Taylor, 17 December 1814,” Founders Online, National Archives, version of January 18, 2019, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Adams/99-02-02-6371>.

were used in the pursuit of true liberty for the United States.⁸² He writes that all these references had “given the Americans a kind of affection and veneration for the citizens of these republics.”⁸³ In John Adams’ mind, those ancient civilizations and the modern states had clearly played an important role in the founding of the United States.

The impact of Athens throughout history has been quite remarkable. This single city has been a recurring topic for historians of many different views and backgrounds for millenia. Each of them had their own reasons for writing and seemed to use Athens for their own contemporary concerns. Herodotus and Thucydides wrote during the height of Athenian power and were the forerunners of modern western history and instrumental in establishing an entire discipline, flawed as they were. To Polybius who just a few centuries later illustrated the progress that had already been made in historical methods and was comparing the examples of ancient Greece and Athens in particular to the Roman government, the superpower of his day. The influence of Athens and the example of government by the people was also seen in the 18th and 19th centuries as well. The British historians of those centuries examined Athens not only for the relevance that the Athenian government held to the changing structures of Great Britain, but also for the similarities in handling an empire. Across the Atlantic the American Founding Fathers not only studied Athens but used her strengths and flaws as an example for their own state, a democratic republic which continues to influence world affairs to this day.

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⁸² Adams, John. “From John Adams to Boston Patriot, 12 August 1809,” Founders Online, National Archives, version of January 18, 2019, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Adams/99-02-02-5413>.

⁸³ Ibid.

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