

# The Ideal of Political Moderation in Aristotle's *Athenaion Politeia*

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THE AUTHOR OF THE *Athenaion Politeia* does not usually express his personal opinion about the constitutional changes and the different political situations described.<sup>1</sup> There are four striking exceptions to this rule, in which a clearly positive judgment is expressed on the Areopagite regime (23.2), on Nicias, Thucydides, and Theramenes as the best Athenian politicians (33.2), on the constitution of the Five Thousand (28.5), and on Archinus' good government after the democratic restoration in 403 B.C. (40.2). This paper seeks to analyze and explain these explicit judgments in the light of the ideal of political moderation that emerges from Aristotle's treatment of the different stages of the Athenian constitution and, in particular, his presentation of Solon's reforms and Pisistratus' tyranny. Although no value judgment is expressed about either Solon's reforms or the tyranny of Pisistratus and his sons,<sup>2</sup> I will argue that the way in which Aristotle presents these two stages

<sup>1</sup> Although conscious of the complexity of the problem, I will here assume that Aristotle is the author of the *Ath. Pol.*, in conformity with the ancient tradition and in agreement with the opinion of some modern commentators and scholars. For detailed discussion of the problem see P. J. Rhodes, *A Commentary on the Aristotelian Athenaion Politeia* (Oxford 1981: hereafter RHODES) 58–63. K. von Fritz and E. Kapp, *Aristotle's Constitution of Athens* (New York 1950) 7, state firmly: "both the external and the stylistic evidence are entirely in favor of the assumption that the treatise was written by Aristotle himself." For a less dogmatic view see M. Chambers, "Aristotle and His Use of Sources," in M. Piérart, *Aristote et Athènes* (Paris 1993) 39.

<sup>2</sup> See von Fritz and Kapp (*supra* n.1) 57 n.79: "Aristotle's defense of Solon's personal integrity and his evaluation of the personal character of Pisistratus and his sons are intended to establish factual truth and do not belong to the kind of value judgments mentioned above."

in Athens' constitutional history is as important as his more explicit value judgments in illustrating his moderate political vision.

## I

In his masterful commentary, P. J. Rhodes repeatedly states that any direct expressions of opinion are most likely comments that Aristotle—or, as he prefers to put it, the author of the *Ath.Pol.*—already found in his sources. According to Rhodes, Aristotle did not express his own spontaneous opinion on the bare material presented by his sources, but simply repeated the comments he found in the sources because he was in agreement with them.<sup>3</sup> An example used by Rhodes to support his thesis is the close verbal resemblance between the judgment on the regime of the Five Thousand expressed by Thucydides and the one we find in the *Ath.Pol.*<sup>4</sup> Moreover, Aristotle himself seems to acknowledge his debt by using the verb *δοκεῖν* in three of the four cases cited:<sup>5</sup> so, he says, it is generally believed that Nicias, Thucydides, and Theramenes had been Athens' best leaders, and that the Athenians were beautifully governed both at the time of the Five Thousand and at the time of Archinus. Nevertheless, Rhodes' emphasis on the lack of spontaneity of Aristotle's judgments does not support the claim that these

<sup>3</sup> A very different opinion is put forth by von Fritz and Kapp (*supra* n.1: 57–60), who hold that “value judgments are not altogether absent from his treatise,” and who freely refer to Aristotle's opinions.

<sup>4</sup> Rhodes 414. The influence of Thucydides' work on Aristotle is a much debated point. However, S. Hornblower, “The Fourth-Century and Hellenistic Reception of Thucydides,” *JHS* 115 (1995) 55, has argued that “the most obvious Thucydidean debtor among the works of Aristotle is the *Athenaion Politeia* ... Thucydides was an obvious source for the events of 411 BC, and for other items also.” The view that Aristotle used Thucydides is shared also by G. de Saint-Croix, “Aristotle on History and Poetry,” in A. Rorty, ed., *Essays on Aristotle's Poetics* (Princeton 1992) 22–32.

<sup>5</sup> Aristotle often uses *δοκεῖν* to indicate general agreement on a specific matter (“it is generally agreed, it is generally thought”): see H. Bonitz, *Index Aristotelicus* (Berlin 1870) 203a.27. For discussion of specific passages see Chambers (*supra* n.1) 40 n.6.

judgments were mechanically repeated only because found in a source. Two observations may point to a different conclusion. First, it is evident—and Rhodes does not dispute it—that Aristotle agrees so deeply with these statements as to make them his own. Second, it should not be surprising that the author, in tracing the history of the Athenian constitution, would present his opinions as substantiated by some kind of tradition rather than as his own spontaneous comments uttered on the spur of the moment.

What is more relevant is that these direct judgments agree with the “moderate” political view, which emerges quite clearly from the first part of the *Ath.Pol.* The example that best illustrates this political point of view is Aristotle’s treatment of Solon and his reforms (*Ath.Pol.* 5–12). The grim picture of pre-Solonian Athens, in which the many are enslaved to the few and *stasis*, as a consequence of an unbearable situation, reigns in Athens, is contrasted with the moderation of the reforms introduced by Solon. The Greek lawgiver is described as among the first in birth and reputation (5.3, τῆ μὲν φύσει καὶ τῆ δόξει τῶν πρώτων), but “middle-class” in wealth and position (τῆ δ’ οὐσίᾳ καὶ τοῖς πράγμασι τῶν μέσων). Aristotle states that Solon’s μεσότης is confirmed both by other sources (which he does not report) and by Solon’s poems. Surprisingly, he cites a few lines of one of Solon’s poems that do not at all prove his claim, since they simply invite the rich not to be greedy (παραινῶν τοῖς πλουσίοις μὴ πλεονεκτεῖν), as Aristotle himself remarks.<sup>6</sup> Such an unsubstantiated claim raises reasonable doubts about its truthfulness. Plutarch too, the other (much later) major source on the Athenian lawgiver, accepts and con-

<sup>6</sup> *Ath.Pol.* 5.3. The claim about Solon’s μεσότης appears in almost the same formulation in the *Politics* (1296a), where Aristotle, after arguing both that the middle form of constitution is the best (ὅτι δ’ ἡ μέση βελτίστη, φανερόν), and that the best lawgivers are from the middle class (τὸ τοὺς βελτίστους νομοθέτας εἶναι τῶν μέσων πολιτῶν), confidently affirms on the basis of Solon’s poetry that the Athenian lawgiver clearly was a μέσος πολίτης (Σόλων τε γὰρ ἦν τούτων, δηλοῖ δ’ ἐκ τῆς ποιήσεως).

firmly the tradition of Solon's μεσότης. He reports that all who wrote about Solon agree that he was the son of Execestides, a man of moderate wealth and influence (*Sol.* 1.1, οὐσία μὲν, ὡς φασι, καὶ δυνάμει μέσου τῶν πολιτῶν), but a member of one of the best families in Athens (οἰκίας δὲ πρώτης κατὰ γένος· ἦν γὰρ Κοδρίδης ἀνέκαθεν).<sup>7</sup>

The problem with Plutarch's *Life of Solon* is that it clearly depends on the *Ath.Pol.*, as Plutarch himself seems to acknowledge (25.1).<sup>8</sup> Nevertheless, the account given by Plutarch is much more detailed than the one provided by *Ath.Pol.* In fact, in order to justify the modesty of Solon's wealth, Plutarch reports Hermippus' explanation, that Execestides had diminished his estate in a very appropriate and honorable way, namely εἰς φιλανθρωπίας τινάς ... καὶ χάριτας (*Sol.* 2.1). From Plutarch's account, it is clear that Solon's μεσότης is used to explain his travels and his (disgraceful) activity as a merchant, when still a young man. Plutarch himself does not seem completely convinced by this tradition, and, therefore, reports another explanation for Solon's youthful travels, namely his renowned love of learning (2.2).<sup>9</sup> Like Plutarch, I think that there are good reasons to be skeptical about Solon's μεσότης, strictly intended as moderate wealth and political influence (οὐσία καὶ δύναμις). Aristotle seems to be interpreting the scarce evidence about an almost mythical past in the way best fitting his own theory. His picture of archaic Athenian society does not seem to allow for the existence of a middle class. In *Ath.Pol.* 5.1, Athenian society in Solon's time is portrayed as sharply divided between the

<sup>7</sup> The language used by Plutarch clearly parallels that used in the *Ath.Pol.*, though Plutarch emphasizes Solon's φύσις, *i.e.* his illustrious origin, as the descendant of the mythical king Kodros, while Aristotle puts on the same level Solon's φύσις and δόξα.

<sup>8</sup> According to Rhodes (118), Plutarch probably used the material found in the *Ath.Pol.* or its source or both.

<sup>9</sup> According to Plutarch, Solon was admittedly (ὁμολογουμένως) a lover of wisdom (σοφίας ἐραστής), as a famous saying of his indicates (γηράσκειν αἰεὶ πολλὰ διδασκόμενος).

many (οἱ πολλοί) and the few (οἱ ὀλίγοι), and the first group is enslaved to the second (δουλεύοντες). The choice of Solon as διαλλακτής and ἄρχων indicates that the Athenian lawgiver was a member of the leading class, the only group to have the right to office, probably acceptable to the *demos* for his well-known moderation rather than for his modest income. It is worth recalling that Solon's reforms divided Athenian society into four classes (*Ath.Pol.* 7.3), precisely according to wealth (τίμημα) and not birth (φύσις). Solon clearly intended to break the monopoly of political power, retained until then by a few aristocratic families, rather than share wealth in a more equitable way.<sup>10</sup> Solon's poetry, in the selection presented by Aristotle, shows no signs of hostility towards wealth, but rather hostility towards ill-gotten wealth. In a passage from a poem cited by Aristotle (*Ath.Pol.* 12.1), Solon openly states that he took care not to injure those who had power and were enviable for wealth (οἱ δ' εἶχον δύναμιν καὶ χρήμασιν ἦσαν ἀγητοί), while granting to the *demos* what was appropriate (τόσον γέρας ὅσσον ἀπαρκεῖ).

The evidence provided by Solon's poetry, which Aristotle cites in order to substantiate his portrait of the lawgiver, certainly shows Solon's μετριότης in his political reforms, rather than his being "middle-class in wealth and position." Solon repeatedly represents himself as standing in the middle between the two opposing parties and allowing neither to triumph.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>10</sup> In one poem Solon expresses strong disapproval of giving equal shares of his rich country (ἰσομοῖρα) to κακοί and ἐσθλοί (both terms refer to one's standing in society), and Aristotle explains that these verses were written with a view to the extremists who wanted a redistribution of the land (*Ath.Pol.* 12.3, περὶ τῶν διανείμασθαι τὴν γῆν βουλομένων).

<sup>11</sup> See *Ath.Pol.* 12.1, where Solon stands casting his strong shield around both parties, letting no one win unjustly (ἔστην δ' ἀμφιβαλὼν κρατερὸν σάκος ἀμφοτέροισι, / νικᾶν δ' οὐκ εἶασ' οὐδετέρους ἀδίκως), and 12.5, where he represents himself as the only barrier in the battlefield between the two parties. The meaning of the second passage is controversial (see Rhodes 179). Since Aristotle is reporting Solon's indignant reaction to later attacks from both sides, I think that ὄρος should be interpreted as the barrier which prevented a

Aristotle seems to agree completely with this view (11.2), arguing that Solon firmly resisted the pressure coming both from the δῆμος and from the γνῶριμοι. Moreover, while he could have become a tyrant by joining either side, Solon saved his country and established the best constitution (σώσας τὴν πατρίδα καὶ τὰ βέλτιστα νομοθετήσας). It is difficult to believe that Aristotle is not expressing his own enthusiastic opinion on the subject.<sup>12</sup> Before citing Solon's verses that prove such a claim, Aristotle underlines the fact that there is universal consensus (12.1, οἱ τ' ἄλλοι συμφωνοῦσι πάντες) that such was Solon's "way of behaving" (τρόπος). It should also be remembered that Aristotle found more convincing (πιθανώτερος) the democratic account of Solon's σεισάχθεια precisely for that reason (6.2–4).<sup>13</sup> According to Aristotle, it was not likely (οὐ γὰρ εἰκός) that Solon would have sullied himself with such a manifest and trivial fraud, since he had preferred to save the city and incur the hostility of both sides, even though he could have become a tyrant by joining either side.<sup>14</sup>

Aristotle's moderate political view seems also confirmed by his treatment of Pisistratus' tyranny. According to the definition given in the *Politics* (1279b5–9), tyranny is a deviation (παρέκβασις) from kingship, and like all other deviations, it governs not in the interest of the community but in the interest of the ruler. In *Ath.Pol.* 14.3, however, Pisistratus is said to have ruled

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battle between the two parties: καὶ πάλιν ὀνειδίζων πρὸς τὰς ὕστερον αὐτῶν μεμψιμοιρίας ἀμφοτέρων ... φησί ... ἐγὼ δὲ τούτων ὥσπερ ἐν μεταίχμῳ / ὄρος κατέστην.

<sup>12</sup> On the contrary, Rhodes (171) believes that Aristotle's judgment is "probably to be read as a formulation of what Solon thought he was doing, rather than as an expression of *A.P.*'s enthusiastic approval."

<sup>13</sup> Aristotle also defends Solon from the accusation of "having deliberately made his laws obscure to give the people the power of decision" (9.2), which anachronistically implies that Solon's democracy was the same as the fourth-century litigious democracy.

<sup>14</sup> The language used in both passages is the same. Aristotle substantiates Solon's claim that he could have become a tyrant, by adding that the state of affairs in Athens at the time was dangerously unsound (6.4, τὰ τε πράγματα νοσοῦντα).

as a man devoted to the interest of the *polis* rather than as a tyrant, *i.e.* rather than in his own interest (πολιτικῶς μᾶλλον ἢ τυραννικῶς). The same comment is later repeated (16.1), with the addition that Pisistratus ruled with moderation (μετρίως), and that he showed himself to be benevolent, mild, and forgiving (φιλόανθρωπος ... καὶ πρᾶος καὶ ... συγγνωμονικός). His reign is defined as a golden age, since he was able to preserve peace both at home and abroad (16.7). Such a positive judgment on the Pisistratean tyranny certainly sounds puzzling. Even if one believes that Aristotle found this judgment in his source and simply repeated it because he agreed with it, the question must still be asked how the philosopher could be in agreement with it. His opinion on the Pisistratid tyranny closely echoes Thucydides' judgment (6.54.5–6).<sup>15</sup> Thucydides says that Pisistratus' government was not grievous to the *polis* and its citizens: the tyrants cultivated wisdom and virtue, preserved Athenian laws, though making sure that magistracies were held by members of the Pisistratid family, and splendidly adorned Athens. Thucydides' positive judgment is certainly not astonishing: after all, in a famous passage, he praises highly Pericles' government, which he describes as a disguised monarchy (or tyranny),<sup>16</sup> a democracy in name but in fact the government of the first citizen (2.65.10, λόγῳ μὲν δημοκρατία, ἔργῳ δὲ ὑπὸ τοῦ πρώτου ἀνδρὸς ἀρχή).<sup>17</sup> It is also interesting to notice another parallel between Pisistratus and Pericles: as long as they were in power,

<sup>15</sup> According to O. Luschkat, "Thucydides," *RE Suppl.* 12 (1970) 1284–85, Aristotle's account of Pisistratus' tyranny is strictly derivative from Thucydides': "there is an unequivocal relationship in content between *Ath.Pol.* 18.2 and Thuc. 6.54 ff., where the author tries to correct Thucydides' account. On the basis of these allusions there can be no doubt about the strict relationship between the *Ath.Pol.* and Thucydides."

<sup>16</sup> Note that ἀρχή is also used by Aristotle to qualify Pisistratus' rule (16.9, διὸ καὶ πολλὸν χρόνον ἔμεινεν [ἡ ἀρχή]). Thucydides repeatedly uses the same term to indicate Athens' dominion of the sea (ἀρχή τῆς θαλάσσης).

<sup>17</sup> According to Thucydides (2.65.5) in peace time (ἐν τῇ εἰρήνῃ) Pericles was able to govern Athens moderately and to keep it safe (μετρίως ἐξεγεῖτο καὶ ἀσφαλῶς διεφύλαξεν αὐτήν), so that the city became greatest thanks to him (ἐγένετο ἐπ' ἐκείνου μεγίστη).

things remained under control, but after they died, their successors were not able to pursue their policy, and the situation collapsed.<sup>18</sup>

Besides the influence of Thucydides' judgment, the very nature of the Pisistratean tyranny can perhaps explain Aristotle's sympathy towards it. As we have seen, Pisistratus is said to have ruled πολιτικῶς rather than τυραννικῶς. A tyrant who rules in the interest of the *polis* rather than in his own interest can hardly be called a tyrant at all, according to the standards set by Aristotle in the *Politics*.<sup>19</sup> Since Pisistratus ran the state in accordance with the law (*Ath.Pol.* 16.8, πάντα διοικεῖν κατὰ τοὺς νόμους), and was supported by the majority of both the nobles and the common people (16.9, ἐβούλοντο γὰρ καὶ τῶν γνωρίμων καὶ τῶν δημοτικῶν οἱ πολλοί), he can be defined as a king rather than a tyrant.<sup>20</sup> Finally, we can reasonably speculate that at least one feature of Pisistratus' government would have sounded especially appealing to Aristotle (*Ath.Pol.* 16.2–3): by lending money to the ἄποροι so that they could make a living as farmers, Pisistratus virtually removed them from the city, and thus prevented the unruly mass (ὄχλος) from active participation in politics.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>18</sup> So, under Hippias' rule (*Ath.Pol.* 16.7 and 19.1) the tyranny became much harsher (τραχυτέρα), and after Pericles' death the irresponsible conduct of his successors brought disaster to Athens (Thuc. 2.65.10, where Thucydides makes clear that Pericles' successors were demagogues, who turned over the conduct of state affairs to the masses).

<sup>19</sup> 1279b5, ἡ μὲν γὰρ τυραννίς ἐστὶ μοναρχία πρὸς τὸ συμφέρον τὸ τοῦ μοναρχοῦντος.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. *Pol.* 1285a25, οἱ μὲν γὰρ (kings) κατὰ νόμον καὶ ἐκόντων, οἱ δ' (tyrants) ἀκόντων ἄρχουσιν. It is interesting to note that Pisistratus obtained power the first time through the help of a citizen bodyguard (κορυνηφόροι), voted by the *polis* against Solon's wishes (*Ath.Pol.* 14.1); at *Pol.* 1285a5, kings differ from tyrants precisely in that they have a bodyguard of citizens rather than of mercenaries.

<sup>21</sup> Cf. *Pol.* 1319a26–32, where Aristotle observes that farmers, being scattered over the country, neither attend nor have the same wish to attend the Assembly as artisans, market-people, and thetes (τὸ πλῆθος τὸ τε τῶν βαναύσων καὶ τὸ τῶν ἀγοραίων ἀνθρώπων καὶ τὸ θητικόν). The three latter groups of people participate in the inferior kinds of democracy, since there is no element of virtue (ἀρετή) in their occupations.



## II

The first explicit value judgment expressed by Aristotle concerns the Areopagus. Evaluation of this judgment is made more complicated by the fact that the section dealing with the aftermath of the Persian Wars until after Pericles' death (*Ath.Pol.* 23–28) is rather confused and contradictory.<sup>22</sup> According to Aristotle's account, the Areopagus became predominant after the Persian Wars and put an end to the unchecked growth of democracy. As might be expected, Aristotle declares that at this time the Athenians enjoyed good government (23.2, καὶ ἐπολιτεύθησαν Ἀθηναῖοι καλῶς [καὶ] κατὰ τούτους τοὺς καιρούς). This judgment is later reinforced by the observation that after the loss of power of the Areopagus (ἡ μὲν οὖν τῶν Ἀρεοπαγιτῶν βουλὴ τοῦτον τὸν τρόπον ἀπεστερήθη τῆς ἐπιμελείας), the constitution became slacker (ἀνίσσθαι μᾶλλον τὴν πολιτείαν) because of the demagogues (26.1).<sup>23</sup> It is not surprising to read that, according to Aristotle, Athens' political situation further declined with Pericles' introduction of jury pay, which had a corrupting effect (*Ath.Pol.* 27). What is more surprising is the open contradiction between the description of Athenian political decline as a consequence of Pericles' actions and the conclusion that "the political situation was reasonably good as long as Pericles was still alive, but after his death it became dramatically worse."<sup>24</sup> In this case, Aristotle is apparently repeating the judgment found in Thucydides (2.65),<sup>25</sup>

<sup>22</sup> For evaluation of the *Ath.Pol.* account of the Areopagus and its historicity see R. W. Wallace, *The Areopagos Council to 307 B.C.* (Baltimore 1989) 39–47; M. Ostwald, "The Areopagus in the *Ath.Pol.*," in Piérart (*supra* n.1) 139–153.

<sup>23</sup> As Rhodes points out (323), Aristotle uses *δημαγωγεῖν* and *δημαγωγός* in reference to a particular kind of leader, of whom he clearly disapproves.

<sup>24</sup> 28.1, ἕως μὲν οὖν Περικλῆς προειστήκει τοῦ δήμου, βελτίω τὰ κατὰ τὴν πολιτείαν ἦν, τελευτήσαντος δὲ Περικλέους πολὺ χειρῶ.

<sup>25</sup> Rhodes (344) notes that also Isocrates believed that Pericles was Athens' last good leader, probably a sign that Thucydides' influence was already very great.

even though it openly clashes with his own analysis.<sup>26</sup> Aristotle could not have praised Pericles' regime, which he characterizes as extreme democracy, unless he had been persuaded that Periclean democracy was a democracy only in name and that such a system could only work thanks to the extraordinary and (disinterested) personality of Pericles, but it was destined to fail once in the hands of his (inferior) successors.<sup>27</sup>

After listing a series of Athenian leaders (*προστάται*) starting with Solon, Aristotle selects the three whom he considers the best, after the early period (*Ath.Pol.* 28.5).<sup>28</sup> The three he names (Nicias, Thucydides, Theramenes) are all presented as *προστάται τῶν γνωρίμων*. According to Aristotle, Nicias and Thucydides are universally recognized as noble men (*καλοὶ καὶ ἀγαθοί*), who governed in the interest of the *polis* (*πολιτικοί*) and took care of the city like fathers (*τῇ πόλει πάση πατρικῶς χρώμενοι*), while the judgment upon Theramenes is more controversial (*ἀμφισβήτησις τῆς κρίσεώς ἐστι*). Aristotle's choice is hardly surprising, but the picture he gives is not very accurate. Thucydides, as son of Melesias and connected by marriage to Cimon's family, could certainly be defined as *καλὸς καὶ ἀγαθός*, but Nicias was rather a *homo novus*, a first-generation politician and the son of a very rich merchant (exactly like his opponent Cleon). Moreover, Thucydides was the failed opponent of Pericles, and Nicias, though a successful general and a gentleman, especially when compared with Cleon, was commander of

<sup>26</sup> In reference to this passage, J. Keaney emphasizes that "Aristotle is upholding a theory first put forward by Thucydides, that the quality of the leadership worsened after Pericles," but he then argues that "the position of Pericles in the *Ἄθρολ* is consistently undermined" (*The Composition of Aristotle's Athenaiion Politeia* [New York/Oxford 1992] 58–62). However, the very fact that, as Keaney himself admits, Aristotle's criticism of Pericles is implied rather than expressed openly indicates the extent of the influence of Thucydides' judgment, as we suggest here.

<sup>27</sup> The judgment of Cleon as one of Pericles' worst successors closely resembles Thucydides' portrayal of him as "the most violent among the citizens" (3.36.6, *βιαιότατος τῶν πολιτῶν*).

<sup>28</sup> Rhodes (344, 358) cites the testimonia that this modern period was felt to begin after Pericles' death.

the disastrous Sicilian expedition. The most interesting among the three is certainly Theramenes, and the portrayal in the *Ath. Pol.* of this unfortunate politician is crucial to our understanding of Aristotle's own political view.

Theramenes is praised as a good citizen (ἀγαθὸς πολίτης) who supported all constitutions so long as they did nothing illegal (παρανομεῖν).<sup>29</sup> In *Ath. Pol.* 32.2, Theramenes appears both as one of the most active politicians in setting up the oligarchy of the Four Hundred together with Peisander and Antiphon, and as the most responsible for overthrowing the same Four Hundred in favor of the moderate oligarchic regime of the Five Thousand (33.2). According to Aristotle, Theramenes, like his colleagues Phrynichus and Antiphon, was well born (γεγεννημένων ἐδῶ),<sup>30</sup> and enjoyed the reputation of being outstanding in both intelligence and judgment (καὶ συνέσει καὶ γνώμῃ δοκούντων διαφέρειν).<sup>31</sup> Apart from these explicit comments about the main authors of the oligarchic revolution in Athens, Aristotle's account of the coup of the Four Hundred and the counter-coup of the Five Thousand (29–33) is rather brief and confused.<sup>32</sup> As we have seen, he simply says that Theramenes was most responsible for the overthrow of the Four Hundred because he and Aristocrates "did not agree with what was done by the Four Hundred, who did not refer anything to the Five Thousand" (33.2). However, it is interesting that one of Theramenes' main reasons for overthrowing the Four Hundred was the fear that they were ready to betray Athens to the

<sup>29</sup> Aristotle's defense seems a direct response to the insulting definition of Theramenes as a Κόθορνος, *i.e.* a boot capable of fitting either foot (Xen. *Hell.* 2.3.31).

<sup>30</sup> Theramenes' father Hagnon was in fact a respected Athenian and old associate of Pericles, who acted as πρόβουλος together with Sophocles in the difficult aftermath of the disaster in Sicily.

<sup>31</sup> Cf. Thucydides 8.68.4, who describes him as "not incapable of speaking or judging" (οὔτε εἰπεῖν οὔτε γῶναι ἀδύνατος).

<sup>32</sup> Most notably, Aristotle reports the draft of a constitution as drawn up by the Five Thousand, though the Five Thousand existed only λόγῳ during the regime of the Four Hundred (30).

Spartans in order to maintain their strictly oligarchic regime.<sup>33</sup> In this sense, Theramenes, like Nicias and Thucydides, the other two “best Athenian leaders,” acted in the best interest of the *polis* (πολιτικῶς).

The new regime created by Theramenes and his associates is given a positive judgment by Aristotle (33.2: *cf.* Thuc. 8.97.2). The constitution of the Five Thousand appears to have been a good one and more appropriate to the immediate situation, since there was a war, and power belonged to those who provided their own armor (ἐκ τῶν ὀπλῶν τῆς πολιτείας οὔσης). It is not surprising to find such a judgment, and there is no need to conclude that Aristotle simply drew it from his source. The men who created the regime were moderate, and Theramenes, their leader, was a politician admired and defended against his detractors by Aristotle. The new constitution certainly excluded from power the poorest citizens, the unruly ὄχλος that could be so easily swayed by demagogues.<sup>34</sup> It is notable that, according to *Ath.Pol.* 34.1, this is exactly what happened with the restoration of democracy. Though Aristotle does not express any direct judgment, limiting himself to stating that “the people shortly overthrew the Five Thousand,” he reports that the generals who fought and won the battle at Arginusae were tried and indiscriminately condemned to death.<sup>35</sup> The *demos*, in taking this tragically wrong decision, had been misled by “those who had been enraged by what had happened” (διὰ τοὺς παροργισαντας). Aristotle does not mention Theramenes’ disgraceful

<sup>33</sup> Though Thucydides accuses the dissidents among the Four Hundred of private ambition as the driving motive for the overthrow of the same regime, he also makes clear that they had a more patriotic motive, namely the fear that the envoys sent to Sparta might harm Athens (8.89.2–3).

<sup>34</sup> Clearly it excluded members of the thetic class. The crucial importance of the thetes in a war that was now fought prevalently at sea can explain the rapid return to democracy.

<sup>35</sup> Rhodes (423) notes that Aristotle is wrong in believing that all ten generals were condemned. Only eight of them fought at Arginusae, and six were put to death, while two never returned to Athens and were condemned in absence.

involvement in the event, preferring to place responsibility on the fickle *demos*.<sup>36</sup> The *demos* is again easily deceived by Cleophon's violent behavior, and prevented from making peace with the Spartans. The stupidly wrong decision made by the *demos* is promptly met by disaster: the Athenians are badly defeated at Aegospotami, and Lysander is able to install the regime of the Thirty (34.2–3).

The creation of the bloody regime of the Thirty is ultimately a consequence of the irresponsible behavior of the *demos*. Aristotle's treatment of the subject is clearly inaccurate and partisan. Theramenes' active involvement in the creation of the regime is completely ignored, while great emphasis is given to his heroic resistance against the Thirty and to his martyr's death (*Ath. Pol.* 35–36). There is no reason to doubt that such a restricted oligarchy as that of the Thirty would have been unacceptable to a man who had actively participated in the overthrow of the Four Hundred. It is also not impossible that Theramenes, in his negotiation of the peace with Lysander, would have informally accepted the idea of a change of constitution and a return to Athens' ancestral constitution (ἡ πατριος πολιτεία). Certainly the πατριος πολιτεία could have meant different things to different political groups. Interestingly, Aristotle distinguishes three factions, namely oligarchs, democrats, and "moderates" led by Theramenes, in contrast with Diodorus (14.3.3), who presents a twofold division between oligarchs (οἱ γὰρ τῆς ὀλιγαρχίας ὀρεγόμενοι) and democrats (οἱ δὲ πλείστοι δημοκρατίας ὄντες ἐπιθυμηταί). But the threefold division proposed by Aristotle seems to be more accurate.<sup>37</sup> The situation is in fact strikingly similar to that of 411 B.C. Back then, the oligarchs presented their revolution as a return to the

<sup>36</sup> The expression διὰ τοὺς παροργίσαντας calls to the mind of the reader the image of individuals who harangue and sway the mass with their violent and angry speech, much like the demagogues of the post-Periclean era.

<sup>37</sup> Lysias too speaks of a threefold division according to which the Thirty were selected (12.43–47).

πάτριοι νόμοι (*Ath.Pol.* 29.3), while the democrats in Samos accused them of trying to abolish the ancestral laws (Thuc. 8.76.6, τὸς πατρίους νόμους καταλύσαντας).

The active participation of Theramenes and his associates in the overthrow of the regime of the Four Hundred and the establishment of the Five Thousand clearly shows that the oligarchic front was split from the beginning between extremists and moderates who interpreted differently the return to the πάτριοι νόμοι. Likewise, in the aftermath of the disaster at Arginusae and the difficult peace negotiations with Sparta, Theramenes and his associates would have wished to establish a regime probably modeled on the short-lived constitution of the Five Thousand. However, the extremists, such as the nobles who belonged to the *hetaireiai*, would have no doubt wished for a tight oligarchy supported by Sparta.<sup>38</sup> Aristotle nevertheless does not mention either Critias or Theramenes, certainly two prominent members and active participants in the establishment of the Thirty. He simply states that Lysander sided with the oligarchs and the *demos* was forced to vote for oligarchy (34.3). Aristotle's omission of these two names is easy to understand: on the one hand, Critias' involvement in the disgraceful affair of the Thirty was certainly played down by the Platonic school in order to protect the reputation of Plato's relative, and Aristotle's silence can be interpreted as an act of loyalty towards his old master. On the other hand, Aristotle's evident purpose in omitting the name of Theramenes in the establishment of the oligarchy is to portray him as the unblemished hero of the resistance against the Thirty. Moreover, the chronology of Aristotle's account is clearly constructed to show that most of the outrageous crimes of the Thirty were perpetrated after the death

<sup>38</sup> Aristotle names four of Theramenes' associates, who were deemed inferior to none and wished a return to the ancestral constitution (34.3). None of them was a member of the Thirty, and two (Archinus and Anytus) were at Phyle with Thrasybulus.

of Theramenes, the only Athenian who had the courage to speak out against the tyrants.<sup>39</sup>

In this case, I think it is difficult to maintain that Aristotle simply found the chronology in some obscure source and limited himself to copying it. If we admit that he derived the chronology from an unknown source, we should also admit that he looked carefully for a source that would closely agree with his own idea about Theramenes' role.<sup>40</sup> In fact, Aristotle rejects not only Lysias' clearly tendentious account, but also less hostile accounts like those offered by Diodorus and Xenophon. Another reason, perhaps, for wanting to dissociate Theramenes from the Thirty is the great brutality of the regime (*Ath.Pol.* 35.4). It is interesting to contrast the oligarchic regime of the Four Hundred, as presented by *Ath.Pol.* 29, and the extremely bloody rule of the Thirty. In Aristotle's account, the Four Hundred were established in a completely legal and peaceful way, even though Thucydides depicts a real coup accomplished by means of terror, brute force, and deceit.<sup>41</sup> Aristotle did not need to go so far as to distort historical reality beyond the fact of the oligarchic coup. But he must have consciously opted to ignore the violent establishment of the regime of the Four Hundred and emphasize instead its strictly legal nature precisely because his hero Theramenes had been undeniably involved in it (even though it would have been easy to blame the violence on the

<sup>39</sup> In all the other accounts, Theramenes' execution follows the disarming of the unprivileged, Thrasybulus' occupation of Phyle, and the arrival of the Spartan garrison: *Ath.Pol.* 37; *Xen. Hell.* 2.3.13–56; *Diod.* 14.4.3–14.5.4.

<sup>40</sup> Cf. M. Ostwald, *From Popular Sovereignty to the Sovereignty of Law* (Berkeley 1986) 469–470: "the source or sources Aristotle and Ephorus may have used for a more sympathetic picture of Theramenes than others drew of him need not have invented facts but may merely have been selective in presenting them or emphasizing actions that showed him in a favorable light while suppressing anything unfavorable."

<sup>41</sup> See especially Thuc. 8.65–66, who describes the atmosphere of fear created by a series of political assassinations, such as, most notably, the murder of Androcles, the chief leader of the *demos*. The picture painted by Thucydides certainly sounds more convincing. See D. Kagan, *The Fall of the Athenian Empire* (Ithaca 1987) 142ff.

extremists, since, as Thucydides points out, the murders were carried out by bands of younger men, usually associated with the *hetaireiai*). However, in the case of the regime imposed by the Thirty, their blatant brutality could hardly be passed over in silence.<sup>42</sup> In this second case, it was easier for Aristotle to omit mentioning Theramenes' involvement in the establishment of the regime and focus the account on his martyr's death.<sup>43</sup>

Finally, we should consider Aristotle's positive judgment about Archinus and the behavior of the restored democracy. According to Aristotle (*Ath.Pol.* 40.2), the Athenians appear to have handled their private and public affairs more beautifully (*κόλλιστα*) than anybody else under the same circumstances and in the best interests of the state (*πολιτικώτατα*). Such a strikingly positive judgment of democracy is explained in detail by the author: the Athenians decided to repay the money borrowed from the Spartans by the Thirty instead of redistributing the land like the democrats in other states.<sup>44</sup> In other words, Aristotle praises the democratic regime precisely because on this occasion it did not act like the other (extreme) democracies.

Archinus is singled out for praise as the leader of the restored democracy, and such a choice can hardly have been casual. In the *Ath.Pol.* he is numbered among the supporters of Theramenes, *i.e.* the moderates who aimed at the restoration of Athens'

<sup>42</sup> According to *Ath.Pol.* 35.3–4, the Thirty, after getting rid of the sycophants and wicked mischief-makers, threw off the mask and went after prominent citizens because of greed and in order to remove any threat to their regime. The clear implication of the passage is that the Thirty pursued a systematic policy of terror.

<sup>43</sup> As we have seen, Theramenes' role in the establishment of the tyranny was highly controversial. Xenophon pictures him as *ὁμογνώμων καὶ φίλος* of Critias in the first phase of the regime (*Hell.* 2.3.15), while Diodorus places him on the democratic side and has him speak against oligarchy (14.3.2–7). However, apart from the very hostile account of Lysias, the sources all agree that Theramenes objected to the reign of terror imposed by the Thirty at the cost of his life.

<sup>44</sup> The condemnation of this revolutionary method is a recurring theme in the *Ath.Pol.* Solon, for example, is praised for having resisted the pressure of the *demos* for the redistribution of land (11.2).



ancestral constitution, in contrast to both the extreme oligarchs and the democratic faction. In conformity with his moderate political views and deep distaste for radical democracy, Aristotle does not choose as the hero of the restored democracy Thrasybulus, the successful leader of the refugees at Phyle and an unblemished member of the democratic faction, but Archinos, the old associate of Theramenes.<sup>45</sup>

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