

**FROM ATHENS TO ATLANTIS: DEMOCRATIC MYTHMAKING IN CLASSICAL
GREECE**

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A thesis submitted to the faculty of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in the Department of Political Science.

Chapel Hill

2013

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ABSTRACT

CASEY EDWARD STEGMAN: From Athens to Atlantis: Democratic Mythmaking in Classical Greece

(Under the direction of Michael Lienesch)

This paper is concerned with *political myth* and the process of *political mythmaking* in Classical Athens (5th-4th centuries B.C.E.), and by extension, in other democracies as well. While there has been a number of political science works that have looked at how monopolistic political myths are formed in authoritarian or otherwise restricted nationalist regimes, few have considered how political myths are created and transmitted in democracies. This paper addresses this dearth in the literature by investigating the understudied phenomenon that it labels *democratic mythmaking*. In looking at Classical Athens, this paper illustrates that democratic mythmaking has been a part of democracy since its inception. Discussing Herodotus, The Old Oligarch, Thucydides, Isocrates, and Plato, this paper illustrates that their works: 1) refer to and describe other democratic myths; 2) contribute myths of their own; and 3) demonstrate that the process of political mythmaking in a democracy is pluralistic, contested, and above all democratic.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This thesis reflects the high level of encouragement and intellectual support I have received from faculty and friends since arriving at UNC-Chapel Hill as a graduate student in the department of political science. First of all, this thesis would not have been possible without the impeccable academic guidance from Michael Lienesch, who acted as my advisor over the last year, and Susan Bickford and Jeff Spinner-Halev, who supported and intellectually aided me in this endeavor for the last two semesters. Further, my thanks go to my community of fellow graduate students in the department of political science. They have helped me in ways too numerous to list. Finally, I wish to state my indebtedness to my parents and my partner Liz Masnik. It is from them that I draw my strength and my courage.

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Introduction

In his 2008 *Annual Review of Political Science* article “What the Ancient Greeks Can Tell Us About Democracy,” Josiah Ober discusses the ongoing academic debate about when Ancient Athens actually became a democracy. Within this debate there are three specific dates (all B.C.E.) posited as the moment of “transition”—when Ancient Athens went from a government of the *oligoi* (the elite few) to a *dēmokratia*, or a government of the *dēmos* (the people). Ober writes: “The mainstream debate has focused on the relative importance of the events of 594 [Solon’s reforms], 508 [Cleisthenes’ reforms], and 462 [when the *dēmos* severely restricted the Council of the Areopagus]” (72). And thus the question in most academic debates is: did Athens become a democracy in 594, 508, or 462? In his article, Ober states that his “own position is that the right date for the emergence of democracy is 508” (72). In an earlier work, *Mass and Elite in Democratic Athens* (1989), he asserts the same conclusion, writing that Cleisthenes’ constitutional reforms in 508 “created the most democratic state the Greek world had ever seen” (69). Yet while there is much to Ober’s argument—Cleisthenes’ reforms did reorganize Athens quite drastically by creating new tribal divisions and new institutions and popular participatory procedures—a credible case can still be made for the other dates.

In fact, when we consult many of the great surviving works from fifth and fourth century Athens, we see that a number of the great historians, orators, and philosophers offered differing opinions on the exact date that the democracy began. Herodotus, for example, (like Ober) thinks it began with Cleisthenes’ reforms in 508 (6.131). Isocrates, by

contrast, in his oration *Areopagiticus*, argues that the correct date was not 508, but 594, when Solon instituted his reforms, since in his view Cleisthenes simply re-established Solon's laws (16). Then there is the fifth-century Athenian writer we know only as the "Old Oligarch" (Pseudo-Xenophon).¹ Although he never explicitly writes about the restriction of the Council of the Areopagus in 462, his entire work centers on the inclusion of the lower classes as the central aspect that distinguished democracy from government of the *oligoi* (1.5). In this way, the Old Oligarch sees the "radicalization" of Athens' *dēmokratia* as the beginning of its democracy.

Let us consider what can be gained by accepting that each account is "correct," even if some may not be "true" in a historically objective sense. By denying the claims of any origin account we run the risk of dismissing a central aspect of the argument that contains it. For example, Isocrates is not only arguing that Solon founded the democracy in 594, but also that the democracy of his own time (365/4) should be restricted and that the Council of the Areopagus should be re-instituted (58-59). The Old Oligarch, meanwhile, is using the radicalization that brought about the restriction of the Council to illustrate how the *dēmokratia* of his day (420s) is a government of the morally corrupt (1.5). In any case, if we do not consider the *ways* in which these differing origin accounts are being used politically—to make arguments about the political present—we may miss understanding *how* history works as a political tool, especially in a democracy.

¹ Marr and Rhodes (2008) write in their introduction to their translation of the Old Oligarch's *Constitution of the Athenians* that he was originally thought to be Xenophon, but that this view has been subsequently abandoned by modern scholars (7). Further, Marr and Rhodes write that this label is still somewhat misleading since the unknown author "is almost certainly a young man" and his views, while "opposed to the Athenian democracy," do not conform to the traditional views of a "conventional oligarch" (2).

This paper takes up this consideration. For its purposes, the “true” origin date of Athens’ *dēmokratia* is not the point. Rather, it is concerned with how writers, orators, and philosophers during the fifth and fourth centuries used differing and contrasting conceptions of Athens’ democratic past as a basis for arguments concerning its democratic present (the time of their writing). In this way, the paper is concerned with *political myth* and the process of *political mythmaking* in democratic Athens, and by extension, in other democracies as well. While there has been a number of political science works that have looked at how political myths are formed in authoritarian or otherwise restricted nationalist regimes, few have considered how political myths are created and transmitted in democracies.² As this paper will argue, political mythmaking in democracy is unique compared to other regimes. In non-democratic regimes one political myth comes to dominate all others, thus holding a monopolistic position institutionally (Smith 2002).³ In democracy, however, no single political myth comes to dominate. Rather, there exists a plurality of institutionalized political myths that are often in contest with one another. This process of contestation is evident in the first recorded democracy. In Athens we see evidence of a plurality of contrasting political myths, each of which employ differing historical, religious, discursive, and symbolic aspects as a means for addressing the democratic present.

In order to investigate this concept of *democratic mythmaking*, we will look at the mythmaking process in Athens during two time periods central to the city-state’s democratic history. The first is the radical democratic mythmaking process that took place in the mid-to-

² For works that investigate political myths in authoritarian or otherwise restricted regimes, see: Anderson (1982); Armstrong (1982); Hobsbawm (1992); Smith (2002); Darden [forthcoming].

³ Concerning nationalist regimes, Smith discusses the eventual emergence of the “the *ethnie*”—“the named human population which is associated with a particular territory, and which shares myths of ancestry and historical memories, as well as elements of common culture” (92). The *ethnie* thus becomes the dominant (monopolistic) identity in a nationalist regime over time.

late fifth century, a time when Athens was expanding democratically as a *polis* and an empire.⁴ This section will discuss three key surviving works from this period: Herodotus' *The Histories*, the Old Oligarch's *Constitution of the Athenians*, and Thucydides' *History of the Peloponnesian War*. The section will show how these works variously interpret Athens' past—its origins, its “founder(s),” its class structure, and even its glory in the Persian Wars—as a means of defining the present state of *dēmokratia*. The second section will then look at the conservative turn that democratic mythmaking took in the fourth century following Athens' defeat in the Peloponnesian War. This section will focus on Isocrates' *Areopagiticus* and Plato's *Timeus* and *Critias*. In all, the paper will illustrate that these works: 1) refer to and describe other democratic myths; 2) contribute myths of their own; and 3) demonstrate that the process of political mythmaking in a democracy is pluralistic, contested, and above all democratic.

Political Myths, Political Mythmaking, and Democratic Institutions

Political myth is not a new subject of study. Roughly defined, political myth is a common narrative constructed over time by a group of people that encompasses their conception of history, reinforces or critiques their existing social organization, and frames their day-to-day experiences.⁵ Political narratives along these lines have been discussed, analyzed, and investigated by numerous social scientists for decades. Many of the most recent works have focused on the relationship between political myth and nationalism (e.g. Anderson 1982; Armstrong 1982; Hobsbawm 1992; Smith 2002; Darden [forthcoming]). These works highlight how a particular narrative is developed to create what Benedict

⁴ The term “radical” is used here because this was the time period at which Athens' government was its most inclusive (including all male, land-owning citizens).

⁵ For recent definitions, see: Flood (2001, 44); Bottici and Challand (2006, 316); Bottici (2007, 14).

Anderson famously called an “imagined community” within a bounded and sovereign state, and as such constitute a great contribution toward our understanding about the part that political narratives play in the formation of political identities. However, this literature mostly focuses on singular narratives within authoritarian and otherwise restricted regimes.

More recently, Chiara Bottici has aimed to reorient our understanding of political myth by removing it from a specific political regime type. In her book, *A Philosophy of Political Myth* (2007), Bottici advances a more general definition of political myth that counters earlier social scientific and anthropological ones.⁶ Arguing that many of these earlier definitions emphasized the *truthfulness* of political myths, Bottici posits a different definition, “a common narrative by which members of a social group (or society) provide significance to their political experience and deeds” (2007, 14).⁷ For her, the question is not whether a political myth advances a truth claim that its adherents believe to be correct. Rather, the question is how political myths work to underscore their adherents’ views of the present. Put simply, the function of political myths is to give meaning to contemporary political experiences.

In discussing Ancient Greece, Bottici writes that Athenian thinkers characterized their contemporary political experience through the use of *logos* (account/reasoned discourse) and *mythos* (myth). While these two concepts came to have distinct definitions by the end of the

⁶ Political myth is almost completely synonymous with political narrative in Bottici’s usage, since it is narrative driven. However, it encompasses other elements besides narrative, such as symbols (flags, patriotic signs, etc.) and discursive signifiers (e.g. proper names).

⁷ In particular, Bottici critiques and responds to Christopher G. Flood’s definition of political myth: “an ideologically marked narrative which purports to give a true account of a set of past, present, or predicted political events which is accepted as valid in its essentials by a social group” (2001, 44). As Bottici explains in her article “Rethinking Political Myth” (2006), co-authored with Benoît Challand, previous works on political myth “fail...to understand that political myths cannot be falsified because they are not scientific hypotheses, but rather the expression of a determination to act” (316).

fourth century (becoming counterposed in the same way that we currently think of reason and myth today), they were used interchangeably before then. Bottici notes that in the Homeric age, for example, *logos* and *mythos* were synonymous, meaning only: “word, speech” (21). Throughout the fifth and fourth centuries B.C.E., they were generally used interchangeably, albeit slowly becoming antonyms, to give meaning to contemporary political experiences.⁸

In this paper, we will see numerous examples of this slow transformation. In democratic Athens, these two concepts overlapped most of the time, interacting with one another in an overall process of institutionalizing a plurality of political myths. “Institutionalize” here does not solely mean within formal institutions such as the Assembly. Rather, “institutionalize” refers to “norms, rules, and routines, understandings and frames of meaning that define ‘appropriate’ action and roles and acceptable behavior of their members” (Mackay, Monro, and Waylen 2009, 255), as well as “discursive struggles and can be understood as sedimented discourse” (Kulawik 2009, 268). In their book, *Athenian Myths and Institutions* (1991), W. M. Blake Tyrrell and Frieda S. Brown similarly describe the institutionalization of religious and historical myths in Classical Athens, writing that institutional myths “constitute a discourse, a verbal medium, through which members of the community...use [various narratives about] the past to talk about the present” (8). The institutionalization of democratic myths works in much the same way. That is, like religious and historical myths, they refer to other political myths, and use the past—both the religious and historical past—to influence and shape the politics of the present.

What differentiates democratic myths is that they not only communicate narratives to members of a community, but also conceptualize and signal what constitutes the community

⁸ “[I]t was with Aristotle,” Bottici writes, “that the definitive passage from *mythos* to *logos* occurred, and the consequent association of myth with a distorted reproduction of reality took place” (34).

itself. In other words, different democratic myths signal different conceptions of the *dēmos*. For instance, in discussing how democracy is a government of the morally corrupt, the Old Oligarch conceptualizes the *dēmos* as “the worthless and the poor and the common people” (1.4). By contrast, Isocrates states that while the *dēmos* of his day has become morally corrupt by “scoundrels” (*ponēroi*), it was once a government ruled by “excellent men” (*chrēstoi*).⁹ His speech, which argues for a return of the aristocratic Council of the Areopagus, is aimed at transforming the *dēmos* from scoundrels to excellent men. In short, Classical Athens demonstrates that democratic myths institutionalize contested conceptions of the *dēmos*.

In addition to investigating the process of democratic mythmaking, the paper will also analyze the content of certain democratic myths. Particularly, it will attempt to parse out three dimensions shared by the myths under review. These three dimensions are: 1) *archaeological*, which is characterized primarily by historical and religious content; 2) *discursive*, which is characterized by cues relating to the regime, its principles and its population (i.e. the *dēmos*); and 3) *symbolic*, which is characterized by how those discursive cues represent the democracy itself.¹⁰

Radical Democratic Mythmaking in the Mid-to-Late-Fifth Century: Herodotus, The Old Oligarch, and Thucydides

⁹ See Ober (2001, 279),

¹⁰ This analytic framework shares some similarities with the one developed by John A. Armstrong in his book *Nations before Nationalism* (1982). This paper holds that these dimensions work in conjunction with one another in often complicated and difficult-to-parse-out ways. For example, symbols work through words, which are conveyed through verbal and non-verbal discourse, which refer to religious and historical content, which symbolize different principles by which a community should adhere, etc. For the purposes of this paper then, the discussion surrounding these three dimensions will simply highlight key aspects relating to religious-historical (archaeological), discursive and symbolic content. It will not attempt to definitively state the degree to which these three dimensions interact.

In the mid-fifth century B.C.E., Athens' *dēmokratia* underwent radical changes. While other powerful city-states, like oligarchic Sparta, maintained a strict hierarchical order between the nobility and the lower classes, Athens reformed its political process in order to eliminate any and all barriers between different classes within the *dēmos*. In 487, the *dēmos* made the first step in this direction by deciding to elect Archons by lot. This was the first significant step in limiting aristocratic political control (Ober 1989, 76). In 462, the *dēmos* made an even more radical move when, at the urging of Ephialtes, it greatly restricted the powers of the Council of the Areopagus.¹¹ Later, in the mid-440s, Pericles brought about a system of pay for jury service.¹² This last reform was perhaps the most significant, putting all of Athens' legal power in the hands of the *dēmos*, regardless of class or distinction.¹³

The political reforms of the mid-fifth century institutionalized the notions of *isonomia* (equality under the law) and *isēgoria* (equality of speech) as the foundation of *dēmokratia*.¹⁴ The growth in the power of the lower classes at the expense of the upper class was met with both praise and anger. While certain members of the *dēmos* lauded *isonomia* and *isēgoria*, others argued that it was leading Athens toward a state of moral decay. It is in three key surviving works from this period that we see democratic mythmaking around these two positions. The first is Herodotus' *The Histories* (440-430 B.C.E.), much of which details Athens' involvement in the early fifth century Persian Wars, also depicts in some detail the leveling of Athens' *dēmokratia*. The second work is the *Constitution of the Athenians* (420

¹¹ For classical accounts of this, see *The Athenian Constitution* (25.4-26.1) and Aristotle (1274.7).

¹² See *The Athenian Constitution* (27.4); Aristotle (1274.8).

¹³ As Ober states, “[t]his effectively established the masses as the legal judges of all citizens” (1989, 81).

¹⁴ As Aristotle writes, “each popular leader [during this period]”—Ephialtes, Themistocles and Pericles—“enhanced the power of the people” (*Politics* 1274.10).

B.C.E.) by the Old Oligarch, which specifically discusses lower class involvement in the *dēmos*. The third work in this section, Thucydides' *History of the Peloponnesian War* (431-404 B.C.E.), is the most complex in terms of treating themes of equality and moral decline.

Herodotus

Born in Halicarnassus, Herodotus was an outsider in Athens, being both a foreigner (*xenos*) and someone born without an ingrained allegiance to a particular strain of Athenian ideology. He is not an overly vocal proponent of *dēmokratia*, particularly the Athenian model of it (Saxonhouse 1996, 36).¹⁵ He gives a fair amount of credit to the Spartans in helping to defeat the Persians (Ostwald 2009, 269-270; Grant 1970 46-47). And his praise of Athenian naval power is limited to only their involvement in the Persian War (Ostwald 268). Yet in the *Histories*, Herodotus provides evidence for a plurality of political myths concerning Athens' past, while also promulgating one particular myth that is both pro-Athenian and pro-*dēmokratia*.

Herodotus offers the most explicit evidence for coterminous democratic myths in mid-fifth century Athens in his discussions of the concept of autochthony. As Carol Dougherty (1996) explains, in fifth century Athens there were competing stories about the origins of the city's population; one set of narratives claimed that the Athenians shared kinship with the Greeks of Ionia (non-autochthonous), while another set argued that they were instead indigenous inhabitants of Attica, born from its very soil (non-autochthonous) (250). As Christopher Pelling (2009) notes, this autochthonous narrative was a democratic narrative, since its notion that all members of the *dēmos* were "born of the same earth [and

¹⁵ The only section where he discusses democracy to any great length is in the Persian debate amongst the Seven in determining what kind of government to install (3.80-3.84). This argument, while not about Athens, is still quite relevant, and does come to bear on Herodotus' feelings about democracy compared to other systems.

are thus were] all brothers and sisters” cut through class distinctions (471), and was used to reclaim Athens’ political institutions “from an alien oligarchic class” (473). By contrast, most non-autochthonous narratives were aristocratic narratives, not only stressing Athens’ ties with Ionia but also asserting class distinctions—because Ionia’s strict hierarchical class system symbolized aristocratic virtues for much of the Greek world at that time. In the *Histories*, Herodotus gives accounts of both views, and then posits his own.

As to the claims that the Athenians were autochthonous, Herodotus offers two accounts. The first, interestingly enough, does not come from an Athenian. Book One describes an incident in which Croesus consults the Delphians about going to war with Persia, asking them “who were the most powerful of the Greeks” (1.56). Herodotus writes that the Delphians replied:

...the Lacedaemonians and the Athenians were preeminent...For these had been the outstanding races from the olden time, the one Pelasgian [the Athenians] and the other Hellenic [the Lacedaemonians]. The Pelasgian has never yet moved out of its land, but the Hellenic has wandered exceedingly (1.56).

According to this passage, the Athenians are autochthonous, for they have “never yet moved out of [their] land” (1.56).¹⁶ The second account occurs in Book Seven, where the Athenians and the Spartans have sent messengers to Syracuse in hopes of convincing the tyrant Gelon to join their struggle against the Persians. When Gelon responds that he will help, but only if he can lead, both messengers rebuke him and the Athenian messenger responds:

For it would then be in vain that we had acquired the greatest force of seashorement in Greece, if, being Athenians, we should concede the leadership to the Syracusians—*we who are the oldest race in Greece, [and] we who are the only ones who have not changed our country* (italics added for emphasis; 7. 161).

¹⁶ Some, like Christopher Pelling (2009), have argued that this passage is evidence of Herodotus “accepting Athenian autochthony” (480), which is quite odd, since he has the Delphians relating this information and refutes elements of it in the following chapter (1.57).

Once more, the claim is that the Athenians have never left their home—they have “not changed [their] country” (7.161). As Christopher Pelling writes in his discussion of this particular account: “the Athenian autochthonous note [is] loud and clear” (481).

Herodotus also provides three examples of contrasting non-autochthonous narratives. One is the account of Themistocles’ message to the Ionians. In an effort to convince the Ionians to either aid the Athenians or, at the very least, not fight them if conscripted by the Persians, he tells them “[we] are your ancestors... [and] you are born of our stock” (8.20). In this passage, Themistocles can be seen promulgating a non-autochthonous narrative that both recognizes a relationship between the Athenians and Ionians and asserts the dominance of the Athenians *over* the Ionians—since it is they, the Ionians, who “are born of [Athenian] stock” (8.20). Earlier, Herodotus gives another account where Aristagoras of Miletus (an Ionian) claims an ancestral relationship between Athens and Ionia when he comes to the Athenians seeking help in his revolt against Persia. “Miletus was a colony of Athens,” he states, “and that, given the greatness of Athenian power, they should certainly protect the Milesians” (5.97). A third example occurs in Book Seven, where Herodotus gives an account of Artabanus telling his nephew Xerxes not to conscript the Ionians against the Athenians:

Cyrus, son of Cambyses, subdued all of Ionia, except the Athenians, to pay tribute to Persia. I would advise you by no means to lead these Ionians against *their ancestors*. We are surely able to conquer our enemies without their help. For if they follow you, they must either be utter scoundrels to enslave *their motherland* or else prove themselves the justest of men in helping her to freedom (italics added for emphasis; 7.51).

Artabanus not only labels the Athenians “ancestors” to the Ionians, but also calls Attica the Ionian “motherland.” All of these passages provide evidence of a non-autochthonous narrative that connects the Ionians to the Athenians and, at the same time, recognizes the Athenian hegemony over the Ionians.

What these conflicting narratives have in common, and what makes them constitute democratic myths, is that both center on Cleisthenes' political reforms and his role as "founder" of the democracy. In 594, when Solon made his famous reforms, he asserted that Athens was "the oldest land of Ionia" (*The Athenian Constitution* 5.2), suggesting that it was not autochthonous and that its population shared kinship with the Ionians. Further, Solon's reforms held in place Athens' four existing tribes, which (as Herodotus writes) "had the names of the sons of Ion—Geleon, Aegicores, Argades, and Hoples" (7.66). It was Cleisthenes who severed the link between Ionia and Athens, in that his reforms "abolished [these tribes] and discovered in their stead the names of other local heroes" (7.66). This radical revision resulted in the creation of ten new tribes named solely after Attic heroes, along with the extension of citizenship rights to those Athenians who "had formerly been deprived of all their rights" during the tyranny (7.69). One possible reason Cleisthenes severed the tie between Athens and Ionia was to combat aristocratic privilege, since Ionian identity—particularly in Athens—"was a highly aristocratic view of the world" (W.R. Connor 200). These reforms played a direct role in the creation and promulgation of autochthonous narratives, for each was an attempt to undermine class privilege.¹⁷ All told, most non-autochthonous narratives served to promote a class-based view of the *dēmos*. There is one non-autochthonous narrative, however, that does not assert a class-based view of the *dēmos*, and it is directly tied to the notions of equality and democracy. This narrative belongs to Herodotus.

Herodotus' position on the autochthony debate first appears in Book One. After describing the Delphian account of the Pelasgians, Herodotus offers his own opinion on the

¹⁷ See Connor 204-206

matter, commenting specifically on the issue of whether the Athenians are autochthonous.

Upon first reading, his discussion is somewhat confusing. Herodotus writes, regarding the

Pelasgians:

But what language the [they] spoke I cannot say exactly. However, if I should speak...from the evidence of the Pelasgians who once inhabited Placia and Sylace on the Hellespont, who were fellow dwellers with the Athenians...I say that...the Pleasgians originally spoke a non-Greek language...[and] the Attic race, being itself Pelasgian, must also have changed its language when it became one with the Greeks (1.57).

He goes on, “[t]he Greek stock, since ever it was, has always used the Greek language, in my judgment” (1.58). At first this assessment is somewhat perplexing. For one, Herodotus seems to be saying two conflicting things: 1) that the Athenians were Pelasgian, but 2) at the same time were coterminous residents alongside them in Attica. Second, he also seems to be arguing that the Pelasgians were immigrants, settling in different areas and then moving out later, and not residents of one land since time immemorial. Third, with his statement that the “Greek stock... has always [spoken] the Greek language,” he seems to imply that the Athenians, if they are Pelasgian, are not “Greek stock.” When looked at through the lens of migration and civic identity, however, Herodotus’ narrative becomes somewhat less confusing. In terms of migration, we can interpret Herodotus here as positing a non-autochthonous position, saying that the Pelasgians were a migrant population and that the Athenians, many of whom are related to the Pelasgians, were not in fact born of the soil they occupy.¹⁸ W.R. Connor argues that Herodotus is conveying a particular conception of civic identity that views it “not [as] an ‘inheritance’ from the past, an inescapable pattern

¹⁸ Christopher Pelling writes that, for Herodotus, “the Pelasgians (or some of them) are not the totality of the Athenians, but people who joined a preexisting population as ‘joint-dwellers’” (480). And while this interpretation might still leave open the possibility that some Athenians are autochthonous (the non-Pelasgians), it still counters the total autochthonous narrative conveyed by the Delphians: “The Pelasgian has *never* yet moved out of its land” (italics added, 1.56).

transmitted along descent lines, but [as something that] can and does change” (1993, 195). In other words, for Herodotus, Athens’ culture is not stagnant, but has been subject to continued change.

This emphasis on the “changing nature” of civic identity is further seen in Herodotus’ treatment of Cleisthenes. While he explicitly states that Cleisthenes established “the democracy” (6.131) and abolished the previous Ionian tribal names (5.69), he does not link these reforms to an autochthonous notion of the *dēmos*. For Herodotus, the Athenians do share a kinship with the Ionians. That said, Herodotus does not assert a kinship tie in order to promote a class-based view of the *dēmos*. While Cleisthenes creates a distinction between Athenian and Ionian identity, his reforms do not support an autochthonous narrative, since Herodotus only states that “the Athenian Cleisthenes... seems to me to have had the same contempt for the Ionians” (5.69). That said, Herodotus does note its effect:

The main body of the Athenian people had formerly been deprived of all rights, but now [Cleisthenes] drew them into his own party, changing the names of the tribes and making them more in number than they had been (5.69).

In other words, for Herodotus, the changing of the tribal names is linked to the inclusion of those Athenians—mainly the lower classes—who had been deprived of their rights. Thus, his non-autochthonous narrative is not aristocratic in its orientation, but populist, crediting Cleisthenes with abolishing the city-state’s harmful class divisions and with changing the *dēmos*’ civic identity (5.69). This point supports Connor’s argument that Herodotus used this discussion as an example of the changing nature of civic identity, and not as evidence for the Athenians’ autochthony.

A further feature of Herodotus’ democratic myth is an emphasis on equality. Herodotus highlights and promotes the Athenian democratic principles of *isonomia* (equality

under the law), *isēgoria* (equality of speech), and the more general *isokratia* (equality). Kurt A. Raaflaub (1996) discusses the connection between *isonomia/isēgoria* and democracy in Herodotus, writing: “In the Constitutional Debate [among the Seven Conspirators in Persia] Herodotus emphasizes *isonomia*...[and elsewhere] explains Athens’ rise to power...with the introduction of equality of speech” (*isēgoria*) (140-141). And while it is uncertain how much the Persian Debate among the Seven reflects Herodotus’ own opinion of Athens’ *dēmokratia*, it does show him positively associating *isonomia* with *dēmokratia*. He writes that during the debate, Otanes argues that “[when] the people is ruler...its title is the fairest of all—namely, equality before the law” (*isonomia*) (3.81). As Raaflaub points out, Herodotus is describing a debate that occurred in the very early fifth century, while using a mid-fifth century word closely associated with Athenian *dēmokratia* to describe it (144). The same is true for *isonomia*, *isēgoria* and *isokratia*, except that Herodotus associates them directly and positively with Athens’ *dēmokratia*: “So Athens increased in greatness. It is not only in respect of one thing but of everything that equality [*isokratia*] and free speech [*isēgoria*] are clearly good” (5.78). For Herodotus, *isonomia*, *isēgoria*, and *isokratia* are symbolic of *dēmokratia*, and serve—in Ober’s (2008b) view—as “periphrasis for democracy” (6).¹⁹

The Old Oligarch

Turning to the Old Oligarch, we find an author who is not so much concerned with interpreting the ancient past as with providing a nuanced oligarchical response to the growing role of the lower classes in the *dēmos*. He begins by addressing contemporary arguments against Athenian democracy: “a thing which some *people* are surprised at, namely the fact that in every area [the Athenian *dēmos*] assign more to *the worthless and the poor and the*

¹⁹ Ostwald writes that Herodotus only “applauds” democracy when it employs *isokratia* (270).

common people than they do to the *valuable*” (italics added for emphasis; 1.4). The “people” who are surprised are the *oligoi* outside of Athens, for they constitute the Old Oligarch’s intended audience (Marr and Rhodes 13-16). The “valuable” are, of course, the Athenian upper class. And “the worthless and the poor and the common people” are the lower classes who have gained greater inclusion into the democracy following the mid-fifth century reforms. But what begins seemingly as tirade against Athens’ *dēmokratia* and its inclusion of “the worthless” and “the common people” turns in a different direction when the Old Oligarch, in previewing his short composition, states that “it will become clear that it is precisely through this practice that they preserve their democracy” (1.4).

For the Old Oligarch, Athens’ *dēmokratia* thrives as a result of its inclusive class dynamic. Moreover, its success stems from the central role played by the lower class. He describes this process: “For the poor and the common people and the inferior classes will increase the strength of the democracy by doing well and by increasing the numbers of themselves and their like” (1.4). Furthermore, he tells his fellow oligarchs that it is not possible to remove the lower class from *dēmokratia*, for to do so would be to undo the democracy itself. He writes:

I maintain that there is not the ability for public business at Athens to be different from the way it is now, except in so far as there is the ability to remove or add something to a slight extent. There is no ability to make a substantial change, without removing some element of the democracy itself (3.8)

It follows then that Athens’ *dēmokratia* can only be based upon the rule of the lower class.

Rhodes and Marr write that the Old Oligarch is here telling his “naïve” audience that “the democratic constitution cannot be ‘reformed’...by the removal or moderations of the various practices they object to” (18). To restrict the *dēmokratia* would be to destroy it. The Old

Oligarch he does not believe that the *dēmos*' "commonness" is a source of weakness, rather it is *dēmokratia*'s greatest strength.

Admittedly, the Old Oligarch is not pro-*dēmokratia*, repeatedly describing the *dēmos* as "worthless," "poor," "licentious," "low," and "common." Further, he is clearly in favor of oligarchy. He writes that "[t]hroughout the world the best element is opposed to democracy" (1.2). That said, his argument is aimed primarily against other contemporary oligarchical critiques of *dēmokratia*, which in his view fail to understand that moral arguments are pointless against such an immoral system. As Finley (2004) puts it, the Old Oligarch is essentially saying that "I and some of you dislike democracy, but a reasoned consideration of the facts shows that what we condemn on moral grounds is very strong as a practical force, and its strength lies in its immorality" (169). For the Old Oligarch, arguing that *dēmokratia* leads to moral decline does not work because *dēmokratia* only takes hold after moral decline has set in. In this sense, he argues that—in the context of his own time—*dēmokratia* is a *new* form of rule, not a corrupted one that can be repaired somehow. Thus in his short composition, the Old Oligarch both acknowledges other oligarchical narratives against *dēmokratia* and offers his own: that *dēmokratia* evades moral arguments because it is a new form of rule that is completely immoral.

In positing his own critique, the Old Oligarch links *dēmokratia*'s immorality with its emphasis on freedom (*eleutheros*). For the *dēmos*, the concept of *eleutheros* was fundamental to both the establishment and the maintenance of *dēmokratia*.²⁰ In its literal meaning, *eleutheros* connotes "free to do what one wants politically" (Marr and Rhodes

²⁰ Kurt A. Raaflaub (1983) writes, "The democratic notion of freedom...was not only a collective but a very comprehensive and complex notion. In contemporary [fifth-century] discussions, it was set in opposition to the rigid, repressive social and political system of Sparta, to tyranny, and to oligarchy" (522).

71).²¹ For the Old Oligarch, however, *eleutheros* is mainly a synonym for licentiousness. He makes this point in his comparison between oligarchy and democracy: “For within the best men there is the least amount of licentiousness and injustice, and the most scrupulousness over what is valuable; whereas within the *dēmos* there is the greatest ignorance, indiscipline and worthlessness” (1.5). In short, *dēmokratia* is a new form of government for which morality is irrelevant, precisely because it is based upon and derives its strength from immorality—i.e. “freedom” (*eleutheros*)—that has been instituted by those who are unfit to rule in any other type of regime.

The Old Oligarch links this immoral new form of “free” government with a pejorative class-based view of the *dēmos*. Throughout his essay, he clearly uses the word “*dēmos*” as a synonym for the “lower classes.” This practice is not unique to him, since it was the norm for oligarchs who despised the inclusionary reforms of the mid-fifth century (Raaflaub 1983, 527). He explains: “For the *dēmos* do not wish the state to be governed well while they themselves are slaves, but rather to be free and to rule, and so they are not concerned about bad government” (1.8). He contrasts his depiction of the *dēmos* with his oligarchical version of “good government” (*eunomia*) where “the valuable men will punish the worthless ones; they will be the ones who make policy for the state, and they will not allow wild persons to be members of the council or to speak or to attend meetings of the assembly” (1.9). Since *dēmokratia* allows no hierarchy, the *dēmos* is “free” (*eleutheros*), which is to say immoral and licentious.

In the same way, the Old Oligarch discursively links negative democratic freedom with *isēgoria*. In describing the lot of Athenian slaves compared to Lacedaemonian ones, he

²¹ Mogens Herman Hansen (1996) argues that the Ancient Greek noun form, *eleutheria*, is “strikingly similar to the concept of freedom in modern liberal democracies” (99).

writes that in Athens slaves are afforded “equality of free speech [*isēgoria*]” (1.11). Further, they are not taught to fear their masters, since there is almost no distinction between a slave and a free man in Athens (1.11). “If it were legal for the slave or the metic or the freedman to be beaten by a free-born citizen,” the Old Oligarch writes, “he would often strike an Athenian by mistake, thinking that he was a slave” (1.10). In all, this is a highly exaggerated if not completely specious claim. But it does link this pejorative form of *eleutheros* with a pejorative form of *isēgoria*. For the *isēgoria* that the Old Oligarch is discussing brings the “free-born citizen” down to the level of the slave or the metic, erasing any and all social distinctions between the *dēmos* at the expense of the upper class.

Thucydides

Writing at the end of the fifth century, Thucydides provides evidence for a plurality of democratic myths both during and after the war with Sparta. The best evidence for their existence is seen in Book Six of *History of the Peloponnesian War*, where he discusses the “inaccuracy” of several historical narratives concerning the Pisistratidae tyranny and the supposed tyrannicide committed by Aristogeiton and Harmodious (6.54). Here, Thucydides dismisses the version of the story where Aristogeiton and Harmodious bring about the end of the tyranny by killing Pisistratus’ son Hipparchus. He begins by arguing that Hipparchus was not tyrant at that time. “That Hippias [not Hipparchus] succeeded to the tyranny as the eldest son I can definitely confirm from my own knowledge based on particularly reliable oral sources,” he writes (6.55). Chalking the incorrect version up to “the notoriety of his incidental murder” (6.56), Thucydides argues that Aristogeiton and Harmodious killed

Hipparchus over a lovers' quarrel, and not as a political act (6.54).²² Furthermore, he suggests that Hipparchus' murder did not end the tyranny, but actually made it worse. "The consequence for the people of Athens," Thucydides writes, "was that the tyranny now entered a more oppressive stage, as Hippias [Hipparchus' brother] was increasingly fearful for his security" (6.59). It would be another four years before Hippias was "deposed" by the Alcmaeonidae and the Spartans (6.59).

Thucydides makes it clear that these inaccurate histories are evidence of a plurality of democratic mythmaking. He writes that after the mutilation of the Herms, the profanation of the Mysteries, and the recall of Alcibiades (all of which occurred in 415), these histories fueled fear among the Athenians that there was a plot against the democracy. "With this history in mind," Thucydides writes, "and recollecting all the other traditional information they had about the tyrants, the Athenian people were now fiercely suspicious...of some oligarchic or tyrannical conspiracy" (6.60). Their suspicion resulted in arrests among all sectors of Athenian society, even "men of high standing," and numerous forced confessions in the face of little evidence (6.60). These confessions led to public trials, where all who confessed were sentenced to death (6.60). But as Thucydides points out, even years later "it was unclear whether the victims were justly punished" (6.60).²³ In all, he speculates that it was fear of a possible tyranny and belief in the justness of Athens' tyrannicide preceding the

²² Note: the murder occurs after a more rigorously planned assassination scheme during the Panathenaic procession is abandoned once Harmodios and Aristogeiton see one of their conspirators talking to Hippias and think the plot has been uncovered (6.57).

²³ Thucydides writes that, even though it was unclear whether the prisoners' confessions were true, "[t]he people of Athens were greatly relieved to gain what they supposed clear evidence of the truth, having seethed at the possibility that they might never discover who was plotting against their democracy" (6.60). Thus, faced with the possibility of not uncovering who was behind the "conspiracy," the Athenians relied on hearsay and forced confessions as proof and legitimized this course of action with particular (incorrect) historical narratives about their own experience with tyranny and how it was finally brought to an end.

foundation of democracy—both based on incorrect versions of the Harmodious and Aristogeiton story—which drove the Athenians to such drastic measures. Understood this way, Thucydides’ account is not only geared toward refuting incorrect historical narratives, but more importantly critiquing how these narratives influenced (fearful and drastic) political decision making.

In fact, it is Thucydides’ contempt for his fellow Athenians’ naïve reading of their history that drives much of his project. For it is this naïve approach that he aims to undo: “All men show the same uncritical acceptance of the oral traditions handed on to them, even about their own country,” he writes in Book One (1.20). By contrast, his goal in writing his *History* is “to provide a clear understanding of what happened” (1.22) because “what happened...will happen at some time in the same or similar pattern” due to constancy of “the human condition” (1.22). Thucydides believes in the power of history to guide political decision making, but he opposes the blind acceptance of oral histories, especially those that are “glorified” and made “more to please the ear than to serve the truth” (1.21). What he aims for is a critical approach to history that can guide informed political decisions in the present and the future. As Ober (2005) explains, the *History* “is a didactic text...[designed] to produce in its reader a level of expertise adequate to judge historical legacies [in order to make moral judgments]” (64).

Of course, in this way, Thucydides is also taking part in the political mythmaking process. His *History* explicitly assails “uncritical” histories that have been used to legitimate fearful and drastic political decisions. But beyond this critique he posits his *own* version of history for the purposes of political decision making, as well as for legitimating those decisions. Hence he criticizes *how* Athenians have used history in politics, but not *why* they

have used it. For Thucydides, history is of supreme value to politics, but on its own is meaningless; rather, it must be interpreted in a critical and moderate way.²⁴ Finley (1975) writes that we should not read the work of Thucydides as “history in many meaningful sense of that word,” but rather as a “general sociological theory, a theory about power and progress, applied retrospectively to the past” (19). In other words, he writes for the present, using history to legitimate his view of “the human condition” (1.22)—not just the Athenian or the Greek condition, but a more ubiquitous and ambiguous notion of humanity. Ostwald (2009) posits that Thucydides’ goal for his work was that it could “help later generations be aware of what is in store for them” (285), stressing the disastrous influence of prestige (*timē*), fear (*phobos*), and self-interest (*ōphelia*; *kerdos*; *pleonexia*) (Ostwald 286-289). In in this regard, we more clearly recognize the democratic mythmaking in which Thucydides takes part.

But how do we conceptualize Thucydides’ political myth? Is it pro- or anti-Athens? Is it pro- or anti-*dēmokratia*? In all, what implication does his *History* appear to have for politics at the time he was finishing it (around 403)? While his *History* deals with the events of the Peloponnesian War (431-404), it is directed at those living in the war’s wake. The most immediate time following the war, in which Thucydides was most likely still writing, was during the newly restored democracy which had replaced the oligarchical, Spartan-

²⁴Hannah Arendt makes a similar argument regarding the relationship between facts and historical narratives in “Truth and Politics.” She argues that facts on their own are apolitical. That an event happened—such as, “Germany invaded Belgium in August 1914” (249)—is not political. Rather it “acquires political implications only by being put into an interpretive context” (249). Again, Arendt’s 1914 example illustrates this. The fact that “Germany invaded Belgium in August 1914” (249) tells us something that happened. It does not tell us *why* that thing happened. When the *why* question is asked, the fact becomes political because the fact is then put into some sort of context—into some sort of narrative—where it ceases to be an event and becomes part of a larger story.

imposed government of the Thirty Tyrants (404).²⁵ The reign of the Thirty, Ober (2005) writes, “featured arbitrary confiscations, expulsions, and killing” (61). Once this oligarchy was overthrown, the *dēmokratia* was reinstated. However, as Ober goes on to note, the newly restored democracy imposed an amnesty “declaring that past actions, performed under the government of the Thirty, could not be the basis for legal prosecution” (61). In effect, it declared a certain portion of the past “off limits,” creating an opening in which new and reconstructed histories could be instituted (Ober 62). Thus, it was during this time that Athens’ ancestral constitutional debate began to heat up.²⁶ In this context, Thucydides’ *History* is both part of the democratic mythmaking process and part of a specific debate about the most salient and important features in Athens’ past for the newly restored democracy.²⁷ But Thucydides’ *History* is not dogmatic, nor is it ardently pro-democracy or even pro-Athenian. Rather, it is a complex history that discusses both the problems and the benefits of Athens’ democratic system. And it does so by weighing in on certain features of the ancestral constitutional debate.

²⁵ There is no general scholarly agreement on the exact time period when Thucydides wrote his *History*. Thucydides does tell us that he began writing it “right at the outbreak, reckoning that this would be a major war and more momentous than any previous conflict” (1.1). Mark Munn (2000) claims Thucydides wrote the majority of his text in the early fourth century. Ober (2005) writes that this is “unpersuasive” (63 n.41), but does say that we know from Thucydides own statements (2.65) that he was still writing during the Spartan’s victory in 404, which gives some credence to the idea that he lived following the overthrow of the Thirty (63).

²⁶ Ober writes: “Thucydides’ *History of the Peloponnesian War*, like much Athenian ancestral constitution literature, can best be understood as a ‘conflict-era historical project’... a permanent resource for judgment in his readers’ present” (2005, 63).

²⁷ It should be noted that this is not meant to imply this was Thucydides’ only intention with his work, given that he started composing it right after the war started and intended for it to be used for later generations beyond his contemporary period. That said, his work, especially in “the Archaeology,” discusses numerous aspects/issues associated with the broader ancestral constitutional debate.

In “the Archaeology” (1.1-1.19), Thucydides discusses two particular issues that were salient in the ancestral constitutional debate: Attica’s indigenous versus migrant population, and Athens’ historical relationship to other Greek colonies, namely Ionia. Both of these, as we saw in Herodotus, were aspects of the autochthony vs. non-autochthony debate in the mid-fifth century prior to the Peloponnesian War.²⁸ Although autochthony is only indirectly referenced, Thucydides appears to side with those who argue that Attica’s population is completely indigenous.²⁹ While other Greek settlements were the result of “constant migrations,” with different populations settling in and even attacking other existing settlements in a search for better soil to farm, “the thin soil of Attica kept it largely free [from migration], so the original population remained” (1.2). So while Thucydides does appear to agree with the autochthony narrative that Athens’ population is indigenous, he does not completely celebrate it.³⁰ Thucydides does go on to state that migrations and conflicts elsewhere created strife and stasis that then forced other groups out of their own settlements, with many of these displaced people coming to Athens because it was such “a stable society” (1.2). Over time, Attica became so populated that colonies were sent out to establish new settlements, as in Ionia (1.2). Thucydides sides here with the claim that Ionia is a colony of Athens. Further, he discusses how Ionia actually influenced Athenian lifestyle, telling us how the wealthier men of Athens took to wearing linen tunics and tied their hair into a

²⁸ This particular issue continued to be debated in the late fifth century/early fourth century during the ancestral constitutional debate.

²⁹ It is also mentioned at the beginning of Pericles’ Funeral Oration: “I shall begin with our ancestors first of all...The same race has always occupied this land, passing it from generation to generation until the present day, and it is to those brave men that we owe our inheritance of a land that is free. They deserve our praise” (2.36).

³⁰ Pelling (2009) writes that this particular narrative makes autochthony “not anything particularly to be proud of any more...just a consequence of their not being worth invading” (476).

topknot with a golden cicada in it—“the same fashion which prevailed for some time among the older of their kinsmen in Ionia” (1.6). Thus Ionia continued to have a relationship with Athens and even exerted some influence on it. All told, he presents a more complicated history of Athens, one that includes aspects associated with both the autochthonous and non-autochthonous narratives.

Beyond this, Thucydides’ discussion of Attica’s origins provides insight into his views on democratic politics in Athens. For while he sides with one aspect of the autochthonous narrative—that Athens’ population is indigenous—he does not champion it. Attica had bad soil that no one wanted, save the people that were born there. This weakness allowed Attica to avoid the threat of both external and internal conflict, since elsewhere “[i]t was the quality of the earth which led to an imbalance of power and the resulting internal quarrels which destroyed communities, as well as the greater risk of aggression from outsiders” (1.2). Rather than celebrating the greatness of the region, Thucydides’ narrative highlights a different aspect: its equability—i.e. its moderation and resoluteness. It is equability that allowed Attica to develop independently of other Greek settlements. And it is equability that made the region attractive to other displaced peoples. Later on, it is equability that became one of the main principles that is undermined when prestige (*timē*), fear (*phobos*), and self-interest (*ōphelia*; *kerdos*; *pleonexia*) influenced decision making before and during the Peloponnesian War.

The Mytilenian debate is evidence of Thucydides’ stress on equability as integral to democratic politics. At the beginning of the debate, Cleon, “the most drastic of the citizens” (3.36), chastises the *dēmos* for rethinking its previous decision to execute all Mytilenian men and sell each woman and child into slavery. “I have often thought on previous occasions that

democracy is incapable of running an empire, and your present change of mind over Mytilene is a prime example,” Cleon tells the *dēmos* (3.37). He goes on to say that “[t]he good sense which comes with intellectual naivety is a more valuable quality than the sophistication which knows no morals, and generally it is ordinary folk who make the better citizens compared with the cleverer folk” (3.37). Afterward, Diodotus—who had argued the previous day against the harsh decision to punish all the Mytilenaeans—responds to Cleon by saying that he “has no sympathy with those [like Cleon] who object to multiple debates on issues of major importance” (3.42). Instead, he insists: “the two greatest impediments to good decision-making are haste and anger. Anger is the fellow of folly, and haste the sign of ignorance and shallow judgement” (3.42). Beyond his disapproval of Cleon, it is clear that Thucydides sides with Diodotus here—not only for the content of his argument but also for the way in which Diodotus rationalizes it. In his speech, Diodotus “replac[es] anger with moderation,” as Gerald M. Mara (2001, 830) puts it, stressing thoughtfulness and restraint. Further, “[w]hile Diodotus’ speech implicitly appeals to the most thoughtful Athenians, he does not attempt to privilege or to marginalize any particular class of citizens” (Mara 831). Diodotus believes that all are capable of practicing thoughtfulness, but also understands that haste and anger are natural to men (3.41; 3.45).

Like Thucydides, Diodotus stresses equability, especially in the face of prestige (*timē*), fear (*phobos*), and self-interest (*ōphelia*; *kerdos*; *pleonexia*). He is against rash and immoderate thinking in political decisions. His stance is similar to Thucydides in his depiction of the Athenian response to the mutilation of the Herms and the profanation of the Mysteries. In the Mytelinean debate, the first decision to murder all the Mytelinaean men and sell all the women and children into slavery (which Cleon favors) is harsh, guided by the

fear of a similar revolt happening elsewhere and by the self-interest of maintaining Athens' prestige as a preeminent imperial power. This decision is the result of—to use Cleon's words—“intellectual naivety” (3.37). Yet Diodotus does not, like Cleon, appeal to naïve gut reactions, but to intelligence and thoughtfulness; and his appeal to “moderation” and “practical vigilance” (3.46) ends up winning the day.

Hence Thucydides' approach to democratic mythmaking cannot simply be seen as either pro- or anti-Athens, or pro- or anti-*dēmokratia*. More nuanced, it highlights equability as being a valuable but all too often undervalued aspect of Athens' democratic system. While Cleon criticizes the *dēmos* for displaying “weakness” (3.37) in agreeing to hold a second debate, Thucydides labels its initial decision “savage and excessive” (3.36.2), having been made in a complete “state of anger” (3.36). When it sides with Diodotus' call for moderate thinking, the *dēmos* is presented as being capable of replacing impulsive decision making with equability. But, as the Thucydides' *History* reveals elsewhere, equability is not always the result. Hence Thucydides both critiques and praises Athens' democracy.

Conservative Democratic Mythmaking and the Ancestral Constitutional (*Patrios Politeia*) Debate in the Mid-Fourth Century: Isocrates and Plato

At the beginning of the fourth century, Athens was much different than it was in the mid-to-late fifth century. By this time, it had suffered a crushing defeat after a prolonged war with Sparta. It had experienced two oligarchical government takeovers. And while these regimes were eventually overthrown and *dēmokratia* re-established, it appeared that the radical days of its unique regime were over. As P.J. Rhodes (2004) writes, “the democracy of the...fifth century” was one in which “Athenians were proudly conscious” (199). Yet, by the fourth century “this *motif* disappears: after two experiences of oligarchy based not on

patronage but on violence, everyone accepted democracy, but we no longer find the old enthusiasm for it” (199). It was during this time that the ancestral constitutional (*patrios politeia*) debate became ubiquitous among the members of the *dēmos*. Harkening back to an older ideal of Athens, *patrios politeia* was used as a means for proposing policies aimed at returning Athens to its more restricted form of rule. Not surprisingly, democratic mythmaking in Athens during the fourth century became much more conservative than it had a century before.

In the following section, we will look at two works that highlight this conservative political mythmaking tract. The first is Isocrates’ *Areopagiticus*, which appeals to the citizens to consider the *dēmokratia* of their forefathers, specifically Solon and Cleisthenes. Isocrates argues for reinstating the Council of the Areopagus, which had been restricted and ultimately dissolved during the radical democratic reforms in the mid-fifth century. The other is actually divided between two works: Plato’s *Timaeus* and *Critias*, in which the famous philosopher wades into the *patrios politeia* debate, using elements associated with other myths—specifically, Solon, hierarchy, and autochthony—for the telling of his own, the famous Atlantis myth.

Isocrates

In *Areopagiticus*, the famous fourth century orator Isocrates invokes Solon and Cleisthenes, labeling them the founders of Athenian democracy, and appeals to his fellow citizens to return to the constitution of these forefathers. In this respect, Isocrates is a “chief spokesman,” as Finley calls him, of Athenians seeking a mixed-constitutional government rather than the newly restored full democracy (1975, 50). This “mixed-constitution” was in all but name an oligarchical agenda. The reason it was not labeled outright as oligarchical

was that, as Finley points out, “oligarchy ceased to be a practical issue” after the overthrow of the Thirty (50). Because the *dēmos* was opposed to any reform remotely hinting of oligarchy, Isocrates and others pushing for limiting the “full” democracy had to vocally claim their opposition to oligarchy in order to present their plan for restricting *dēmokratia*.³¹ They also did this by praising an earlier and idealized conception of Athens’ *dēmokratia*—the *dēmokratia* of Solon and Cleisthenes. Thus Isocrates’ appeal to these democratic “founders” actually served as the basis for his argument for a less participatory democratic regime.

While Isocrates’ *Areopagiticus* invokes that past, it is not meant to be a history lesson. It is squarely about Athens’ political present.³² Isocrates is giving what Finley terms “a political argument based on the past and tradition” (1975, 52). Particularly, Isocrates’ speech is a critique of the contemporary *dēmos*.³³ “For the soul of a state is nothing else than its polity,” he states at the beginning of his oration, “...[a]nd yet we are quite indifferent to the fact that our polity has been corrupted” (14-16). For Isocrates, this corruption is due to a multitude of factors, chief among them moral decline. The *dēmos* is rife with moral

³¹ “Full” is meant to connote the inclusion of all male citizens. Of course, Athens’ *demokrātia* barred participation by women, foreigners, and slaves. Further work concerning the democratic myths that were used throughout the democracy to legitimize these restrictions is needed.

³² Most scholars believe that Isocrates wrote the *Areopagiticus* in the mid-350s B.C.E. (somewhere around 355/4). However, there are a few scholars, such as famed ancient historian Werner Jaeger and more recently Robert W. Wallace who write that this speech was actually written before this period, more likely 358/7 (1986, 77-78). The reason this date seems more likely is that from 357/6 to 355/4, Athens fought in the Social War, which had particularly devastating effects for Athens, not least of which was the loss of these three wealthy city-states as allies. Nowhere in his speech does Isocrates mention this loss or this war. In fact, Isocrates says at the very beginning of his speech that “Athens...enjoys peace throughout her territory, maintains her empire at sea, and has, furthermore, many allies who, in case of any need, will readily come to her aid, and many more allies who are paying their contributions and obeying her commands” (1). Hence, Isocrates’ introduction makes no sense if Athens was, at that time, participating in such a disastrous war.

³³ His tone on Athens’ empire would change with his anti-imperialism speech *On the Peace*, delivered either during or after the Social War, which many scholars believe is further evidence that *Areopagiticus* was written earlier.

delinquency—gambling, promiscuity, and laziness (48). “But let no one suppose that I am out of temper with the younger generation,” he says, “[for] I do not think they are to blame for what goes on...[rather] the...blame [falls] on those who directed the city a little before our time” (50-51). Isocrates here is referring to the radical democratic reformers of the mid-fifth century—for it is they who set Athens on the course toward moral decay. Unlike the Old Oligarch, he does not believe Athens’ *dēmokratia* is synonymous with immorality. In fact, he believes that Athens “may redeem” its polity and its greatness (14-16). He writes:

I find that the one way—the only possible way—which can avert future perils from us and deliver us from our present ills is the we should be willing to restore the earlier democracy which was instituted by Solon, who proved himself above all other the friend of the people, and which was re-established by Cleisthenes, who drove out the tyrants and brought the people back into power—a government than which we could find none more favourable to the populace or more advantageous to the whole city (143.17-18).

The two historical moments that Isocrates sees as being a model for contemporary Athens are the time of Solon’s reforms (594/3) and the period Cleisthenes’ re-establishment of a more inclusive government following the Pisistratidae tyranny (508). For Isocrates there is no discontinuity between Solon and Cleisthenes. And while he would have surely been aware that this narrative conflicted with earlier views of Cleisthenes’ reforms (e.g. Herodotus 6.131), Isocrates does not make any claims of historical accuracy. Instead he simply uses history as a way to legitimate this argument.

Isocrates’ speech invokes and compares a *non-ideal* and an *ideal* Athens. His *non-ideal* is the Athens from 462 to the political present (minus the brief oligarchical interludes). According to Isocrates, this is the Athens that “has been the cause of so many evils” and “which is...drifting on from bad to worse” (18). It is also the most participatory Athenian democracy, the form of government which has “delivered the poor [into] want...[,] the young [into] excesses...[,] the men in public life [into] the temptations of greed...and the older men

[into] despondency” (55). By contrast, his *ideal* is the Athens of Solon and Cleisthenes, the Athens where “citizens lived in accord with each other and at peace with mankind, enjoying the good will of the Hellenes and inspiring fear in the barbarians” (52).

With his invocation of Solon, Isocrates is attempting to accomplish at least two things: 1) identifying Solon as primary “founder” of the democracy, and 2) linking his own conception of an ideal *dēmos* with Solon’s reforms. In terms of the first, Isocrates’ identification of Solon as “founder” of the democracy is not unique. In fact, as Claude Mossé (2004) says, “[many] Athenians of the end of the fifth and of the fourth centuries recreated the image of Solon to make him the founding father of the democracy, a democracy which was...wise and stable...” and which skillfully “mixed [its] constitution” (241). Solon’s democracy, for these Athenians, was a restricted democracy.³⁴ By arguing that his proposition for restricting the democracy is a return to the “democracy which was instituted by Solon” (16), Isocrates is framing his argument with an ancient *ideal* that both predates the inclusionary reforms of Ephialtes and invokes one of Athens’ most celebrated and wisest citizens. This makes the more inclusionary democracy seem like a derivation from what was originally intended.³⁵

Invoking Solon also creates a comparison between the period of civil tumult in the early sixth century, which Solon’s reforms were strictly designed to solve, and the “moral” tumult Isocrates sees in the Athens of his own day. In the early sixth century, Athens faced a crisis between its wealthy elite and the majority of its lower class citizens. The *The*

³⁴ But this was just one view of Solon. Moses I. Finley (1975) tells us that other, more pro-democracy orators, such as Demosthenes, greatly disagreed with this depiction (50). But these disagreements, in should be noted once again, were not over the *historical* Solon.

³⁵ Alisse Theodore Portnoy (2003) writes: “Isocrates can, and does, interpret—even constitute—Solon as embodying his argument” (106).

Athenian Constitution (*Athēnaiōn Politeia*) describes this period as a time when “the many were enslaved by the few” (5.1). This description was not simply figurative, since many of the elite were actually selling debtors into slavery. As Plutarch writes, “All the common people were in debt to the rich. For they either tilled their lands for them...or else they pledged their persons for debts and could be seized by their creditors, some becoming slaves at home, and others being sold into foreign countries ” (*Life of Solon* 13.2). As a result of this tumult, both the upper class and the lower classes turned to Solon. The result was a moderate compromise in which he cancelled all debts, ending the sale of debtors into slavery and bringing back those who had been previously sold. But Solon did not go as far as taking the land away from the wealthy and redistributing it to the poor. By evoking Solon, Isocrates is thus envisioning a similar kind of “moderate” reform. Instead of financial and class cleavages, however, he sees Athens as suffering a moral cleavage. For while he feels that the inclusion of the lower classes has been problematic for Athens, he believes that all men belonging to the *dēmos* exist in a state of corruption (55). Hence he aims to make Athens a more “orderly and just government of the people” (70) through reforms similar to Solon’s.

Isocrates proceeds to link Solon to Cleisthenes (16), creating the myth of a more restricted and sustained ideal of democracy. While Herodotus had presented Cleisthenes as the founder of democracy (*Histories* 6.131), Isocrates argues that Cleisthenes simply “re-established” the *dēmokratia* that Solon had founded (16). This is not to say that Cleisthenes plays an insignificant role in Isocrates’ democratic myth. While not the founder of *dēmokratia*, he is described as the one who “drove out the tyrants and brought the people back into power” (16-17). Hence Cleisthenes is the hero who saves Athens’ *dēmokratia*. The reforms that Cleisthenes instituted that differed from those of Solon matter little to

Isocrates. What is important to him is that both figures instituted a *dēmokratia* that was “the most impartial and mildest of governments” in both theory and in practice (20).

For Isocrates, the greatest benefit of this earlier *dēmokratia* came from the aristocratic Council of the Areopagus. The Council was the institution that kept Athens and the *dēmos* virtuous. Isocrates describes it:

For our forefathers placed such strong emphasis upon sobriety that they put supervision of decorum in charge of the Council of the Areopagus—a body which was composed exclusively of men who were of noble birth and had exemplified in their lives exceptional virtue and sobriety, and which, therefore, naturally excelled all the other council of Hellas (37-38).

The Council did not accomplish moderation through laws; rather it established “manners and morals” by being examples of everyday virtue (40). It is in this vein that Isocrates calls for the people of Athens to “imitate our ancestors” (84) by bringing back the Council and moderating the democracy once more.

While calling for the restriction of the democracy, Isocrates still emphasizes the importance of equality (*isotēs*). He accomplishes this seemingly paradoxical action by distinguishing between moderate and corrosive forms of equality. He writes: “what contributed to [Solon’s and Cleisthenes’] good government of the state was [knowledge] of the *two recognized kinds of equality*—that which makes the same award to all alike and which gives each man his due” (italics added; 21). The former kind of equality, Isocrates says, is unjust because it “holds that the good and the bad are worthy of the same honours” (21-22). In this form, each member of the *dēmos* is equally honored regardless of his deeds. The latter kind of equality, by contrast, prefers “that which rewards and punishes every man according to his desserts” (22). In other words, each member of the *dēmos* earns the distinction of honorable and virtuous. Ober (2001) writes that in addition to signifying two

kinds of equality, Isocrates' discussion also creates a distinction between two "types" of men: "excellent men (*chrēstoi*) and scoundrels (*ponēroi*)" (279), arguing that a truly moderate democracy enforces a form of *isotēs* that promotes *chrēstoi* over *ponēroi*. It was this form of *isotēs* that allowed the ancestral *dēmokratia* to "[select] the best and the ablest for each function of the state" (22). The other form of *isotēs*—the corrosive form—only trains "citizens in such a fashion [to look] upon insolence as democracy, lawlessness as liberty, impudence of speech as equality, and licence to do what they [please] as happiness" (20). This corrosive form is the form of *isotēs* that exists in the contemporary democracy. It sees *ponēroi* as being the same as *chrēstoi*. In this way, Isocrates' distinction presents the *dēmos* with a choice: either no reform, leading to further decline; or reform in the way of restricting political governance, leading to greater moderation.

In order to avoid criticism, Isocrates distinguishes his *ideal* democracy from any and all forms of oligarchy. He does this partly because he is writing at a time when the reign of the Thirty is still in the minds of many older Athenians. But his reasons for distinguishing his prescription from oligarchy are also symbolic, since he emphasizes that his *ideal* democracy is still one that is ruled by the *dēmos*. "I am not in favour of oligarchy or special privilege," he says, "but of a just and orderly government of the people" (70). Isocrates also refers to his past record, saying that, "in most of the discourses which I have written, you will find that I condemn oligarchies and special privileges, while I commend [equality] and democratic governments—not all of them, but those which are well-ordered" (61). Once again, Isocrates stresses this positive form of democratic "equality," insisting that he is opposed to all forms of oligarchy. Indeed, he emphasizes his esteem for *dēmokratia*, acknowledging the power of the *dēmos*, and stating that the city's fate rests in its hands.

Plato

There has been much scholarly discussion concerning Plato's views on the Athenian *patrios politeia*. Some scholars believe he ardently avoided discussing the debates, while others argue that he touched upon aspects of them in his own work. For example, Moses I. Finley argues that Plato viewed the whole constitutional debate with "with magnificent contempt," and that "his philosophy never rested on 'ancestral' arguments" (1975, 50-51). As evidence, Finley points to the complete absence of Cleisthenes and Draco in Plato's dialogues (50). And while other figures, most notably Solon, are discussed in certain dialogues, "the references...are casual" (50) and not part of any "serious argument" (51). This view contrasts with a more recent argument made by Kathryn A. Morgan (1998), who writes that Plato's Atlantis myth in *Timaeus-Critias* "parallels...contemporary [mid-fourth century] panegyric versions of Athenian history...[most notably] some Isocratean orations" (101). The main parallel that Morgan finds between Plato's Atlantis myth and other *patrios politeia* myths is the role of Solon. Countering Finley's claim that Plato's discussions of Solon were purely casual, Morgan argues that Plato's use of Solon in *Timaeus* "is anything but" (112).

In looking at both the content of the Atlantis myth and the setting in which the discussion of it occurs in *Timaeus-Critias*, Morgan's assessment is clearly correct. Solon does play more than a casual role in the story. However, it is not only the use of Solon that illustrates the relationship that these two dialogues have with mid-fourth century constitutional debates. Rather, the method and setting in which the story is discussed also illustrates the extent to which these dialogues engage with them. As this section will illustrate, Plato's discussion and use of the Atlantis myth shares striking similarities with the

other democratic myths discussed in this paper. In fact, while Plato may have viewed the ancestral constitutional debate “with magnificent contempt” (Finley 1975, 50), he definitely took part in it.

Written sometime around 355, *Timaeus-Critias* is thought to have originally been planned as trilogy of dialogues. However, *Critias* comes to an abrupt halt in what seems like the middle of the story. T. K. Johansen (2008) writes that there are three possible explanations for this fact. One is that the speaker, Critias, intentionally stops his story because of his “limited abilities or devious character” (xxx). According to Johansen, this claim cannot be correct since Critias announces at the beginning of *Timaeus* that he had just told the story earlier that morning, and thus would be quite capable of finishing this version (xxx; 26c). The second possibility is that Plato abandoned the text in favor of writing the *Laws*, which some believe contains the same content that would have appeared in the third dialogue.³⁶ The problem with this theory, Johansen writes, is that “it makes the scope of Plato’s project far exceed what is announced by Critias” (xxx).³⁷ The third theory is that “Plato abandoned the *Critias* because he realized that spelling out the Atlantis story was, in a way, superfluous” (xxx-xxx). In other words, the story was not needed to illustrate the main points contained in *Timaeus* about a just and orderly universe. Johansen believes this explanation is the most probable. Regardless of the reasons Plato abandoned the text, it is

³⁶ This content, according to Johansen, would have been the discussion of different kinds of constitutions (xxx).

³⁷ In “previewing” the dialogues at the beginning of *Timaeus*, Critias says nothing about the content of Hermocrates’ discussion (27a-b). In fact, Critias does not even tell Socrates that Hermocrates is going to speak in *Timeaus*. Rather, it is Hermocrates who tells Socrates earlier in the dialogue that he will live up to his “part of the bargain” by delivering a speech (20c-d). Yet Hermocrates does not go into detail on the specific content of his speech. Later, in *Critias*, Socrates states that, after Critias’ discussion, “it is [Hermocrates’] turn to speak” (108b). Critias then tells Hermocrates that he is “brave because [he is] in the rear rank” (108c).

quite clear that the Atlantis story in the *Critias* exists in an incomplete form. That said, the basic elements of the story are summarized at the beginning of *Timaeus*. And it is this summary which provides the greatest support for the argument that *Timaeus-Critias* represents Plato's commentary on and foray into the Athenian constitutional debates.

In some ways *Timaeus-Critias* are wholly dependent on the *Republic*. During the festival of Athena (the setting of the dialogues), Socrates is asked by his three companions—Timaeus, Critias, and Hermocrates—to give “a brief summary of the discussion” from the previous day (17b).³⁸ This summary is strikingly similar to Socrates' description of the kallipolis in the *Republic*. “Yesterday my main object, I suppose, was to describe my view of the best constitution and its citizens,” he says (17c). In this constitution (*politeia*), Socrates describes people separated into different classes and by “appropriate occupation or craft” (17d). One of these classes contains “those whose duty it was to fight on behalf of all...the city's sole guards against threat of harm, whether external or internal” (17d-18a). This constitution would also be aimed at bringing women's nature closer to men's (18c), and that the two sexes would “share the same occupations both in war and in the rest of life” (18c). Further, children born in this ideal city would “be shared in common by all, and arranged that no one should recognize any child born as their own, but that all should regard themselves as related to everyone else” (18c-d). In all, as Johansen (2004) writes, “*Timaeus-Critias* is presented as a continuation of the *Republic*” (7).³⁹

³⁸ There was to be a fourth unnamed companion who could not make it after having “fallen sick” (17a).

³⁹ In a *Journal of Politics* article from 1947, Eric Voegelin calls *Timaeus* “the sequel to the *Republic*” (307).

Unlike the *Republic*, however, Socrates is not the central figure in *Timaeus-Critias*. Rather he acts as listener, while his three companions act as storytellers. Socrates asks them to take on this role, telling them that he yearns to hear of his ideal city in motion (19b-c). He goes on:

I would be glad to hear someone give an account of it fighting with other cities in the contests in which cities compete entering a war in an appropriate way and showing in the fighting all the qualities one would expect from its system of education and training, both in deeds through its actions and in words by its negotiations with its rivals (19c).

Socrates describes his companions as being fitted to the task of discussing his ideal city in this way, since they are “by nature and upbringing imbued with philosophy and statesmanship” (20a).⁴⁰ Timaeus, who “comes from the well-ordered city of Locris in Italy,” is “second to none in wealth and birth” and has “reached the highest eminence in the every kind of philosophy” (20a). Critias is “no amateur in these matters” either (20a). And Hemocrates “is qualified...both by his natural gifts and by his education” (20a-b). It is to these three that Socrates has given the task to “return [his] hospitality by way of speeches” (20b-c).

Critias’ speech centers on a great contest that occurred over nine thousand years ago between the immensely powerful island-city of Atlantis and Athens, which at that time was ordered in the same manner as Socrates’ ideal constitution. The story of this contest, Critias tells Socrates, was handed down to him by Solon, the “wisest of the seven wise men” (20e). Critias explains how Solon first heard the story. During his trip around the Mediterranean

⁴⁰ They are not like the “poets, past and present” (19d), nor “[t]he tribe of sophists” (19e), both of whom are incapable of hitting “upon the sort of things that men who are at once philosophers and statesmen would do and say in way and in battles they engage with enemies in action or in verbal conversation” (19e).

after giving Athens its laws, Solon had visited the city of Saïs in Egypt (22e).⁴¹ There he engaged in conversations with its wise priests about the ancient past. During the conversation, “a very old priest” explained that while the Athenians have no record of the ancient past, due to the more recent development of writing in Greece (23a), the Egyptian priests have “preserved from the earliest times a written record of any great or splendid achievement or notable event which has come to our ears” (23a). The priest went on to reveal that before the great deluge that has traditionally marked Athens’ origins, “the city that is now Athens was pre-eminent in war and conspicuously the best governed in every way” (23c). In fact, this prehistoric Athens was said to have “the finest [constitution] of any in the world” (23d). During this time period, Athens “checked a great power which arrogantly advanced from its base in the Atlantic ocean to attack the cities of Europe and Asia” (25c). This great power was the island-city of Atlantis.

According to Critias, Solon planned to write an epic poem upon his return detailing this contest between Athens and Atlantis, a poem which would have rivaled “even Homer or Hesiod” (22d). But due to his advanced age and the turmoil in Athens at that time (related to Pisistratus’ attempts to establish his tyranny), Solon could not finish the work. Still, he related the story to Critias’ grandfather who in turn told it to his grandson (21a-b). Critias tells Socrates: “I was reminded of this story and noticed with astonishment how closely, by some miraculous luck, with no intention, your account [of an ideal constitution] coincided with Solon’s” (25e-26a). Critias then states that his speech, which will recount the war with Atlantis, “will transfer to reality [*epi talēthes*] the citizens and the city which [Socrates]

⁴¹ Immediately after passing his reforms, Solon stayed in Athens. However, people still came to him to discuss and contest his laws. Herodotus writes that, while Solon stated that his travel was for the purposes of “sight-seeing” (*theōrein*), he actually left so “that he might not be forced to abrogate any of the laws he had laid down” (1.29).

described yesterday as in myth [*mythos*]" (26d). Socrates replies that Critias' "story is particularly well suited to the present festival of the Goddess [Athena]" and supposes that "it is not a fabricated myth [*mythos*] but a true account [*logos*]" (26e). Without any skepticism, he asks Critias to proceed.

In the account, Athens is given a completely new origin story. At the beginning of the world, the gods divided up the entire Earth by casting lots. Attica was given jointly to Hephaestus and Athena (109c), who both "produced a native race of good men and gave them suitable political arrangements" (109d). These "political arrangements" were similar to Socrates' ideal constitution: men and women both served as guardians (110b); there was a separate class of artisans (110d); and there was no private property (110d). In all, this account contrasts with the more traditional story of Athens' origins, in which Athena competed with and defeated Poseidon in a chariot race in order to become the main deity of the city. Poseidon, angry at the outcome of the race, then punished the city with a great deluge. And while in the Atlantis myth there is still a great deluge sent by Poseidon, it is reimagined as being the direct result of a conflict between humans—the Atlanteans' battle with the Athenians. In all, the gods in this story are entirely peaceful, which contrasts with the more chaotic and violent stories in Hesiod's *Theogony*. As Critias says about the gods, "[F]or it would be quite wrong to think the gods do not know what is appropriate to them, or that, knowing it, they would want to annex what properly belongs to others" (109b).

Atlantis has a similar origin as Athens. But unlike the ideally-constituted Athenians, the Atlanteans quickly degenerate due to human greed and license. Allotted to Poseidon, the island-city is divided into ten parts, each ruled by a king (113d-e). These ten kings are Poseidon's offspring, whom he fathered with a mortal inhabitant of Atlantis (113e). In

addition to giving the island-city its rulers, Poseidon also gave it its laws (119c-d). While the kings are said to have ruled with absolute power in their separate districts, they would meet “every fifth or sixth year (thereby showing equal respect to both odd and even numbers)” in the temple of Poseidon, where the laws were inscribed, to consult “on matters of mutual interest and [inquire] into and [give] judgment on any wrong committed by any of them” (119d). During their meetings, they also paid tribute to Poseidon (119e). However, with the passage of time the successive generations of kings degenerated: “the divine portion in them became weakened by frequent admixture of a large quantity of mortal stock, and their human traits became predominant, they ceased to be able to carry their prosperity with moderation” (121a-b). As the Atlanteans’ ruling hierarchy broke down, and the human qualities of its kings overshadowed their divine qualities, the society became greedy (121b). In this way, Atlantis’ story differed from that of the virtuous Athens, which maintained its hierarchy and practiced moderation. Critias states at the beginning that this insatiable human greed led the Atlanteans into conflict with “various barbarian and Greek nations of the day” (109a), including—of course—Athens. As a result of this greed, Atlantis was punished by the gods, who subsequently unleashed catastrophic earthquakes which sent the great island into the depths of the sea (109s).

There are a lot of moving parts to this story. In fact, there are numerous stories going on within it. There is Critias’ story about the tale he heard from his grandfather, who heard it from Solon, who heard it from an old Egyptian priest, who in turn learned it from an ancient record written some eight thousand years ago (a thousand years after the conflict between Atlantis and Athens). Further, the story contains a revisionist religious-historical narrative about Athens’ origins, its population, and its place within Greek cosmology. And then there

is the role of Solon. As the original Athenian “source” of the story, Solon—in contrast to Finley’s argument—clearly plays more than a “casual” role (1975, 50). However, his role is also more nuanced than Morgan’s discussion allows. It is Solon’s role that illustrates the extent to which *Timaeus-Critias* can be seen as an attempt at democratic mythmaking on the part of Plato.

Given the arguments centered on Solon as “founder” of democracy in the early-to-mid fourth century constitutional debates, Plato’s use of Solon as the original Athenian “source” of the Atlantis story can be interpreted as more than just a casting decision. By the time *Timaeus-Critias* was composed (around 355), Solon had already become an intensely debated political figure, as orators such as Isocrates were claiming him as the founder of Athens’ *dēmokratia* in order to propose major institutional changes and protect upper class interests. These orators compared the sixth-century civil tumult which Solon’s reforms remedied with the fourth-century “moral tumult” they saw occurring. And while Plato in *Timaeus-Critias* does not follow exactly the same line of argument, he does cast Solon against the backdrop of civil and moral tumult in the Atlantis story itself.

Although Plato only makes explicit reference to the civil discord that existed after Solon’s return to Athens (21c), he does draw upon the story—discussed in part by Herodotus—of Solon leaving Athens due to the problems that developed as a result of his laws. After mediating the conflict between upper and lower classes and giving the city a new set of laws (*thesmoi*), Solon had instituted a new method by which the people could interpret these laws for themselves, enhancing the role of the jury-court and granting permission to

anyone seeking an appeal of any aspect of the law to bring his case before the court (9.1).⁴² Having put the power of deciphering and enforcing the laws into the hands of the people, he decides to leave Athens. Herodotus writes that while he claimed that his travel was for the purposes of “sight-seeing” (*theōrein*), Solon actually left so “that he might not be forced to abrogate any of the laws he had laid down” (1.29). Plato does not explicitly state this part of the story, starting at the point where Solon leaves Athens, but this aspect still exists in the backdrop of Critias’ speech. Further, the elderly priest’s statement that he will tell Solon the Atlantis story is “for his sake and his city’s” (24d), also implies that Athens was in need of reform.⁴³ Indeed, upon Solon’s return to Athens, he is unable to transmit his story to the people because the city has fallen into further chaos with the rise of Pisistratus.⁴⁴ Hence both Solon’s departure and his homecoming are marked by civil tumult (21d). In contrast to these struggles, Solon stands as a symbol of moderation, similar to the way that Isocrates paints him (16).

In Plato’s story, Solon also constitutes that rare person Socrates discusses at the beginning of *Timaeus* who combines philosophy with statesmanship. According to Socrates, this rare quality is what distinguishes Timaeus, Critias, and Hermocrates, and is also what distinguishes Solon. His failure to write the Atlantis story as an epic poem is actually evidence of this statesmanship. “[P]oets, past and present,” Socrates says, “[...] [are] imitative people [who] imitate best and most easily what they were brought up with, while what lies

⁴² *The Athenian Constitution* states: “[B]ecause his laws were not written simply and clearly...it was inevitable that many disputes should arise and that the jury-court should decide all things both public and private” (9.2).

⁴³ The old priest also says he will relate the story “chiefly in gratitude to the Goddess” Athena, who—Critias says—is also the deity of Saïs (24d). .

⁴⁴ As Solon wrote about this period: “From great men comes destruction of a city, and the people fall through ignorance under the slavish rule of one man” (*W* 9).

outside [their] experience is difficult to imitate well in deeds and even more so in words” (19d). Johansen (2004, 34-35) argues that Socrates’ suggestion here, that poets are imitators without any sort of practical knowledge of their subject, is comparable to the question he poses to Glaucon (and with which Glaucon agrees) in Book X of the *Republic*: “...shall we conclude that all poetic imitators, beginning with Homer, imitate images of virtue and all the other things they write about and have no grasp of truth [*alētheia*]?” (600e). When comparing this discussion with what Socrates says in *Timaeus*, it is clear that Solon is no mere imitator. While he has failed as a poet in committing the Atlantis story to print, he stands as a successful statesman. In this way, he is a more “reliable” source than Homer, having a “grasp of truth [*alētheia*]” (600e).

That the Atlantis story itself also contains *alētheia* is confirmed by those who pass it down after Solon’s initial re-telling. Critias explains that Solon told the story to his grandfather, Elder Critias, who in turn passed it down to him. While little is said of Elder Critias, Socrates makes it clear that Critias is also one “who is by nature and upbringing imbued with philosophy and statesmanship” (19e-20a). In other words, similar to Solon, Critias is one of those rare individuals whose storytelling—his “imitation”—permeates with experience. And while we can only infer that Elder Critias also was “imbued” with this rare ability, we know for sure that Critias has it (20a), since like Solon, he is one of those with a “grasp of truth [*alētheia*].”

In all, the Atlantis saga is presented as a true story. However, it is not “true” in the way many modern readers might think. While Critias states that the tale of the war with Atlantis “will transfer to reality [*talēthes*] the citizens and the city which [Socrates] described yesterday as in myth [*muthos*]” (26d), he does not mean that the Atlantis story stands as

historical proof that such a war *actually* happened and that such a prehistoric Athens *actually* existed. Rather “reality,” or *talēthes*, can be seen as similar to *alētheia* in the sense that the story is not merely an empty imitation. For while the story does not contain truth “in a literal historical sense,” as Johansen writes, it still contains “an illustration of a general truth” (2004, 46). It is both *plastheis mythos* (a fabricated story) and *alēthinōs logos* (a true account) (Johansen 46). Hence Critias is doing precisely what Socrates asks, giving motion to the ideal constitution he had described earlier (19b), transforming it from pure myth (*mythos*) into an imitation—a story—with truth (*alētheia*). It is this process of imbuing the story with a larger general truth (*alētheia*) that makes it a form of democratic mythmaking. While it involves a war with a mythical island-city, the myth is squarely about Athens and its constitution (*politeia*).

The story’s revisionist account of Athens’ origins produces a similarly revisionist notion of Athens’ *politeia*. Plato, of course, is a thinker who is concerned with *politeia* throughout his writings. While *politeia* has emphasized different things over the centuries, as it was used from Herodotus to Aristotle it primarily encompasses “not only...organization of legislative, judicial, and administrative authority but also the patterns of life and ideology that distinguish its civic culture” (Monoson 2000, 6-7). In all, it carries a moral dimension. Plato also conceptualizes *politeia* not only in relation to certain historical figures, but also within a revisionist origin story of the universe, the world, and Athens itself. Rather than the chaotic origin in Hesiod’s *Theogony*, his revisionist beginning of the world and its relations to the gods is peaceful. In fact, it is even democratic. The Earth is given to the gods by lot. “Each gladly received his just allocation,” Critias says, “and settled his territories; and having done so they proceeded to look after us, their creatures and children, as shepherds look after

their flocks” (109b). This last potion, concerning the relationship between gods and humans—their “children” (109b)—is important to the story. Not only is Athens ordered similarly to Socrates’ ideal constitution, but it has been ordered that way by its patron goddess, Athena, in concert with Hephaestus: “They produced a native race of good men and gave them suitable political arrangements” (109d). Here we see the return of autochthony. Not only are the Athenians born from the very soil they now occupy, but they were raised and cultivated by their patron goddess. In this respect, the Atlantis story can be seen as tying Athens’ *politeia* directly to its patron goddess.

In all, Athena is the principal figure throughout *Timaeus-Critias*. It is not chance that this dialogue is set during her festival. As Critias tells Socrates, the story is meant to both “repay...[Socrates] and to offer the Goddess on her festival day a just and truthful hymn of praise” (21a). Tom Garvey (2008) discusses the importance of the Atlantis story as a hymn to Athena. Garvey writes: “The Atlantis story *qua* hymn to Athena is thus a means of reclaiming for Athens its patron goddess, a reenactment of the original chariot race for the city in a manner more amenable to Plato’s idiosyncratic conception of the gods” (392). In other words, Plato’s use of Athena is meant to reassert Athena back into Athens’ *politeia*. Unlike Isocrates, he is not calling for a return to the *politeia* of Solon or Cleisthenes; he is calling for a return to the *politeia* of Athena—the just god who brought up the Athenians from the soil and gave them their “political arrangements” (109d).

This “call for a return” is further emphasized in the story’s treatment of Atlantis and its relationship with its patron god, Poseidon. That Atlantis serves as a contrast with prehistoric Athens is quite clear. Unlike the well-ordered, self-contained, and religiously-devout prehistoric Athens, Atlantis eventually strays from its divine laws. As Critias states,

Atlantis was ordered originally according to the laws passed down by Poseidon (119c). Each of the kings, when assembled together, always “exchanged mutual pledges” through tribute and sacrifice to Poseidon before conducting their joint business (119e). Thus Atlantis paid respect and gave tribute to its own divinely-ordered *politeia*. However, as Critias explains, “when the divine portion in them became weakened...[and] they ceased to be able to carry their prosperity with moderation...[due to their] pursuit of unbridled ambition and power,” they degenerated completely (21b). As Atlantis’ *politeia* strayed from its divine origins, its population paid the ultimate price after their “pursuit of unbridled ambition and power” (21b) led them into conflict with other nations, including prehistoric Athens.

Beyond serving simply as a contrast with prehistoric Athens, Atlantis aligns itself with moral critiques of mid-fourth century Athens. When looked at in combination with Isocrates’ statement that mid-fourth century Athens “delivered the poor [into] want...[,] the young [into] excesses...[,] the men in public life [into] the temptations of greed...and the older men [into] despondency” (55), the degeneration of Atlantis looks quite similar. As Pierre Vidal-Naquet (1981) explains, this is not a coincidence, for Atlantis contains many “Athenian aspects” (212). For instance, the division of the island into ten kingdoms is quite similar to Cleisthenes’ reforms, which divided Athens into ten tribes (Vidal-Naquet 212). Further, Atlantis’ growth as an imperial power and its eventual defeat by a smaller power (prehistoric Athens), is quite similar to Athens’ Sicilian expedition and its defeat in the Social War (Vidal-Naquet 213).⁴⁵ In this way, Plato’s call for a return to Athena’s *politeia* is illustrated further through Atlantis’ degeneration.

⁴⁵ The latter of which would have been occurring, or at least would have just recently ended, during the writing of *Timaeus-Critias*.

In all, it is clear that Plato is advancing a unique democratic myth in the Atlantis story. Although it exists in an unfinished form, the story comments on the content of previous democratic myths, and is also positioned as distinctive. Plato advances a pro-autochthony version of Athens' origins, but unlike previous thinkers he ties its population directly to its patron goddess. Plato also stresses the importance of religion and its relationship with (and in contrast to) human action, which stands in contrast to others (like Herodotus and Thucydides) who mainly focus on the latter. For Plato, the gods are just and moral, and people can be too, but only when they pay tribute and respect to their divine origins—i.e. their divine *politeia*. It is when men stray from their divine origins that they break with the gods, and further degenerate into immorality. In this sense, Plato's Atlantis story contains similar themes to that of the Old Oligarch and Isocrates. Similar to the Old Oligarch, Plato's story links a popular form of government with immorality. And like Isocrates, Plato advances the notion that the only way for a city-state to regain its morality is to return to the *politeia* of its ancestors. However, unlike Isocrates, Plato's democratic myth does not argue for a return to the *politeia* of Solon. Plato instead uses the wisest statesman, who has a "grasp of truth [*alētheia*]" (*Republic* 600e), to transmit a story about a much more ancient *politeia*.

Thus while this story may not be historically "true," the story is still presented as containing a larger general truth (*alētheia*) meant squarely for Athens' *dēmos*. And that truth, which is the center of Plato's democratic myth, is that it must return to its divine origins, to the *politeia* ordered by Athena herself. If it does not, then, like the Atlanteans, the *dēmos* will risk apocalyptic consequences. But if it can return to its well-ordered *politeia*—which is Socrates' ideal constitution—it will, like Critias in the dialogue, "transfer to reality

[*epi talēthes*]” what exists only “in myth [*mythos*]” (26d). The *dēmos* can become moral and virtuous. But this can only happen if, like Solon, it learns to grasp the truth (*alētheia*).

Conclusion

In this brief sampling of works produced during two distinct eras in democratic Athens’ history, we have seen evidence of a democratic approach to political mythmaking. Not only do these different thinkers, writers, orators, and critics provide evidence for and comment on coterminous political myths, but they themselves posit unique myths of their own. In the mid-to-late fifth century, after the radical expansion of the *dēmos*, we see three particular works responding to and discussing the institutionalization of *isonomia* (equality under the law) and *isēgoria* (equality of speech) and their effect on *dēmokratia*. Herodotus gives numerous accounts of two particular political myths concerning Athens’ *dēmos* and notions of equality—one autochthonous (stressing equality) and one non-autochthonous (stressing class distinctions)—and then posits his own account, which while decidedly non-autochthonous is unique in its advocacy of equality and *dēmokratia*. The Old Oligarch, meanwhile, dismisses other oligarchical critiques of the immorality fostered by Athens’ institution of *isēgoria*, arguing that they do not understand that immorality is the very foundation of *isēgoria* and *dēmokratia*. Thucydides focuses on how *isonomia* and *isēgoria* foster the potential for equability. His concern is that without an emphasis on equability the *dēmos* will give in to prestige (*timē*), fear (*phobos*), and self-interest (*ōphelia*; *kerdos*; *pleonexia*), as it did in response to the mutilation of the Herms and the profanation of the Mysteries, as well as in the first day of the Mytelinean debate.

In the mid-fourth century, we saw a shift toward conservatism in democratic mythmaking. Isocrates, in his oration *Areopagiticus*, derides the *dēmos* of his day for being

morally corrupt. He thus harkens back to a more restricted form of *dēmokratia*, the one founded by Solon and then re-established by Cleisthenes. It is only by returning to this *dēmokratia* that the *dēmos* can institutionalize a form of equality (*isotēs*) that can transform its members from scoundrels (*ponēroi*) to excellent men (*chrēstoi*). Similarly, Plato's *Timaeus-Critias* argues for a return to a prior and more virtuous *politeia*. This *politeia*, however, is less democratic than even Isocrates' prescription. Couched in an epic contest between a prehistoric Athens and the fictitious island-city of Atlantis, and utilizing contested political figures like Solon, Plato's discussion of this ideal *politeia* emphasizes virtuousness through a well ordered and more religiously pious *dēmos*.

While the content of these democratic myths were unique to the political contexts in which they were created, the mythmaking process seen in Athens is one that is still with us today. Citizens in modern representative democracies still identify with, unite under, and contribute to conflicting political myths that are represented institutionally. One of the more salient examples of this today is seen in the debate between conservative Tea Partiers and liberal Democrats on the religiosity of the U.S. founding and the Constitution. As Theda Skocpol and Vanessa Williamson discuss in their book *The Tea Party and the Remaking of Republican Conservatism* (2012), many conservative Tea Partiers believe “that America is a ‘Republic with Christian-Judeo influences’” and hold a “fundamentally religious understanding of the U.S. Constitution” (52). By contrast, many liberal Democrats have a secular understanding of the founding and Constitution (47). What is interesting to Skocpol and Williamson, however, is that Tea Partiers “are not so different from other Americans” when it comes to believing in the legitimacy of the democracy itself (47). Hence in this contemporary example, we clearly see two groups with contrasting ideas about how the

democracy came into being, why it is legitimate, and what purposes it is meant to serve, but—at the same time—who both share a common belief in the system as a form of government.

More study is needed on contemporary democratic mythmaking. How does a shared sense of legitimacy concerning democracy tie conflicting democratic myths together? How do formal representative institutions incorporate and contribute to the democratic mythmaking process throughout informal institutions? And to what extent does democratic mythmaking support or undermine the democratic political process? These questions provide fertile ground for future work in this area. As this paper illustrates, political mythmaking in democracy is a unique yet understudied process. To understand it is to gain a better understanding of democracy itself.

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