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**ATHENIAN DEMOCRACY:
FROM INSTITUTIONS TO IDEOLOGY**

A Review of

Peter J. Rhodes (ed.), *Athenian Democracy (Edinburgh Readings on the Ancient World)*, 384pp., Oxford University Press 2004; Hardcover: ISBN 0195221397, \$ 99; Paperback: ISBN 0195221400, \$ 34⁹⁵.

by Cui Lina and Guo Xiaoling

Of all the Greek cities in the classical period, Athens is the one for which we have by far the greatest range and quantity of evidence. Therefore, Athenian history – and in particular Athenian democracy – has been a major subject of twentieth century scholarship. From the vast number of valuable works dedicated to Athenian democracy we should like to name C. Hignett's *History of the Athenian Constitution* (1952), A. H. M. Jones' *Athenian democracy* (1957), R. K. Sinclair's *Democracy and Participation in Athens* (1988), J. Ober's *Mass and Elite in Democratic Athens* (1989), M.H.Hansen's *The Athenian Democracy in the Age of Demosthenes* (1991), which ever since have been indispensable reference books for teachers and students in ancient Greek history. Although study of Athenian democracy has been going on for more than a century, many questions have not been settled yet. At the turn of the new century, Rhodes has brought forward his new book '*Athenian Democracy*'. In fact, it is a collection of academic theses, but it certainly will necessitate much reconsideration of scholars in the field of 'Athenian democracy'. The work consists of fourteen articles, each illuminating Athenian democracy from different angles and by different kinds of approaches. The articles are organized into four major topics as follows.

Part I focuses on the political institutions and is, in turn, organized into five chapters. Chapter one is concerned with Athenian citizenship. This is followed by a discussion on the voting in the assembly. Next comes the subject of the allotment of jurors to law-courts. The fourth subject is payment for service in assemblies and juries. The last chapter treats the different forms of capital punishment. Part II explores aspects of political activity in Athens: the demagogues and their relationship with the assembly, the operating of the politicians within the framework of the democracy, the functions and the problems of competitive festivals, and the extent to which private life is separated from public life. Part III is devoted

to three crucial points in the development of democracy: the reforms of Solon, Cleisthenes, and Ephialtes. Finally, Part IV attempts to find what it was that led to the development of democracy in Athens. Before every part, there is a brief summary of the content of the respective articles. A guide to further reading and a bibliography are given at the end of the book.

The structure of the book displays the expertise of the compiler throughout. Part I and II introduce political institutions and activities, that is to say, the practice of Athenian democracy. Part III and IV deal with the origin and development of democracy. Obviously, the general idea of the book is to start from the institutions and move forward to the ideology. Such layout establishes an inherent connection among isolated chapters. Since it is a book about Athenian Democracy, not democratic Athens, all the articles should center on democracy. Even so, the related articles are virtually innumerable. The limited space requires the compiler to make a careful selection. Rhodes gives his own principle in the general introduction: "I have tried to put together a selection of studies from the twentieth century which are important in themselves and which illustrate the different kinds of question which can be asked and the different kinds of approach which can help us to answer them" (p. 8). Indeed, the selection of articles can claim to offer a representative picture of modern scholarship on Athenian democracy.

The Papers are without exception highly accomplished. Most important, the authors are not restricted by traditional arguments and put forward original views. For example, M. H. Hansen refuted idea universally held that votes were actually counted, and suggested that when the assembly voted by show of hands the majority was adjudged without a precise count of votes (p. 42). Contrary to the views that juries and assemblies were composed predominantly of citizens of moderate property, M. M. Markle argued that jury and assembly pay was sufficient to allow the poor to serve in juries and to attend to the assemblies, and that they constituted the majority in law-courts and in the assembly (p. 96). Demagogues were usually thought of as sycophants and seducers of the masses. However, Finley argued that demagogues were a structural element in the Athenian political system. Without them, the system could not function at all (p. 180). P. J. Rhodes himself in chapter 7 explored in detail how Athens' politicians operated within the framework of Athens' political institutions, suggesting that a political career was more difficult for a man without inherited wealth and connections (p. 206). R. Sealey gave a new

view of Ephialtes' reforms by suggesting that his aim was to end a particular abuse, not to promote democracy (p. 324). In asking how and why democracy developed in Athens, C. Meier looked back on the progress of Athenian democracy and argued that the transition to more genuine democracy towards the middle of the fifth century was a matter of historical contingency: the prime cause was the victory over the Persians. He particularly focuses on Ephialtes' reform of the Areopagus (p. 347). In summary, acute observations abound in all fourteen papers. Certain conclusions have not been universally accepted to this day, but they certainly contribute to broaden our ways of thought, leave room for dispute and further discussion, and stimulate research on Athenian democracy.

The usage of historical sources and grasping of academic trends are one of the criteria when judging the value of a book or an article. It goes without saying that access to both firsthand sources and new studies is much easier for foreign scholarship. Moreover, they usually would also know about academic trends promptly. The articles selected reflect such advantages. The historical sources used contain not only textual, but also archaeological and epigraphic evidence. For example, the *Kleroteria* were for a long time commonly thought to denote rooms in which allotment took place. S. Dow correctly identified it as blocks of stone with slits on one side, as a result of the actual discovery of such stones (p. 62). It is stimulating to read Dow's description of the process of allotting a jury. L. Gernet solved the problem of capital punishment by actually examining a set of buried skeletons. He reaffirmed the use of throwing condemned persons into a pit as an alternative to *apotympanismos*, i.e. fixing a condemned man with five clamps to a pole (pp. 137-141). In chapter 12, D. M. Lewis made good use of epigraphic evidence to study Cleisthenes' complicated new associations of the Athenian citizen body and suggested that Cleisthenes was engaging in electoral geography to undermine an old order in which his own family was at a disadvantage (p. 308). It means that Cleisthenes' reform was in fact less democratic than we usually thought. The three articles based on archaeological and epigraphic evidence call our attention to the sources besides texts. In the study of history, archaeological and epigraphic sources can often complement the shortcomings of the text tradition and even supply a means to correct some of its errors. Therefore, the joint use of those diverse approaches generally makes conclusions more reliable and convincing.

The variety of approaches is indeed one of the characteristics of this book. Athenian democracy is a multi-dimensional picture. It includes not only all kinds of institutions and processes, but also ideology. It means that we cannot understand it completely only from the perspective of the institutions. As early as 1908, A. F. Bentley suggested that a study of politicians and political groups could illuminate the working of a state (p. 6). This suggestion stimulated the application of new approaches; take chapter 8 as an example. Its author R. Osborne selected drama as a way of understanding democracy and expounded the place of competition in the Athenian political order by studying Athens' dramatic competitions within the range of the city's competitive festivals. He argued that dramatic competitions necessarily made politics one of the axes around which the competition revolved (p. 218). The author offered a framework for understanding the relationship of drama to the city.

Some articles adopt the approach of comparative study. Comparison is sometimes necessary and advantageous. Comparison with other societies, whether the Graeco-Roman world or the modern world, can help us to understand Athens. In chapter 1, J. K. Davies investigates the qualifications for citizenship in archaic, classical and hellenistic Athens, and notes that other criteria apart from descent might have been used and that Athens and some other Greek states in Hellenistic age were prepared to replenish their treasuries by granting citizenship to foreigners willing to pay for it (pp. 36-37). In order to support his arguments that the assembly voted by show of hands without a precise count of votes, M. H. Hansen compared the Athenian assembly with the *Landsgemeinde* of some Swiss cantons at which the hands were never counted (pp. 55-57). S. C. Humphreys' paper is concerned with the division of social life into public and private spheres. She starts by contrasting democratic Athens with Homeric society, the Hellenistic world and even the subordinate units of classical Athens and finds that the interlocking of public and private affairs was greater in these three sketches, while Athenian democracy in the fifth century achieved quite a substantial disengagement (pp. 226-227). When explaining the relationship between the *boule's* act of resistance and the uprising of the demos, J. Ober offered the example of the French Revolution and demonstrated that focused and effective revolutionary activities could be carried out by masses of citizens in the absence of established leaders or traditional structures of leadership (p. 261). As we all know, the history of

different times is often surprisingly similar, which supplies some feasibility for horizontal comparison of ancient and modern times.

In recent years, postmodernists have called the objectivity of historical study into question. They claim that what originally happened in the past is irretrievable, that anyone's construction suits his purpose. Consequently, history loses its claim of objectivity. Beyond doubt, study of ancient history is vulnerable their objections, because our objective of research is what happened in the remote past and most of our evidence is not contemporary but later. But the postmodernists' attack should not make historians feel frustrated, they still do what is possible to collect and sort out historical sources, to restore the historical 'truth' at least to a certain extent. In chapter 10, C. Mosse tries to show how the image of Solon as the founder of Athenian democracy took shape from the end of the fifth century onwards. He starts from the fourth century view of Solon and treats it as a reconstruction, trying to work out what truth may lie behind it (pp. 246-258). In fact, most historians, including every author in the book, are doing the same. It is thus clear that in spite of the postmodernists' objections, positivism is a historical approach accepted by most working in the fields of history.

The academic standard is a problem often discussed in Chinese historical circles. The authors of the articles included in Rhodes' selection are all specialists in Greek history. They set a good example for us in terms of academic standard, which shows not least in their way of giving annotations. Firstly, the annotations are accurate. Where there should be annotations, there are annotations. It may be said that every sentence has its source, which reflects the rigorous scholarship and the proficiency of the authors in the historical sources. Secondly, annotations are detailed. When annotating a problem, the authors often give out not only classical source, but also the related study results of modern scholars. Books and articles in English, German and French are frequently cited and discussed. Such examples can be seen in any one article in this book, very much to the convenience of the reader.

In conclusion, the book compiled by Rhodes is a valuable contribution to our understanding of Athenian democracy. Of course, it is impossible that a selection of a dozen or so articles on Athenian democracy satisfies every expectation. However, the intention of the compiler is to introduce the original spirit and approach of the different authors, not to embrace all the results of research on Athenian democracy. Fourteen

articles are enough for this purpose. We hope that the book will have some stimulating effect and further the interest of historians in Athenian democracy once again, urging them to seek new approaches. Meanwhile, it is also significant to reexamine Athenian democracy from a practical perspective, namely in comparison with modern democracies in the new century. For Athenian democracy may be of direct relevance to the understanding of modern representative democracies.