



ANCIENT GREECE

The birth pangs of democracy

Thomas N. Mitchell's in-depth study of how Athenians made their first strides towards their innovative democracy also throws light on our own failure at times to elect mature, upstanding leaders.

THE FIRST democracy that we can study – arguably the first in world history – was established in Athens by a series of reforms which took place between 507 and the 460s BC. Any discussion of democracy is enhanced by engaging with the classical Athenians' experience. Thomas Mitchell has written an ambitious and substantial history of the Athenians and their polity. He begins three centuries before the 507 revolution led by Cleisthenes and takes the main narrative through to the dissolution of the independent Athenian government by the Macedonians in 322 BC. But the author never allows his reader to forget that the story he is telling – of the Athenians' intense, trial-and-error creation of the most egalitarian community the world had yet seen – is important because, as Thucydides suggested, human nature being what it is, learning about the experience of people in the past can benefit their descendants in the future.

Complete with maps and well-chosen glossy illustrations, the book is lucidly, if somewhat discursively, written and elegantly produced. It is arguably

too dense and expansive for the beginner in Greek history or political theory, but provides a rewarding workout for the reader who already has knowledge of the basic outlines of the classical Athenian experience.

Mitchell opens with a valuable discussion of what we mean by democracy. The current

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definition, which emphasises the electoral process by which people select their governors and confer power upon them, only after candidates for government have competed for the people's votes, emerged surprisingly recently. No ancient Athenian would have agreed with our notion that the 'essence' of democracy lay in open, free and fair elections; for them, the 'essence' of democracy was that executive power (*kratos*) lay in the hands of the mass of people (the *demos*) rather than

in the hands of a ruling class or dynasty with superior financial resources or education.

The Athenian citizens who constituted the *demos* did elect leaders, usually members of upper-class families. But elections were annual rather than quadrennial or quinquennial and accountability was rigorously enforced. This meant that the *demos* could quickly rid itself of unpopular generals or magistrates. Moreover, the citizens did not elect parliamentary representatives; they each voted in person for every measure that was put to their parliament, the *ekklesia* or Assembly. They were also all eligible to serve on the crucial institution of the Council, which was drawn from across the geographical and class spectrum. The Councillors amassed evidence and deliberated motions before they were put to the vote. The Council was perhaps the most inspiring achievement of the democracy, since it required in its ordinary citizen members a grasp of fiscal, financial, military and administrative affairs that would put to shame most modern parliamentarians, let alone regular members of the populace.

Mitchell de-clutters his pages by relegating his (thorough and helpful) textual references, and suggestions for further reading to the endnotes, while sustaining a narrative voice notable for its good sense and humanity. Some will complain that the women, slaves and resident foreigners, who were all excluded from agency in the central political processes of the Assembly, Council and law-courts, are treated too little and too late; others will notice that Mitchell is no less vague than most of his predecessors on the topic of the *thetes*, the lowest class of voting citizens. But his judgment is excellent and his enthusiasm clear for the undoubted achievement of the developed democracy, which succeeded in including a sizeable proportion of the inhabitants of Athens in its deliberative and executive procedures.

Mitchell demonstrates carefully how long it took the Athenians to make even their first strides towards their innovative democracy, despite severe inequalities and extreme vested interests. He stresses that their system was no worked-out ideal imposed effortlessly from above, but a continuously evolving organic response to a series of specific and concrete problems. In these emphases, the most profound point the book makes about our contemporary world is the folly of expecting often recently created states, with no experience of even fledgling democracy, to produce a mature civil society that can maintain free and fair elections within months of all-out war. The ultimate message of thinking with Mitchell about Athenian democracy's protracted birth pangs is that investigating our ancestors' history has sadly never prevented us from repeating their mistakes. But what such investigations can surely do is enable us to understand just how predictable some of our own mistakes have been.

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Democracy's Beginning: The Athenian Story by Thomas N. Mitchell
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