

ASSASSINATIONS, ELECTIONS AND DEMOCRACY – ANCIENT ATHENIAN-STYLE¹

By Paul Cartledge

Summary: Assassination is never a pleasant theme to contemplate, but in some contexts historians are bound not just to contemplate it but also to factor it in as a crucial variable in trying to explain major political transformation. Such a context is offered by the history of Athens between c. 514 and 411 BCE. Within that span four transformational assassinations occurred, of Hipparchus, Ephialtes, Androcles and Phrynichus. They were variously motivated, but all had significant immediate or longterm impact on the Athenian narrative, in this case the narrative of the world's foundational democracy. The essay that follows seeks to pay due tribute to the memory of the great scholar – and friend – who did more than anyone to enrich and explain that narrative.

Introduction

There's a tradition among writers of overlooking violence because they want to believe a myth, whether it's the myth of a utopian state or the myth of an ascetic selflessly devoted to a noble cause.²

There are no prizes for guessing why I should have chosen this topic to address, initially in 2024. The assassination attempt on 13 July of that

- 1 Earlier versions were delivered in 2024 at Wadham College, Oxford, to a nonspecialist audience, and over zoom to an academic conference in Lisbon. I thank most warmly my respective hosts, Peter Thonemann and Delfim Leão, for their kind invitations. In this published version, I have sought to retain the informality of oral delivery and have kept annotation to the barest minimum. I am indebted to co-editor Thomas Heine Nielsen for inviting its submission (see further n. 43). Like Mogens's typically great *The Athenian Assembly in the Age of Demosthenes* (1999) p. vii, this essay too "is intended not only for specialists, but also for students of classics, history and political science, as well as for anyone who takes interest in the history of ancient Greece and of democracy" (I'm told that the Danish term is 'formidling').
- 2 Fernanda Eberhardt, *Bite Your Friends. Stories of the Body Militant*. Europa Editions, 2024.

year on the life of future (second-term) US President Donald J. Trump was a potentially transformative occurrence that remains of more than merely passing historical significance.

When I googled ‘assassination political Greece’, however, the first item that popped up was ‘Category: Assassinated Greek Politicians’ – that is, *modern* Greek politicians (post-Ioannis Kapodistrias, murdered on September 27, 1831), not ancient.³ For the ancient world, by contrast, and especially perhaps for the history of democracy in the ancient world that our honorand so made his own, political assassination’s a subject that seems to me strangely understudied by us professionals, despite a couple of exceptions. Strangely, because among other things a successful assassination not only could affect the course of an (any) ancient Greek history in decisive ways but in actual fact did crucially affect the history of democracy at Athens at three ‘moments’ during the century or so between ca. 514 and 411 BCE. There is no equivalent to my knowledge for democratic Athens of Simon Ball’s *Death to Order: A Modern History of Assassination* – from that of Franz Ferdinand to that of Osama Bin Laden.⁴

One reason for this scholarly lacuna might be the fact that politically motivated assassination was really quite rare in ancient as compared to modern Greece. Or indeed in the modern U.S.A. Certainly, it was rare almost as hen’s teeth in *pre*-democratic Athens, but, though statistically rare also in democratic Athens, its few occurrences were, as mentioned, not without critical impact. Partly indeed, no doubt, due to their very rarity.

The second item brought up by my googling ‘assassination political Greece’ was far more fruitful. Cinzia Bearzot’s article ‘Political Murder in Classical Greece’⁵ first of all quoted a helpful modern definition⁶ of ‘assassination’ and then proceeded to distinguish three kinds of assassination, or three different aspects of calculated, premeditated political murder, in the Classical Greek world: tyrannicide, judicial murder, and murder in civil war. In this short, honorific essay I’m going to offer examples

3 <https://greekreporter.com/2024/09/16/political-assassinations-ancient-greece/>.

4 Ball 2025. Populist violence US-style: <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/united-states/our-own-worst-enemies>.

5 Bearzot 2007.

6 Ford 1985: 1; cf. 46, 196, 301-7.

of the first and the third of those kinds or aspects: that is, tyrannicide and civil-war murder, as those occurred in Athens over the century or so between 514 BCE and 411 BCE. But I'm then going to add a fourth example, which falls obviously under none of those three categories, and which in a way remains the most puzzling of all.⁷ All this in the service of asking: what were the factors or conditions that favoured or otherwise explained the resort to political assassination? What light do these assassinations throw on the claim of the Athenian *polis* to be a law-abiding, rule-governed political institution? Here is the definition quoted by Bearzot:

Assassination is the intentional killing of a specified victim or group of victims, perpetrated for reasons related to his/her/their public prominence and undertaken with a political purpose in view.

Case-Studies

My four case-studies are: (i) the murder of Hipparchus in 514 BCE; (ii) the murder of Ephialtes in 461; and (iii) and (iv) the (separate) murders in 411 of Androcles and Phrynichus. Rather satisfyingly, these four cover the waterfront, in terms of political ideology. Hipparchus, though not

7 To anticipate, and to pre-empt any question, or objection, I shall *not* be including the assassination of Alcibiades in late 404 BCE, however much that might be considered germane to the history of the Athenian democracy. For his assassination occurred after Athens had ceased to be a democracy and been placed under the heel of the Spartan-imposed collective dictatorship (*dynasteia*) of 'the Thirty' (later 'Tyrants'); moreover, by itself it did not affect the course of political governance at Athens, as my four chosen examples in their different ways did. The latest biographer of Alcibiades (Roubineau 2025: 192) canvasses various possible instigators of the assassination, deciding that the most probable was Sparta with the aid of satrap Pharnabazus. For what it's worth, the most recent opinion on the motivation and modality of the assassination that I've read assigns responsibility rather to Alcibiades' fellow Athenian elites, whether more or less ideologically oligarchic: McCoy 2026. – The assassination of ostracized ex-demagogue Hyperbolus on Samos in 411 (Thuc. 8.73.3) fails to make the cut on grounds of its insignificance.

himself a ruling tyrant, was the brother of Athens's then ruling tyrant, Hippias. Ephialtes was a democrat, indeed an extreme one, as was Androcles. But Phrynichus was an (ultra)oligarch. Thus, in themselves the victims embody the three main kinds of political rule in any organized Greek polity or state: Rule by One, Rule by All, and Rule by Some.⁸

i. Hipparchus

One of my points of interest in this case as in the others is to note the possible gap between intention and outcome, between the political purpose of the assassination, if indeed 'political' is quite the right term here, and the actual, more or less immediate political result. The tyranny at Athens – by no means entirely 'tyrannical', as we understand that word – had been founded by Hipparchus's father, after a couple of false starts, in about 545.⁹ Peisistratus the founder had died in his bed in 527 (though at least one opponent of his had been assassinated), and he'd been succeeded as tyrant, apparently smoothly, by his oldest son Hippias, using the chief annual executive office of the archonship as a legitimization cover.¹⁰ Hippias, as ex-archon eponymous, was from 526 a member of Athens's senior council, the Areopagus, which among its other functions exercised a guardianship of the laws proposed in 594/3 by Solon.¹¹ But he ruled/reigned *de facto* on his own as a non-responsible autocrat until he

8 A classic ancient instance, though not the first to identify the tripartite distinction, is Herodotus 3.80-82 (the so-called 'Persian Debate'): Cartledge 2009, 2018. There is potentially a fourth kind, a 'mixed' constitution, though there's legitimate doubt as to whether that can be meaningfully individuated as a distinct form of polity.

9 History of Athens's (Peisistratid) tyranny, ca. 545-510 BCE: Lavelle 2005 ('democratic' requires its scare quotes); rev. G. Anderson *BMCR* 2006.04.18.

10 Excellent discussion of the relevant fragment of the (ca. 425 BCE) archon-list first published in 1939: Meiggs & Lewis, *GHI* 11-12 (no. 6c).

11 Solon's new 'constitution': Mogens reverted many times to the key question of to what extent, precisely, Solon's reform package might be considered genuinely pre- or even proto-democratic, as opposed to a more or less whole-cloth figment of especially fourth-century BCE oligarchic propaganda; Solieman 2012 usefully places Mogens's work in doxographic context; as does H.W. Pleket *Mnemosyne* XLIV.1-2 (1991) 260-64, a review of two of Mogens's (many) studies of the Athenian assembly.

was overthrown – by a combination of internal and external forces – in 510.¹²

Some four years earlier, however, in about 514, Hippias's younger brother Hipparchus, and not he himself, had been assassinated. Why? Was it because Hipparchus too was a tyrant? In one, retrospective sense, yes: for this was the sense that the political regime that – eventually – succeeded the tyranny was to insist upon. That is to say, the Athenian democracy or proto-democracy founded in 507 embraced the murder of Hipparchus as its founding charter-myth, with two consequences. First, Hipparchus had to have been a 'tyrant', at any rate retrospectively, if his two assassins were properly to be labelled, as they semi-officially were, the *Tyrannoktonoi* or 'Tyrant-Slayers' and heroized as such.¹³ The second consequence was that democracy – or at first proto-democracy – was thereby conceived and promoted essentially as anti-tyranny: a regime of civic freedom and citizen equality, based on discussion and argument, not on force, in which the people as a whole (the *demos*) exercised power (*kratos*).¹⁴

And yet ... in sober truth – at least as I see it, following the admittedly non-democrat Athenian historian Thucydides (6.54) – Hipparchus had not in fact been the or even a tyrant ruler of Athens. That was Hippias: for tyranny was sole rulership, a form of mon-archy, not a joint dictatorship. Conjoint autocrat rulers are of course not unknown in the ancient Greek world: Ptolemy II and his (full) sister-wife Arsinoe spring instantly

12 The *coup de grâce* was delivered by an invasion taskforce under King Cleomenes I of Sparta: Hdt. 5.55, 64–65; Hippias 'retired' or rather defected to the Persian court: Thuc. 6.59.4.

13 Tyrannicides statues (bronze pair), and their reception: Azoulay 2014. Teegarden 2013 discusses legislation advocating or enabling assassination of potential or actual tyrants, as a democratic measure, but, though democratic Athens experienced tyrant-scares (as in 415 BCE, associated with Alcibiades), no actual anti-tyrant legislation is attested before 336 BCE. See the review of Teegarden by A. Gottesman: <https://bmcr.brynmawr.edu/2014/2014.10.35/>.

14 Core values of the new regime of *demokratia*: Cartledge 2018. Against a too widespread tendency to etiolate the term, I insist on the full force of *-kratia*, whether the *kratos* was exercised by the *demos* over the *politeia*, or directed by the *demos* against the elite – and often anti-democratic – few citizens (Simonton 2017).

to mind. But any full-blooded sort of kingship was something the Athenians had left behind formally in 683/2, and the Peisistratid tyranny was always regarded as an exception to normality of governance – rightly so, as it was based ultimately on force, not legitimate consent.¹⁵

The killing of Hipparchus, however, was only one aspect of the mismatch between intention and consequence – again, if we follow Thucydides, as I do. For the two murderers of Hipparchus, Harmodius and Aristogeiton, in another sense too were *not* ‘tyrannicides’. They killed the non-tyrant Hipparchus not for a political or ideological reason but because of a very personal grudge, an inter-aristocrat feud, caused by a public slight to the sister of one of them (she had been banned by Hippias from participating in a major annual religious festival, the Panathenaia).¹⁶ So the assassination of Hipparchus was, at most, a case of tyrannicide by proxy, and more political in (major) consequence than in intent. Why then did the later, democratic Athenians make such a song and dance about Aristogeiton and his junior partner Harmodius’s being Tyrannicides, commission bronze statues of them to be erected in the Agora (Town Square), include them in civic prayers, worship them as heroes, etc. etc.?

There were two main reasons: First, the ending of the tyranny in 510 was largely due not to the Athenians themselves, but to the Spartans ... and that was something to be covered up, if at all possible, not celebrated, for all sorts of reasons (not least that in the year after the reform of 507 Sparta led a massive invasion force against Athens, precisely to try to put an end to the new, infant-democratic regime). Second reason for Tyrannicides-worship: there was no other Athenian, specifically no democratic ‘Liberator’, available for the Athenians to celebrate and glorify as their Founding Father at the moment of the democracy’s foundation. The case of Cleisthenes is the proof of that.

His name somehow became appended to the very extensive, very successful democratic reform package of 507, whatever precisely his role in

15 See n. 9, above. Ptolemy II and Arsinoe did rather up the ante by having themselves dubbed, and worshipped as, ‘the brother-and-sister gods’.

16 Sources differ on the precise personalities, and motivations, involved: the highly unreliable author of the 320s BCE, the Aristotelian *Ath. Pol.* (18.1) even mistakenly drags the third Peisistratid brother, Thessalus, into the ever more convoluted storyline.

formulating it and having it enacted might have been.¹⁷ But Cleisthenes was himself an aristocrat, not a man of the people, and, worse, the grandson of a foreign tyrant, and, possibly worst of all, the senior member of a family (the *Alkmeonidai*) living under the stigma of a curse inherited from an ancestor deemed guilty of abusing his legitimate powers of office to commit an act of gross sacrilege.¹⁸ Insofar as the Athenians did get around to choosing an ‘inventor’ of democracy, they chose either to go way back – away from solid factual history into the realm of myth, back to an ancient founder-king, Theseus; or, alternatively, to regress to a real human being and a legislator (ancient Greeks were fond of the type of the *nomothetes*), but one who was by no stretch a democrat or even a proto-democrat, Solon. Rather revealingly, the latter was always the preferred choice of Athenian oligarchs (of whom there were always some, and at some moments, as we shall see, effectually so).¹⁹

So much for assassination in the form of tyrannicide for our purposes.

ii. *Ephialtes*

We know about as little about him as we do about Cleisthenes.²⁰ We don’t even know as much about his family background, or his early political career. He seems to burst on the scene in the 460s, as a reforming legislator, whose reforms completed Athens’s transition from a proto- or early-democracy to what some call a radical democracy.²¹ In any case to a democracy in which the *kratos* firmly lay with the *demos* in two senses: both the citizen body as a whole, who had to sign off by majority vote on all decrees and laws; and in the sense of the poor majority of that total citizen body – poor not necessarily in the sense of being destitute, but on account of having to work for a living, and being unable to employ or

17 As actual ‘founder’ of the democracy: Herodotus 6.131. Mythical founders: Theseus (Plut. *Thes.* 25.2) or Solon (see nn. 11, 19). The nature and extent of the ‘popular’ Athenian contribution to creating the regime that Athens enjoyed from 508/7 are controversial; I side with (Balzan 2025 Prizewinner) Ober 1996.

18 Alcmaeonid curse: Hdt. 5.71; Thuc. 1.126.3.

19 Oligarchs’ preferred Founder, Solon (600 BCE): Mossé 1979.

20 Cleisthenes: Ostwald 1988.

21 Contribution to a debate: Cartledge 2006.

own the labour of others to free them from the necessity to work.²² In fifth-century BCE Athens there was no notion of the separation of the powers of governance – between the executive, the legislative and the judicial branches, each acting as a check on the other, as in a modern representative democracy. In fifth-century (directly) democratic Athens, the people ruled in all spheres, in assembly and lawcourts alike.²³

That was simply too much for some Athenians. The term *demokratia* had first been coined in the 470s, probably. It soon generated its binary opposite, *oligarchia*.²⁴ Oligarchs were those who believed that governance should be the exclusive preserve of those properly qualified – the wealthy, above all, who by definition were few (*oligoi*) in number but also often well-born and well-educated and, so they thought, smarter than the average, poor Athenian citizen. Oligarchy could be clothed in various forms – there was a huge difference for example between the fancy versions espoused by intellectuals such as Plato and Xenophon, and the visceral form favoured by those who took a mutual oath to do as much harm as they could to the hated *demos*.²⁵ It was people such as the latter, presumably, who were responsible for our second assassination, that of Ephialtes, shortly after the passage of his democratic reforms, in 461.

I quoted at the beginning Bearzot's assertion that there were three kinds of assassination: tyrannicide, judicial murder, and murder in civil war. But Ephialtes's was none of the above. He was not a tyrant. He was not murdered judicially. Nor was Athens undergoing civil war at the time he was murdered, and his assassination did not, unlike my third and fourth case-studies, presage or cause civil war – even though we learn from Thucydides that just a couple of years later there was still an underground oligarchic faction in Athens prepared even to betray Athens to Sparta in order to make Athens oligarchic again and put themselves back in the driving seat.²⁶ I'll revisit that scenario shortly.

22 Being 'poor' in democratic Athens: de Ste. Croix 1983; cf. 'Marx lover' <https://lib-com.org/article/summary-g-e-m-de-ste-croixs-class-struggle-ancient-greek-world>.

23 Of his many possible outstanding works, see, e.g., Hansen 1990.

24 Simonton 2017.

25 Arist. Pol. 1310a11-12: <https://sententiaeantiquae.com/2012/11/05/aristotle-politics-1310a-11-12/>.

26 Thuc. 1.107.4.

So what exactly was the point of having Ephialtes assassinated, and who was or were responsible for committing the murder? According to the Athenian ultra-oligarch Antiphon (a key figure in 411, below), in a lawcourt speech of about 420 (5.68), it was never discovered who was or were responsible. But the author or authors of the *Ath. Pol.* (25.4), composed a mere 130 years after the event, was/were sure that the assassin was one Aristodikos of Tanagra. At least, that man's name and place of origin are plausible: Tanagra was a constituent *polis* of 'the Boeotians', an *ethnos* then dominated by oligarchic Thebes, which had been a declared enemy of Athens since at least about 520 and had actually fought on the wrong, Persian, side in the Helleno-Persian Wars of 480-479.²⁷ Such a man might quite plausibly have been open to hire for such a nefarious deed in neighbouring, democratic Athens. His name too is suggestively 'speaking': *Aristo-* meant 'best', the root of 'aristocracy', and *-dikos* implied having to do with justice, so the combination signified something like 'He who does justice the best'. An aristocrat, therefore, by birth at any rate, and not likely to have been a democrat by choice.

And yet ... there are even scholars who, disregarding the *Ath. Pol.*'s ascription and Antiphon's possibly feigned ignorance, believe the assassin may have been an Athenian actually from within Ephialtes's own political circle – conjuring up a sort of Indira Gandhi situation.²⁸ But that seems implausible to me. The real reason for his being assassinated is in my view that the two other routes potentially available to his enemies for getting rid of him physically were not going to be successful. Those two routes were the judicial one – a public prosecution (*eisangelia*) on some political charge now before a people's court (no longer the Areopagus) – and a non-judicial one, via ostracism, both leading to exile from Athens for at least a considerable period of time. But most Athenian citizen judge-jurors were poor and so probably democratic-minded and therefore unlikely to vote Ephialtes guilty. As for ostracism, that peculiarly Athenian democratic procedure (ascribed to Cleisthenes) had been

27 Cartledge 2021.

28 Indira Gandhi, Prime Minister of India, was assassinated by two of her (Sikh) bodyguards on October 31, 1984. The assassination prompted a public (Thakkar) commission of enquiry – and was of sufficient public interest or prurience to lead to at least one film being made of the affair.

inflicted only the year before upon Cimon, a conservative rightwinger and opponent of Ephialtes and his junior adjutant Pericles.²⁹ It was not going to happen to Ephialtes.

Hence, I infer, his assassination. From which I think our main take-away should be this: that, despite (or because of) it, democratic Athens, spurred on by convinced democrats such as the upper-class Pericles, carried on in its own sweet way, becoming ever more democratic and ever more powerful through the 450s.³⁰

iii. and iv. The Murders of Androcles and Phrynichus, 411

So we come to my third and fourth case-studies, the assassinations of Androcles and Phrynichus in 411. In the exact half-century between 461 and 411 a lot of water flowed under many bridges, so far as the Athenian democracy was concerned. Most obviously and most consequentially, there broke out in 431 what was to prove one of the most determinative episodes of the entire fifth/fourth-century BCE Classical period, the Peloponnesian War, or, as I prefer, the Atheno-Peloponnesian War. This Great War between Athens and its allies and Sparta and its allies lasted on and off for 27 years (431-404), an entire human generation.³¹

For the ancient world, and not least the war's brilliant historian, Thucydides of Athens, it was a war 'like no other' in all sorts of ways, apart from its sheer length. One of those ways, of direct relevance to us, is the ever-increasing outbreak and significance of *stasis* – a Greek word meaning literally a process of standing, in this case a standing apart, a standoff, between two great socioeconomic tendencies or movements within many of the Greek cities involved.³² In other words, under pressure of war, the 'teacher of violence', political class struggle erupted ever more frequently into civil war between, on one side, the few wealthy citizens fighting on behalf of a version of oligarchy and, on the other, the many poor struggling on behalf of democracy. In Book 3 Thucydides uses just

29 Ostracism: from a crowded field I'd select Forsdyke 2005; rev. by P. Hunt, *BMCR* 2006.06.02.

30 The best study, unfortunately little known, of Ephialtes and his reforms is Rhodes 1970.

31 Contrasting modern accounts: Hanson 2005; Roberts 2017.

32 Best English-language translations of Thucydides: Mynott 2013; Waterfield 2025.

one detailed case-study, the extreme outbreak on the island of Kerkyra (today's Corfu) in 427, as a paradigm of what such *stasis* might, horrendously, entail: not just citizens killing citizens, but also citizens justifying their murders by turning their normal peacetime values and value-terms on their head.³³

In 411 Athens, having thus far been free of civil-war *stasis*, having indeed experienced nothing of the sort during its democratic period altogether, eventually suffered a full-blown outbreak, leading not only to citizen deaths but also to political revolution, a transformation from democracy to an extreme form of ultra-oligarchy.³⁴ This was the last major episode of the war that Thucydides was able to write up before he had to break off his work, mid-sentence, by when his narrative had covered only as far as high summer 411 (though, as he knew, the war was to last nearly another seven years). Importantly, Thucydides personally had skin in this game.

He was born about 460 into a very wealthy aristocratic family related to his namesake Thucydides son of Melesias, who had been Pericles's major opponent in the 440s and ostracised in 443. Thucydides the historian was prominent enough to be elected as one of the board of 10 generals, the democracy's top executive office, in 424, but sadly for him he was blamed for a major military-political failure in the field; and, prosecuted by leading politician, Cleon, he was found guilty and condemned to indefinite exile. Still in 411, nevertheless, through his contacts in the city, he was, he thought, able to garner enough reliable information to write up a sufficiently accurate account of the oligarchic coup. Its mastermind and leader was Antiphon, who – as many of us think – had also been a teacher of rhetoric to Thucydides in his younger days. Certainly, the historian retained an intellectual admiration for Antiphon: otherwise, it's hard to see how and why he didn't call out Antiphon more fiercely for the damage he did not only to Athens's internal stability but also, as a direct result, to the city's conduct of the Peloponnesian War

33 *Stasis*: Hansen 2004; [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stasis_\(ancient_Greece\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stasis_(ancient_Greece)). *Stasis* as political class-struggle: de Ste. Croix 1983. Kerkyra (Corfu) *stasis*, 427 BCE: Thuc. 3.69–85, esp. 82.

34 The 400 regime as ultra-oligarchic: Shear 2011; rev. M. Simonton *BMCR* 2012.02.12.

against Sparta. Instead, he went out of his way to praise him as, intellectually, ‘second to none’.³⁵

Given all that, one might have expected that Thucydides would have welcomed the ultra-oligarchic coup of 411 – even if from afar. But did he? Well, not exactly. Instead, even though he admired and knew personally two of the most prominent authors of the revolution, he unsparingly recorded the violence and deceit they and their co-conspirators encouraged and employed. Moreover, it was not under their ultra-oligarchic regime, known as ‘the 400’, that Thucydides considered Athens to have been best governed in his own lifetime. That suggestive plaudit he accorded rather to the regime that succeeded it, that of the 5000, which he hailed as a “moderate blending in the interests of both the few and the many.”³⁶ For him, in other words, it was a mixed or blended regime modestly combining elements of both oligarchy and democracy. Some but not all scholars today tend to see it as a moderated, but not necessarily a moderate, oligarchy.³⁷

The two ultra-oligarchs whom Thucydides knew personally were the aforementioned Antiphon and Phrynichus. This is where we bring in Phrynichus, and a special term of praise in Thucydides’s political vocabulary: *xunesis*, meaning intellectual grasp, intelligence, smartness. Phrynichus was one of the very few upon whom Thucydides bestowed that term of praise (8.27; cf. 8.54.1). And yet ... and yet ... Was Thucydides perhaps rather blinded here again by ideology, prepared because of Phrynichus’s brainpower to overlook the damage he did to Athens? I think so. And I call in evidence one particular passage of Thucydides: 8.90–91. Failing, as the 400 were, to command strong popular support, and feeling their position threatened by politicians who though oligar-

35 Exiled for failing as general to save Amphipolis in 424 BCE (4.102–8), Thucydides was in exile (5.26.5) during the revolutionary events of 411, for knowledge and understanding of which he was dependent on informants whose reports he thought he could rely on (1.22). Praise for Antiphon: Thuc. 8.68.1.

36 Thucydides, remarkably but tantalisingly, comments here (8.97.2) that either theoretically or pragmatically this relatively brief (8 months) interregnum saw Athens the best governed in his own (presumably adult) lifetime.

37 Exactly what the regime was – a moderate democracy or a moderate oligarchy – is open to dispute: Rhodes 1972; David 2014.

chic were far less extreme and more pragmatic than they, they despatched an embassy, including Phrynichus, to Athens's principal enemy Sparta. The embassy sought to make a peace treaty, offering Sparta all sorts of favourable terms. But the 400's bottom 'negotiating' line was this: please keep us, the 400, in power, and we will act as your tame catspaw and ally.

Outrageous ... a total betrayal not only of Athens's democracy but also of its sovereignty. The Spartans, knowing that the 400 couldn't possibly deliver such a deal, sent them on their way, and soon afterwards the 400 fell, after a rule of only four months, to be replaced by the so-called 5000. And it wasn't long, just another eight months, before that oligarchic regime fell too, and democracy, old-style, was restored in 410. But by then Phrynichus was already dead, assassinated allegedly in the central square of Athens, the Agora, so in full public view, soon after his return from Sparta. He was murdered as being a traitor.³⁸

It's important to stress that the democrats didn't start the assassination game of 411. Phrynichus's murder was payback for the murder earlier in the year, by unnamed 'youths', of the democrats' leading figure Androcles, which had been a necessary preliminary to the ultra-oligarchic coup. Androcles, largely otherwise unknown to fame, had featured most prominently hitherto in the trial and condemnation in 414 of Alcibiades on a charge of sacrilege. In 411 he was apparently the most prominent 'demagogue' (democratic leader of the *demos*) since the exile by ostracism of Hyperbolus probably in 417 and therefore the most suitable target for the "young bloods" (Mynott's translation of Thuc. 8.65.2) who carried out his assassination. For once, this was an assassination that did achieve its objective, being a bog-standard civil-war murder that both preceded directly and helped usher in the oligarchic counter-revolution.

In the case of ultra-oligarch Phrynichus, however, as in the case of democrat Ephialtes, and no less puzzlingly, there's disagreement between the sources as to who exactly was responsible for doing the dirty deed. Thucydides opted to lay the responsibility on one of the Athenian border guards (*peripoloi*), unnamed, assisted by an also unnamed man from Argos – a democratic city, an ally of Athens, so a plausible enough

38 As in the case of Ephialtes's, recollections of who murdered Phrynichus differed. That of Thucydides (8.92.2) conflicts with the official version.

origin on those terms. But the restored Athenian democracy of 410/9 had other ideas. In that year they voted the highest possible honours available – a golden crown, a sum of money, and Athenian citizenship – to be bestowed on another foreigner, one Thrasyboulos of Kalydon in Aetolia (central mainland Greece), for his role, together with others, in Phrynichus's assassination.³⁹

Most of this we know from the formal, published decree of the assembly. Publishing assembly decrees on stone was the democratic way. But other sources tell us there was some uncertainty at first – under the oligarchic regime of the 5000 – as to whether Thrasyboulos was in fact a benefactor of Athens or not. So, he had been initially arrested and clapped in jail. It was only under the restored democracy that he was rewarded as a public benefactor, retrospectively. In the end therefore Phrynichus's too was a classic case of civil-war assassination. But it didn't do the Athenians much good in the longer run, as the city went on to lose allies, the Atheno-Peloponnesian War, and, once again in 404, its democracy. That defeat was caused partly and not least because the wounds opened up in the body politic in 411 hadn't yet healed.⁴⁰

Conclusion

I wouldn't want to claim that the assassinations I have re-examined above were the most significant of all those committed throughout the ancient Greek, let alone Graeco-Roman, world. That accolade, if so it be, must go to the murder of Caius Iulius Caesar on the Ides of March, 44 BCE.⁴¹ Nor do they stand comparison with the greatest, that is most influential, assassinations of the modern era, those of Kapodistrias for the history of Greece, of Abraham Lincoln for the (dis)United States, or that

39 Honours for Thrasyboulos of Kalydon: <https://www.atticinscriptions.com/inscription/OR/182> (with commentary)

40 Thuc. 2.65 (anticipatory obituary notice of Pericles).

41 Woolf 2007 is exemplary; note that it takes Caesar's as a case-study of 'political assassination'. Possibly next in line in terms of historical significance is the assassination in 336 BCE of Philip II, king of Macedon, also by a trusted bodyguard: but for that, would his son and heir Alexander (III) have become 'the Great'?

of Indira Gandhi for fissiparous post-Independence India. But for the history of pre-, proto-and post-democratic Athens between ca. 514 and 411 BCE they counted and still count for a very great deal. Above all, they challenge any claims democratic Athens might have, or others might wish to advance on its behalf, to holding or honouring a fundamental commitment on principle to the rule of law.⁴² If there is a generally applicable message to be drawn from them, as possibly from all assassinations (and assassination attempts), it might be this: Be careful what you wish for. Political assassination isn't necessarily a golden ticket.⁴³

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Anderson, G. Review of Lavelle 2005, *BMCR* 2006.04.18.
 Azoulay, V. 2014. *The Tyrant-Slayers of Ancient Athens*. Princeton.
 Ball, S. 2025. *Death to Order: A Modern History of Assassination*. New Haven.
 Bearzot, C. 2007. 'Political murder in classical Greece' *Ancient Society* 37, 37-61.
 Camp, J.M., Jr. 1990. *The Athenian Agora*. 4th ed. Athens.
 Cartledge, P.A. 2000. 'Boiotian Swine F(or)ever? The Boiotian Superstate in 395 BC' in P. Flensted-Jensen et al. (eds.) *Polis & Politics. Studies in Ancient Greek History Presented to Mogens Herman Hansen*. Copenhagen, 397-418.

42 According to Gowder 2014: 1-2, "classical Athens substantially satisfied the demands of the rule of law throughout the democratic period." Not all will agree.

43 *Personal endnote*. I met Mogens first in Clare College Cambridge in the early 1980s. He struck me then and throughout our long friendship as a most remarkable person as well as a quite exceptional scholar, one who transformed our understanding of two absolutely fundamental aspects of the ancient Greek world, the *polis* and democracy, both of them in a properly comparativist spirit. I owe him much and for many things, not least Lene Rubinstein, one of the very best of my many Cambridge PhD students. It was through her too, and an editor of the present volume, that I was enabled to contribute an essay to Mogens's 60th-birthday Festschrift (Cartledge 2000). It is thanks chiefly to my good friend Thomas Heine Nielsen that I appear here now, paying my heartfelt posthumous respects to a good man and a great scholar.

- Cartledge, P.A. 2006. 'Democracy, Origins of: Contribution to a Debate' in K.A. Raaflaub & R. Wallace (eds.) *Origins of Democracy in Ancient Greece*. Berkeley, 155-69.
- Cartledge, P.A. 2009. *Ancient Greek Political Thought in Practice*. Cambridge.
- Cartledge, P.A. 2018. *Democracy: A Life* (augmented repr.). New York.
- Cartledge, P.A. 2021. *Thebes. Forgotten City of Ancient Greece*. New ed. Basingstoke & New York.
- David, E. 2014. 'An Oligarchic Democracy: Manipulation of Democratic Ideals in 411 BC' *Eirene* 50, 11-38.
- Flory, S. Review of Hanson 2005, *BMCR* 2006.03.40.
- Ford, F.L. 1985. *Political Murder: from Tyrannicide to Terrorism*. Cambridge, MA.
- Forsdyke, S. 2005. *Exile, Ostracism, and Democracy: the politics of exclusion in ancient Greece*. Princeton.
- Gottesman, A. Review of Teegarden 2013, *BMCR* 2014.10.35.
- Gowder, P. 2014. 'Democracy, Solidarity, and the Rule of Law: Lessons from Athens' *Buffalo Law Review* 62.1, 1-67.
- Hansen, M.H. 1983. *The Athenian Ecclesia. A Collection of Articles 1976-83*. Copenhagen.
- Hansen, M.H. 1984. *Die athenische Volksversammlung im Zeitalter des Demosthenes*. Konstanz.
- Hansen, M.H. 1990. 'The Political Powers of the People's Court in Fourth-Century Athens' in O. Murray & S. Price (eds.) *The Greek City: From Homer to Alexander*. Oxford, 215-44.
- Hansen, M.H. 1999. *The Athenian Democracy in the Age of Demosthenes*. Bristol.
- Hansen, M.H. 2004. 'Stasis as an Essential Aspect of the Polis' in M.H. Hansen & T.H. Nielsen (eds.) *An Inventory of Archaic and Classical Poleis*. Oxford.
- Hanson, V.D. 2005. *A War Like No Other. How the Athenians and Spartans fought the Peloponnesian War*. New York.
- Hefner, H. 2005. 'Phrynichos Stratonidou Deiradiotes als Politiker und Symbolfigure der Oligarchern von 411 v. Chr.' in U. Bultrighini (eds.) *Democrazia ed Antidemocrazia nel mondo Greco*. Alessandria, 89-108.
- Hunt, P. Review of Forsdyke 2005, *BMCR* 2006.06.02.
- Lateiner, D. Review of Azoulay 2014, *BMCR* 2018.11.15.

- Lavelle, B.M. 2005. *Fame, Money, and Power: The Rise of Peisistratos and 'Democratic' Tyranny at Athens*. Ann Arbor.
- McCoy, M. Forthcoming. 'Alcibiades and Assassination: From the Tyrant-Slayers to the Revolution of the Four Hundred in Athens'.
- Mossé, C. 1979. 'Comment s'élabore un mythe politique: Solon "père fondateur" de la démocratie athénienne' *Annales (ESC)* 34.3, 425-37.
- Mynott, J. 2013. *Thucydides. The War of the Peloponnesians and Athenians*. Cambridge.
- Ober, J. 1996. 'The Athenian Revolution of 508/7: Violence, Authority, and The Origins of Democracy' in *The Athenian Revolution: Essays on Ancient Greek Democracy and Political Theory*. Princeton, 32-52.
- Ostwald, M. 1988. 'The Reform of the Athenian State by Cleisthenes' *CAH* IV², 303-46.
- Pleket, H.W. Review of Hansen 1983 and 1984, *Mnemosyne* 44.1/2, 260-64
- Rhodes, P. 1970. 'Ephialtes and the Achievement of Athenian Democracy' in *Essays Presented to C.M. Bowra*. Oxford, 39-49.
- Rhodes, P. 1972. 'The Five Thousand in the Athenian Revolutions of 411 B.C.' *Journal of Hellenic Studies* 92, 115-27.
- Roberts, J.T. 2017. *The Plague of War: Athens, Sparta, and the Struggle for Ancient Greece*. Oxford.
- Roubineau, J.M. 2025. *Alcibiade. L'Amant d'Athènes*. Paris.
- de Ste. Croix, G. 1983. *The Class Struggle in the Ancient Greek World*. London.
- Shear, J.L. 2011. *Polis and Revolution: Responding to Oligarchy in Classical Athens*. New York.
- Simonton, M. Review of Shear 2011, *BMCR* 2012.02.12.
- Simonton, M. 2017. *Classical Greek Oligarchy: A Political History*. Princeton.
- Soliman, M. 2012. 'Democracy Rules. A Reading in Mogens Herman Hansen's Book, *The Athenian Democracy in the Age of Demosthenes*': https://acl.journals.ekb.eg/article/89456_dec1e6b5010e43be3793862e9e32ecf5.pdf
- Teegarden, D. 2013. *Death to Tyrants! Ancient Greek Democracy and the Struggle against Tyranny*. Princeton.
- Waterfield, R. 2025. *Thucydides. The History of the Peloponnesian War*. New York.

Woolf, G. 2007. *Et tu, Brute? The Murder of Caesar and Political Assassination*.
Cambridge, MA.