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Reasons for the Coup of the Four Hundred

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Introduction

The Peloponnesian War (431-404 B.C.) between Athens and Sparta came to a temporary halt during the period between 421 and 413. In 415 the Athenians, under the influence of Alcibiades, inaugurated an ambitious invasion of the island of Sicily that by 413 had turned into a disaster for the invaders. The Athenians lost thousands of men, most of their navy, and their two leading statesmen, the generals Nicias and Alcibiades. Nicias died in Sicily and Alcibiades defected to the Spartans. Also, in 413 the Spartans formally reopened the war by occupying on a permanent basis the fortress at Decelea which was on the Athenian frontier. Bereft of effective leadership and the greater part of its navy, Athens was on the verge of losing its empire as more and more of its subject allies began to rebel. The foundation upon which Athens' strength was built seemed to be on the verge of collapse. This crisis led directly to a coup in Athens in the year 411; the democracy was overthrown by a group of oligarchs known as the Four Hundred. The Four Hundred held power in Athens for about four months through mid-September before they were replaced by a more moderate oligarchy known as the Five Thousand. The Five Thousand in turn were in control in the city for only eight or nine months until democracy was restored again in spring 410. The oligarchy of the Four Hundred made a profound impression upon the Athenians, and it foreshadowed the horrors of that later oligarchy, the Thirty Tyrants, who were imposed upon the Athenians by the victorious

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Spartans at the end of the Peloponnesian War in 404.

What were the motives of the Four Hundred in overthrowing the democracy? The traditional view is that they were controlled by a small inner core of extreme oligarchs who wanted to set up an Athenian oligarchy on the model of Sparta, and who were willing, if necessary, to accomplish this with Spartan aid.¹ The moderates were not willing to go this far, but they did want to limit the democracy; they wanted to restrict the magistracies, if not also the citizenship, to those of hoplite class, about half the citizen population. In other words, the motives of the Four Hundred were ideological; they preferred a government based on the principle of oligarchy to one based on democracy.

In 1967 Raphael Sealey tried to show that the traditional view was wrong, and that the most important motives of the participants in the coup were personal.² By "personal" he meant individual attempts to win a prominent place in politics without reference to any political program based on ideology. Sealey looked at the passages in Thucydides that concern the careers of three leaders of the coup: Theramenes, Phrynichus, and Antiphon and tried to show that none of them had any preference for oligarchy.³ In 1976 Sealey republished his position in a widely read textbook where he again asserted that political ideology "played only a minimal part."⁴

I believe that Sealey is wrong. This essay seeks to demonstrate that the Four Hundred were made up of two groups of oligarchs, moderates and extremists, both of whom were actuated by ideological motives. Both groups wanted an oligarchic government in place of the democracy. They differed with respect to how broad the oligarchy should be. They differed on other issues as well. The small inner core downplayed their extremist views in order to attract as many followers as possible. The extremists had no real quarrel with the Spartans; they looked upon them as fellow oligarchs and even hoped to gain their support in maintaining a narrow oligarchy at Athens. The moderates were unaware of these secret goals. They were patriotic Athenians who had every intention of fighting and defeating the Spartan enemy. The stated goals of the movement were, in fact, the goals of the moderates: the creation of a hoplite oligarchy based on five thousand wealthy Athenians, and the solicitation of Persian aid to win the war against the Spartans. Only when the moderates discovered that the extremists really wanted neither of these, but rather the retention of the narrow oligarchy of the Four Hundred and the eventual capitulation to Sparta, did they, under the leadership of Theramenes, form a separate faction.

The Sources

Thucydides is by far the most important and the most detailed source for these events. There are, however, some disadvantages to his account. Thucydides had been exiled from Athens since 424, and so he was not present to witness these events first hand. Also his account occurs in a part of his history that is less polished than other parts, and many modern historians think that it does not represent Thucydides' final revision.⁵ The closest that Thucydides comes to making an explicit statement about the cause of the coup occurs in a speech given by Pisander, one of the conspirators, to the Athenian people.⁶ He says that they can win the war against Sparta if they receive aid from the King of Persia, and that this aid can only be had by changing their constitution. This is the publicly stated goal of the conspirators. Aristotle in the *Constitution of Athens* says much the same thing with the added emphasis on the idea that Persian aid is what won the masses over to a change in the government.⁷ In the *Politics* Aristotle makes a more revealing statement.⁸ He says that the Four Hundred deceived the people with the lie that the King of Persia would send money to Athens if the democracy were not in power. The clear implication is that the leaders of the Four Hundred used the Persian alliance as a cover to hide their real motives. If it was not to continue the war, it must have been to arrange a peace with Sparta. Thucydides reports that one of the first actions that the oligarchs took when they entered office was to contact King Agis of Sparta for the purpose of coming to terms.⁹ In addition to these sources, we may add Xenophon's *Hellenica*, Lysias' "Against Eratosthenes," and the fragments of a speech by Antiphon written in his own defense.

The Coup of the Four Hundred

Thucydides implies that the idea of a coup originated with Alcibiades who had defected to Sparta and was now looking for a way to get recalled to Athens.¹⁰ Pisander, Antiphon, Phrynichus and Theramenes were some of the leading conspirators, most of whom were with the navy at Samos at the time. They sent Pisander to Athens to convince the people to recall Alcibiades and to modify the democracy. Pisander succeeded in his goals and persuaded certain political clubs to agitate for a program whereby five thousand of the wealthiest people in the city would perform the functions of government for no salary, thus freeing the limited funds that were available to pay the men on active military service.¹¹ Pisander sailed away to arrange matters with Alcibiades and the Persians.

While he was gone the conspirators in Athens launched an intense propaganda campaign as well as a secret campaign of intimidation and

murder. Androcles, a leader of the people and enemy of Alcibiades, was one of the individuals who was killed. When Alcibiades proved unable to deliver the promised Persian aid, the conspirators proceeded without him. Pisander sailed back to Athens and persuaded the Assembly to create a committee of ten with full powers to draw up proposals to change the constitution. The committee made their proposals at an extraordinary Assembly held, not in the city, but at Colonus. The Assembly voted to relieve the present magistrates from their office and to abolish the practice of paying salaries to future magistrates. A council of Four Hundred, which was supposed eventually to choose a government of Five Thousand, was chosen through a complex procedure.

The Four Hundred ruled with a strong hand, putting some of their enemies to death while exiling and imprisoning others. During this same period, the navy at Samos formed, in essence, a democratic government in exile, and the Athenian state seemed dangerously close to Civil War. The Four Hundred, who never called or even published a list of the Five Thousand, became increasingly unpopular. Theramenes began to isolate himself from the other leaders and called for the selection of the Five Thousand. The extremists decided to call in the Spartans in order to bolster their regime. They sent ambassadors to Sparta and began to fortify Eetionea, a place where an enemy fleet could control Athens' harbor. The tide began to turn against the extremists. Phrynichus was assassinated. Theramenes encouraged his followers to tear down the fortification at Eetionea. After they lost a sea battle with the Spartans, and their subject ally and nearby neighbor, Euboea, revolted, the Athenians called an Assembly to depose the Four Hundred and to institute the Five Thousand.¹² The oligarchy of the Four Hundred had lasted less than four months.

The political nature of the government of the Five Thousand, though in itself a controversial issue, has been viewed by most scholars as a hoplite oligarchy in which about half of the Athenian citizen body was eligible to participate in the government.¹³ It is also thought that Theramenes and the moderate faction of the Four Hundred were instrumental in establishing this regime.¹⁴ It is our task to look at the actions of the various leaders of the two factions within the Four Hundred and to try to discover if their motivation for seeking an oligarchical type of government was for personal or ideological reasons. Was it simply to advance their own careers as Sealey has argued or did these men prefer oligarchy to democracy on a principled ideological basis as has been the traditional view?

Theramenes

In order to prove his theory, Sealey must demonstrate that any differences among members of the Four Hundred were more a matter of individual rivalries than of genuine political disagreements. Theramenes' leadership within the moderate oligarchic faction which, disillusioned with the goals of the extremists, helped bring down the Four Hundred and usher in the Five Thousand is well established and even Sealey admits that Theramenes is "the most serious candidate for recognition as a moderate."¹⁵ Theramenes surfaced again during the reign of the Thirty Tyrants (404-403 B.C.), and for the second time played the role of the moderate, now opposite the extreme position of Critias. In the *Hellenica* Xenophon has Theramenes deliver a speech in which he outlines his political position.¹⁶ He says that he has always been an enemy to the extremes of democracy and oligarchy and has always proposed that the government be in the hands of those who could afford to serve their country as either cavalrymen or as hoplites.

Sealey tries to discredit this testimony of a contemporary source by discrediting Xenophon. Xenophon left Athens in 401 and was later exiled. Sealey suggests, perhaps rightly, that Xenophon was exiled as a result of his having been a supporter of the regime of the Thirty Tyrants. According to Sealey, Xenophon then had a vested interest in preserving a sympathetic portrait of Theramenes. Xenophon seems to be saying that Critias was a true villain, not that all the tyrants were bad. Xenophon makes Theramenes out to be a moderate and a martyr for the cause of moderation. Granted, Xenophon is not always an ideal source, but he was an eye witness to many of these events. Moreover, it would be a mistake to disregard his testimony totally, simply because he was directly involved in the events that he narrates.

After the fall of the Thirty some of the oligarchs and their collaborators were brought to trial. Lysias' speech "Against Eratosthenes" provides us with some information on this topic. Eratosthenes had been a part of both the revolution of 411 and that of 404. He was apparently going to defend himself by saying that he was a part of the moderate faction of Theramenes and not one of the extreme oligarchs. Lysias tries to destroy this argument by destroying the character of Theramenes, saying that he is no different from the other tyrants. Sealey, agreeing with Lysias, tries to prove that the projection of Theramenes as a martyr for moderation was self-serving and hence false. We could argue that the same source reveals that apparently a large portion of the Athenian population was willing to believe that there was a difference between Theramenes and the extreme oligarchs. It might be noted that Lysias' condemnation of Theramenes was equally self-serving. In any case an argument that is self-serving is not

necessarily false.

For further confirmation of the idea that Theramenes was an opportunist, Sealey points to Thucydides 8.89. Here Thucydides says that leaders such as Theramenes began to demand that the Five Thousand be appointed in order to give the government a broader base. Thucydides goes on to say that most of these men were motivated by personal ambition. They knew that the democratic party at Samos was strong and that the cause of the Four Hundred was weakening. This is what Sealey calls Thucydides' "judgement on Theramenes."¹⁷ It should be noted in reply to Sealey that this passage is generalized, and it is not applied directly to Theramenes. But, even if Thucydides had said that Theramenes acted out of personal ambition, it must be remembered that this is Thucydides' opinion, not a fact. All politicians are open to the charge of opportunism, and to some extent, it is usually true.

Sealey challenges historians who accept Xenophon's judgement of Theramenes over Thucydides' to give their reasons.¹⁸ Here are a few. Xenophon was an eyewitness to the events he describes, while Thucydides, who was still in exile and as such had to rely on informants, was not. Further, Thucydides offers us only a generalized opinion about some of the oligarchs that may or may not include Theramenes. Xenophon reminds us that, in fact, Theramenes' political ideas were coherent and consistent. Everyone acts out of personal ambition. Yet, this does not preclude the possibility that one can be motivated by ideological goals as well.

Other passages in Book Eight of Thucydides seem strangely at odds with that section of 8.89 in which most of the moderates are accused of personal ambition. Thucydides calls the government of the Five Thousand, dominated by the moderates, the best government Athens had had in his lifetime.¹⁹ Andrewes does not believe that the previously mentioned section of 8.89 represents Thucydides' real views.²⁰ This section, like others in Book Eight, may be a summary of a report the historian wrote up, but did not live to revise in its final form. It may have even come from one of the fleeing oligarchs who naturally would have looked upon the moderates with hostility. If Andrewes is right, and I think he is, Sealey is deprived of his best argument.

Sealey does not mention other passages both directly before and after this one. Earlier in 8.89 Thucydides says that Theramenes and his associates were afraid that the extremists had gone to Sparta to make a secret bargain that would be harmful to the state. In 8.90 Thucydides says that those who were particularly bitter against the democracy sent Antiphon, Phrynichus and others to make any kind of terms with Sparta that would seem acceptable. Thucydides says that Theramenes asserted that the extreme party was building a wall at Eetionia not to keep the

Athenian fleet out, but to let the Spartan navy in.²¹ Thucydides goes on to confirm that the extremists had some such plan in mind. They wanted first to maintain the oligarchy and the empire. If this failed, Thucydides continues, they would at least hold on to Athens. If even this proved difficult, they were prepared to call in the Spartans on any terms whatever, as long as they themselves were left in power. All of this should suggest that Theramenes performed a vital role in his country's history. In preferring Athens to oligarchy at any cost, he showed that he represented a different ideological stance than Phrynichus, Antiphon and the other extremist members of the Four Hundred.

Phrynichus

Another major point in Sealey's argument is his explanation of the mysterious behavior of Phrynichus. Phrynichus was with the fleet in Samos at the time that Alcibiades offered help from Tissaphernes, the Persian satrap, if the Athenians would alter their democracy. Phrynichus opposed the plan. Thucydides says that this was because he believed that Alcibiades only wanted to get recalled and was not committed to democracy or oligarchy, and that, furthermore, a revolution was not a good idea for the Athenians at that time. There followed an extraordinary series of events in Thucydides.²²

Phrynichus betrayed the Athenian navy to Astyochus, the Spartan admiral. Astyochus took the information to Alcibiades in Magnesia. Alcibiades then wrote to the generals in Samos, revealed what Phrynichus had done and suggested that they put him to death for treason. Phrynichus then wrote a second time to Astyochus, protested the disclosure of his earlier information, and then revealed a plan to him whereby the Spartans could destroy the whole Athenian fleet at Samos since it was unfortified at the time. Astyochus revealed this message to Alcibiades just as he had revealed the first one. Phrynichus learned that the second plan had also been betrayed and that Alcibiades had sent a second letter to the generals at Samos. He acted before the letter arrived. Phrynichus alerted the navy that the Spartans were coming, fortified Samos, and managed to save his own credibility. When Persian support failed to materialize, Alcibiades ceased to be a factor in the advent of the revolution. As soon as Alcibiades was out of the way, Phrynichus became one of the principal leaders of the coup.

Some aspects of this narrative have been called into question. Sealey and others believe that this episode is "Thucydides' summary of the things that Alcibiades told him."²³ There has been much speculation on the idea that Alcibiades may have been one of Thucydides' informants.²⁴ There is no proof of this, but it remains an intriguing possibility.

Thucydides was banished from Athens for twenty years, beginning in 424.²⁵ He was probably in the Peloponnese in the early years of his banishment.²⁶ It seems likely that Thucydides was in the Peloponnese at the time of Alcibiades' first exile (415-411 B.C.), and perhaps they were together in Thrace or Asia Minor at the time of Alcibiades' second exile (406-404 B.C.). If Alcibiades was the individual who informed the historian about the Phrynichus episode, then it is possible that Alcibiades told him a false version of the story that was damaging to Phrynichus and flattering to Alcibiades.

In 1940 J. Hatzfeld raised serious doubts about the validity of this episode in the belief that Alcibiades had invented the whole story.²⁷ H.D. Westlake, in an attempt to show that the Phrynichus episode was more than just the creation of Alcibiades, answered Hatzfeld with two arguments.²⁸ Westlake first emphasized that Phrynichus was not important enough to justify so elaborate a lie. Alcibiades' plans had been accepted by the great majority of the generals, so Phrynichus' resistance did not offer a serious threat. Westlake's second and more important argument was that many of the events of this episode, such as Astyocho's visit to Alcibiades in Magnesia, the sending of various messages, and the fortification of Samos were a matter of public record and would have been known by many people. A few of these events might be incorporated into a lie, but not all of them. For Westlake, the story is simply too complex to be mere fabrication.

Sealey's conclusion is that Phrynichus' behavior prior to his becoming an oligarch can only be explained as having been inspired by a personal jealousy of Alcibiades. Further, Sealey believes that Phrynichus wanted a major role in the revolution, and he knew that his status would be subordinated if Alcibiades returned. But is it not possible that Phrynichus did not agree with Alcibiades' political and military goals? Alcibiades had always been associated with the radical democracy. If he was associating with oligarchs at this time, it was a measure of how desperate he was to be recalled. He at first was opposed by Androcles, one of the leaders of the democracy, who had successfully blocked his return to Athens from exile. After Androcles was assassinated, it is reasonable to believe that, were Alcibiades to be recalled, he would again attempt to curry favor with the democracy. Alcibiades' natural constituency was among the sailors who favored democracy and the war policy. He would need victories to strengthen his reputation among those Athenians who still doubted his leadership. Alcibiades was in no position to make peace with the Spartans whom he had just deserted and betrayed. Phrynichus was smart enough to see that Alcibiades was not the man to lead Athens toward oligarchy.

In addition, the story of Phrynichus' machinations with Astyocho may be exaggerated, but everything Thucydides tells us about Phrynichus

supports the idea that he was ready to make peace with the Spartans at almost any price. A change in goals might also have attracted Phrynichus to the coup. Hignett sees such a shift in the plans of the oligarchs. "The opponents of the democracy had changed their foreign policy; disappointed by Persia, they now hoped that their other enemy, Sparta, would be more willing to grant peace to Athens if it was ruled by an oligarchy."²⁹ Is it not possible that Phrynichus was interested in a revolution whose goal was an end of the war, but not in one whose goal was a prolongation of the war? Might not Phrynichus have believed that only through an oligarchy could the war end? This seems to be a better explanation for Phrynichus' conversion to oligarchy than that it came about because of personal rivalry between Alcibiades and Phrynichus, as Sealey would have us believe.

Antiphon

We have a few fragments from Antiphon's speech, made in his own defense against the charge of treason.³⁰ Thucydides says that this speech was the best one ever made in a law court until his time.³¹ From what we can ascertain from these few fragments, Antiphon seems to be arguing that his part in the revolution was not from any motive of personal gain. He had not been deprived of his rights or his property, and he did not fear the disclosure of any wrongdoing. He did not face an impending lawsuit, and he was not seeking revenge for any wrong done to him. Antiphon composed speeches to deliver in court, an activity the Four Hundred would forbid. Why then would he desire an oligarchic government if not for ideological reasons?

From the evidence, Sealey argues, instead, that Antiphon is denying he ever was an oligarch. The evidence, however, does not support Sealey's conclusion. These fragments are too slender to support a major argument, and nowhere does Antiphon deny that he was an oligarch or his role in the coup. No one in the jury would have believed him if he had tried. Contrary to Sealey's assertion, Antiphon seems to be arguing that he became involved because of patriotic duty, not out of any hope for personal gain. In spite of the brilliance of the speech, it failed to convince a law court; Antiphon was convicted of treason. His house was torn down, and a sign was posted on the spot to indicate that a traitor had once lived there. The state refused to bury him on Athenian soil, and his descendants were disenfranchised forever.³²

Conclusion

Human motivation is seldom simple or pure. A man is likely to embark

on a course of action for a variety of reasons. Any large political movement will contain individuals with considerably different motivations. To say that in the Coup of the Four Hundred, ideological concerns "played only a minimal part" is an oversimplification that distorts our ancient evidence. The Athenians chose to remember Theramenes as a martyr to freedom. They also chose to condemn the extreme oligarchs. The body of Phrynichus was disinterred and removed from Athenian territory.³³ His assassins were granted citizenship and voted public honors.³⁴ Antiphon was convicted of treason and condemned to death. This treason probably did not relate to the overthrow of the democracy since many more were compromised by this action including Theramenes himself. The charge of treason was made against those who were willing to hand Athens over to the enemy. Ideology incorporates the means as well as the ideas and symbolism of a class or political movement. The extreme oligarchs were willing to use violence and even treason to obtain their goals. The moderates were not. The moderates wanted to continue the war against Sparta. That was the stated goal of their movement and the reason for their rebellion against the extremists who wanted to hand their country over to the enemy.

NOTES

¹ See e.g. N.G.L. Hammond, *A History of Greece* (Oxford, 1959) 405-407; J.B. Bury and Russell Meiggs, *A History of Greece* (New York, 1975) 308-311.

² R. Sealey, *Essays in Greek Politics* (New York, 1967) 111-132.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ R. Sealey, *A History of the Greek City States* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1976) 366.

⁵ See e.g. A.W. Gomme, A. Andrewes, and K.J. Dover, *A Historical Commentary on Thucydides* 5 (Oxford, 1981) 361-383.

⁶ Thucydides, 8.53.

⁷ Aristotle, *History of the Athenian Constitution* 29.1.

⁸ Aristotle, *Politics* 5.1304 b 7-15.

⁹ Thucydides, 8.70.

¹⁰ Thucydides, 8.47. This account of the Four Hundred is based on Thucydides, 8.47-98.

¹¹ These clubs or *hetaireiai* were not subversive organizations, but rather organizations that existed for the mutual benefit of their members, especially in lawsuits and elections. However, in this one instance, they proved to be a potent force in the creation of an oligarchy. See Thucydides, 8.54.

¹² Thucydides, 8.97.1-3.

¹³ The traditional view is that only five thousand people in Athens were allowed to vote in the assembly and hold office. G.E.M. de Ste Croix, 4 "The Constitution of the Five Thousand," *Historia* 5 (1956) 1-23.5, suggested that basic rights were returned to all Athenians, and that only the right of holding public office was restricted to the Five Thousand at the fall of the Four Hundred. Further, Sealey (*Essays*, 126ff.) adopted this theory and also suggested that the Five Thousand never were considered an oligarchic body by any Athenian. This aspect of his theory has been adequately answered by P.J. Rhodes in "The Five Thousand in the Athenian Revolutions of 411 B.C." *JHS* 92 (1972) 115-127.

- ¹⁴ J. Hatzfeld, "Le fin du régime de Thérámene," *REA* 40 (1938) 113-124.
- ¹⁵ Sealey (supra n.2) 129.
- ¹⁶ Xenophon, *Hellenica* 2.3.35-49.
- ¹⁷ Sealey (supra n.2) 130.
- ¹⁸ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁹ Thucydides, 8.97.
- ²⁰ Gomme et al. (supra n.5) 253, 298-300.
- ²¹ Thucydides, 8.91.
- ²² Thucydides, 8.48-51.
- ²³ Sealey (supra n.2) 118.
- ²⁴ See esp. P.A. Brunt, "Thucydides and Alcibiades," *REG* 65 (1952) 59-96; E. Delebecque, *Thucydide et Alcibiade* (Aix-en-Provence, 1965).
- ²⁵ Thucydides, 5.26.
- ²⁶ *Ibid.*
- ²⁷ J. Hatzfeld, *Alcibiade* (Paris, 1940) 235-236.
- ²⁸ H.D. Westlake, "Phrynichos and Astyochus," *JHS* 76 (1956) 99-104.
- ²⁹ C. Hignett, *A History of the Athenian Constitution* (Oxford, 1952) 271.
- ³⁰ Antiphon, Fragments, Loeb Classical Library, *Minor Attic Orators* 1 (Cambridge and London, 1941) 294-299.
- ³¹ Thucydides, 8.68.
- ³² [Plutarch], *Lives of the Ten Orators* 55.
- ³³ Lycurgus, *Against Leocrates*. 113-115.
- ³⁴ *IG* I³102. This inscription can be found in R. Meiggs and D.M. Lewis, *A Selection of Greek Historical Inscriptions* (Oxford, 1969) no. 85.