



PROJECT MUSE®

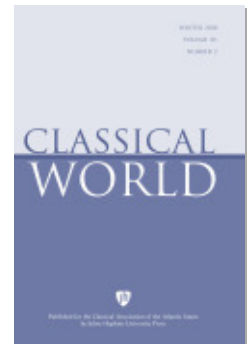
Pericles on Democracy: Thucydides 2.37.1

W. R. Connor

Classical World, Volume 111, Number 2, Winter 2018, pp. 165-175 (Article)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/clw.2018.0000>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/686307>

Pericles on Democracy: Thucydides 2.37.1

W. R. CONNOR

ABSTRACT: Understanding the role of democracy in Thucydides' history depends to a large extent on 2.37.1 in the Periclean Funeral Oration. Four ostensibly minor stylistic features of the passage show that Thucydides represented Pericles as praising Athenian democracy but carefully embedding his comments in a wider discussion of Athenian mores (ἐπιτηδεύματα) and characteristics (τρόποι). These account for much of Athens' endurance and resilience during the war, but have the ironic effect of prolonging the war and increasing the loss and suffering it caused.

In name (μὲν) it is called a democracy, because we govern not for the few but (δὲ) the many; whereas (μὲν) before the law there is equality for all in private disputes, nevertheless (δὲ) regarding popular esteem the individual receives public preference according to his recognized achievement in some field—not by rotation rather than by excellence—and furthermore (ἀδ) should he be poor but able to perform some service for the city, he is not prevented by insufficient public recognition.

(Thuc. 2.37.1)

These words from the Funeral Oration ascribed to Pericles constitute one of the most discussed passages in Thucydides. Nine lines of Greek, more than 150 years of scholarly discussion, countless articles, exemplary commentaries, sharp debate—yet it is still hard to agree on a translation, let alone a full interpretation. Much of the discussion, however, is built on a shared assumption that the interpretive issues center on whether Thucydides approved or disapproved of Athenian democracy. Did he express a consistent judgment about it? Was it, in his view, an effective system of governance? And so on. Behind such questions is a

This essay is based on a talk given in April 2016 at the de Tocqueville Forum at Georgetown University. I am also grateful to Ryan Balot for his suggestions.

more wide-ranging question: Did democracy (as Thucydides understood it) work, or did it cause the “Fall of Athens”?

These are legitimate questions with long pedigrees. An ancient commentator on Thucydides gave his answer to some of them in his paraphrase of the passage:

Since democracy seems to be a paltry thing, and he saw the Lacedaemonians boasting about their aristocracy, he continues by saying that in name our civic system is a democracy, but in reality an aristocracy.
(Scholion on 2.37.1 in manuscripts *ABFGc2*)

Many commentators since then have followed the scholiast’s lead and concluded that Pericles is here represented as implying that Athens was a democracy in name only—that, in effect, whatever Athens achieved was accomplished despite its democracy, while its failures were primarily the result of that democracy. Pericles in the Funeral Oration, then, would anticipate what Thucydides himself seems unhesitatingly to assert later in book 2:

In short, what was nominally a democracy became in his hands government by the first citizen. With his successors it was different. More on a level with one another, and each grasping at supremacy, they ended by committing even the conduct of state affairs to the whims of the multitude.

(2.65.9, tr. Crawley)

Thucydides’ view of democracy can then be understood along the lines of Hobbes’ distich:

He says Democracy’s a Foolish Thing,
Than a Republick wiser is one King.

If, however, one reframes the question, by asking not how 2.37.1 fits into a judgmental agenda, but how word choice and stylistic features affect the working of the passage and a reader’s reactions to it, the passage appears in quite a different light. That gives reason to hope that even at this late date, after so much scholarly discussion—well surveyed by Andrews—some new light might still be shed on Thucydides 2.37.1 and its implications for the understanding of ancient *dēmokratia* and modern democracy. Four comparatively neglected features of the passage, ostensibly minor stylistic matters, may prove revealing about the passage, the author’s narrative strategy, and some even more wide-ranging issues.

First, “In name it is called a democracy . . .”:¹ The main verb in this passage, κέκληται, is usually translated as if it were a simple present, “is called.” But, of course, it is a perfect. Why a perfect? Rusten (1989: 145) is surely right in citing Smyth’s grammar (section 1946), which notes that the perfect can be used for “the enduring result” of an action. Thus, at a minimum, the wording suggests the name “democracy” has been in circulation for some time. The perfect of καλέω (“call”), however, often has an added connotation—the endurance of the name reflects an achievement, something to be respected, a source even of pride. That connotation can be detected, for example, in Thucydides 5.9.3 where a Spartan commander urges his allies to fight bravely against the Athenians: “. . . and on this day either through your bravery secure freedom, and be called allies of the Lacedaemonians, or become the slaves of Athens. . . .” The perfect of καλέω has similar, albeit more contorted, connotations in 3.82.7, Thucydides’ analysis of the civic strife in Corcyra: “As a rule men are more easily called ‘clever’ when wicked than ‘good’ when stupid . . .” (Tr. Hornblower). Here the perfect is used, as often, in a generalization, but with an added hint of sarcasm about pride in being called wicked. Again, in 4.64.3 Hermocrates uses the perfect of this verb when he reminds representatives of Sicilian states that they are “called by one name, ‘Sicilians.’” That name is a source of pride and thereby an incitement to concerted action. In each of these instances, a simple present of the verb would convey the basic meaning, but it would be flat and lusterless; the perfect adds the idea of recognizing an achievement and being proud of such a name.

This usage of the perfect of καλέω would come as no surprise to Thucydides’ readers, for it was also found in tragedy (as at Aeschylus’ *Agamemnon* 160–161 and *Prometheus Bound* 840; Sophocles’ *Electra* 366, Euripides’ *Hippolytus* 2). A similar tone of enduring pride or respect is found in Homer, for example *Iliad* 2.260, where κέκληται readily evokes the fame, κλέος, of a Homeric hero. Indeed there is a Homeric, or at least a hexameter cadence, in Thucydides 2.37.1: ~ ~ ~ | ~ ~ ~ | ~ ~ / δημοκρατία κέκληται.

Phrasing of this sort suggests that in 2.37.1 Pericles is not represented as trying “to excuse the name” *democracy*, as some commentators have thought, but affirming that it is something to be proud of.

¹ Unless otherwise noted, here and elsewhere the translation of Thucydides is by J. S. Rusten (1989).

It might be objected that beginning a sentence with “in name on the one hand . . .” (ὄνομα μὲν) creates an expectation that the forthcoming “on the other hand” will contrast name and reality, as in similar constructions in 1.11.2 and 2.65.9. Will Pericles, the reader may wonder, go on to tell his grieving listeners that their loved ones died for what was not really a democracy at all, or for a system so flawed that it could not live up to its pretentious name? Far from it! In this sentence the correlative to *name* is action, the actual practices of Athenian civic life, especially participation in the judicial system and other forms of civic engagement. These features, discussed in the next sentence, illustrate, instantiate, and validate the claims implicit in the word “democracy.” To be sure, the validation is crisply focused, and may leave the alert reader suspecting that a broader analysis, not constrained by the demands of an epideictic speech, or by any obligation to echo the words Pericles used, might lead to a more critical assessment of Athenian democracy under Pericles, and perhaps of Pericles himself. That is in fact exactly what happens in 2.65, when Thucydides, in his own voice, asserts that under Pericles Athens was becoming (ἐγίγνετο, not ἐγένετο, “became”) “in name a democracy but in fact domination by the first man” (λόγῳ μὲν δημοκρατία, ἔργῳ δὲ . . . ἀρχή). That, however, is not the point ascribed to Pericles in the Funeral Oration. As one reads ahead in book 2, one hears two different voices express two different views of Athenian democracy; readers are, in effect, challenged to make up their own minds as they read ahead.

A second detail of phrasing, when carefully analyzed, also indicates that Pericles speaks in positive terms about Athenian democracy: “. . . we govern not for the few but the many”. The phrase, often translated in this way or as “the administration is run with a view to the interests of the many, not of the few,” raises two ostensibly minor issues which, when fully considered, make possible a better understanding of the sequence of thought in this section of the Funeral Oration (Hornblower 1991). The intent is clearly to expand on the term δημοκρατία, “people-rule.” It does so, however, in a surprising way. The idea of “rule” is expressed not with more obvious infinitives, such as κρατεῖν or ἄρχειν, but with the more homely οἰκεῖν, whose metaphor evokes “to manage like a household.” That verb has a wide semantic range, spanning “to inhabit,” “to be in charge of,” and, indeed, sometimes “to rule.” Thucydides, I suspect, liked the range, perhaps even the ambiguity, of the word.

The preposition in this phrase, ἐς, literally “in” or “into,” is now widely understood, at least in the English-speaking world, as meaning “for the benefit of” the majority, that is for the advantage or the interest of one segment of the citizenry. In the nineteenth century, however, the little preposition was at the center of extensive and sometimes heated debate, with many British scholars advocating the now dominant view, and some excellent German scholars contending it meant “in the hands of” the majority of citizens. A convenient summary of the debate can be found in Sheppard and Evans (1870: 190).

Parallel phrasing in 5.81.2, 8.38.3, 8.53.3, and perhaps 8.97.2 convinces me that the Germans were right. In each of these cases the preposition in the phrase ἐς ὀλίγους means not *to the advantage of* the few, but *in the hands of* or *in the control of* the few, that is, of an oligarchy. By analogy the preposition in the Funeral Oration should imply that in Athens the management of affairs is in the hands of a majority of the citizenry.

This inference is also supported by the wording that Megabyzus is represented as using in the constitutional debate in book 3 of Herodotus: “. . . to give the power (κράτος) to (ἐς) the multitude (πλῆθος)” (3.81.1, tr. Godley). By analogy Pericles was not saying to the grieving friends and parents of the war dead that Athens’ government was, in effect, an instrument of class struggle, but quite simply that Athens was managed by majority vote of its citizens. That assertion implicitly continues the contrast introduced at the beginning of 2.37.1: “We use a polity that does not mimic the laws of our neighbor”—a statement that proudly differentiates Athens from some other states, unnamed, but surely including Sparta, where power was more narrowly concentrated.

Since those who have power are likely to use it to their advantage, the difference in interpretation of one preposition may seem a microscopic matter, but the next sentence turns the microscope around and lets the reader view telescopically a feature of Athenian civic life with, as we shall see, wide-ranging implications: broad civic participation.

A third feature of the wording of 2.37.1 points again toward the speaker’s positive view of Athenian democracy. It is a single word whose significance is often blurred, if not entirely omitted, in most translations. The word is μέτεστι, which typically means “there is a share in,” or a claim to, or participation in, something. It is emphatic in this setting. Immediately after the comment about the term democracy, comes this verb, whose position, first in its clause, emphasizes the importance of participation. The word’s latitude allows it to evoke both “being part of” the

polis, and “taking part in” its privileges and responsibilities. These ideas are also prominent in Greek political thought, for instance in Plato *Laws* 6.768b, and Aristotle *Politics* 3.1292a. It is also a significant theme elsewhere in Thucydides, as Maurice Pope (1988) has shown.

This passage in the Funeral Oration conveys the nature of such participation through two carefully coordinated clauses, each introduced by the preposition *κατά*. The first clause affirms equal treatment under law in private disputes; the second concerns recognition or status (*ἀξίωσις* I.3 LSJ). Differences of status are not excluded in Athenian democracy but are accorded on the basis of one’s ability to contribute to society. There are two reasons why participation is so emphasized in this passage. First, the theme of participation instantiates and reinforces the assertion that Athens is a true democracy, and proud of it. These forms of civic engagement are marks of a true democratic culture. In addition, it looks forward to the discussion of Athenian character in the next portion of the speech.

A fourth feature of the phrasing of the passage must not be overlooked, “he is not prevented. . . .” The passage builds from a contrast at the outset between systems based “on a small number” (*ὀλίγους*) and the Athenian pattern of governance by the “larger number” (*πλείονας*), and then proceeds to assert that Athens’ judicial system is open to “all” (*πάσι*) on an equal basis. The discussion of participation then concludes with the statement that a poor person who has something to contribute to society is not barred from doing so, *κεκώλυται*. This, the final word in 2.37.1, is another verb in the perfect, and echoes *κέκληται* five lines earlier. The two verbs play off each other, alliterating with k sounds, and rhyming through their similar endings. The first of these verbs concludes the observation about the term democracy, while the second marks the completion of the discussion of participation in Athenian civic life. The two similar verbs thereby delimit the section specifically devoted to democracy and clear the way for a transition to the theme of Athenian social mores (*ἐπιτήδευσις* or *ἐπιτηδεύματα*) that follows. This theme has already been introduced in book 2, just before the discussion of democracy, when Pericles lays out the structure of the speech:

But from what kind of mores (*ἐπιτήδευσις*) we came to this situation, and with what kind of civic organization (*πολιτεία*) and of characteristics [literally ‘bents,’ *τρόποι*] this greatness came about I will try to make clear before I proceed to my praise [of the fallen] . . .

(2.36.4, tr. Crawley, modified)

The ring composition marked by the two allusions to social mores embeds the treatment of democracy in a wider discussion of Athenian civic life. Democracy is an important part of that life, but only one part of it.

The treatment of democracy is thus surprising both for the brevity of what is said, and for what is not said. Pericles is shown as praising democracy but avoiding what is often regarded as its core: decision-making through democratic institutions. Instead, apart from the allusion to “the greater number,” that is, majority rule, there is not a word about how Athenian democracy made or implemented its decisions; no claim about its ability to formulate wise policies, or foster intelligent debate; no praise of its institutions, notably the Council where legislation was drafted and the agenda set, and the Assembly where after often contentious debate the voting took place. (If there were such a discussion, it might sit awkwardly with Pericles’ temporary refusal [2.22.1] to allow the Assembly to convene.) The focus in 2.37 is on participation in other aspects of civic life. Later, in 2.40, Pericles returns to Athenian decision-making, framing his comments not so much with the city’s political structure, as with the intelligence and versatility of its leaders and ordinary citizens who, although they are engaged in their individual labors, “are still fair judges of public matters” (2.40.2, tr. Crawley).

The brief remarks about democracy in 2.37.1, then, are made part of a wider discussion of Athenian civic culture and character, what Thucydides calls “bents” (τρόποι). This theme, explored throughout Connor (1984), is made emphatic when Pericles says: “In short . . . I doubt if the world can produce a man who, when he has only himself to depend upon, is equal to so many emergencies and graced by so happy a versatility as the Athenian” (2.41.1, tr. Crawley).

Democracy, the passage implies, is important not because it regularly resulted in good decisions (Thucydides does not disguise the blunders and mistakes made under the democracy), or because it produced economic growth or social stability. It is important because it goes hand in hand with other features of Athenian civic life—its civic mores (ἔπιτηδεύματα) and characteristics (τρόποι)—and thereby contributes to the shaping of a distinctive Athenian character, self-reliant, versatile, and resilient.

To sum up what we have found about the phrasing of 2.37.1: Pericles is represented as saying what a good rhetorician would express in an epideictic speech before an audience that included the parents of those

who died defending Athens and its way of life. The passage is not, as some have argued, an apology for the name democracy, nor a concession that although the system is called a democracy, it is really something else. It is not an oblique way of saying that Athens is a crypto-aristocracy or quasi-monarchy. Instead, it affirms that through participation in this form of government certain individual and civic characteristics are developed, and a society shaped that is worthy of the ultimate sacrifice. 2.37.1, then, is a confident affirmation of Athenian democracy—but, as we have seen, a strictly limited one. The brief comments about democracy are contextualized within a discussion of Athenian social mores and character. There is, however, more to it than that.

Reading Thucydides is not for the faint hearted, nor for those who fear complex ideas or ironic outcomes. The claims about Athenian character in the Funeral Oration call to mind the contrast between Athens and Sparta drawn by Corinthian speakers in book 1:

The Athenians are addicted to innovation, and their designs are characterized by swiftness alike in conception and execution. You [Spartans] have a genius for keeping what you have got, accompanied by a total want of invention. . . . They are adventurous beyond their power and daring beyond their judgment. . . . To describe their character in a word, one might truly say that they were born into the world to take no rest themselves and give none to others.

(1.70.2–9, tr. Crawley)

The Corinthian speakers, agents of a commercial oligarchy, understandably draw no connection between these characteristics and Athenian democracy. Pericles, as presented in Thucydides 2.37, also leaves the connection unspoken, though implicit. Later in his narrative of the work, however, Thucydides makes that tie explicit. Athens, he notes, has no monopoly on democracy or on the characteristics that go with it. Other democracies too are adaptable, innovative, and resilient. That is brought out in the narrative of Athens' war with Syracuse and other democracies in Sicily and affirmed in Thucydides' comment: "These (Sicilian cities such as Syracuse) were the only cities that they [the Athenians] had yet encountered, similar to their own in character (ὁμοιοτρόποις), under democracies (δημοκρατουμέναις) like themselves" (7.55.2, tr. Crawley).

Sparta, on the other hand, is represented as often sluggish and overly cautious, as Thucydides makes explicit in book 8, when the Spartans fail to take advantage of an opportunity to seize the Piraeus:

But here, as on so many other occasions, the Lacedaemonians proved the most convenient people in the world for the Athenians to be at war with. The wide difference between the two characters (τὸν τρόπον), the slowness and want of energy of the Lacedaemonians, as contrasted with the dash and enterprise of their opponents, proved of the greatest service, especially to a maritime empire like Athens. Indeed this was shown by the Syracusans, who were most like the Athenians in character (ὁμοιότροποι), and also most successful in combating them.

(8.96.5, tr. Crawley)

This comment is strategically placed, coming just after the overthrow of the oligarchy of the 400, and just as the democratic assembly resumes its meetings (8.97).

Thus as Thucydides' narrative proceeds, an ironic effect emerges. Despite blunders in decision-making, Athens hangs on, and bounces back from defeat. The disaster in Sicily, far from being the much-discussed "Fall of Athens," comes almost ten years before Athens' final defeat in this war. In the interim, as the halting narrative of book 8 makes clear, Athens' situation improves and deteriorates, its fleet is rebuilt, wins and is defeated, its democracy overthrown and then restored. Through all this, Athens demonstrates amazing resilience. Pericles' words in his last speech resonate throughout this narrative, "Remember . . . that if your country has the greatest name (ὄνομα) in all the world, it is because she never bent before disaster" (2.64.3, tr. Crawley). But the result of such endurance is ironic: it prolongs and intensifies the suffering of the war.

Reading Thucydides can be a roller-coaster ride. The story evolves from the Funeral Oration's depiction of a society that seems to have found a synergy between individual self-realization and commitment to the common good, and between strong leadership and participation in a democratic culture. The progress of the narrative—the great plague and its political consequences, the death of Pericles, Cleon's success at Pylos, the short-lived Peace of Nicias, the decision to invade Sicily, the annihilation of the Athenian expeditionary force in 413 BCE—shows how tenuous that balance was. But for better or worse, Athens holds on, as the reader is forewarned in 2.65, a passage that looks back on what under Pericles was nominally a democracy but turning into "domination by the first citizen" (2.65.9), and continues by looking forward:

With his successors it was different. More on a level with one another, and each grasping at supremacy, they ended by committing even the

conduct of state affairs to the whims of the multitude. . . . Yet after losing most of their fleet, besides other forces in Sicily, and with factions already dominant in the city, despite the attrition, they nevertheless held out against their original adversaries, joined not only by the Sicilians, but also by their own allies, nearly all in revolt, and at last by the king's son, Cyrus, who furnished the funds for the Peloponnesian navy, and they did not give in before they themselves fell into private disputes, and stumbled.

(2.65.12, tr. Crawley, modified on the basis of the emendation in Connor 1979.)

This chapter points to the paradox of democracy as Thucydides presents it. He makes clear that the Athenians made risky decisions and sometimes serious blunders, but the democratic culture that enabled these mistakes also helped produce a people of astonishing adaptability and resilience. The Sicilian disaster, terrible as it was, was not the “Fall of Athens.” Athens repeatedly picks itself up after defeat, continues the fight not only to 411 BCE when Thucydides’ narrative breaks off, but to the destruction of its walls, and Sparta’s imposition in 404/3 of rule by The Thirty. The city held on for 27 years.

Thucydides’ story is in part a tribute to the resilience of Athens’ democratic culture. But such resilience, as we have seen, prolonged the war and intensified the suffering. Thucydides had that in mind at the beginning of his narrative when he wrote: “Indeed this war was the greatest movement (κίνησις) yet known in history, not only of the Hellenes, but of a large part of the barbarian world—I had almost said of mankind” (1.1.1–2, tr. Crawley).

Athens’ astonishing combination of blunders in decision-making and resilience amid setbacks is at the heart of the story that Thucydides believed would be of value even at indeterminate points in the future. It evokes admiration but also a persistent recognition of the disruption caused by the war. Alert readers are likely to experience their own κίνησις, to be wrenched out of old patterns of thought, with their understanding challenged and deepened as the narrative advances, not least in the depiction of the endurance and halting recovery of Athens in book 8. Every part of the story depends in varying ways on the understanding, implicit and explicit, of a democratic culture presented in the Funeral Oration, and traced through rest of the work.

That, I believe, is what was at stake in the war, and why Thucydides thought it was important to write a work that readers in other times and

circumstances might find valuable. That is why it is still important to ride that roller coaster.

HILLSBOROUGH, NC
wrconnor1@gmail.com

Works Cited

- Andrews, J. A. 2004. "Pericles on the Athenian Constitution" *AJP* 125, 539–61.
- Connor, W. R. 1979. "Thucydides 2.65.12" *Arktouros: Hellenic Studies Presented to B. M. W. Knox*. 269–71. Berlin.
- 1984. *Thucydides*. Princeton.
- Hornblower, S. 1991. *A Commentary on Thucydides* vol. I. Oxford.
- Pope, M. 1988. "Thucydides and Democracy." *Historia* 37: 276–96.
- Rusten, J. S. 1989. *Thucydides: The Peloponnesian War: Book II*. Cambridge.
- Sheppard J. G. and L. Evans. 1870. *Notes on Thucydides Books I, II and III*. London.
- Smyth, H. W. 1959. *Greek Grammar*, rev. G. Messing. Cambridge, MA.