The Death of Athenian Democracy?

Melissa Lane
Gresham Professor of Rhetoric

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Abstract

The death of Athenian democracy is as difficult to date definitively as its birth. Was it 338 BCE, when the battle of Chaeronea brought the city under Macedon's thumb? Or 322 BCE, when Athens was defeated in another battle, which led to the installing of a Macedonian garrison that would remain in the city for over a century? What kinds of constitution could the Athenians institute in such circumstances, and how do they compare to the heyday of their democracy?

Introduction

> *This is the way the world ends*
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> *Not with a bang but a whimper.* (T.S. Eliot, 'The Hollow Men', 1925)

Which way did democracy in ancient Athens end – and when? Many have thought that the bang came in 322 BCE, when the Macedonians defeated the Athenians to the point of establishing domination over them, enforced by the installation of a Macedonian garrison on the outskirts of the city. Some have emphasized a preceding bang in 338 BCE, when the Macedonians had already inflicted a decisive military blow at the battle of Chaeronea. But one could also make a case for, say, 58 BCE, when 'Clodius' law…turned Athens from a partner into a vassal of Rome' (though their relations continued to mutate after that).[1] There were also many moments in between and later, when the Athenians briefly succeeded in shaking off one or another foreign yoke, only to be defeated and subjugated once again.[2]

Choosing any of those dates equates Athenian democracy with free self-rule, and free self-rule in turn with independence from foreign domination: not being under the thumb of any foreign power. That might seem to equate to a bang – though domination can also creep in gradually.

[1] Christian Habicht, *Athens from Alexander to Antony* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), 340, though adding there that 'in 55…Athens regained its former status as an independent ally of Rome… [b]ut…this amounted to little more than the conversion of formal dependency into de facto subjugation…if something had happened once, it could happen again'.

[2] I am focusing especially on the course of the 'long Hellenistic Age' from 'Alexander's campaigns in the East [336-323 BC] to roughly the reign of Marcus Aurelius (AD [CE] 161-80)': see Angelos Chaniotis, *Age of Conquests: The Greek World from Alexander to Hadrian 336 BC-AD 138* (London: Profile Books, 2018), 3, for both quotations (though in fact, I shall end with the reign of Hadrian from 117-138 CE).

But free self-rule can also have another sense, connected instead to a polity's domestic constitution: self-rule by whom? Who counts as a citizen, who is eligible to hold office, and how inclusive must that be for a constitution to be a democracy. Or to put it another way: if (with Andrew Bayliss) we take 'the guiding principle of Athenian democratic ideology' to be that 'all the citizens should be allowed to participate in the governing of Athens, at all (or most) levels',[3] how restrictive might such participation become before tipping the constitution from democracy into oligarchy? Might that too happen as a sudden bang – and/or, might democracy sometimes whimper itself to death by a thousand cuts?

Emphasizing those latter questions brings a different set of dates for the death of Athenian democracy into contention. After the short-lived oligarchic revolutions of the late fifth century BCE that I discussed in my last Gresham Lecture (in 411 and 404 BCE),[4] 322 was the next time that a democratic Athenian constitution was abolished and replaced by an oligarchic one (negotiated by the Athenian statesman Phocion with the Macedonian overlord Antipater in 322/1), which 'disenfranchised well over half of the [previously voting male] population'.[5] But democracy would be briefly restored in '318, 307, 288 and 229'[6] – to speak only of the next quarter-century.

So Athenian self-rule was buffeted on the one hand by oscillations of foreign influence, and on the other, by oscillations between a wide democratic franchise and a narrow oligarchic one. These waves were sometimes reinforcing, sometimes cross-cutting. Both of them washed through a set of institutions that remained remarkably stable (in some respects) literally for centuries. The Assembly, the Council, the jury courts, many of the public offices: all are attested on stone decrees as continuing to function (sometimes in modified forms) throughout many of the dates that I have mentioned. But we see those institutions functioning differently depending on how the waves of foreign influence vs independence, and democratic vs oligarchic participation, hit them at a given moment.

To make this more intuitive, think of how a polity might function differently in different circumstances:

- On one axis: when a political assembly can make wholly independent decisions, versus having a foreign potentate dictate what it is and is not allowed to choose or decide
    - Think of the Channel Islands under Nazi hegemony during the Second World War

- On the other axis: when a polity is governed by a wide swathe of the population, versus being monopolized by some kind of elite
    - Think of the British Parliament before the 1832 Reform Act (and the later Reform Acts)

Which of those axes grips your imagination more? Depending on your answer, you might be attracted to a different definition of democracy – as either Independence or Inclusion:

- Democracy as Independence *from* foreign rule
- Democracy as Inclusion *for* maximizing participation

In this lecture, I won't be identifying a singular date when Athenian democracy unequivocally ended. Instead, I shall be exploring both of these understandings of democratic self-rule, as in different moments in Athenian history they declined: not to prove definitively which one is right – they both have a claim, I think – but to share the stakes in thinking it through, with reference to a period when many (though not all) people continued at least to pay lip service to democratic symbols and values, and while key political institutions (as I have noted) persisted. Postclassical Athenian history shows what it might mean to live in a once proudly independent democratic polity, as it contends with a series of more powerful foreign enemies; undergoes internal struggles between the elite and the less powerful; and grapples with both continuity and change in

[3] Andrew J. Bayliss, *After Demosthenes: the Politics of Early Hellenistic Athens* (New York: Continuum, 2011), 96.
[4] Melissa Lane, 'Oligarchs and Their Discontents', Gresham College Lecture, 5 March 2026: https://www.gresham.ac.uk/watch-now/oligarchs-discontents.
[5] Peter Green, *Alexander to Actium: The Historical Evolution of the Hellenistic Age* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 42.
[6] Bayliss, *After Demosthenes*, 1.

understanding its own history, values and institutions. We'll see that it is not so easy to decide whether democracy was – or is – still persisting as one might think.

These themes stretch across the very long history of ancient Athens. Because that history is complicated and likely unfamiliar, I shall not try to give a continuous narrative. Instead I highlight three episodes in which Athenian foreign (in)dependence and democratic vs oligarchic citizenship are differently intertwined – and then skip across some later centuries to Rome in the course of my conclusion. The three episodes are:

(1) The run-up to 338 (Chaeronea) and then 322 (Macedonian intervention):
How can democracy defend itself against foreign pressure?

(2) 317-307: Macedonian intervention to install Demetrius of Phalerum as 'caretaker' of Athens with an oligarchic franchise:
Was democracy entirely absent under his rule?

(3) 307-287:[7] Macedonian intervention by Demetrius Poliorcetes ('The Besieger') to widen the democratic franchise and nominally restore external freedom – but with the Besieger as king:
What happens when democracy is (re-)installed by foreign force?

I'll then conclude by sketching how Macedonian domination gave way to that of Rome – and by assessing the significance of a single Athenian institution that survived all these changes.

1. Demosthenes urging Athens to resist foreign pressure: the looming Macedonian thumb

In the 350s BCE, the ambitious King Philip of Macedon (who had ascended to the throne on the death of his brother in 359) built a new kind of military force that could threaten foes across Greece and beyond. Athenian political leaders struggled to figure out how to respond to Macedonian pressure, on top of the varying but ever looming threat from Persia (and on top of that, continuing rivalries, sometimes alliances, with cities such as Sparta and Thebes). Should Athens stand up for democracies elsewhere (such as Rhodes) that were being threatened by Philip – even those that had been its own traditional rivals? Should the Athenians decide their policy based on justice – or simply their own advantage? Should they invest more in their military (via the Stratiotic Fund), even if that meant breaching the law that preserved support for civic drama festivals (via the Theoric Fund) – that is, should they choose guns over butter? And how should they assess Philip's intentions and plans?

The Athenian orator and statesman who was most intensely anti-Macedonian was Demosthenes. He argued that the Athenians could not preserve their self-rule in the sense of wide and inclusive democratic participation, if they did not preserve their self-rule in the sense of external independence. Yet at the same time, he feared that the very dynamics of democratic deliberation were lulling his fellow citizens into potentially fatal complacency. In the Third Olynthiac, Demosthenes offered an analysis of how the democracy was going wrong in its decision making that echoed Plato's *Gorgias*:

> '[E]ver since these speakers have appeared who are always asking you, 'what would you like?' 'what may I propose for you?' 'what can I do to please you?' the interests of the city have been wantonly given away for the sake of the pleasure and gratification of the moment; and we see the consequences — the fortunes of the speakers prosper, while your own are in a shameful plight'.
> (Dem. 3.22)[8]

[7] Ian Worthington, *Athens after Empire: A History from Alexander the Great to the Emperor Hadrian*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2021, 97, observes that 'It was originally thought that the revolt occurred in early summer of 286, but more likely it should be dated to the spring of 287'.

[8] James S. Romm, *Demosthenes: Democracy's Defender* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2025), 36, comments that the metaphor is of the passing off of the interests of the city from hand to hand, like the cup of mixed wine and water passed around at a symposium.

Demosthenes posed a stark challenge to his fellow citizens: 'When will you do what is needed, if not now?' (Dem. 3.16).[9] In other words, the Athenian orator was warning his contemporaries of what the political theorist David Runciman has called the democratic 'confidence trap': 'the dangerous belief that democracies can muddle through anything…which may lead to a crisis that is just too big to escape, if it hasn't already'.[10] In other words, the citizens of a democracy are often reluctant to grasp the nettle of action demanded in any given moment, because they have the confidence, which may be vain hope, that they can, and will, ultimately do what is needful in time.

In fact, Demosthenes himself had sometimes fostered such hope, having thundered in the Second Olynthiac:

> 'It cannot be…Athenians, that a wrongdoer and an oath breaker and a liar acquires a power that's stable; such things endure for an instant or but a short time, and flourish on hopes if fortune favors them, but in time they are laid bare and collapse on themselves' (Dem. 2.10).[11]

But such reassurance risked fostering dangerous delay. James Romm has highlighted that in another speech, the Third Philippic, Demosthenes berated all the Greeks for 'see[ing] these things [Philip's approaching tyranny] and endur[ing] them, gazing…as they would gaze at a hailstorm — each people praying that it may not come their way, but no one trying to prevent it' (Dem. 9.33).[12]

Ultimately Athens (and its Greek allies) were devastated by Philip in the Battle of Chaeronea (338 BCE). Demosthenes himself survived that battle, but was mocked by Philip, who according to Plutarch, traversed the battlefield 'to see the bodies of the slain, and being in his cups, recited the beginning of the decree introduced by Demosthenes, dividing it into feet and marking off the time:—Demosthenes, son of Demosthenes, of Paeania, thus moves…' (Plut. *Dem.* 20). That defeat showed that Athenian external Independence was now overshadowed by the flex of Macedonian power. But it did not immediately undermine the Inclusiveness of democracy at home.

In fact, in the aftermath, Athens doubled down on its commitment to its existing democratic constitution. The Assembly passed 'Eucrates' law to protect democracy from any attempt to overthrow it', and the outgoing Council a few years later decided (in 332) 'to erect a bronze statue of a figure representing Democracy as one of the last acts of their year in office'.[13] Democracy was a 'cult' in Athens at the time, and the Athenians were determined to protect it.

Philip was succeeded by Alexander (the Great) in 336, who then died himself suddenly in 323. That paved the way for actual Macedonian intervention in Athens, which was brought about over the next half century or so by a succession of warlords who were battling out claims for hegemony and kingship. This brings me to the next two episodes of foreign Dependence, living under the Macedonian thumb, in the course of which Athens would oscillate between democratic and oligarchic forms of domestic Inclusion.

2. Athens under Demetrius of Phalerum: oligarchy – but still or also in some ways a democracy?

The first Macedonian intervention in Athenian self-rule was made by the new king Antipater in 322 – beginning with the notorious demand that Demosthenes, and other orators who had supported Greek resistance, be condemned to death. The Athenian demos, to its shame, while certainly under duress, complied. Demosthenes was driven to flee and then commit suicide to avoid being murdered by a bounty hunter. But rather than dwell on this first intervention (after a few years of which democracy was briefly

[9] I have modified the syntax in English to make it more vivid: the translation cited in the bibliography for this lecture reads, 'When, if not now, will you do your duty?'.
[10] David Runciman, *The Confidence Trap: A History of Democracy in Crisis from World War I to the Present* (rev. edn) (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017) (overall description).
[11] As translated and discussed in Romm, *Demosthenes*, 34-5.
[12] Discussed in Romm, *Demosthenes*, 68.
[13] Habicht, *Athens from Alexander to Antony*, 28, citing A.E. Raubitschek, 'Demokratia', *Hesperia* 31 (1962) 238-243, for giving 'further evidence for the existence of a cult of Democracy in Athens at that time'.

restored in 318), I want to focus on the second, in 317 BCE, which resulted in a new kind of political leader being installed in Athens – with some paradoxical consequences that I wish to explore.

This second intervention came in 317 BCE, when the Athenians made peace with the new Macedonian warlord, Cassander:

> 'When the Athenians could not get rid of the garrison [of Macedonians]…it was unanimously decided to send an embassy to Cassander [...]. They concluded peace on the following terms. The Athenians were to retain their city and territory and their revenues and ships and everything else….and they were to appoint as caretaker (*epimelētēs*)[14] of the city one Athenian, who had the approval of Cassander. Demetrius of Phalerum [a locality of Athens] was elected. He assumed the supervision of the city and ruled in a peaceful and—in relation to the citizens—caring way.'
>
> (16A SOD, from Diod. Sic. 18.74-1-3: trans. modified from 'overseer' to 'caretaker')

In this situation, it's clear that Athens was now directly under a Macedonian thumb. One historian has described Demetrius as 'play[ing] the puppet to Macedonian domination'.[15] Athens now lacked external Independence. And some ancient commentators took this to make the new domestic ruler automatically into a 'tyrant' (Paus. 1.25.6).[16]

It's also clear that at the conqueror's behest, Demetrius imposed a drastically restricted citizenship regime, based on a very high wealth qualification that in Greek eyes would have been seen as clearly oligarchical. (In so doing, he echoed what had been done already in 322, though that had been briefly overturned for some months in 318.) So we might say so far that Demetrius was a tyrant and an oligarch.

But assessing Demetrius' role and actions over the ten years that he remained in power is more complex. One later chronicler observed that in this period, Demetrius 'restored democracy to the Athenians'.[17] Indeed, many of the institutions of the historical Athenian democracy remained – while Demetrius also introduced some new additional ones that can be argued, in some cases, to have a pro-democratic valence. I will highlight some ways in which the question of how to label, and evaluate, Demetrius' regime is more complex than a simple on-off assessment of whether it was still a democracy – ways that might illuminate similar debates about democratic institutions today.

Let me say a bit more about Demetrius himself. He was a philosopher trained by no less than the successor to Aristotle; he was later described as 'well-educated and widely experienced beyond anyone' (Diog. Laert. 5.80), and he composed numerous political studies (among other works), including: '*On Legislation in Athens*, 5 books; *On Constitutions in Athens*, 2 books; *On Leadership of the people,* 2 books; *On (the Art of) Politics*, 2 books; *On Laws,* 1 book; On (the Art of) *Rhetoric*, 2 books…'[18]

So it is not surprising that he chose to act not only as a 'caretaker' but also as a lawgiver. We are told that he 'made laws in Athens', placing himself in the grand tradition of Solon and others,[19] again as the statesman who took the reins of Athens in 322 had also done.

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[14] There is a question of whether *epimelētēs* (caretaker) or another term, such as *nomothetēs* (lawgiver), which better fits the number of illegible letters, should be read in the inscription *IG* II 1201 line 11: for the former view, see e.g. Stephen V. Tracy, *Athenian Democracy in Transition: Attic Letter-Cutters of 340 to 290 B.C.* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995),; for the latter, see e.g. Lara O'Sullivan, *The Regime of Demetrius of Phalerum in Athens, 317-307 BCE: A Philosopher in Politics* (Boston: Brill, 2009).

[15] Harding, *The Story of Athens*, Commentary on 169.

[16] Noted by Bayliss, *After Demosthenes*, 77.

[17] 20B SOD, from Georgius Syncellus, *Chronological Abstract*: 'Demetrius of Phalerum was known as the third lawgiver in Athens. After having restored democracy to the Athenians he went to Egypt'. But see also 18 SOD (Plutarch, *Demetrius* [Poliorcetes] 10.2) and 19 SOD (Strabo, 9.1.20) on Demetrius in relation to democracy.

[18] Demetrius also wrote explicitly about Solon and other lawgivers, collecting sayings of some of them in his *Sayings of Seven Wise Men*.

[19] 20A SOD *Marmor Parium* B 15-16, Ep. 13 (composed in 264/3).

You may recall that the archaic Athenian lawgiver Solon of the sixth century BCE had been appointed by leading figures in the city itself (we don't know the exact mechanism) to act as a 'reconciler' between the rich and the poor: he established a constitution that was not fully democratic (indeed the concept of *dēmokratia* did not yet exist), but also one that was not fully oligarchic – as I have discussed in previous Gresham Lectures.[20] In other words, Athens chose Solon independently, and he legislated to make it neither an oligarchy nor a democracy – though he opened the door to democracy.

It has been suggested that we can read many of the specific laws that Demetrius passed as being in the reconciliatory Solonian spirit: including especially his 'sumptuary laws' restricting the permissible lavishness of funerals and grave markers.[21] Demetrius revived the *ephēbeia,* the training period of young men, which fostered civic habituation and unity. Most strongly on the pro-democratic side, consider the new public office that he established (called the *agōnothetēs*) to manage the production of plays for civic festivals with public funding – which had the effect of replacing private donors with the people (*demos*) itself now as the credited producer. From a modern perspective, that would arguably count as an anti-oligarchic move: curbing wealthy donors and expanding the role of public funding.

More broadly, we can think about how Demetrius exercised sway within the city. He never abolished the role of public discussion, nor ruled by force alone. On the contrary, '…Through public speeches (*dēmēgorōn*) before the Athenians, he led the city for ten years…'.[22] And he himself observed '[t]hat speech has as much force in political affairs as iron has in war' (Diog. Laert. 5.82).

These observations about his use of persuasion (as implicitly opposed to force) have led one scholar to go so far as to compare Demetrius – notwithstanding his puppet role for Macedon, and his oligarchic restriction of citizenship – to the great Athenian democratic hero, Pericles. She calls the evidence:

> 'indicative not of a man who legislated away the constitutional powers of the assembly, but of one whose personal influence gave him *de facto* guidance of the *dêmos*. The obvious comparison, and one made already in antiquity, is with Pericles: Plutarch's assessment of Demetrius' power, in which he describes the Athenian state after 317 as "in theory an oligarchy, but in practice a monarchy" … (*Demetr.* 10.2 = Demetr. 18 SOD), is surely a conscious reminiscence of Thucydides' portrayal of fifth-century Athens under Pericles as being "in name a democracy, but in reality a rule by the foremost individual"…'(2.65.9)'.[23]

O'Sullivan concludes that in both cases, Demetrius of Phalerum and Pericles, 'the implications are not of formal interference in the mechanisms of democracy, but of an undermining of democratic vigour through the personal influence of a single individual'.[24] Her point is not just that Demetrius can be both oligarchic in some respects and Periclean in others. It is that Pericles himself, in the heyday of Athenian democracy, had been informally accorded a kind of directive role, that can be compared to one-man rule, even as it depended on popular support in the assembly votes (both on policy and on the annual election of generals). Democracy may not always mean what we might first think that it does.

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[20] Melissa Lane, 'Writing Laws: Hammurabi to Solon', Gresham College Lecture, 23 January 2025, https://www.gresham.ac.uk/watch-now/writing-laws; 'Ancient Greek Ideas of Justice', Gresham College Lecture, 11 January 2024, https://www.gresham.ac.uk/watch-now/greek-justice.

[21] O'Sullivan, *Regime of Demetrius of Phalerum,* reads these and other laws and offices credited to Demetrius as focused on enforcing individual morality and moral behaviour, describing him as a 'moral reformer' – which is how she also interprets the archaic Greek lawgivers such as Zaleucus, Charondas, Lycurgus (of Sparta), and Solon (though she does not reject the idea that Demetrius' overall purpose was 'distinctively political' (92). O'Sullivan interprets in this light in particular two of the offices that Demetrius is sometimes credited with introducing, or which were at least introduced or modified in this period: *gunaikonomoi* ('censors of women') and *nomophulakes* (whose role is contested, as to whether it was to ensure coherence of any new laws and decrees, which some have claimed displaced the role of the Assembly and/or the Areopagus, though the *nomothetai* and regular juries continued in their fourth-century functions, perhaps even with the size of juries hearing *eisangelia* charges enlarged – or to exercise a more general moral supervision, as O'Sullivan suggests). Against O'Sullivan's interpretation, and more generally against democratic readings of Demetrius of Phalerum, see Bayliss, *After Demosthenes*, 86-93.

[22] 1 SOD, Diog. Laert. *Dem.* 5.75.

[23] O'Sullivan, *Regime of Demetrius of Phalerum,* 127-8.

[24] O'Sullivan, *Regime of Demetrius of Phalerum*, 128.

3. A Macedonian king – and a democratic franchise

I've been arguing that Demetrius' relationship to democracy might have been more subtle than first appears. Nevertheless, the Athenians would rejoice when they were finally rid of him in 307/6:

> 'when his accusers could not get hold of his person, they disgorged their venom on the bronze of his statues. These they tore down from their pedestals; some were sold, some cast into the sea, and others were even, it is said, broken up to make bedroom-utensils'.[25]

This change was brought about by another Demetrius, this one a Macedonian, who sailed into the harbor on behalf of his father Antigonus, 'proclaim[ing]…that he had been sent by his father…to set Athens free [from a rival Macedonian warlord, Cassander]' (Plut. *Demetr.* 8.2, 8.5). The freedom, of course, would be relative: still under a Macedonian thumb, though one promising a lighter touch. But in contrast to previous Macedonian interventions, this time, the external intervention (so still an absence of external Independence) served to bring about internal Inclusion. For the new Demetrius – whom I'll call by his ancient nickname, the 'Besieger' – insisted that he had:

> 'been sent by his father… to restore to the people their laws and their constitution [*politeia*]' (Plut. *Demetr.* 8.5, trans. modified).

Indeed, the Besieger restored the full extent of the democratic franchise: making the poorest Athenians full citizens again. As a result, these new Macedonian men in town were feted and celebrated by the Athenians in dramatic ways. Fragments of histories from the time tell us:

- 'Philokhoros says that the Athenians sang songs of victory (paeans) in honour of Antigonos and Demetrios' (Harding no. 221 – Philokhoros F165 = Athenaeus *Deipn*. 15.52 p.697A)

- 'Philokhoros says that the Athenians voted that the whole month Demetrion be designated a holy month, that is to say, one long festival' (Harding no. 222 – Philokhoros F166 = Scholion to Pindar *Nemean* 3.2).[26]

The Assembly would vote to incorporate these two Macedonians into the very fabric of Athenian democracy: including their images on the traditional robe honoring the goddess Athena in the most important annual religious festival, the Panathenaia, and erecting gold-plated statues in their honour next to the most celebrated statues of Athenian democracy, those honouring its archaic tyrannicides.[27] Indeed even the identities of Athenian citizens were redrawn to recognize the Macedonian overlords: the Athenians created two new tribes (added to the ten originally created by Kleisthenes – see my lecture of October 2025) Antigonis and Demetrias [both sic]. They would be treated virtually as gods.

Here we see again a paradoxical dimension to democracy. Citizenship had been widened at the behest of a foreign king. And then these newly re-inclusive democratic institutions were galvanized to honour foreign dependence.

Ultimately, the paradox began to dissolve. The Athenians became disenchanted by Demetrius: despite having been charmed by his good looks and some of his early political moves, they would become horrified by his louche lifestyle and by what Plutarch called the many lawless and shocking things done by Demetrius in the city at this time' (Plut. *Demetr.* 27). After further ups and downs, the Athenian people rebelled in 287. The rebellion was resolved by an agreement, that the Besieger could maintain a military presence in the Piraeus (the Athenian port) and in forts in the countryside. But the Athenians regained a more meaningful

[25] Diog. Laert. *Dem.* 5.77, discussed by Vincent Azoulay, 'La gloire et l'outrage: heurs et malheurs des statues honorifiques de Démétrios de Phalère', *Annales. Histoire, Sciences Sociales* 64 (2009) 303-40, at 335-6.
[26] Philip Harding (ed. and trans.), *The Story of Athens: the fragments of the local chronicles of Attika* (London and New York: Routledge, 2008).
[27] Worthington, *Athens after Empire*, 233.

autonomy in managing the affairs of the democracy: 'The city had already removed his [the Besieger's] partisans from high office and elected their own magistrates…'.[28]

Still, Macedonian domination did not disappear. Twenty-five years later, in 262 BCE, history repeated itself once again: 'Defeated in the war against Macedonia, Athens lost its independence, falling under the rule of Antigonus Gonatas, son of the King Demetrius who had deposed the regent Demetrius of Phalerum in 307'.[29] Honours and prayers were again dedicated to a Macedonian king and his family. And this time we see even more hollowing out of the persisting democratic institutions – a more pronounced move toward turning them into a whimper.

A chronicler recorded that in this period 'everything became subject to the will of one man', which one scholar has interpreted to mean not that all public offices were eliminated, but rather that 'one man had binding authority and could also veto decisions made by subordinate officials'.[30]And despite ups and downs of official independence or dependence over the next thirty-odd years, as the scholar Christian Habicht has put it: 'the king still dictated foreign policy. The Assembly met as regularly as before but had little or no latitude to make political decisions'; 'the conventional institutions of democracy such as the Assembly, Council, public officials, and courts continued to exist, but with limitations on their powers incompatible with democratic ideology, even after the royal governor was recalled. It now seems certain that the archons of this period were no longer chosen by lot, but either appointed or (more likely) elected… other normal democratic practices were interrupted or suspended in this period as well, such as the traditional method of selecting a secretary for the Council…'.[31]

But even then, after decades of whimpering, democracy would sometimes still speak up for itself. When the Athenians again regained full external independence in the year 229 BCE, they struck the Macedonian king and his family off 'from public prayers, state decrees, and the liturgy of official sacrifices', and also off imagery on coins – though the names of the two tribes that had been established in honour of the earlier Macedonian dynasts remained.[32] Despite all the bangs, despite the long whimpers, the Athenians were still attached to the ideals and images of democracy; they renewed in this period the cult of Demos.[33]

Conclusion: foreign (in-)dependence under the Roman thumb

From the year 200 BCE onward, a renewed Macedonian threat began to drive many Greek cities into the arms of Rome (on whose side they fought in several wars). And especially from 168 BCE, even while Greek cities retained formal independence at various times, and were able to conduct their own foreign relations with other cities and empires to a certain degree, the Roman Republic (and later the Empire) found ways both formal and informal to curb the exercise of that independence.

Nevertheless, Athens would occasionally seek from time to time to achieve full external freedom – including through occasional revolts, such as in 88/87 BCE, the Athenians threw in their lot with the Pontic king Mithridates Eupator: Rome's most dangerous antagonist at the time. This opened the door to short-lived internal tyranny, which was routed in under two years by Sulla's brutal reconquest of the city that returned it to Roman control. In later decades, in honour of Caesar Augustus, Athenians would find themselves installing a temple of Roma and Augustus on the Parthenon itself.

There is too much history to recount here. We could dwell on the visits of Cicero, Julius Caesar, Mark Antony and others to Athens. Or, on the repeated punishments of the city for siding with one or another of the contenders for power in the bitter civil wars of the late first century BCE. Many of these men had sought to be initiated into the city's fabled Eleusinian Mysteries and to glorify themselves by association with the

[28] James S. Romm, *Demetrius: Sacker of Cities* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2022),152.
[29] Habicht, *Athens from Alexander to Antony,* 150.
[30] Habicht, *Athens from Alexander to Antony*, 151.
[31] Habicht, *Athens from Alexander to Antony*, 158, 159; he notes on 158 that this remains true even after 255 BCE, when the royal governor was recalled and the city became officially independent again.
[32] Habicht, *Athens from Alexander to Antony*, 175-6.
[33] Habicht, *Athens from Alexander to Antony*, 180-81.

philosophical and cultural traditions of Athens, sometimes even to the point of becoming citizens themselves (while retaining their Roman citizenship as well).

In this period, and through all these upheavals, in this period, our two cross-cutting criteria for democracy – Democracy as Independence *from* foreign rule; and Democracy as Inclusion *for* maximizing participation – were both diminished. Nevertheless, Athenian civic institutions such as the *ephēbeia* continued to function, as did much of the iconography, and vocabulary associated with the original Athenian democracy. And the question of which institutions make for true democracy remains complex. We have seen that some institutions can survive even as much of what was valued about them withers. Conversely, people can remain attached to the symbols and history of a democratic past – and while that might be mere nostalgia, it might also inspire meaningful action when conditions allow. Instead of a single on-off switch (democracy alive versus how it dies), the issue may be rather: how much democracy, and of what kind.

I shall close by remarking on some ironies of Athenian history regarding its Areopagus Council – and how this bears on the question of when Athenian democracy might (if ever) have died.

The Areopagus Council: democratic and/or oligarchic?

In the early archaic history of Athens, the Areopagus was an aristocratic council and court, holding many of the reins of power in its hands. Solon had somewhat reduced its role; as Athens democratized, the Areopagus became a body of ex-officeholders (so not all elite by birth) whose judicial functions were reduced to homicide.

By the time of Roman rule (with all its ups and downs), the Areopagus had clearly become positioned as a body whose role served to limit and constrain democracy. For example, the Roman general Sulla – who had sacked the city at one point – had 'likely restored the supervisory role of the Areopagus over the archons and expected archons to be pro-Roman'.[34] Old aristocratic families were again important to its functioning, even as it was generally forced to accede to Roman demands: for example, '…the Areopagus gave its consent to the son-in-law of the once all-powerful dictator Sulla, Gaius Memmius, to tear down Epicurus' house to build his own palace on the site…'.[35] Indeed, Cicero would observe that 'When one says "the Athenian state is ruled by the council," the words "of the Areopagus" are omitted' – because it was obvious that it was this archaic council which was again in control (Cic. *De nat. deo.* 2.74).[36]

But before we too quickly conclude that an Areopagus meant a much diminished democracy, we need to think again. For the Areopagus had also been elevated in late classical Athens. Indeed, Demosthenes, the great anti-Macedonian democratic statesman himself, had successfully proposed a decree in the late 340s to allow 'the Areopagus to act on its sole authority, without consulting the Assembly, against those it suspected of wrong doing…The high court became a tribunal'.[37]

Thus assessing the role of an elite Council – whose members were friends of Cicero's in the latter's day, for example – within a democracy returns us to some of the questions about democracy with which we began. What kinds of varied levels of influence – of group elites and of individual leaders – are compatible with true democracy? When has the line between democracy and oligarchy been definitively crossed? And how far can a people's self-rule remain meaningful when their independence of foreign influence is undermined? The history of Athens asks us to ask those questions for ourselves, as enduring paradoxes alongside those embodied in the Arch of Hadrian, commissioned by the Athenians in 132 CE, which is inscribed 'on the west side, "This is Athens, the ancient city of Theseus" [the legendary founding Athenian king], and on the east, "This is the city of Hadrian, and not of Theseus"'.[38]

[34] Worthington, *Athens after Empire*, 214.
[35] Habicht, *Athens from Alexander to Antony*, 340.
[36] I owe the reference to this quotation, and further assistance with this lecture, to Emily (Sal) Salamanca.
[37] Romm, *Demosthenes*, 72.
[38] Worthington, *Athens after Empire*, 3, and see his further chapter on 'Hadrian's Arch' (313-336).

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