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The Speech of Athenagoras in Thucydides 6.36–40:

Demagoguery and Democracy in Syracuse*

Introduction

In an article devoted to the speeches of Hermocrates in Thucydides, C.M. Fauber rightly notes that “the problems presented by the speeches in Thucydides’ work are nearly as old as the genre of history itself”.¹ This is true, since the historian’s famous explanatory words in Book 1.22.1 raise more questions than they provide answers. Brief and unsatisfactory as they are, however, these words remain the only passage in which Thucydides clearly addresses the question of how he composed his speeches. There has been an increased interest over the last two decades in Thucydides’ narrative techniques, particularly in the role of emotions in his historical writing, but less attention has been devoted specifically to the question of the nature of his

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¹ FAUBER 2001, 37. All translations of Thucydides’ text are either Pelling’s or Hornblower’s (as indicated). In some cases, my own (as indicated). On direct speeches in Thucydides: LUSCHNAT 1942; EGERMANN 1972; STADTER 1973 and 2017; COGAN 1981; LEIMBACH 1985; ROOD 1998, 40–51; MORRISON 2006; SCARDINO 2007; GREENWOOD 2006, 57–82; PELLING 2009; TSAKMAKIS 2017 (cf. TSAKMAKIS 2006). Specifically on the speeches and the debates of Book 6: HUNTER 1973; 123–175; STAHL 2009 [1973]; KOHL 1977; VATTUONE 1978; COGAN 1981, 93–119; MACLEOD 1983; CONNOR 1984, 168–184; SCARDINO 2007, 483–606; PELLING 2022, 22–29.



speeches.² In an exception to this trend, Carlo Scardino's work has contributed to exploring the question of the function of Thucydides' speeches in the broader context of narrative.³ His research has proved very useful for improving our understanding of the way Thucydides followed the principles of plausibility and verisimilitude, based on an overall consideration of Thucydides' narratological purposes and the function he assigned to the speeches.

Notably, at 1.22.1, Thucydides explains that the orations are not verbatim reproductions of what was said, but, rather, are delivered in the way in which, in his view, "each speaker might have at most said what was required about the issues at hand, keeping as close as possible to the overall line of thought of what was really said (ἐδόκουν ἐμοὶ ἕκαστοι περὶ τῶν αἰεὶ παρόντων τὰ δέοντα μάλιστ' εἰπεῖν, ἐχομένῳ ὅτι ἐγγύτατα τῆς ξυμπάσης γνώμης τῶν ἀληθῶς λεχθέντων)".⁴ Christopher Pelling has convincingly argued that the historian provides here "an umbrella description which could cover a range of different procedures, and that he composed more freely at some times than at others".⁵ The key expressions are τὰ δέοντα and ξύμπασα γνώμη, which have been at the centre of much discussion.⁶ Here, I follow the interpretation of τὰ δέοντα as the words and arguments required to support the plausibility of the speech in relation to the speaker, and to the context of delivery and the historical facts, while I maintain ξύμπασα γνώμη is "the overall line of thought" of the speech (I take Pelling's translation again here), i.e., the line of thought that the historian's knowledge and judgement suggests befitting the characters and their speeches.⁷ From this perspective, the

² Literature on the role of emotions in Thucydides' work is vast. Since it is not the focus of the present article, I limit myself to referring the reader to ROOD 2022 with bibliography.

³ SCARDINO, *ibid.* Cf. STAHL 2009 [1973] on the necessity of considering the combination of speech and the course of events to fully understand Thucydides' judgement.

⁴ Transl. PELLING. For discussion of Thuc.1.22.1, see GOMME 1945, 139–140; WILSON 1982; HORNBLLOWER 1991, 59–60 (cf. 1987, 55–66); BADIAN 1992; PORCIANI 1995 and 2007; GARRITY 1998; TSAKMAKIS 1998, (cf. 2017, 272–274); SCARDINO 2007, 402–410; PELLING 2009, 176 – 182 and 2022, 23–24; RHODES 2015, 19–21.

⁵ PELLING 2009, 180.

⁶ See FINLEY 1942, 94–104; cf. CRANE 1996, 66; PORCIANI 2007; SCARDINO 2007, 406 with n. 47. For the view that Thuc.1.22.1 contains an inconsistency, see HORNBLLOWER 1987, 45 and 1991, 60; against this view, FAUBER 2001, 37–38.

⁷ This interpretation draws on PELLING 2022, 23–25, as well as on the works mentioned in n.6 above. For the ambiguities in the Greek, which leave unanswered questions about the meaning of this passage, see PELLING, *ibid.* Cf. also the different interpretation of PORCIANI 2007, who understands τὰ δέοντα as "the necessary things". However, given the fact that Thucydides addresses the question of τὰ ἔργα in the following paragraph of the same chapter



ξύμπασα γνώμη serves as a parameter for shaping and calibrating τὰ δέοντα, the choice of arguments. Both τὰ δέοντα and ξύμπασα γνώμη set the limits to free composition, since they maintain creativity and authorial intervention within the confines of the historian's overall knowledge of the context and events, and the dynamics behind them.

In the light of this, the speech of the Syracusan demagogue Athenagoras in Thucydides 6.36–40 provides an interesting case study. The speech is certainly not unique in Thucydides' work, as there are several other speeches delivered by foreign characters, in the absence of Athenian envoys, which are more likely to be free compositions by Thucydides than elaborations of witness reports.⁸ But, what makes the case of Athenagoras worthy of discussion is the fact that, both in early and more recent literature, this character has been interpreted as a bad copy of an Athenian-style demagogue, evoking an Athenian-esque political setting in his rhetoric style and arguments.⁹ However, I argue in this article that Thucydides does not create the speech of this Syracusan demagogue entirely through an Athenian lens; by following the principles of τὰ δέοντα and ξύμπασα γνώμη, the historian provides a picture of Syracusan democracy that is not simply a mirror of Athens.¹⁰ The speech contains clues about a specific Syracusan perception of democracy, power, and leadership.

Echoes of Athens in Athenagoras' Speech

The debate in Syracuse is symmetrical to that which took place in Athens earlier the same year, which Thucydides narrates at 6.8–26.¹¹ Both debates were held before the assemblies of democratic cities. The Athenians discussed the prospect of preparing an expedition to Sicily; the Syracusans discussed how to react to the Athenians. The Syracusan debate, like the Athenian, was dominated by two speakers, i.e., Hermocrates, whom Thucydides had already introduced to his readers in Book 4, and the

(1.22.2) I believe τὰ δέοντα refers to the arguments in a rhetoric context, rather than actions, facts, or behaviours. The reader should note that in both perspectives the point is always about plausibility.

⁸ See, for example, the several cases discussed by DEBNAR 2001.

⁹ PELLING 2022, 33 speaks of "Cleon-like Athenagoras" and "Periclean Hermocrates".

¹⁰ For scholars maintaining that Thucydides' image of democratic Syracuse mirrors Athens, see n. 42 and 43 below.

¹¹ For commentaries on Athenian debate, see DOVER – GOMME – ANDREWS 1970, 230–264; CORCELLA 1996; HORNBLOWER 2008, 320–366; PELLING 2022, 122–170; on Syracusan debate, see DOVER – GOMME – ANDREWS 1970, 296–308; HORNBLOWER 2008, 395–417, MADER 2013; PELLING 2022, 184–204.



demagogue Athenagoras, about whom readers are not informed any further after the end of the debate.

Before introducing Athenagoras, Thucydides provides a brief description of the Syracusan internal scene, which confirms the picture that readers have already inferred from Hermocrates' words: Syracuse is divided between those who do not believe the news about the imminent Athenian attack, those who believe Syracusans, in case of an attack, would fight more strongly than Athenians, and those who ridicule the whole story (6.35.1).¹² It is against this background that Thucydides introduces Athenagoras with few, but significant, words: δήμου τε προστάτης ἦν καὶ ἐν τῷ παρόντι πιθανώτατος τοῖς πολλοῖς "the leader of the people and, in those days, very powerful in persuading the masses" (6.35.2, my transl.). In Book 3, a similar characterisation and the use of the adjective πιθανώτατος is reserved for Cleon. So, at 3.36.6 Thucydides defines Cleon as τῷ τε δήμῳ παρὰ πολὺ ἐν τῷ τότε πιθανώτατος "the most persuasive among the people at that time"; and at 4.21.3 as ἀνὴρ δημογωγὸς κατ' ἐκεῖνον τὸν χρόνον ὦν καὶ τῷ πλήθει πιθανώτατος "a popular leader of the time and very good at persuading the multitude" (my transl.).¹³ It has been noted that Athenagoras' language shows similarities with Cleon's for its use of emphatic particles that are otherwise rare in Thucydides.¹⁴ This reading aligns with attempts to identify the Syracusan counterparts of Athenian leaders: for example, Kurt Raaflaub and others interpreted Hermocrates as the "Syracusan counterpart of Pericles",¹⁵ and Hans-Peter Stahl maintained that Athenagoras was the counterpart of Nicias in the Athenian debate.¹⁶ The similarities between Athenagoras and his (many) Athenian counterparts are clear, but, in contrast with the sophisticated rhetoric of Athenian speakers, the speech of the Syracusan demagogue is far

¹² Cf. the words of Hermocrates in Thuc.6.33.1. On the internal divisions and factions of the Syracusan audience in 415 BC, see MADER 2013, 239.

¹³ My transl. The adjective πιθανώτατος in Thucydides occurs only with reference to Cleon and Athenagoras, see BÉTANT 1969, 322. On the absence of patronymic in the introduction of Athenagoras, see HORNBLLOWER 2008, 398, who notes that Hermocrates, by contrast, is introduced with a patronymic. For naming strategies in Thucydides' Book 6, see PITT 2022, 183.

¹⁴ TSAKMAKIS 2017, 278. The name itself might indicate "Athens-like speaker"; see PELLING 2022, 194. On Athenagoras' similarity to Cleon, see also TAMIOLAKI 2013, 67–68.

¹⁵ RAAFLAUB 2006, 221; cf. WESTLAKE 1969. Cf. also KREMMYDAS 2017, 113; PELLING 2022, 28 (including possible parallels between Hermocrates and Alcibiades, and Hermocrates and Nicias) and 186 (agreeing with Raaflaub on the parallel Hermocrates-Pericles).

¹⁶ STAHL 2009 [1973], 357.



from the well-structured piece of rhetoric that one would expect from a successful populist leader.¹⁷

In the first section of the speech (6.36.1–4), Athenagoras argues that an Athenian attack is unlikely to happen. This part of the oration has been regarded as “highly ironic”,¹⁸ because the Athenians are described as too intelligent to undertake the expedition. Further, Athenagoras attributes the news of their imminent arrival to some unnamed Syracusans who wish to incite terror in the city (6.36.2), an aspect he mentions again later in the speech, as we shall see. This paradoxical portrayal of the Athenians as “shrewd men and of large experience” (6.36.3), who would never leave the ongoing war at home to face new problems overseas, closely recalls Nicias’ arguments for opposing the expedition (6.9–14 and 6.20–23).¹⁹ It has been suggested that Athenagoras’ speech is complementary to that of the Athenian general, building an ironic inconcinnity:²⁰ in fact, on the one hand, there is the perspective of the reader, who knows that the Athenians will sail to Sicily; on the other, there is the somewhat naive viewpoint of Athenagoras, who credits the Athenians with wisdom. From this perspective, the contrast between Athenagoras’ professed belief and the reality of Athenian behaviour serves Thucydides’ purpose of highlighting the folly of the Sicilian expedition and guiding “the reader’s evaluation of the whole Sicilian adventure”.²¹ But, in the short second section of the speech (6.37.1–2), Athenagoras’ rhetoric style becomes similar to Alcibiades’: after abruptly admitting the possibility of an Athenian attack,²² and again echoing the arguments of Nicias about the difficulties of taking the cavalry to Sicily (6.37.2; cf. 6.21.1),²³ Athenagoras’ rhetoric resembles Alcibiades’ in its general optimism and in the superficiality of its military analysis. In the same way that Alcibiades minimises the Sicilian forces and takes the expedition’s success for granted, so Athenagoras disregards any concern for the Athenians.²⁴

¹⁷ On the speech’s rhetoric flaws, see esp. MADER 1993, 433–440 and 2013, 237–262; BLOEDOW 1996, 141–158; ANDREWS 2009, 1–12. In JAFFE’s words (2017, 398) Athenagoras is “a deeply unsympathetic figure whose advice is clearly foolish”. Cf. SCARDINO 2007, 552–553. In what follows, I follow BLOEDOW 1996 in the division of the speech in three sections.

¹⁸ BLOEDOW 1996, 147.

¹⁹ For the parallels between Athenagoras and Nicias, see MADER 1993, 435.

²⁰ MADER 1993, 433–440, esp. 436–437. Cf. SCARDINO 2007, 553 with n. 449.

²¹ MADER 1993, 439.

²² BLOEDOW 1996, 149–150; ANDREWS 2009, 4–5 notes that Athenagoras’ arguments are dictated mainly by demagogic purposes, which partly explains the fact that they lack consistency.

²³ MADER 1993, 435.

²⁴ The parallel between Athenagoras and Alcibiades is briefly hinted at by BLOEDOW 1996, 153.



In the third and last section of his speech (38.1–40.2), Athenagoras returns to the role of those who have spread alarm and terror in the city. He does not name any of these conspirators but makes clear that their intention is to subvert democracy. He claims that it is not the first time they have made such an attempt (6.38.2); their aim is to scare the masses (ibid.: πλῆθος) in order to seize power in the city (ibid.: τῆς πόλεως ἄρχειν). Syracuse, he says (6.38.3), is often plagued by unrest, internal war, tyrannies, and bad leaders. This time, however, he wants to avert these risks by gaining the support of the people. His intention is “persuading you to punish them” and he makes a commitment to “reproach, watch over and teach the few”, in order to divert the aspiring oligarchs from evil deeds (6.38.4).²⁵ Here, Athenagoras clearly claims his role of watchdog of the people in a similar style to that used by Cleon to portray himself, according to Aristophanes.²⁶

There are several problems in this last section. The first concerns the information about the oligarchic plot. At 6.38.5 and at 6.40.1–2 Athenagoras directly addresses the plotters, whose plans he seems to intuit from previous experience, and calls them νεώτεροι (6.38.5).²⁷ On the one hand, the nature of the internal conflict in Syracuse seems to be partly generational. This feature again recalls the Athenian debate, in which Alcibiades champions the young Athenians, while Nicias voices the concerns of older people.²⁸ On the other hand, there is also a social divide: the plotters and their sympathisers belong to the ranks of the civic elites.²⁹ But we are unable to connect information about

²⁵ ANDREWS 2009, 6 with n. 27 interprets these words as addressing not the plotters but the Syracusan elite. An example of what he means by “teaching” (ibid.: διδάσκων) follows immediately after, when Athenagoras shows why their plans are doomed to fail at 6.38.5. On the presence of three groups, i.e., “the many”, “the plotters” and “the few” in the words of Athenagoras, see PELLING 2022, 199.

²⁶ Ar. *Vesp.* 902, *Eq.* 1017–1019 and 1024–1025. On Athenian demagogues and the rhetoric associated with them in Athenian sources, see MANN 2007.

²⁷ For the association between νεώτερος and “revolutionary”, see DOVER – GOMME – ANDREWS 1970, 304.

²⁸ Cf. Thuc. 6.13.1. (Nicias refers to Alcibiades seeking support from the young); 6.18.6 (Alcibiades accuses Nicias of setting the young against the old) and 6.24.3 (Thucydides draws a distinction between the expectations of the old and those of the young). The fact that “the generational question”, or at least a “generation-gap rhetoric” is present in both the Athenian and in the Syracusan debate and the fact that this may suggest a further parallel between Athens and Syracuse is surprisingly overlooked by most commentators: see, for example, SCARDINO 2007, 546 n. 428, denying that the *Generationen-Konflikt* was an issue at Syracuse; PELLING 2022, 199 only briefly refers to it.

²⁹ Athenagoras seems to implicitly depict Hermocrates as a sympathiser of the plotters, see TAMIOLAKI 2013, 68. From Hermocrates’ overall story, including his exile and his attempt to seize Syracuse with an army of supporters that included the would-be tyrant Dionysius the Elder, it does not seem unlikely that Hermocrates had tyrannical ambitions



the plotters to any of the (few) events that we know about Syracusan democratic history: the only traumatic events attested in the period between the end of the tyrannies of the Dinomenids and the seizure of power by Dionysius the Elder are represented by the attempt of Tyndarides in 454 BC to establish a tyranny (δυναστεία, Diod. 11.86.4) and the institution of petalism (Diod. 11.87.1–4).³⁰ Athenagoras does not seem to refer to any of these facts. One possible explanation of this vagueness has been suggested by Edmund Bloedow, who believed that, rather than a fabrication of rumours about an Athenian attack by young oligarchs, we are dealing here with “a fabrication of a fabrication of rumours” by Athenagoras, namely Athenagoras’ invention of the oligarchic plot.³¹ However, public speakers rarely play with topics unknown to their audience; rather, they exploit existing knowledge, and Thucydides certainly knew this well.³² Widespread fears for the stability of democracy were certainly not unlikely in a polis such as Syracuse, with its tormented history of political instabilities and tyrants.³³

The picture of Athenagoras that emerges from initial analysis is that of a confused speaker who subsumes, at times inconsistently, the rhetoric style of Cleon, Nicias and Alcibiades. But a deeper discussion of Athenagoras’ excursus on democracy reveals that Thucydides conducted a considerably more sophisticated operation than simply providing a blurry reflection of an Athenian demagogue.

before being killed in 408 BC (cf. Diod. 13.75.5). For early scholarship depicting Hermocrates as an oligarch, see FREEMAN 1891, II, 69; GROTE 1884, VII, 251–259 interpreted Athenagoras’ speech as expressing genuine concerns for Syracusan democracy and Hermocrates’ plans; cf. also DIESNER 1956, 155; DOVER – GOMME – ANDREWS 1970, 296–297. For the positive judgment of Thucydides on Hermocrates, and his parallel with Pericles, see n. 15 above.

³⁰ See discussion by ROBINSON 2000, 192. On petalism in Diodorus’ account, see BARBATO 2023.

³¹ BLOEDOW 1996, 151. Against this view, see ANDREWS 2009, 3 with n.14 and p. 6 n. 26.

³² On Athenagoras’ exploitation of already existing fears about oligarchic plots in the audience, see GÄRTNER 2000, 121–124 and MADER 2013, 244–248; on the exploitation of the audience’s internal division, see *ibid.* 253–254. On the role of fear in Thucydides’ writing, see DESMOND 2006, 359–379 and CUSUMANO 2011.

³³ For a less sceptical view than BLOEDOW 1996 on the possibility of *stasis* during the democratic period in Syracuse, see ANDREWS 2009, 6 n. 26. Cf. RUTTER 2000, 147–148; ROBINSON 2000, 192–197.



Beyond the Mirror: Democratic Syracuse according to Athenagoras

Athenagoras' excursus on democracy (6.39–40) represents the most interesting part of his speech. From the rhetorical point of view, the excursus differs from the previous two parts, both in content (it is much more theoretical) and in the greater complexity of its argument.³⁴ In this part, the demagogue reveals the "Aristotelian intelligence" that George Grote attributed to him,³⁵ as the simple Athenagoras of the first part turns into a sophist in the second part.³⁶ On the one hand, Thucydides pays tribute to the kind of rhetoric typical of the sophists: the orator starts by counter-arguing the usual criticism of democracy, namely the idea that property owners are the best fitted to rule (6.39.1).³⁷ On the other hand, there is a type of rhetoric typical of Athenian demagoguery, namely, the *topos* of the speaker siding with the people against potential enemies of democracy.³⁸ The allusion to an ongoing oligarchic plot in Syracuse itself is reminiscent of contemporary politics in Athens.³⁹

Before criticising oligarchy as a government in which all share in the perils but only a few enjoy the advantages (6.39.2), Athenagoras presents his model of a just political regime, which is indeed a democratic regime. In democracy, "these three groups have an equal share, both in the parts and in the whole" (6.39.1, transl. Pelling, modified). This description closely recalls the established discourse on the three parts (τρία μέρη) of the civic body, which featured in Athenian sources at least from the 420s, as clearly emerges

³⁴ Not all scholars agree on the fact that this is a sign of inconsistency: thus ANDREWS 2009, 49 noted that "if concepts such as freedom, equality, and distributive justice now emerge as dominant concerns, it is only because of their utility for a speaker who is trying to confirm a democratic assembly's judgment that he alone merits their trust".

³⁵ GROTE 1884, VII, 256.

³⁶ BLOEDOW 1996, 156; cf. MADER 2013, 254–256.

³⁷ For the defensive character of Athenagoras' excursus on democracy and its similarity with Pericles' funeral oration, see RAAFLAUB 2006, 221; cf. SORDI 2001. By contrast, the aggressive character of Athenagoras' speech, namely the attempt to spread fear in the audience, is stressed by MADER 2013, 244–248.

³⁸ MANN 2007; CECCHET 2015, 141–163.

³⁹ See the narrative by Thuc. 6.27–29 with DOVER – GOMME – ANDREWS 1970, 265–290 and HORNBLLOWER 2008, 367–381. ANDREWS 2009, 2: "Athenagoras' slanderous accusations of oligarchic conspiracy are a sort of mirror of the emerging political turmoil in Athens". He maintained that, not having reported any direct speech of Alcibiades' accusers in Book 8, Thucydides used this part of Athenagoras' speech as a 'paradigmatic treatment' of the subject (ibid. 12) cf. CONNOR 1984, 172. On the rhetoric of the oligarchs at Athens, see BEARZOT 2006, 21–64 and 2009, 69–86. On the absence of direct speeches in Thucydides' Book 8, see MCCOY 1973, 79–89.



in Euripides' tragedies, before becoming a recurring theme in the political philosophy of the fourth century.⁴⁰ In Euripides, the division of the citizen body into three parts is mainly based on an economic classification of "the rich", "the poor", and "the part in between" (Eur. *Supp.* 238–245). In slightly different terms, Athenagoras identifies the three parts as "the rich" (οἱ πλούσιοι), "the wise" (οἱ ξυνετοί) and "the mass of the people" (οἱ πολλοί) and all three parts have equal share in the government of the polis (6.39.1). His concept of democracy is that of a functional system in which all three parts are involved in public and political life. Wisdom is the criterion that entitles οἱ ξυνετοί to act as counsellors, while decision-making is regulated by the principle of the majority vote, but it takes place only after οἱ πολλοί have received advice from οἱ ξυνετοί.⁴¹

Robert Connor notably argued that "the view of Syracuse that is provided by this debate is like an unexpected reflection in a mirror. We turn expecting to see a remote, alien antithesis to Athens and find instead a close analogue".⁴² Along the same lines, Simon Hornblower maintained that "by giving us a Syracusan debate, parallel in several respects to that which has taken place in Athens (...), Thucydides suggests a larger parallel between the two cities, which will become increasingly important in Book 7". Hornblower defines Athenagoras' excursus as "the most sustained defence of Athenian-

⁴⁰ The subject of discussion in Euripides is which one of the three parts is the most apt to rule; in *Aeolus* Fr. 21 the answer is that only the *synkrisis* of the poor and the rich secures the well-being of the state; in *Suppliants* 238–245 it is "the part in between the rich and the poor" that is the most suitable to a just government; cf. *Orestes* 917–922. On this, see also CECCHET 2015, 88–100 and 2019, 153–154. On Athenagoras' tripartite division among the citizens, see also SAÏD 2013, 208, who interprets tripartite division as "a correction and an echo of Pericles' Funeral Oration", but, surprisingly, she does not note the analogy with Euripides' *Suppliants* 238–245.

⁴¹ ANDREWS 2009, 7–10 interprets Athenagoras' words at 6.39.1 in a different way: following FROST 1879, 214, he understands the particle *an* in the sentence as indicating an admission of the speaker (while the first clause is a report of the assertion of the oligarchic party): ἔπειτα φύλακας μὲν ἀρίστους εἶναι χρημάτων τοὺς πλουσίους, βουλευσαί δ' ἂν βέλτιστα τοὺς ξυνετούς, κρῖναι δ' ἂν ἀκούσαντας ἄριστα τοὺς πολλούς. So, in his view, Athenagoras does not refer to a tripartite division of functions in democracy, but speaks only of the rule of the wise, and then the rule of the masses, in order to show that these two categories would also have the right to champion sole rule based on their abilities, in the same way as the rich claim to be the best guardian of property. The traditional interpretation of the text, however, is accepted by most scholars, among whom see DOVER – GOMME – ANDREWS 1970, 304–306; HORNBLOWER 2008, 413–414 and PELLING 2022, 200–201. I follow them.

⁴² CONNOR 1984, 172. For Connor's arguments on the several parallels between the Athenian and the Syracusan debates, see *ibid.*, 168–176. For Athens as the *Doppelgänger* of Syracuse, see also BROCK – HODKINSON 2000, 13.



style democracy in the whole *History*".⁴³ Nonetheless, these views have contributed to significantly downplaying important aspects of Athenagoras' speech that clearly distinguish democratic Syracuse from Athens. The fact that, in Books 7 and 8, the historian defines Athens and Syracuse as ὁμοιότροποι ("similar in character")⁴⁴ should be understood as a reference to the fact that they are both democracies and naval powers, but it does not mean Thucydides depicts the Sicilian polis as the twin sister of Athens.

As far as sources from the classical period are concerned, the idea that Syracuse was a different type of democracy has so far mainly relied on Aristotle. In *Politics*, Aristotle defines Syracuse as a πολιτεία (i.e., a mixed constitution, halfway between oligarchy and democracy, Aristot. *Pol.* 1293b 31–34 and 1294b 2–6)⁴⁵ in the period from 466/5 to 413 BC, and as a δημοκρατία only after the Athenian defeat in 413 BC (Arist. *Pol.* 1304a 27–29). By contrast, in *Pol.* 1305b 39–1306a 2 he refers to the tyranny of Dionysius I as the result of the collapse of the previous oligarchic regime, implying that Syracuse was governed by an oligarchy before 406 BC. And the question becomes even less clear if we consider that, in *Politics* 1316a 32–33, he defines the Syracusan regime after 466/5 BC as a democracy (cf. 1312b 6–9 and Diodorus 11.68.6).⁴⁶ This confused picture has been much discussed by historians and commentators. While earlier debates were polarised between the view that Aristotle provided evidence that Syracuse was not a democracy and the view that we should instead follow Thucydides and Diodorus in maintaining it was a democracy,⁴⁷ more recent debates have focused on analysing Aristotle's statements in their own context. Maria Elena De Luna has plausibly argued that the change from *politeia* to *demokratia* in Arist. 1304a 27–29 can be explained by the fact that 413 BC marked a victory for the Syracusan fleet, hence a victory for the sailors, i.e., the lower strata of the

⁴³ Both citations from HORNBLOWER 2008, 396; cf. CONNOR 1984, 171. However, HORNBLOWER *ibid.*, 406 acknowledges that Athenagoras' excursus might well fulfil a wider function than simply an allusion to Athens. Namely, it prepares the reader for the later seizure of power by Dionysius the Elder, a narrative that Thucydides presumably planned for his Book 9 or 10. He suggests that Thuc. 6.38 might contain foreknowledge of Dionysius' tyranny, though the hypothesis is conjectural; cf. HORNBLOWER 2008, 412.

⁴⁴ Thuc. 7.55.2; 8.96.5; PELLING, *ibid.*

⁴⁵ Cf. Aristot. *Pol.* 1279a 37–39 and 1279b 2–4, 1288a 12–15. See ACCATTINO – CURNIS 2013, 182–183.

⁴⁶ On these contradictions, see ZIZZA 2012 and DE LUNA 2013, 93–95; cf. DE LUNA – ZIZZA – CURNIS 2016, 333–336 (comment by DE LUNA).

⁴⁷ See the positions of WENTKER 1956 (Syracuse as aristocracy) and BRUNT 1957 (Syracuse as democracy). Cf. CONSOLO LANGHER 1997 for the view of that Syracuse was a *politeia* governed by the cavalry and hoplite class.



demos and the strongest supporters of democracy.⁴⁸ From this perspective, Aristotle used a different term (*demokratia*) to highlight the more radical character of democracy after 413 BC, as compared with the more moderate democracy (*politeia*) that held sway in Syracuse before the victory over the Athenians. Similarly, Eric Robinson argued that Aristotle's use of *politeia* for Syracuse before 413 BC was "contextually determined", because in 412 BC, as we learn from Diodorus Siculus (13.34.6–35.1), the Syracusan Diocles introduced allotment for offices and entrusted the revision of the constitutions to a board of elected lawgivers. Aristotle's use of two different terms before and after 413 BC, was thus aimed, in Robinson's view, at highlighting the development of Syracuse's democracy, but it did not indicate two different types of political constitution.⁴⁹

These alternating (and seemingly contradictory) definitions of Syracuse's political constitution, however, might well show that, as late as Aristotle's own day, there were some serious doubts about the democratic nature of the Syracusan regime before Dionysius I. Such confusion may have originated from some aspects of Syracusan democracy that made it substantially different from Athenian-type democracy. Discussing the problem of Aristotle's definition of Syracuse's constitution, N.K. Rutter rightly highlighted that *demokratia* in Aristotle is an "umbrella term" covering different types of democracies that do not resemble Athenian "radical" democracy.⁵⁰ Rutter argued that Syracuse was a different type of democracy than Athens,⁵¹ a point that Maurizio Giangliulo had already made in his analysis of Syracuse's instability in the so-called democratic period.⁵²

Surprisingly, the speech of Athenagoras has received scanty attention in the debate over the nature of Syracusan democracy. Some clues about the differences between Syracusan and Athenian democracy clearly contained in the speech have so far been overlooked by scholars, apart from Maurizio Giangliulo,⁵³ who, in his analysis of the speech, has drawn attention mainly to (i) the role of "the wealthy" (ii) the role of "the wise" (iii) the law that forbids young Syracusans from taking office, and (iv) the fact that Athenagoras underlines the opportunity for the elites to benefit the polis in order to obtain

⁴⁸ DE LUNA in DE LUNA – ZIZZA – CURNIS 2016, 335–336.

⁴⁹ ROBINSON 2000, 196.

⁵⁰ RUTTER 2000, 150–151.

⁵¹ *Ibid.* 150, he also notes the absence of a *boule* in Syracuse and the fact that, in Thuc. 6.41, an unnamed general appears to stop the proceeding of the assembly, which seems a non-democratic action.

⁵² GIANGIULIO 1998.

⁵³ GIANGIULIO 2015, 89–94. I draw from his analysis, though mine differs in some respects, such as my interpretation of the rich as the best guardians of property.



“a wider share”. A close consideration of these aspects reveals that Thucydides carefully shaped Athenagoras’ arguments in an attempt to render the image of a local – non-Athenian – type of demagogue, attributing words to him that were deeply rooted in the fabric of local politics and history.

In praising οἱ πλούσιοι as the best guardians of property, Athenagoras does not establish a link between individual wealth and office-holding, but he clearly attributes a special recognition and a precise function to the wealthy. The overall context, which concerns political rule, suggests Athenagoras refers to wealth in general, including both private and public wealth. From this perspective, οἱ πλούσιοι are the best citizens to preserve public funds and to protect private property against redistribution, which are in fact complementary rather than contradictory aspects. The first scenario, i.e., the wealthy as guardians of public property, finds a parallel case in Athens, where in the Solonic order the Treasurers of Athena were citizens of the highest census class, the Pentakosiomedimnoi, even though membership in a census class was no indicator of wealth in the classical period.⁵⁴ Praise for the πλούσιοι as the best guardians of property is a feature that one does not expect to find in the speech of a demagogue and is certainly not the best argument for evoking the sympathy of the people, but, in the light of the discussion above, it does not reflect an anti-democratic perspective. The second scenario, i.e., the wealthy as the best guardians of private wealth, has been plausibly explained by Giangliulo by the instability of Sicilian *poleis*, in which turmoil and the threat of land redistribution were not rare events. From this perspective, Athenagoras reassures the rich in his audience: his view of democracy does not entail any intervention on private property.⁵⁵ In fact, this type of reassurance is not foreign even to Athenian democracy, as it was part of the Heliastic oath to swear never to allow debt cancellation and land

⁵⁴ Treasurers of Athena: [Arist.] *Ath. Pol.* 47.1. Census classes probably did not matter for the appointment to office in the classical period, see the case of thetes, [Arist.] *Ath. Pol.* 7.4, but in the case of Treasurers of Athena, the author of the *Ath. Pol.* states that the law is still in force in his day, but he also shows membership of the highest census class did not equate to being wealthy in the fourth century: κληροῦται δ’ εἰς ἐκ τῆς φυλῆς, ἐκ πεντακοσιομεδίμων κατὰ τὸν Σόλωνος νόμον (ἔτι γὰρ ὁ νόμος κύριός ἐστιν), ἄρχει δ’ ὁ λαχὼν κἂν πάνυ πένης ᾷ (47.1).

⁵⁵ The latter scenario is the interpretation of GIANGIULIO 2015, 93. He also highlights the fact that Athenagoras does not mention the allotment of offices, which is another trait typical of Athenian-type democracy. Without making an *argumentum e silentio*, it is significant that Diodorus informs us that selection by lot for offices in Syracuse was introduced in 412 BC (Diod.13.34.6–35.1, see discussion above).



redistribution – although we know that both measures were not undertaken in democracy after Solon.⁵⁶

The aspect that concerns decision-making, instead, marks a clear difference between Syracusan and Athenian democracy. Unlike the picture of Athens we derive from Thucydides and the Attic orators, the political community in Syracuse did not make decisions based only on assembly debates and voting. There was an important preliminary step: the consultation of οἱ ξυνετοί. In Syracuse, decision-making was subdued to their role as advisors and guides, which they exerted by virtue of their wisdom. Athenagoras implicitly presents the role of οἱ ξυνετοί (which he does not link to any ruling body) as a good trait of democracy, but we should note that an Athenian audience would not have agreed with him on this point. From an Athenian perspective, in fact, the idea of a group of wise men on whose advice political decisions depend is dangerously close to the idea of a political class as a closed group, something Athenians abhorred, as we see in the ways public speakers always put a distance between themselves and “professional” politicians or rhetorical experts.⁵⁷

Athenagoras’ words also shed light on the fact that office-holding in Syracuse was probably subject to stricter age limitations than in Athens. This last aspect is apparent when the speaker addresses the young conspirators at 6.38.5, provocatively asking what they expect to achieve with their plans. He asks them if they expect to hold office at once and adds that this would be impossible, because a specific νόμος (6.39.1) forbids it. The Syracusan νόμος, about which we have no evidence other than this passage of Thucydides, probably prescribed age requirements for holding office, hindering political rule by the impetuous youth that Athenagoras attempts to tame. In Athens, age criteria seem to play a minor role: a minimum age of 30 years was required for jurors, as we read in [Aristotle]’s *Ath. Pol.* 63.3, but we have no evidence that it was the standard age requirement for all offices. A high age requirement (60 years) applied to arbitrators (*Ath. Pol.* 53.4), and 40 years for a few other offices, such as the supervisors of the *epheboi* (*sophronistai*, *Ath. Pol.* 42.2) and the *choregos* of the boys’ chorus (*Ath. Pol.* 56.3), in both cases with the clear intention of establishing an age difference between supervisors and

⁵⁶ Dem. 19.179 and 24.149. On land distribution as a political slogan (also by Sicilian tyrants) see CECCHET 2009.

⁵⁷ See, for example, the Athenians’ distrust for politicians (Thuc. 2.65.10–12; Dem. 23.201) and rhetorical experts (Dem. 35.40–43; Isae. 10.1).



supervisees.⁵⁸ However, these cases might be exceptions to the general absence of age requirements for the other offices. The only evidence of an age requirement (30 years) for councillors concerns the council of the Four Hundreds in the oligarchic coup of 411 BC (*Ath. Pol.* 30.2–3), i.e., a non-democratic ruling body whose attendees received no public pay (*Ath. Pol.* 30.2). In general, youth did not hinder political careers in Athens: Thucydides notes that in any other polis Alcibiades would be considered young (5.43.2: ἀνήρ ἡλικία μὲν ἔτι τότε ὦν νέος ὡς ἐν ἄλλῃ πόλει), implying that in Athens his age did not represent an issue. The implication is not that Alcibiades was an ordinary Athenian – indeed, he was not – but that Athenians were less strict on age criteria than other *poleis*. Comic fragments further confirm that it was not rare for Athenians to enter politics at a young age.⁵⁹ In Syracuse, by contrast, legislation was stricter, a fact that allows Athenagoras to criticise the young conspirators as law breakers. Athenagoras' mention of the Syracusan νόμος leads us to presume that he refers to an overall system in which expertise and age played an important role in the appointment of magistracies.

Another clue that distinguishes Syracuse from Athens in Athenagoras' speech concerns the role of private wealth in defining prestige and leadership, which is indicated by the (rather unclear) expression ἴσον καὶ πλεόν. At 6.40.1 Athenagoras again aggressively addresses the plotters. He says that if they only understood that they should contribute to increasing the well-being of the polis, they would receive a share that is ἴσον καὶ πλεόν, i.e., “equal and more than equal” (ibid.: μαθόντες γε ἢ μεταγνόντες τὸ τῆς πόλεως ξύμπασι κοινὸν αὔξετε, ἡγησάμενοι τοῦτο μὲν ἂν καὶ ἴσον καὶ πλεόν οἱ ἀγαθοὶ ὑμῶν ἤπερ τὸ τῆς πόλεως πλῆθος μετασχεῖν).⁶⁰ These words are surprising, as Athenagoras has so far argued that in a democracy, unlike in an oligarchy, the few do not share more privileges than the many (6.39.2). The crucial point is to understand who οἱ ἀγαθοί are and the real meaning of ἴσον καὶ πλεόν.

As for οἱ ἀγαθοί, Athenagoras defines a subgroup among the plotters, namely ‘the best’ among them. In classical sources, the adjective ἀγαθός mainly expresses the ethical and moral connotation of goodness, and it only

⁵⁸ For these cases and a few more, see discussion in DEVELIN 1985, esp. 150–151. For commentaries on the above-mentioned passages of [Arist.] *Ath. Pol.* see RHODES 1993 [1981] *ad loc.*

⁵⁹ See, for example, Aristophanes (F 205 K-A) referring to Alcibiades in 427 BC; Cratinos (F 283 K-A) referring to the young age of Hyperbolos when he entered politics.

⁶⁰ DOVER – GOMME – ANDREWS 1970, 307 comment: “Athenagoras recognizes the principles of rewarding merit”. The meaning of the passage is not commented on by HORNBLLOWER 2008, 415 who simply emendates the text following Alberti (he replaces ἤπερ with ὠνπερ) and translates it as: “share in the same things as the city’s rabble shares”.



rarely occurs with the meaning of 'high-born' that it had in archaic sources.⁶¹ But Athenagoras refers here to οἱ ἀγαθοί among the νεώτεροι, namely, the *jeunesse dorée* of Syracusan society, the aspiring oligarchs from well-off families. He thus addresses a subgroup within the group of πλούσιοι, and these people are the virtuous rich. As for the expression ἴσον καὶ πλεόν, I would argue that the larger share in question concerns honour and prestige,⁶² and not political rights or economic rewards. If it were the latter, Athenagoras' words would contradict those at the beginning of the excursus (6.39.1-2), where he objects to the idea that the rich are the best rulers and defines democracy as a system in which all have equal share, while oligarchy is a system in which all share the danger, but only a few enjoy the privileges. What Athenagoras now implies is not that by following his advice the rich will become rulers, but rather that the virtuous rich who are generous towards the polis will gain a share of honour and prestige that is "above the equal share". Here, we again encounter a non-Athenian type of rhetoric because, although it is true that the performance of liturgies in classical Athens was based on the expectation of recognition by the community,⁶³ recent studies by Mirko Canevaro on honour in classical Athens have shown that the expected recognition had precise limits. The honour(s) conferred on Athenian citizens followed a horizontal (rather than vertical) impulse. In other words, the conferral of honours and the discourses associated with this practice reinforced the principle of political egalitarianism over the idea of vertical stratification, which is foundational to the Athenian idea of democratic citizenship.⁶⁴ Both foreign and civic benefactors were praised for demonstrating equal (not greater) honour to that expected from good citizens. In the Attic orators, in fact, we clearly read that the rich are expected to financially support the polis, while boasting about one's own wealth, or claiming greater recognition than that reserved for fellow-citizens in general as a reward for donations was considered unacceptable.⁶⁵ Athenagoras' rhetoric and his words about οἱ πλούσιοι would certainly have been unthinkable in Pericles' Funeral Oration of 431 BC. Pericles, in the only short reference he makes to wealth in the speech, underlines the opportunity of

⁶¹ CECCHET 2023.

⁶² Here I follow ANDREWS 2009, 10-11 along the same lines as DOVER – GOMME – ANDREWS 1970, rejecting the idea that Athenagoras might refer to a wider share of political rights or economic benefit. CORCELLA 1996, by contrast, translates: "in questa maniera godreste di una parte uguale, i più valenti tra voi di una parte maggiore di quei diritti di cui gode tutta la popolazione della città".

⁶³ See LIDDEL 2007.

⁶⁴ CANEVARO, forthcoming.

⁶⁵ See the portrayal of the arrogant rich in Athenian oratory in CECCHET 2019.



employing it for (good) use, rather than for show (Thuc.2.40.1), revealing a perception of wealth that is far removed from any claims to recognition as a “larger share”.

Overall, the Syracusan discourse of democracy that we can compose by stitching together these pieces of information contained (in greatly condensed form) in Athenagoras’ words shows a moderated (or “mixed”, in Aristotle’s terms) type of democracy, namely, a system combining the basic principles of democracy, such as power of the people, decision by majority vote, etc., with principles that are not typical of an Athenian-type democracy. It is highly probable that Thucydides thought this type of democracy was better than the Athenian system, above all because of its limitation on the chaotic role of the masses, and the restrictions on the irruent role of the youth in politics,⁶⁶ which were aspects he knew well from Athenian experience.

Conclusion

In all probability, Athenagoras’s speech is, to a significant extent, a free composition by Thucydides, but to reduce the Syracusan demagogue simply to the position of counterpart to an Athenian demagogue is misleading. As I hope this analysis has shown, Thucydides did not merely place a copy of contemporary Athenian demagogues on the Syracusan stage: he combined his knowledge of Athenian demagoguery with some traits specific to Syracusan democracy. The result is that Athenagoras does not present simply as a less-skilled Cleon or Alcibiades: his views of political leadership, honour and wealth are not identical to the Athenian democratic ideal. The composition of his speech reflects Thucydides’ sophisticated attempt to follow the principles of τὰ δέοντα and ξύμπασα γνώμη stated in 1.22.1, namely, to shape Athenagoras’ arguments based on the line of thought that his knowledge of democratic Syracuse suggested would be fitting for a local demagogue. In doing so, the historian delivers an image of a less radical democracy than that of Athens.

It is plausible that the speech also serves a paradigmatic purpose, that is, showing the reader a democratic alternative to Athens, a sort of corrective model against which Thucydides placed what he regarded to be the flaws in Athenian democracy. For this purpose, the historian drew on what he knew about Syracuse, a polis that he considered in many (but not all) respects ὁμοίωτροπος to Athens. Athenagoras’ words, in sum, give shape to that kind

⁶⁶ It is useful to recall here Thucydides’ positive judgement on the government of the Five Thousand as a mixed government of democracy and oligarchy (Thuc. 8.97.2).



of moderated constitution that, several decades later, Aristotle preferred to describe as a πολιτεία rather than a δημοκρατία.

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Abstract

This paper discusses the speech of Athenagoras in Thucydides 6.36–40. Thucydides sketches Athenagoras' profile based on his knowledge of Athenian demagogues, his (probably scanty) knowledge of the Syracusan opposition to Hermocrates, and his knowledge of Syracusan democracy. I argue, first, that, despite freely composing Athenagoras' speech, Thucydides does follow the principle of τὰ δέοντα and ξύμπασα γνώμη τῶν ἀληθῶς λεχθέντων that he introduces in his methodological chapter at 1.22.1. Second, that the picture of Syracusan democracy that Athenagoras provides in his excursus on democracy is not simply a mirror of Athenian democracy. The speech contains clues about a specific Syracusan view of democracy, power and leadership, which might also explain why Aristotle defines Syracuse in the period from 466/5 to 413 BC as a πολιτεία (i.e., a mixed constitution, halfway between oligarchy and democracy) and not as a δημοκρατία.

Keywords: Athenagoras, demagogues, Syracusan democracy, Thucydides, assembly speeches, audience

Il presente contributo prende in esame il discorso di Atenagora di Siracusa in Tucidide 6.36-40. Tucidide costruisce la figura di Atenagora sul modello dei demagoghi ateniesi, ma anche basandosi su ciò che sapeva dell'opposizione interna a Ermocrate a Siracusa e, in generale, utilizzando le informazioni che aveva sulla democrazia di Siracusa. Sebbene il discorso sia frutto della creatività retorica di Tucidide, lo storico non trascura i principi dei τὰ δέοντα and della ξύμπασα γνώμη delineati nel famoso capitolo sul metodo (1.22). L'immagine della democrazia siracusana che emerge dalle parole di Atenagora non è semplicemente uno specchio della democrazia ateniese. Il discorso contiene interessanti indizi di un'idea e prassi della democrazia, del potere e della leadership che sono sostanzialmente diverse da quelle ateniesi. Il discorso del demagogo siracusano fornisce quindi elementi importanti, utili a comprendere per quali ragioni Aristotele, nella *Politica*, definisce Siracusa nel periodo tra il 466/5 e il 413 a.C. come una πολιτεία (ovvero una costituzione mista) e non come una δημοκρατία.

Parole chiave: Atenagora, demagoghi, democrazia siracusana, Tucidide, discorsi assembleari, audience