

# Ostracism in athenian democracy



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### **Question 3. Ostraka**

Ostracism was a process instituted as one of the Kleisthenic reforms of 508/7BC as a result of the non-elite intervention in the conflict with the Spartan backed Isagoras, although there is no evidence for its actual use before 487BC (Forsdyke 2005: 144). Lasting for a period of 70 years it was a symbolic reminder of democratic power as opposed to elite rule as well as a pragmatic device for controlling the ambitions of potentially powerful traitors, or leading figures, without destabilizing the political system (Forsdyke 2005: 143). It required a minimum of 6, 000 male citizens to take part in an annual secret ballot by inscribing the name of their preferred candidate on a potsherd (ostrakon plural ostraka) and the person who polled the most votes on a simple majority basis was exiled from Athens and Attica for a period of 10 years (Easterling and Handley 2001: 26) with the property and rights of the exile being protected by law during their exclusion.

#### **Ostrakon A.**

The inscriptions on this ostrakon(Fig. 1) can be transcribed, transliterated and translated as follows:-

**ΠΕΡΙΚΛΕΣ ΞΣΑΝΘΙΠΠΟ**

Perikles Xsanthippo

Pericles (son) of Xanthippos

Pericles was an aristocratic politician who became a democratic leader and this text shows his name inscribed alongside the genitive patronymic (the name of his father). A member of the Alkmaeonid family his mother was the niece of Kleisthenes and his father had been exiled in 484BC but recalled as

a general during the Persian war. In 463/2BC he was elected as a prosecutor of Cimon who had been accused of receiving bribes from Alexander of Macedon and this opposition to Cimon brought a coalition with Ephialtes in 462BC to attack and reform the Areopagus (Hornblower and Spawforth 2003: 1139). When Ephialtes died and Cimon was ostracised Pericles became one of the most influential men in Athens, being elected as strategos (general) for 10 consecutive years from 443BC, and was an unopposed ruler who had an ambitious foreign policy of westward expansion that saw Athens become predominant in Greece (Bowder 1982: 157).

The extensive public building programme instituted by Pericles, which included the re-building of the Parthenon (Bowder 1982: 156), was intended to make Athens an example to all Greece (Thucydides 2. 41). An active military leader he put down a revolt in Euboea in 446BC and reviewed Athens' grain supply during an expedition to the Black Sea (Hornblower and Spawforth 2003: 1139). Having once proposed a unification of all Greek states that had fought Persia, which Sparta opposed, his strategy, based upon the advice of Themistocles (Thucydides 1. 93. 16-17), as Athenian leader in the Peloponnesian war was to avoid fighting in the open, stay behind their fortifications and allow their sea power to prevail. Unfortunately the Athenians did not follow this policy which resulted in defeat (Davies 1993: 118-20). Pericles also made probably the most famous speech on Athenian democracy as a funeral oration for those who fell fighting Sparta in the first year of the Peloponnesian war where he commends the Athenian model to their neighbours as government by the many as opposed to an elite few (Barrow 1999: 29-30, Thucydides 2. 35-46).

**Ostrakon B.**

The text on this ostrakon (Fig. 2) can be transcribed, transliterated and translated as follows:-

**ΣΟΚΡΑΤΕΣ: ΑΝΑΓΥΡΑΣΙΟΣ**

Sokrates: Anagyrasios

Socrates (of the deme) of Anagyrous

The Socrates named here is not the famous philosopher but a general, one of the 10 strategos elected annually one from each of the 10 tribes (Barrow 1999: 20). The text gives the demotic adjective in the nominative case rather than the more usual genitive patronymic and from this deme name we can link Socrates to the Erechtheis tribe (Whitehead 1986: 369).

Anagyrous was a garrison deme, possibly part of the signalling network (Whitehead 1986: 401) and as this ostrakon relates to 440BC (Easterling and Handley 2001: 28) we can assume Socrates was elected as strategos by his tribe in 441/440BC and given command of the Anagyrous garrison. We know nothing else of him so can only guess at why he was nominated for ostracism.

**Inscriptions C (Easterling and Handley 2001: p29).**

These inscriptions can be transliterated and translated as:-

**Themisthokles Neokleos**

Themistocles (son) of Neocles

**Themisthokles Neokleosito**

Themistocles (son) of Neocles Get Out

Although these ostraka have the more normal form showing the genitive case patronymic two items are of note. Firstly, the double use of theta in Themistocles' name and secondly the use of ito (Get out) which underlines the depth of feeling against him (Easterling and Handley 2001: 29) which is an interesting perspective given his reputation as father of the Athenian navy and the fact that he had implemented ostracism in 487BC (Bowder 1982: 198). There is evidence that the surviving ostraka on which Themistocles name is inscribed were written by only 14 people and this may reflect either the poor level of literacy at the time (ostraka being pre-prepared or written by a scribe) or some form of vote rigging (Murray 1993: 285).

Themistocles was an Athenian politician, a member of the Lycomid family, a radical democrat who attempted to destroy the aristocracy and considered to be one of the greatest men of his generation (Bowder 1982: 199). When he was archon he had developed Piraeus as the harbour of Athens (Thucydides 1. 93. 11-12) and argued that output from the Laurium silver mines be spent on increasing the size of the Athenian navy, ostensibly for the war against Aigina but in reality for use against Persia, which culminated in the victory at Salamis in 480BC (Herodotus 7. 144. 1-5). Although he had avoided being ostracised in the 480s he was sent into exile in 470/1BC after clashing with Cimon over accusations of negotiating with Persia (Bowder 1982: 198) but when accused by Sparta of becoming Persian he was recalled, fled and in his absence was condemned to death for treason. Arriving in Persia he was made governor of Magnesia where he remained until his death (Hornblower and Spawforth 2003: 1497).

Ostracism fell into disrepair after 416BC when Alcibiades and Phiax manipulated its use to combine their forces and have their political rival Hyperbolus exiled. Corruption had always been present but this time it had been so blatant and visible that it completely discredited the process and its use was abandoned (Easterling and Handley 2001: 29).

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