THE DĒMOS IN DĒMOKRATIA*

The meaning of dēmokratia is widely agreed: ‘rule by the people’ (less often ‘people-power’), where dēmos, ‘people’, implies ‘entire citizen body’, synonymous with polis, ‘city-state’, or πάντες πολίτες, ‘all citizens’.1 Dēmos, on this understanding, comprised rich and poor, leaders and followers, mass and elite alike. As such, dēmokratia is interpreted as constituting a sharp rupture from previous political regimes.2 Rule by one man or by a few had meant the domination of one part of the community over the rest, but dēmokratia, it is said, implied self-rule, and with it the dissolution of the very distinction between ruler and ruled.3 Its governing principle was the formal political equality of all citizens. In the words of W.G. Forrest, between 750 and 450 B.C. there had developed ‘the idea of individual human autonomy … the idea that all members of a political society are free and equal, that everyone had the right to an equal say in determining the structure and the activities of his society’.4

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This is not, of course, the only interpretation of dēmokratia available in our sources. Many classical authors, most famously Aristotle, interpreted dēmokratia as ‘rule by the common people’, where dēmos was synonymous not with polis or πάντες πολίται but with πληθος, ‘mass’ or ‘majority’. On this understanding, dēmos denoted not the entire citizen body but rather a ‘sociologically delimited fragment’ of the citizenry, namely the poor majority, the less educated, the lower class—in short, the mass as opposed to the elite, rather than a body encompassing both. But scholars today are skeptical of this reading. It is said to have had a ‘pejorative overtone’ and is attributed only to elite anti-democrats who deprecated the inclusion of all citizens in the political process. ‘Skilled democratic rhetoricians’ such as Pericles are said to have rejected it, instead taking ‘the dēmos that was sovereign in Athenian democracy’ to include ‘every voter, no matter how poor—or how rich’. This disagreement has far-reaching methodological implications. According to Hansen and others, since the use of dēmos to suggest ‘the mass’ was simply a slur, any study of dēmokratia that aims to be faithful to democratic ideology must disregard all sources in which that usage appears—which amounts to all extant poetic, philosophical, historical and polemical works. Only inscriptions and speeches given before democratic bodies such as the Athenian assembly or courts remain. 

Dēmos may also be rendered ‘assembly’, said to be synonymous with ἐκκλησία, a political meeting. As Hansen has emphasized, this is in fact its most common meaning in the classical sources, appearing in scores of inscriptions and speeches. However, this usage is said to derive from the prior meaning: ‘entire citizen body’. Even Hansen and Ober, whose differences on the interpretation of dēmos run deep, agree on this point. Ober invokes the literary figure of synecdoche, in which the part stands for the whole, to explain the relationship between what he calls ‘the ecclesia’ and the entire dēmos: like every other institutional ‘part’ of the citizenry, he suggests, the assembly ‘could stand for and refer to the whole citizen body’. Hansen maintains that, when used in an institutional sense, dēmos simply meant ‘assembly’, while other institutions were conceived as representing the dēmos in some way; but he too accepts that ‘ideologically a meeting of the ecclesia was a meeting of the entire people’. And this claim seems plausible, since democratic assemblies (such as the Athenian, the specific

6 Ober (n. 1 [2008]), 8.
8 Roberts (n. 1), 49. Cf. Wood (n. 7), 127.
9 Hansen (n. 1), 505–7; Ober (n. 1 [2008]), 8.
10 I will argue below that, although dēmos certainly meant ‘assembly’, dēmos and ἐκκλησία were not in fact synonymous (as Hansen also now believes: see Hansen [n. 1], 507).
11 Hansen (n. 1), 510. ML 5.11, 14.1; RO 31.7, 41.3–4; Aeschin. 2.17; Dem. 18.248, 24.9.
13 Ober (n. 12), 117–18.
14 Hansen (n. 1), 514. The same claim appears in M.I. Finley, Politics in the Ancient World (Cambridge, 1983), 1; Larsen (n. 1), 45.
The foregoing interpretation is well established, internally consistent and analytically crucial, given the foundational role it plays in our understanding of ancient Greek politics. Yet, it is not entirely satisfactory. For one thing, though it implies a conception of *dēmokratia* as self-rule, no such conception appears in our sources. Forrest’s terminology is instructive. The key word in his sketch is ‘autonomy’, ‘giving oneself the law’, from the classical Greek αὐτόνομος. But being αὐτόνομος meant that the *polis* was not ruled by a foreign power, not that each citizen participated in ruling; and no other classical Greek word performed that function. For another, the claim that *dēmos* came to mean ‘assembly’ via its denotation of the entire citizen body seems doubtful, since *dēmos* (or the Doric *dāmos*) denoted ‘assembly’ all over ancient Greece, not only in democratic regimes. Jettisoning the evidence for the meaning of *dēmos* found in ‘elite’ authors also seems unwise. Even if their use of *dēmos* to mean ‘common people’ was coloured by anti-democratic feeling, others may have used it the same way, either descriptively or with approbation. Certainly some fourth-century democrats sometimes conceived of the *dēmos* as a part rather than as the whole of the citizen body. This is shown by their use of the adjective δημοτικός, ‘in favour of (or in the interests of) the *dēmos*’. Being in favour of one agent necessarily presupposes distinction from another, and this is supported by our sources. Demosthenes, speaking before a popular judicial panel, described a certain politician as ‘a good man, δημοτικόν, very eager in the defence of your majority (τὸ πλῆθος τὸ ὑμετέρων)’ (24.134). Hypereides challenged another judicial panel thus: ‘Why should you spare this man? Because he is δημοτικός?’ (2.10). Demosthenes’ *Against Meidias* confirms the point. ‘Beware of bearing this testimony against yourselves: that if you detect a man of the middle class or a δημοτικόν committing an offence, you will punish him, but pardon the insolence of a rich man’ (21.183, transl. Vince). In each case, a ‘partial’ reading is inescapable. The *dēmos* envisaged is not the entire citizen body but a part of it.

Another reason to question the accepted view is the evidence of our earliest sources, which will be my focus here. Pre-democratic texts are not usually consulted for what they can tell us about the *dēmos in dēmokratia*, but they have much to offer. We do not know exactly when *dēmokratia* was coined, though it was certainly in use during the third quarter of the fifth century (and as Hansen and others have argued, we can hardly expect to find it attested before then, as so little evidence of the right sort survives). But whenever the term was developed, it will have been with the then-current meaning of *dēmos* in mind, in other words that established before the mid

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15 Aristotle’s idea of ‘governing and being governed in turn’ (ἐν μέρει, ‘by parts’, *Pol.* 1261b4, 1317b2) comes close, but none the less differs from ruling continually over oneself.


18 Transl. Cartledge (n. 1), 49–50. See also de Ste Croix (n. 7), 22–3.


20 M.H. Hansen, ‘The origin of the term *dēmokratia*’, *LCM* 11 (1986), 35–6. The earliest possible attestation is *IG I* 37.48 (447/6?), in which the letters 6-ε-μ-ο are legible. After that, see Hdt. 6.43, 131; Ps.-Xen. *Ath. pol.* 1.4–8, 2.20, 3.1, 8–12; *Ar. Ach.* 618; Antiph. 6.45; DK 251. Note also Aesch.
fifth century at the latest. That meaning must therefore be excavated—and the results are revealing.

From Homer around the eighth century B.C. down to at least Aeschylus in the second quarter of the fifth, the meaning of δῆμος was, I shall argue, remarkably stable. It had three essential features. A δῆμος was a singular collective agent, that is, numerous individuals conceived as a single entity, in contradistinction from the same individuals conceived as a multitude of disaggregated persons (in Greek, λαοί). It was an independent political agent, conceived as possessing a will of its own and able to make that will felt across the community, in contradistinction from the same individuals conceived collectively as the union of (typically armed) followers of a leader (λαός). And it was a partial agent, consisting not of the entire community but of the ordinary people who constituted the majority of the population, in contradistinction from both the political elite (ἡγεμόνες, βασιλεῖς, γέροντες) and the entire citizenry (πόλις, πάντες πολίτες).

Putting these points together, I suggest that the original meaning of δῆμος and that implied by δημοκρατία were ‘assembly’, defined as the collective political agent constituted by the common people. This agent was conceptually distinct from those individuals who played leading political roles, such as princes, councillors, elders, generals and orators—including orators in regimes where anyone who wished might speak publicly, such as democratic Athens. Δῆμος indicated not all assembly-goers, that is to say, but specifically the audience: those who listened, deliberated internally and voted en masse, as opposed to those who spoke publicly or performed other solo political actions. By extension, δῆμος denoted all those who participated in politics through collective action, as opposed to those who had personal political significance. The former category comprised the great majority of citizens but not the entire citizen body, since those who performed leading roles were by definition not part of the δῆμος. From Homer to Aeschylus and typically thereafter, δῆμος was an oppositional term, defined by contrast with the political elite. Only once δημοκρατία existed was δῆμος used—on occasion—to denote the entire citizen body, the elite as well as the mass, presumably because only in δημοκρατία did the assembled mass make decisions on behalf of the πόλις as a whole.

What this means is that Aristotle was right, but right in a way not yet fully elaborated by modern scholars. Δημοκρατία did imply rule by the poor—even, as Paul Cartledge has rather mischievously suggested, the dictatorship of the proletariat—if only because the poor constitute the great majority of those who, though personally politically insignificant, are powerful when they engage in collective action. But the interpretation

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21 I defend this distinction between orators and δῆμος in ‘Deliberation in ancient Greek assemblies’ (forthcoming, CP). In brief, though it is often said that the δῆμος (here conceived as encompassing orators and non-orators alike) ‘discussed’ political matters, our sources draw a significant distinction between orators, who addressed the δῆμος (δημηγορεῖ) and advised (συμβουλεῖ), and the δῆμος which deliberated internally (βουλεύσατον). The very act of coming forward made an orator no longer simply one of the crowd. The fact that he later raised his hand to vote along with everyone else did not mitigate his difference from those who engaged in exclusively collective political action.

22 The δῆμος was also implicitly distinct from those on the margins of political life: women, slaves, foreigners. But this article focusses on relations within the formal political community.

of dēmos that I advance is not simply sociological. Though it builds on readings of dēmos as a class or status category associated with Marx and Ste Croix on the one hand and Weber and Finley on the other, it is not reducible to them, since it highlights a specifically political criterion: whether one influences political decisions as an individual or as part of a mass.²⁴ The mass in question, moreover, was typically formally constituted. The dēmos in dēmokratia was not a pre-constitutional or disorderly multitude, as argued by Wolin and Ober, but a political institution from its earliest appearance in the historical record.²⁵ My interpretation resembles that of Jacques Rancière, who identifies the dēmos as ‘the uncounted’.²⁶ Yet, that purely negative conceptualization tells only half the story, since dēmos was also always associated with a positive institutional practice: the mass meeting (ἐκκλησία), typically following a formal call-out (ἐκκαλέω, ‘call out’ or ‘summon’). Strikingly, this was also the view of Thomas Hobbes, who in On the Citizen argued that ‘[t]wo things … constitute a Democracy, of which one (uninterrupted schedule of meetings) constitutes a Δῆμος, and the other (which is majority voting) constitutes τὸ κράτος or authority (potestas)’.²⁷

Interpreting dēmos in this way has important implications. It suggests that dēmokratia indicated not self-rule but the rule of the mass of ordinary voters over the political elite. This regime was born (and reborn) whenever the collective common people gained the advantage over those who had political influence as individuals. The traditional distinction between ruler and ruled was thus not dissolved in dēmokratia. Rather, the balance of power between mass and leading men was simply reversed. The dēmos was ὁ κράτων, the stronger ([Arist.] Ath. Pol. 41), while those who occupied what had, in an earlier era, been positions of rule were reduced to acting as leaders only: generals in the field, δημαγωγοί—‘demagogues’, literally dēmos-leaders—before the assembly.

THE DĒMOS WAS A COLLECTIVE AGENT

The single most important feature of the term dēmos is that it is a collective noun that takes a singular verb. As such it differs from the English ‘people’, which even when used with the definite article usually takes a plural verb, as in the sentence ‘the people have taken to the streets’. The singular version of that sentence, ‘the people has taken to the streets’, would suggest a conception of ‘people’ as a unified entity or corporate body

²⁴ Hence a poor or middling man who became politically influential was no longer, by definition, a man of the dēmos, although he might become one again if his influence waned. The converse does not appear to have been true, however: a wealthy and socially important man who never took a leading political role was not reckoned a man of the dēmos, perhaps because it was assumed that his social status could always translate into political influence if he chose. Cf. L.B. Carter, The Quiet Athenian (Oxford, 1986).


that contrasts significantly with the more common conceptualization of ‘people’ as a mass of disaggregated individuals. ‘Corporate body’, however, is exactly what δῆμος implies. Like ‘team’ or ‘state’, δῆμος signified a collective entity made up of numerous individuals who act (or perhaps better, were conceived as acting) as a single agent.28

This is significant, since ancient Greek did not lack a term for ‘people’ conceived as numerous disaggregated individuals: the plural noun λαοί.29 Other near-equivalents include στρατιώται, ‘soldiers’ and πολίται, ‘citizens’. Yet, λαοί, στρατιώται and πολίται share a feature that δῆμος lacks. Each is closely related to a singular collective noun, that is, λαός, ‘people’, στρατός, ‘army’, and πολις, ‘body of citizens’ or ‘city-state’. There is thus a clear verbal relationship between these collective nouns and their constituent parts. But at least in our earliest texts, there is no term δημόται representing the disaggregated individuals who, when united, comprised a δῆμος.30

The δῆμος was strictly a collective entity. In fact, the word typically used in Homer and subsequently to describe members of the δῆμος conceived separately is λαοί.

These relations between λαοί, λαός and δῆμος are clearly visible in Book 2 of the Iliad. Agamemnon tells the heralds to summon the Achaeansto the place of assembly (ἀγορα), and they (τοι) begin to gather (50–2). The troops are represented by λαοί on their way to the gathering and as they arrive (86, 96). Just as the meeting is about to start, however, the collective singular λαός appears: ‘With difficulty was the people (λαός) made to sit and stay in place, ceasing from its clamour’ (99–100). This ‘people’ continues to be depicted as a singular collective entity until the assembly is dismissed (394–5). πλήθος, δῆμος and στρατός also appear, indicating a consistently singular conceptualization of the attendees (142, 198, 207). The same pattern appears in Book 18, in the description of the judgement-scene pictured on Achilles’ shield. In the line ‘[t]he people were gathering in the place of assembly’, ‘people’ is the plural λαοί (497). But when the poet switches to describing the meeting underway, those attending are identified first by δῆμος and then by λαός, suggesting that, once they have gathered, they are conceived as a single entity (500, 503). This conceptualization is briefly interrupted, but it is a case of the exception confirming the rule: ‘And people (λαοί) were cheering both [speakers], favouring either side’ (503). Here the audience is plainly not acting collectively. Different people are supporting different sides. A unitary conceptualization is thus impossible.31 When the group is represented from the perspective of the heralds keeping order, however, the singular collective returns (503).

Similarly, in Book 2 of the Odyssey, when Telemachus enters the Ithacan assembly-place, those watching are described as λαοί (13); when he explains it was he who gathered them, λαός is used (41); and when Mentor rebukes the gathering, λαοί represents the disparate individuals over whom Odysseus is lord, but δῆμος those currently present (234, 252). Another informative line is ‘are you willingly so oppressed or do the λαοί

28 The singularity of δῆμος is usually lost in English accounts. Even those who emphasize its corporate character tend to use the plural with ‘people’: e.g. Ober (n. 12), 34–5.
30 When δημόται does appear, it typically refers to the people of a smaller locality, not to members of the ‘national’ δῆμος (e.g. Pind. Nem. 7.65; Hdt. 2.172). The δημόται ἀνδρός mentioned at line 5 of the Spartan Rhetra (Tyrtaeus, fr. 4, a difficult text; discussed on p. 53 below) is an important exception.
31 The definite article thus seems better avoided in English, though it is usually included, as in, for example, A.T. Murray’s Loeb translation; G. Nagy, Homeric Responses (Austin, TX, 2003), 74.
throughout the δήμος hate you?’ Again, λαοί indicates separate individuals, δήμος the entity they make up (3.214, 16.95).32

Solon, too, used δημος rather than λαοί when referring to his act of uniting the people: ‘But what did I leave unaccomplished, of all the goals for which I brought the δήμος together?’ (Solon, fr. 36.1–2). Pindar described how Pyrrha and Deukalion had, in Opous, founded a single δήμος out of many λαοί (Ol. 9.42–6), while in Aeschylus’ Suppliants Pelasgus calls the λαοί to vote, after which they are identified as the δήμος.33 The same distinction is implied by the traditional call-outs to the dispersed people, ἄκουστε λεῶ, ‘hear ye, people’ (for example Ar. Pax 551) and δεῦρ’ ἵ’ οἱ πάντες λεῶ, ‘come hither, all ye people’ (for example Ar. Pax 296). Plutarch claimed that the latter had been used by Theseus to establish the Athenian πάνθυμος, ‘whole δήμος’ (Thes. 25). As before, the multitudinous λαοί, once gathered, formed a singular collective agent, either λαός or δήμος.

THE DΉΜΟΣ WAS A POLITICAL AGENT

Dήμος thus indicated ‘people’ in a singular-collective sense, as opposed to plural-individual. As noted, this puts the word in the same linguistic category as λαός, ‘people’, στρατός, ‘army’, and πόλις, ‘city-state’. What differentiated δήμος from these proximate terms?

One factor is military. στρατός suggests the physical presence of men under arms, which is why, in translations of Homer, it is often rendered ‘camp’.34 It occasionally appeared outside a military setting, as in Pindar’s line ‘under every regime the straight-talking man excels: in a tyranny, when the boisterous στρατός rules, or when the wise watch over the city’ (Pyth. 2.86, transl. Race), or in the chorus’ prayer, in Aeschylus’ Seven Against Thebes (467), for the polis to be saved and the στρατός not to be destroyed by fire (221–2).35 Even in these authors, however, military uses predominated.36

The military factor also distinguished δήμος from λαός.37 In the Iliad, λαός is often translated ‘army’, as when Hector and his λαός are prevented from taking the fight to the ships of the Achaeans (15.721). ‘Army’ or ‘host’ may also be the right interpretation of the epithets ποιμένα λαῶ, ‘shepherd of hosts’ (for example Hom. Il. 10.3, Od. 4.24), and λαοσσόος, ‘host-rousing’ (for example Hom. Od. 22.210; Hes. [Sc.] 3, 37). Similar uses appear in the Homeric Hymn to Athena (4), the description of the Greek army’s embarkation for Troy in Hesiod’s Works and Days (652), Pindar’s first Nemean ode (17) and Aeschylus’ Persians (126), where λαός specifically suggests ‘infantry’. Dήμος never appears in this context.

Another distinction relates to territory. A λαός is portable, attached primarily to its leader: the λαοί of Agamemnon and other leaders attend them wherever they go

32 Cf. Hom. Il. 7.175, 24.1; Od. 2.252; Thgn. 53–60.
34 Hom. Il. 1.318, 1.384, 2.779, 10.336, 10.385.
35 Cf. Pyth. 1.87, Isthm. 1.11; Aesch. Eum. 668–9, 683.
36 Pind. Nem. 8.11, 9.18, 10.25, Isthm. 7.28, Ol. 9.96, 10.43, Pyth. 4.191, 6.11, 8.52, 10.8, 11.8; Aesch. Pers. 65–6, 91, 126, 241, 255, Sept. 79, Ag. 638.
(I. 13.492, 16.548). Dēmos often appeared in connection with origins, as in the ‘catalogue of ships’ in Iliad Book 2, where it identifies the people of Athens and Aphasos respectively (545, 828; cf. Hom. Il. 15.738–45). Requests to tell one’s country (γαῖαν), people (dēmon) and/or city (polin) are also common in the Odyssey, suggesting that these concepts were closely identified (for example 8.555, 13.233). Similar associations of people and place appear in the Homeric hymns, Hesiod, Pindar and Aeschylus.38

This territorial aspect has often led dēmos to be translated ‘land’, as in Murray’s description of Odysseus as reared ‘in the land of Ithaca’.39 This rendering is misleading if it causes dēmos to be confused with γῆ or γαῖα, ‘earth’ or ‘country’, since the dēmos is always a human agent, whereas γῆ alludes more literally to the soil (for example Hom. Od. 5.398). Yet, it does usefully highlight another aspect of dēmos: its association with agriculture. The phrase Δελφῶν ἢ πίωνα δῆμον (Hom. Hymn Art. [27] 13), for example, may be translated either ‘to the rich land of Delphi’ (for example Evelyn-White) or ‘to the rich community of Delphi’ (West). What supports both renderings is the productive function of the dēmos.

This function is particularly evident in the Odyssey. ‘But come, let’s each give him a great tripod and a cauldron’, urges Alcinous, ‘and we in turn will gather recompense from among the people (κατὰ δῆμον)’ (13.13–15). Similarly, after Odysseus kills Antinous, ringleader of the suitors, another suitor suggests that the rest could ‘go among the people (κατὰ δῆμον) and get you recompense for all that has been drunk and eaten in your halls’ (22.55–60). To be sure, the dēmos may be milked too severely: see Achilles’ withering comment to Agamemnon: ‘People-devouring king (δημοβόρος βασιλεὺς), since you rule over nobodies!’ (1.231). Yet, the fact that the gods are equally ready to dispose of the dēmos’ productive capacities, as Demeter does in one of the hymns addressed to her, suggests that this may not have been regarded as unfair exploitation (Hom. Hymn Dem. [2] 270–1).

Another difference concerns relations with leaders. A dēmos was a productive object ‘held’ (ἐκχοι) by its leaders and used by them as a source of wealth and power (Hom. Il. 2.546, 2.828, 17.330). This could easily be accompanied by hostility, as in Theognis’ line, ‘[t]rample the empty-headed dēmos, jab it with a sharp goad, and place a painful yoke around its neck’ (847–50, transl. Gerber). The relationship between a λαός and its leaders was more solidaristic. When Priam’s people weep with him over Hector’s death, they are repeatedly identified as λαοὶ and λαός, not dēmos.40 Similarly, when Telemachus bursts into tears while recounting his plight to the Ithacan assembly, those pitying him are named λαός (Od. 2.80–1). The chorus in Persians, when it appeals to the ghost of King Darius, identifies itself the same way (787–9).

The fact that λαός has a martial and a personal connotation while dēmos is associated with settled agricultural activity and a degree of alienation from its leaders has important implications. A λαός, at war, and especially if fighting away from its own territory, needs its leader to be victorious in order to ensure its own survival. Not so a dēmos. The proximity of the dēmos to the means of production and de facto control of territory give it a measure of independence. Because of this, one might expect to see dēmos associated with greater political voice and agency than λαός, and this is indeed the

case. From Homer on, virtually every time the collective people is depicted as taking an active role in the community’s affairs—principally judging its leaders, resisting them or egging them on—dēmos is used. Its first appearance in the Iliad is, as we have seen, during the Achaean army’s rush to the ships, while Odysseus claims that there was no way to refuse the journey to Ilion, ‘for the voice of the dēmos pressed hard upon us’ (Od. 14.235). Similarly, Telemachus counts the fact that πάς δῆμος bears him no grudge as an advantage in his struggle against the suitors, while Penelope challenges Antinous, ringleader of the suitors, by reminding him that his father once came to her house ‘a fugitive in fear of the dēmos’ (Od. 16.114, 16.425).

The political significance of the dēmos is sometimes revealed through passive disapprobation, as suggested by the line ‘there can be no good report among the people (κατὰ δήμου) for men who dishonour and consume the house of a prince’ (Od. 21.331). We must also acknowledge that some of the most insistent concerns about the ‘voice of the dēmos’ come from women, who are themselves politically marginalized.41 None the less, the judgement of the dēmos is often depicted as well founded. The Achaean support for the return of Chryses’ daughter is vindicated, as is Telemachus’ decision to take his case to the assembly. The dēmos is even sometimes expected to assert itself. Speaking before the Ithacan assembly, Mentor does not blame the suitors for pursuing Penelope, but he does blame ‘the rest of the dēmos, in that you all sit there in silence and say nothing to make them stop, though you are many (πολλοί) and they but few’ (Od. 2.239–44). Contrast that with the following, from Iliad Book 4: ‘Each leader (ἡγεμόνοι) gave orders to his men, while the rest marched in silence; you would have said that they who followed in such a mass (τόσσον λαόν) had no voice in their breast, so silent were they, for fear of their commanders’ (428–32).

In later texts, the political agency of the dēmos is strikingly reconfirmed. It is always dēmos, never λαός, that appears in compounds suggesting public actions (δημόπρακτος, δημόκράντος), public provisions (δώματ’ . . . δήμια, δημοπληθή) and public punishments such as stoning (λευστήρα δήμου, δημόλευστος), banishment for bloodshed (δημηλασία) and being driven into exile (ξίνω φυγῇ δημηλάτω).42 By the second quarter of the fifth century, the capacity of the dēmos to make its will felt across the community was an established feature of the Greek language.

THE DĒMOS WAS A PARTIAL AGENT

A dēmos was thus politically significant in a way that a λαός was not. It had an independent voice and a measure of power in relation to its leaders. What then distinguished it from polis, a similarly ‘political’ collective agent?

Polis suggested the outermost and hence most inclusive boundary of the political community. It was the polis, not the dēmos, that interacted with external agents such as the gods. Pindar’s entreaties to Zeus are offered on behalf of and in the interests of the polis,43 Apollo’s advice to the Spartans is given to the polis,44 divine epithets include φιλόπολις, ‘city-loving’, πολιάοχος and ρυσσιπόλις, both ‘protector of the

44 Tyrtaeus, Rhetra (see below). Contrast, however, Pind. Ol. 3.16.
city’, and when the gods visit human communities those communities are described as ἄνθρωπον πόλις. It was poleis that engaged in war and athletic competitions and that held festivals. Most significantly, polis was associated with what we would call national identity. The names used to link particular groups to places and ways of life—Locrians, Myrmidons, Athenians and so on—all designate poleis.

Polis could thus denote all members of a given community. Crucially, that included its leaders. In archaic texts, there is a special connection between a community’s leaders and the polis. Narrowly construed, polis referred to the physical acropolis, the walled citadel inside which the ruling elite lived, as distinct from the land outside the walls, where the working population mostly remained. This usage appears in Homer and elsewhere, but the association between the polis and the ruling class is especially clear in Theognis, who holds its leaders directly responsible for the instability of the polis. Nausicaa, in the Odyssey, also suggests a close relationship between leader and community. Her father, Alcinous, is one ‘whose power (κάρτος) and might are held from the Phaeacians’ (6.197).

Polis in our earliest texts could thus denote either the community as a whole, including both rulers and ruled, or it could suggest the ruling class alone, who were none the less identified with the rest of the community in some way. The identification of a polis’ rulers with the polis as a whole makes sense, since it was those men who governed the rest of the community and represented it to outsiders. But in this respect, polis contrasts sharply with dēmos, which in archaic texts denotes exclusively ordinary citizens as opposed to those who ruled.

That dēmos and polis are not synonymous is suggested in the first instance by their frequent juxtaposition. Hector excoriates Paris for having brought misery to his father, the polis and all the dēmos, whereas Hector is a ‘great joy’ to polis and dēmos alike. Athena visits the dēmos and polis of the Phaeacians, Odysseus those of the Cimmerians, and Hesiod writes that the sun ‘moves to dark men’s dēmos and polis in winter’. Such cases may be interpreted as pleonasm. Yet, that seems unlikely in the cases of Paris and Hector, and analogous pairings of polis and γαία, ‘country’ or ‘land’, are normally interpreted as representing city and country respectively, those inside and those outside the city walls. Theognis’ description of ἀρετή, virtue, as ‘a common (ζυνόν) benefit for the city (polis) and all the people (παντι τε δήμω)’, meanwhile, supports the view that polis and dēmos were distinct (1003–6).

47 Hom. Il. 1.19, 4.290, 8.523, 9.328, 15.77, 15.740, 16.830, Od. 9.263; Pind. Isth. 5.36.
48 Pind. Nem. 5.47, Ol. 2.7, 2.92, 5.4, 9.21.
49 Pind. Ol. 7.94.
50 Pind. Ol. 10; Hes. [Sc.] 380; Hansen and Nielsen (n. 17), 31.
52 See Thuc. 2.15.3.
These examples look like cases of *polis* narrowly construed, that is, *polis* suggesting above all the ruling elite. In such instances, *polis* and *demos* seem complementary—‘elite’ and ‘mass’. But what about when *polis* suggested the entire community? Here too we find a distinction between *demos* and *polis*. In such cases, another group figures as the complement of *demos*, in relation to both of which the *polis* is a whole. This complement are the rulers of the *polis*: in Homeric language, the ἥγητορες καὶ μέδοντες, ‘leaders and counsellors’, of the mass of ordinary men.

A disjunction between the *demos* and its leaders is evident from the first appearance of *demos* in our sources, in *Iliad* Book 2. Odysseus’ aggression towards a ‘man of the people’ (δήμου τ’ οὐνδρος) as he attempts to regather the Achaeans army is explicitly contrasted with his gentle approach to a ‘king or man of note’ (188–98). Similarly, the chiefs of the Achaeans are said to be ‘honoured by the *demos* as a god’—unlike minstrels and other non-political figures, who are represented as honoured by the λαός. Such honouring ought to be mutual: according to Pindar, ‘a man who is ruler (ἄγγιτιρ) … can in honouring his people (damon) turn them to harmonious peace’ (Pyth. 1.69, transl. Race). Indeed, the *demos* and its rulers are often depicted as mutually dependent. Odysseus links the status of the Phaeacian kings to the ‘dues of honour that the *demos* has given’, while Polydamas accepts that a *demos* ought to increase its leader’s power (κράτος). Accordingly, *dēmōi* are readily implicated in their leaders’ failings. Hesiod claims that Zeus will take vengeance on the *demos* for the wickedness of its kings, Theognis that the *demos* in his community is ‘in love with tyranny’, and Solon that the Athenian *demos* ‘increased the power (κράτος)’ of the Peisistratid tyrants by giving them a bodyguard. Yet, even a symbiotic relationship is predicated on difference. Tellingly, it was a point of pride for Solon that, following the civil strife in Athens, the distinction between *demos* and ἤγεμονες was maintained, the ‘milk’ kept separate from the ‘cream’ (Solon, fr. 37.8).

The *demos* and its leaders were thus typically portrayed as complementary entities, and the community that they made up was the *polis*, broadly construed. That the *demos* was regarded as a subset of the *polis* thus conceived, rather than as equivalent to it, is supported by the conventional formula used to identify a *demos*. The usual way to refer to (for example) the Athenian *demos* was ὁ Ἀθηναῖον δήμος, ‘the *demos* of the Athenians’, where ‘Athenians’ is a genitive plural. This construction may be identified as a partitive genitive, indicating that the *demos* is one part of all the Athenians. Another possible formulation—the one naturally favoured by English speakers—would be ὁ Ἀθηναϊκός δήμος, ‘the Athenian *demos*’. That formulation, which leaves the relationship between *demos* and *polis* obscure, does appear in our sources, but it is both rare and relatively late.

The specific role played by the leaders of the *polis* is indicated by a line in one of the Homeric hymns to Demeter. ‘I will tell you the names of the men who control privilege here, who stand out from the *demos* and protect the city’s (πόλεως) ramparts

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63 E.g. Thuc. 4.46, 6.54; Ar. *Thesm.* 301; *Aeschin.* 1.25, 1.85.
64 E.g. *IG* 11 105.
with straight judgements.’ The six men listed are distinct from the dēmos but part of the polis, living within its walls and ensuring its security. The Spartan Rhêtra (Tyrtaeus, fr. 4) is also useful in this connection. The polis is described as being in the care of the kings (βασιλῆς), while the elders (γέροντες) initiate counsel, and certain damos-men (δαμότας ἀνδρῶν) respond. Decision-making power (κράτος) is assigned to the majority of the people (δῆμου τε πλῆθετε), and the whole text is described as ‘Phoebus’ revelation to the polis’. The identities of dēmos, polis and leading men are here unmistakable. The polis is the entire community, comprising kings, elders, men of the dēmos and the dēmos itself. The dēmos is not the whole community but a part of it.

The best synonym for dēmos in the archaic period would thus seem to be πλῆθος, ‘mass’ or ‘majority’. Of course, since πλῆθος can suggest ‘majority’ in any context, the terms are not perfectly equivalent. But both πλῆθος and dēmos were regularly contrasted with ἡγεμόνες and ἡγίτωρες, leaders and rulers, which suggests that they occupied the same position vis-à-vis the polis. Both are also identified as collective bodies of unnamed men, that is, men whose personal identities are irrelevant to their political role. The ‘catalogue of ships’ in Iliad Book 2 opens with the admission that, though the poet will tell of leaders and lords (ἡγεμόνες … καὶ κοίρανοι), ‘the πληθὼν I could not tell or name’ (487). Similarly, when Agamemnon orders the heralds to ‘call each man by name to the place of assembly’, he means ‘leaders and counsellors’ alone (9.10, 9.17). The same pattern appears in Aeschylus’ Persians. ‘Which of the leaders of the host (ἄρχελειον) must we mourn?’ asks Queen Atossa, and the messenger identifies them (297–330). But when the destruction of the mass of men is described, the only names given are λαὸς and dēmos (729–32). Indeed, when otherwise undistinguished men are given individual roles in our texts, they are described simply as emerging ‘out of the dēmos’. No other title was deemed necessary, or perhaps possible.

THE DĒMOS WAS THE ASSEMBLY

The dēmos before démokratia was thus the collective political agent constituted by the ordinary men who formed the majority of the citizen population. It was distinct from the same men regarded as separate persons (λαοὶ) or as a collective military agent (στρατός, λαὸς); from the community’s leaders (ἡγεμόνες, ἡγίτωρες, βασιλεῖς, γέροντες); and from the entire community (polis, πάντες πολίται). I suggest that the familiar English term for a body of this kind is ‘assembly’, in the sense of a mass of people gathered together to pursue some joint purpose. Dēmos denoted the singular collective agent formed by the common people meeting for political purposes, whether that involved listening to speeches, making decisions by majority vote, sending people into exile, or acting collectively in some other way. By extension, dēmos indicated all those who participated in politics through a collective agent, in contradistinction from those who had personal political significance.

Dēmos thus denoted ‘assembly’ in a different sense from that implied by ἄγορά or ἐκκλησία. From its first appearance in the Iliad, when Achilles summons the λαός to the ἄγορα, this term signified primarily the place of assembly.⁶⁹ It could also suggest the assembly as an event or object, as when Hector or other leaders call an assembly (ἄγορην ποιήσωτο, ‘he made an assembly’) or dismiss one (λύσαν δ᾿ ἄγορην, ‘they dissolved the assembly’).⁷⁰ But ἄγορά never denoted the assembly as an agent, that is, as an acting subject.

Something similar was true of ἐκκλησία, at least until late in the classical period. Since at least the days of George Grote and John Stuart Mill, the Athenian assembly has regularly been referred to as ‘the Ecclesia’, but this practice is misleading.⁷¹ As Hansen also now believes, ἐκκλησία primarily indicated ‘meeting’, in line with its derivation from ἐκκαλέω, ‘call out’ or ‘summon’.⁷² This is its sense, for example, in the opening scene of Acharnians, when Dikaiopolis identifies the upcoming meeting as the ἐκκλησία κυρία, the main meeting of the month.⁷³ Ἐκκλησία could also connote the place of assembly, as in the claim, in Knights, that Paphlagon had ‘one foot in Pylos, the other in the assembly’ (ἐν τίκτου ἐκκλησίᾳ).⁷⁴ But it did not indicate the assembly as an acting subject until well into the fourth century and even then that usage was rare.⁷⁵ Rather, dēmos was used.

This is already evident from many of the sources presented so far. Dēmos in Iliad Books 2 and 18 indicates an assembly, as it does in Odyssey Book 2. The dēmos in Solon’s question, ‘[b]ut what did I leave unaccomplished, of all the goals for which I brought the dēmos together?’, may also be interpreted this way (as Rhodes has suggested), as can dēmo- in the various compounds listed above.⁷⁶ The dams featured in the Spartan Rhetra (Tyrtaeus, fr. 4) is certainly an assembly; that in τῶν Ἀθηναίων δήμων more than likely is. In other cases, dēmos seems to denote the wider group from which particular gatherings were drawn, that is, the common people at large. But that usage plausibly derived from the referent ‘assembly’. It was because the dēmos was composed of members of the common people that the same term could be used to represent the common people as a whole.

The earliest direct evidence for this claim appears in inscriptions. In the last quarter of the seventh century, the dams of the Corcyraeans announced its responsibility for a memorial to its proxenos Menekrates of Oianthos; a law from Chios, dated 575–550, refers to ῥητρας of the dēmos, declarations of the dēmos, and to two demotic institutions, the δήμος κεκλημένος or ‘called-out’ dēmos and the βουλή δημοσίη or demotic council; and the common prescript ἐδοξε τοί δήμων, ‘decided by the

⁷² Hansen (n. 1), 507.
⁷³ Ar. Ach. 19, 169; cf. Ach. 746–51, Thesm. 84, 301, 329, 375, Vesp. 31, Eccl. 20, 84, Av. 1027; Thuc. 6.8, 6.9.
⁷⁵ Hansen (n. 1), 507 says that ekklēsia never denotes the assembly as an acting subject in Athenian speeches and inscriptions, only in Plato and Aristotle (e.g. Alc. 1.114b, Pol. 1282a29). The usage is however found in ML 5, a fourth-century reproduction of what purports to be a seventh-century inscription on the founding of Cyrene; cf. A.J. Graham, ‘The authenticity of the ὀρκηστήρων of Cyrene’, JHS 80 (1960), 94–111, especially 104–5.
⁷⁶ CAAP 175.


dēmos’, also seen in the formulation ἐδοξε τῷ βουλῆι καὶ τοῖ δήμωι, ‘decided by the council and the dēmos’, appears for the first time in an Athenian inscription of the late sixth century.  

A reference to the δῆμος πληθύν in an early fifth-century inscription from Elis directly associates the assembly with the masses. And this usage is found in scores of later inscriptions and speeches.

Other sources are also useful. Aeschylus’ Suppliants (c.463) has long been recognized as including a likely reference to dēmokratia in the phrase δῆμου κρατοσ αῖρ, ‘the ruling hand of the dēmos’ (604; cf. 699). What is less often emphasized is that dēmos both here and elsewhere in the play represents an assembly (398, 488, 601, 624). Each of the five uses of dēmos in Euripides’ Suppliants (c.423) also indicates an assembly (351, 406, 418, 425, 442). πανδημία, in the report that the πανδημία approves of the proposal to give the refugees right of residence, may be interpreted in the same way (Aesch. Supp. 607). Though that word is usually translated ‘entire people’, ‘entire assembly’ is equally possible.

Another significant passage is Herodotus’ description of the Athenian revolution of 508/7, identified by Herodotus himself as marking the birth of dēmokratia (6.131). Cleisthenes, we are told, ‘took the dēmos into his ἑταρσείο’ (perhaps best translated ‘fraternity’) and ‘drew the dēmos to his side’, thus gaining the advantage over his rival Isagoras (5.66, 5.69). Ober has argued that ‘it seems a reasonable guess that it was in the Assembly (although not necessarily uniquely there) that [Cleisthenes] allied himself to the dēmos, by proposing (and perhaps actually passing) constitutional reforms.’ I agree, though I would alter Ober’s wording. Herodotus tells us not that it was ‘in the Assembly’ that Cleisthenes allied himself to the dēmos but simply that Cleisthenes allied himself to the dēmos, that is, to the assembly—and thence, by extension, to the common people at large. Though dēmos does not reappear, I suspect that an assembly is also implied in Herodotus’ report that, Cleomenes and his men having tried to dissolve the council, it resisted and ‘the rest of the Athenians, being of one mind (τα ἄνευ φρονήσεως), besieged them on the acropolis for two days’ (5.72). Ober interprets this action as a ‘riot’ originating in ‘the piecemeal word-of-mouth operations typical of an oral society’. But the Athenians’ unity of purpose and subsequent aggressive action (an organized siege, not a riot, on my reading) may have emerged from a mass meeting summoned by the council in more or less the normal way. The fact that dēmos appears in the account of these events given in the Aristotelian Athēnaion Politeia lends some support to this interpretation (20.3).

Further examples of dēmos meaning assembly could be multiplied ad taedium: I will consider just two more authors, Aristophanes and Aristotle. The main character in Knights is ‘Mr Demos of Pnyx Hill’, the Pnyx being the meeting-place of the

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78 IVO 7, discussed by E. Robinson, The First Democracies (Stuttgart, 1997), 108–9. An Athenian parallel is IG I 1 105 (c.409), which seemingly quotes from a much earlier text of the bouleutic oath.
79 M.H. Hansen, ‘Demos, ecclesia and dicasterion in classical Athens’, GRBS 19 (1978), 130–1 provides what he describes as a conservative catalogue of c.300 examples. I suspect there are many more.
80 Ehrenberg (n. 20), 522.
82 Ober (n. 12), 38.
83 Ober (n. 12), 43–4.
Athenian assembly (42; cf. 751). It is the dēmos whose mind is changed in debates (Ach. 626), which is addressed by politicians and which yells right back at them, which authorizes decrees and is held responsible for the results (Vesp. 594, Eccl. 204), which works in tandem with the council (Vesp. 395, 590), and a female version of which is constituted by a large meeting of women (Thesm. 1145). In the Politics, meanwhile, the governing officials in Hippodamus’ ideal state are elected by an assembly (ὑπὸ τοῦ δήμου, 1268a10), while in Carthage, the kings (βασιλεῖς) and elders (γέροντες) decide which matters to refer to that body (πρὸς τὸν δήμον, 1273a5–9). Most striking is Aristotle’s comment that, while his definition of a citizen as one who takes part in deliberating and judging is well adapted to dēmokratiai, it will not necessarily hold in other regimes, ‘for in some there is no dēmos, nor do they hold an ἐκκλησία but only συγκλήτους’ (1275b5–12). Neither ‘entire citizenry’ nor ‘common people’ will do as a translation here: ‘assembly’ is surely required, yet significantly Aristotle does not bother to clarify this. The opposition of ἐκκλησία to συγκλήτους adds valuable context. A σύγκλητος was an ad hoc or extraordinary meeting. Dēmos accordingly appears to have been associated with the custom of regular rather than one-off gatherings, just as Hobbes supposed. This makes sense, for without regularly scheduled meetings a collective political agent cannot easily endure.

THE ASSEMBLY BECOMES THE POLIS

Dēmos meaning ‘assembly’ thus looks both more common and more significant than is generally supposed. But what of the meaning ‘entire citizen body’, which appears in some classical sources? The polyvalence of dēmos in the classical period actually offers further support for the claim that its original meaning was ‘assembly’, defined in the way I have argued. As Hansen has shown, dēmos could also denote ‘common people’, ‘democratic faction’, ‘deme’, ‘democratic political system’, ‘entire citizen body’ and ‘all citizens’. If ‘entire citizen body’ came first, the derivation of some of the other meanings, such as ‘common people’, ‘democratic faction’ and ‘deme’, is opaque. But if ‘assembly’, defined as ‘collective political agent’, was the primary referent, these extensions begin to make sense.

The first three extensions are the most straightforward. ‘Common people’ may be explained by the fact that in all times and places in the ancient Greek world those who participated in politics through collective action were none other than the common people; the institution they composed could thus easily be conceived as standing in for the common people as a whole. ‘Democratic faction’, which typically appears in descriptions of civil war, is justified by the plausible claim that the common people will have been more interested in preserving and extending the political power of the common people than were the elite. And ‘deme’, the local political unit in Attica, reflects the fact that a collective political agent could be a local entity rather than a ‘national’ one.

There is more to say about dēmos signifying the democratic political system, as in Aristotle’s reference to δῆμος καὶ ὀλίγαρχε (Pol. 1301b40) and the phrase

86 Hansen (n. 1), 502–3.
Finally, the primary identification of dèmos with ‘assembly’ suggests an attractive explanation of its occasional synonymy with polis, ‘entire citizen body’, and πάντες πολίται, ‘all citizens’. This sense is implied by Thucydides, voicing Athenagoras of Syracuse: ‘I say dèmos names the whole (ξύμπαν), oligarchy only a part’ (6.39). Other possible examples include Pseudo-Xenophon’s description of Athens’ allies as ‘slaves of the dèmos of the Athenians’ (1.18), Demosthenes’ lines ‘the allies crowned the dèmos for courage and righteousness’ (24.180) and ‘there are honours among the Lacedaemonians that the dèmos to a man (ἄνα τὸ δῆμος) would shrink from introducing here’ (20.106), and Dinarchus’ claim that ‘you and the entire dèmos risk losing the foundations of the polis, the temples of your fathers, and your wives and children’ (1.99).89

Aside from Pseudo-Xenophon and Thucydides, these examples are all fourth-century. Dèmos and polis are also sometimes equivalent in Sophocles and Euripides, but we do not find these terms used synonymously in any earlier text. In other words, as far as we can tell, the use of dèmos to refer to the entire citizen body postdated the existence of the term dèmokratia, and we can now see why this may have been. Consider the double meaning of polis in the context of elite rule. As argued above, polis could indicate either the entire community or more specifically its rulers, and this seemed appropriate since the elite governed the rest of the community and represented it to outsiders. Inasmuch as they ruled it, the ruling class could be conceived as standing in for the community as a whole. The same thing held true in dèmokratia.

88 In fourth-century Athens this was tempered by the political powers of the popular courts: see M.H. Hansen, The Sovereignty of the People’s Court in Athens (Odense, 1974). For an argument that Athens’ popular courts could in the fourth century be regarded as even more favourable to the common people than the assembly, see D. Cammack, ‘The democratic significance of the classical Athenian courts’, in W. O’Reilly (ed.), Decline: Decay, Decadence and Decline in History and Society (Central European University Press, forthcoming).
89 Hansen (n. 1), 502–3 adds IG II1 26.8–9 (394–387) with IG I3 110.6–9 (408/7), and IG II1 97.6–8 with 116.27–8 (375/4). It seems possible, however, that in many cases the intended referent may actually have been the assembly.
mutatis mutandis. In ancient Greek democracies it was the démos, that is, the assembly, that made decisions on behalf of the polis, not a council or a leading man; the démos thus ‘stood in for’ the whole community in an entirely literal sense.

Ober was therefore exactly right to use the concept of synecdoche to illuminate the relationships between the parts and the whole of the Athenian political system, but the figure should be differently specified. It was not that the assembly (part) came to be called démos (whole) because the entire community (polis) was imagined to meet on the Pnyx, but that the démos (part) came to be called polis (whole) because it acted on behalf of, or in other words ruled, the polis. Another way to put this is to say that démos and polis became used interchangeably when the démos gained the upper hand over the political elite. It was the shift in the balance of power towards the assembly expressed in the term démokratia that caused démos, the name of the institution representing the majority of the citizenry, to be treated synonymously with polis, the name of the community as a whole—and thence too with πάντες πολίται, ‘all citizens’ conceived as numerous separate individuals.

Something of this shift may be perceived in fifth-century tragedy, which as a mass public forum was a plausible venue for the exploration and promotion of changes in political terminology, ideology and practice.90 The central question posed by Aeschylus’ Suppliants (c.463) is precisely ‘who speaks for the polis, king or démos?’ or more simply ‘who holds κράτος?’ Claims are made on both sides: the refugees plead with Pelagus, ‘You are the polis, I tell you—you are the public (τὸ δῆμον)’ (370), while the chorus refers to the δήμου κρατοῦσα χείρ, the ‘ruling hand of the démos’, and asserts that τὸ δῆμον, which they do not identify with the king, rules (κρατάων) the polis (604, 699). Yet, there is also ambiguity.91 The démos votes with the king, but εὐποιθεὶς leaves open whether it was ‘well persuaded’ by him, or simply ‘obeyed’ his words (623). Still more significant is how Pelagus frames his initial decision to call the λαοὶ together: ὅσ᾽ ἄνευ δῆμου τάδε πράξαμι ἀν, οὐδὲ περ κρατῶν (398–9). ‘I will not put this action into effect without the démos, even though I have power’ or ‘I would not put this action into effect without the démos, even if I had power’? Both interpretations are possible. The démos may speak for the polis—or it may not.

In Aeschylus, the relationship between démos and polis is thus left open. But in later texts it becomes increasingly close. In the opening speech of Sophocles’ Antigone, an announcement is said to have been made to the πανδήμῳ πόλει, the ‘all-démos polis’, presumably denoting an assembly (7–8). The same phrase appears in Sophocles’ Electra (981). Particularly noteworthy is the question of Creon, which certainly refers to an assembly: ‘Is the polis to tell me what orders I shall give?’ (734). In this case, the assembly is identified with the polis, while the king plays a complementary role. In other words, this is an example of polis narrowly construed to refer to a part rather than the whole of the political community, just as we saw above, in the context of aristocratic government. The crucial difference is that in this case, the institution representing the majority rather than the minority of the citizenry is represented as the dominant partner.

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91 Cf. A.J. Podlecki, ‘Κερ’ ἄρρητη γὰρ φαλαίτος λεώς: the concept of leadership in Aeschylus’, in A.H. Sommerstein et al. (edd.), Tragedy, Comedy and the Polis (Bari, 1993), 55–79, at 72: ‘Aeschylus appears to have gone out of his way to emphasize inconsistencies in [Pelagus’] position as ruler of his city.’
The relationship between dēmos and polis appears more harmonious in Euripides’ Suppliants (c.423). Again, polis is used to indicate the assembly, while King Theseus is its complement: ‘Was it you alone or the whole polis that decided this?’ (129), ‘I want the entire polis to ratify this decision’ (346), ‘the polis gladly and willingly took up this task when they heard that I wished them to do so’ (394), and ‘freedom consists in this: who has a good proposal and wants to set it before the polis?’ (429, transl. Kovacs). Most significant is Theseus’ claim that he has ‘established the dēmos as a monarch’ (κατέστησ᾽ αὐτὸν ἐς μοναρχίαν) by ‘freeing the polis and giving it equal votes’ (352–3)—referring, of course, to votes taken in the assembly. This is the first time in our sources that the synonymity of assembly and polis is confidently asserted. More simply, Theseus adds that ‘the dēmos rules’ (ἀνώσσει, 406).

Both μοναρχία and ἀνώσσει connote nobility. Such language may seem deliberately ironic or paradoxical in a speech that transparently celebrates dēmokratia, but it may have also been meant quite seriously. Euripides was not alone in ascribing monarchical power to the dēmos. Aeschines argued that ‘in dēmokratia, through law and vote, the ordinary citizen is king (βοσιλεύει)’ (3.233), while Aristotle described the kind of dēmokratia that existed in Hellas in his day as a system in which ‘the dēmos becomes a monarch’ (Pol. 1292a12). Such claims were perfectly plausible. Whereas previously a single man or a small group of men had made decisions on behalf of the polis, in classical democracies that role was played by the dēmos. From being ruled, the dēmos had become the ruler. Yet, an identifiable political elite had not ceased to exist; it just had a more limited function, leading instead of ruling, as the term δημαγωγός, ‘demagogue’ or dēmos-leader, implied. The polis still consisted of both dēmos and leading men. All that had changed was the balance of power between them.

CONCLUSION

Two quotations, from two great classicists, may be used to illustrate the difference between my argument and previous accounts. First, Moses Finley: ‘A deep horizontal cleavage marked the world of the Homeric poems. Above the line were the aristoi, literally the “best people”, the hereditary nobles who held most of the wealth and all the power, in peace as in war. Below were all the others, for whom there was no collective technical term, the multitude.’ This seems right, except for the claim that there was no ‘collective technical term’ for what Finley called ‘the multitude’. The term was dēmos, referring most narrowly to the assembly, more broadly to all those who participated in politics through collective rather than through individual action.

Next, J.A.O. Larsen. ‘The greatest victory for the common people in the development of democracy at Athens was that the name for their group became the word used to designate the sovereign people in the records of votes in the assembly.’ Again, there is much to this assessment, but by framing the process purely in terms of a ‘name’ and a ‘word’ Larsen obscures the underlying institutional dynamic. More

94 Larsen (n. 1), 45.
accurately, the greatest victory for the common people was that their institution, the assembly, became the supreme political body. Put more simply, the greatest victory of the dēmos was that it achieved κράτος.

Exactly when this came to pass in any given polis may remain unclear, but the foregoing at least suggests a new way of identifying what we are looking for. Historians’ accounts of the origins of dēmokratia (whether or not it was known by that name) have varied significantly depending on their interpretations of the term. Ruschenbusch, for example, defined it as ‘any system in which the people in assembly are involved in communal decision making’, in which case we first find it in the Homeric epics, while Raaflaub pinpoints ‘when active citizenship and full political participation were extended to all adult male citizens … and when this (exceptionally broadly defined) citizen body through assembly, council and law courts assumed full control over the entire political process, from the conception of policies to their realization and the oversight of those involved in executing them’, in which case Athens became a democracy only after the reforms of Ephialtes in 462/1.

The argument advanced here suggests an alternative criterion. Dēmokratia was born when the balance of power tipped towards the assembly, away from those who (among other things) addressed it. Pace Ruschenbusch, the defining feature of dēmokratia was not the assembly’s mere ‘involvement’ in decision-making but its final decision-making power; and pace Raaflaub, this need not have extended to ‘full control over the entire political process’, though it surely implied control over policy decisions and, probably, over those who took leading political roles.

Interpreting dēmos this way will not necessarily alter the significance of familiar historical landmarks such as (in the Athenian context) the reforms of Solon, Cleisthenes or Ephialtes. But it may change what we infer from them. Pace Forrest, we need not posit the development of a new concept of ‘individual human autonomy’—there is little evidence that the ancient Greeks were thinking in individual terms at all in this context. Nor need we posit any underlying sociological change. Rather, the same two groups, dēmos and leading men, dominated the political scene all the way from Homer to Aristotle and beyond. What changed was the balance of power between them.

This may seem a disappointingly subtle shift. Pace Wolin and Ober, the dēmos in dēmokratia was not a pre-constitutional multitude, forging a political identity for the first time. That is to say, dēmokratia was not originally λαοί-κρατία. Rather, the assembly, an institution that already had a long history, simply gained the upper hand over the kind of men who had, in earlier times, called it into being and dominated it. But if the advent of dēmokratia was gradual, its arrival was none the less revolutionary. The conversion of the political elite from rulers to leaders was a radical transformation, all the more striking when examined against the backdrop of democracy today. The basic political distinction has not changed, after all: either a given citizen is personally politically significant, in which case she is a member of the political elite, or she is personally insignificant but can none the less exercise power as part of a collective

95 Alternative candidates are isonomia and isēgoria. See Ehrenberg (n. 20); M. Ostwald, Nomos and the Beginning of Athenian Democracy (Oxford, 1969), 97–121; Vlastos (n. 87).
97 Wolin (n. 2 [1994]); Ober (n. 2).
agent, in which case she belongs to the common people. The goal of democrats also
remains the same: to secure decision-making power in the hands of those who act
collectively. But modern democrats face a problem their ancient counterparts lacked,
namely how to achieve this in political communities where, as both Aristotle and
Hobbes would surely have spotted, there is no dēmos in the original sense of the word.

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