

POLITICAL MURDER IN CLASSICAL GREECE

Author(s): Cinzia Bearzot

Source: *Ancient Society*, 2007, Vol. 37 (2007), pp. 37-61

Published by: Peeters Publishers

Stable URL: https://www.jstor.org/stable/44079888

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and .facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at https://about.jstor.org/terms



Peeters Publishers is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Ancient Society*

This content downloaded from
132.174.249.100 on Tue, 15 Sep 2026 18:30:03 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

POLITICAL MURDER IN CLASSICAL GREECE*

Abstract: This paper intends to examine three different aspects of political murder in the Greek classical world: (a) justifiable killing of aspiring tyrants; (b) 'judicial' murder as an alternative kind of political killing, i.e. the habit of eliminating (directly or by death sentences) politicians who were considered to be dangerous; (c)murders in civil strifes. Since murder seems to have been rather infrequent in Athens, where political confrontation was particularly fierce, one of the points that will be addressed in this paper is a consideration of the reasons for this 'anomaly'.

According to W. Plat (*Attentate. Eine Sozialgeschichte des politischen Mordes,* Düsseldorf 1982), political murder is «an attack with political motivation against someone having a distinguished social standing». The definition proposed by F.L. Ford (*Political Murder: From Tyrannicide to Terrorism* Cambridge [Mass.] – London 1985) is perhaps more satisfying: «Assassination is the intentional killing of a specified victim or group of victims, perpetrated for reasons related to his (her, their) public prominence and undertaken with a political purpose in view». As an extreme expression of political struggle politically motivated, murder has permanently manifested itself in the history of mankind. As a consequence, many monographs dedicated to this topic do not merely focus on the ancient world: among the most recent contributions mention may be made here of A. Demandt, U. Schultz, and M. Sommer[1].

In the present paper I intend to examine three different aspects of political murder in the Greek classical world, which appears to be a multifaceted phenomenon.

(a) In its most noteworthy form political murder legitimized the killing of aspiring tyrants. Their liquidation was seen as an act of *dikaios phonos*. The provision perhaps dates back to explicit legislation in Drakon's law

* This paper was given in San Lorenzo de El Escorial (Spain) in August 2006 during a Curso de Verano on terrorism in the ancient world, organized by Santiago Montero and José Joaquim Caerols. I am very grateful for their invitation which gave me the opportunity to investigate this issue.

[1] A. Demandt, *Das Attentat in der Geschichte,* Köln–Weimar–Wien 1996; U. Schultz, *Grosse Verschwörungen: Staatsstreich und Tyrannensturz von der Antike bis zur Gegenwart,* München 1998; M. Sommer, *Politische Morde. Vom Altertum bis zur Gegenwart,* Darmstadt 2005.

Ancient Society 37, 37-61. doi: 10.2143/AS.37.0.2024029
© 2007 by Ancient Society. All rights reserved.

This content downloaded from
132.174.249.100 on Tue, 15 Sep 2026 18:30:03 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

on homicide. The tyrannicide *par excellence* — the murder of Peisistratos' son, Hipparchos, by the young aristocrats Harmodios and Aristogeiton — even acquired the status of 'foundation myth' of Athenian democracy.

(b) Apart from the case of tyrannicide, the Greeks had the habit of eliminating (directly or by death sentences) politicians who were considered to be dangerous, even though this phenomenon displays different levels of intensity according to context. The aforementioned definition by Ford points to 'judicial' murder as an alternative kind of political killing that favours the political use of justice instead of the use of force.

(c) Finally, murders in civil strifes were a frequent phenomenon in the Greek *poleis*. Internal political struggle often caused a great number of victims. When Theramenes blamed Kritias for the violence of the Thirty Tyrants against Athenian citizens, the latter replied with a touch of cynicism that «all sorts of changes in government are attended by loss of life» (πᾶσαι μεταβολαὶ πολιτειῶν θανατηφόροι: Xenophon, *Hellenica* II 3.32)[2]. Even if not all the Greeks were as unscrupulous as Kritias, they certainly faced political murder with realism and considered it a fact that could not be ignored in times of intense political struggle. Yet, in Athens, where political confrontation was particularly fierce, murder seems to have been rather infrequent: one of the points that will be addressed in this paper is a consideration of the reasons for this 'anomaly'.

I. JUSTIFIABLE HOMICIDE AND TYRANNICIDE

Greek law admitted justifiable homicide in some specific cases, which in the Athenian context are known thanks to Drakon's law on homicide (second half of the 7th century BC). The law is partially preserved in an inscription dating back to 409/8 (*IG* I^3 304) which republishes the ancient text; other sources allow us to complete the epigraphical data. Drakon's law considered both self-defence murder in case of assault (cf. ll. 36-39 / Demosthenes 23.60) and the murder of a banished convicted assassin returning to his country (cf. ll. 30-31 / Demosthenes 23.28) as a *dikaios phonos*. Other cases as well were probably provided for by the law[3].

[2] Translation by C.L. BROWNSON (Xenophon, I-II, London–Cambridge [MA] 1985-1986).

[3] See R.S. STROUD, *Drakon's Law on Homicide*, Berkeley–Los Angeles 1968; E. CANTARELLA, *Studi sull'omicidio in diritto greco e romano*, Milano 1976, p. 79ff.

This content downloaded from
132.174.249.100 on Tue, 15 Sep 2026 18:30:03 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

Among them is the murder of aspiring tyrants. According to Aristotle (*Athenian Constitution* 16.10) one of the «ancestral laws» of the Athenians stated that an aspiring tyrant must be considered *atimos, i.e.* deprived of legal protection and liable to be subject to justifiable homicide:

> These are the ordinances and ancestral principles of Athens: if any persons rise in insurrection in order to govern tyrannically, or if any person assists in establishing the tyranny, he himself and his family shall be disfranchised[4].

Elsewhere in the Greek world, too, the murder of aspiring tyrants was probably regarded as a case of justifiable homicide[5].

The case of Athens, whose legislation is relatively well-known to us, provides several other testimonies on justifiable homicide against aspiring tyrants or — when fear of oligarchical revolution went along with fear of tyranny — against people who attempted to overthrow the democracy[6]. A very interesting case is the decree of Demophantos, passed in the first prytany of the year 410/9, a few months after the fall of the oligarchical governments of the Four Hundred and the Five Thousand and the restoration of Athenian democracy. The decree provided that not only those attempting to establish a tyranny or to overthrow the democracy, but also those holding offices in a non-democratic government could be murdered with impunity (And. I 96-98):

> If anyone overthrows the democracy at Athens, or holds any office when the democracy has been overthrown, he shall be an enemy of the Athenians and shall be killed with impunity, and his property shall be confiscated and a tenth part of it devoted to the Goddess; and he who kills or helps to plan the killing of such a man shall be pure and free from guilt. All Athenians shall swear over unblemished sacrifices by tribes and by demes to kill such a man. The oath shall be as follows: «I shall kill, by word and deed, by vote and by my own hand, if I can, anyone who overthrows the democracy at Athens, and anyone who, when the democracy has been overthrown, holds any office thereafter,

[4] Translation by H. RACKHAM (Aristotle, XX, London–Cambridge [MA] 1952). On this passage see P.J. RHODES, *A Commentary on the Aristotelian Athenaion Politeia*, Oxford 1981, p. 220ff.

[5] New evidence on Greek legislation against tyranny and subversion is now provided by an extremely interesting inscription dating back to the fourth century BC (*ca* 340), the law of Eretria against tyranny and oligarchy published by D. KNOEPFLER, *La loi d'Érétrie contre la tyrannie et l'oligarchie*, *BCH* 125 (2001), p. 195-238; 126 (2002), p. 149-204.

[6] See M. OSTWALD, *The Athenian Legislation Against Tyranny and Subversion*, *TAPhA* 86 (1955), p. 103-128.

This content downloaded from
132.174.249.100 on Tue, 15 Sep 2026 18:30:03 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

> and anyone who sets himself up to be tyrant or helps to set up the tyrant. And if anyone else kills him, I shall consider that man to be pure in the sight of both gods and spirits, because he has killed an enemy of the Athenians, and I will sell all the property of the dead man and give half to the killer and not keep any back. And if anyone dies while killing or attempting to kill any such man, I shall care both for himself and for his children, just as for Harmodius and Aristogeiton and their descendants. And all oaths that have been sworn against the people of Athens, at Athens or on campaigns or anywhere else, I declare null and void». All Athenians shall swear this oath over unblemished sacrifices, in the customary manner, before the Dionysia, and they shall pray that he who keeps his oath may have many blessings, but that for him who breaks it destruction may befall himself and his family[7].

As its chronological context shows, the decree was conceived to prevent future dangers to Athenian democracy[8]; it differs from more ancient legislation because of its complexity. Whereas ancient law centred on tyranny, the decree of Demophantos focuses on the more recent issue of the subversion of democracy. However, the oath mentions the possible establishment of a tyranny and recalls the tyrannicides Harmodios and Aristogeiton to whom the murderers of men dangerous for the security of the state are compared. It is noteworthy that even the murder of all those involved in holding offices under undemocratic governments is considered justifiable in the decree. This stipulation of the law seems to be particularly severe, especially against the background of the 403 reconciliation agreement, which granted amnesty to men having held offices under the Thirty Tyrants.

Another relevant piece of legislation, albeit more difficult to contextualize, is the so-called law of Eukrates (337/6) which we retain again from an inscription[9]. The law was proposed by Eukrates, a member of the democratic anti-Macedonian party killed by Antipatros in 322. The text recalls both the law quoted by Aristotle (*Athenian Constitution* 16.10) and the decree of Demophantos, and adds some important references to the role of the Areopagos:

[7] Translation by D.M. MACDOWELL (Andocides, *On the Mysteries,* Oxford 1962).

[8] See D.M. MACDOWELL, in Andocides, *On the Mysteries,* p. 134ff.; M. OSTWALD, *Athenian Legislation,* p. 110ff.; ID., *From Popular Sovereignty to the Sovereignty of Law,* Berkeley–Los Angeles–London 1986, p. 418.

[9] See B.D. MERITT, *Greek Inscriptions, Hesperia* 21 (1952), p. 355-359, no. 5; *SEG* XII (1955), no. 87; C.J. SCHWENK, *Athens in the Age of Alexander. The Dated Laws and Decrees of the "Lykourgan Era", 338-326 BC*, Chicago 1985, p. 33-41, no. 6.

This content downloaded from
132.174.249.100 on Tue, 15 Sep 2026 18:30:03 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

> If any one rises up against the people for a tyranny or joins in setting up the tyranny or overthrows the people of Athens or the democracy at Athens, whoever kills the man who has done any of these things shall be undefiled (*hosios*). And it shall not be permitted to any of the counsellors of the Council of the Areopagus, if the people or the democracy at Athens is overthrown, to go up to the Areopagus or to sit together in the meeting or to deliberate about anything at all; and if when the people or the democracy at Athens has been overthrown any of the councillors of the Areopagus does go up to the Areopagus or sit together in the meeting or deliberate about anything, he shall be without rights (*atimos*), both himself and his descendants, and his property shall be made public and the tithe given to the Goddess[10].

Eukrates' law resounds Demophantos' decree about justifiable homicide of people who overthrew the democracy and established the tyranny in Athens. However, the former is characterized by references to members of the Areopagos, the ancient council of ex-archons which Ephialtes reduced to a court for blood crimes in 462/1 but that partially recovered its jurisdiction in the fourth century BC; moreover, in this period the council was also at the centre of political projects of antidemocratic nature (like the one proposed by Isocrates in the *Areopagitikos*).

Eukrates' law has been variously interpreted. Many scholars (the editor among them) think that it intended to prevent attacks against democracy by a pro-Macedonian Areopagos. Others, taking their cue from the fact that the Areopagus seems to have taken action in accordance with Demosthenes in the period before the battle of Chaironeia, believe that the law originated among the pro-Macedonian enemies of Demosthenes. Still other scholars think of a context larger than the Athenian one: the law aimed at encouraging the killing of king Philip of Macedon, represented by the democrats as a tyrant *par excellence*; the law, indeed, guaranteed that the murder would not be prosecuted by the Areopagites[11]. More probably, Eukrates' law embodied the reaction of radical members of the democratic party to the increasing jurisdiction of the Areopagos, promoted by Demosthenes and dating back to 344/3: in this year the procedure of *apophasis* was probably introduced which granted the council the power to investigate and to report a crime in cases of *eisangelia*[12].

[10] Translation by P.J. RHODES – R. OSBORNE, *Greek Historical Inscriptions, 404-323 BC*, Oxford 2003.

[11] For bibliographical references see F. LANDUCCI, *Demostene e il processo arpalico*, in *Processi e politica nel mondo antico* (*CISA*, 22), Milano 1996, p. 93-106.

[12] See J. ENGELS, *Das Eukratesgesetz und der Prozess der Kompetenzerweiterung des Areopags in der Eubulos- und Lykurgära*, *ZPE* 74 (1988), p. 181-209, 189-190; R. WAL-

This content downloaded from
132.174.249.100 on Tue, 15 Sep 2026 18:30:03 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

Eisangelia was the usual procedure against people guilty of crimes that threatened the security of the state: subversion of democracy (*katalysis tou demou*), high treason (*prodosia*), the making of proposals against the people's interest by bribed orators. The text of the law is preserved by Hypereides (III 7-8, year 330); scholars do not agree on the date of its enforcement (going back to Solon according to ancient tradition, but more probably dating to Kleisthenes' time) nor on the amendments which were introduced afterwards (in the years 411/10, 403/2 and 360-355)[13]. *Eisangelia* implied a denunciation to the *boule* or to the assembly by any citizen; the offender was liable to severe punishments, among which the death penalty. Therefore, *eisangelia* was the legal procedure against crimes such as the establishment of tyranny or the subversion of democracy, although prosecutions could be pursued even in an extrajudicial way. Judgment on crimes against the security of the state pertained to the *boule* and, most of all, to the assembly and to the people's court; on the contrary, the reform which introduced the procedure of *apophasis* limited their jurisdiction in favour of the Areopagos, in order, as it seems, to cut expenditure for the assembly's activity.

In the light of these remarks, Eukrates' law could have originated in the radical wing of the democratic party, whose members intended to reaffirm the traditional democratic principles threatened by the recent reform: according to these, it was the prerogative of the *demos* sitting in the *boule*, in the assembly and in the court, and not of the Areopagos, to judge cases of subversion of democracy and of high treason. The democratic nature of the law is revealed by the relief that decorates the stele: it represents *Demokratia* crowning the *demos*.

Outside the Athenian context, a very interesting example is provided by the so-called law *de tyrannis* of Ilion (*IvIlion* 25), preserved by an inscription and dated between 310 and 260[14]. The text seems to recall

LACE, *The Areopagos Council, to 307 B.C.*, Baltimore–London 1989, p. 113ff.; F. LANDUCCI, *Demostene e il processo arpalico*, p. 93-106. On *apophasis* see E. CARAWAN, *Apophasis and Eisanghelia: The Role of the Areopagus in Athenian Political Trials*, *GRBS* 26 (1985), p. 115-140.

[13] See M.H. HANSEN, *Eisangelia. The Sovereignty of the People's Court in Athens in the Fourth Century B.C. and the Impeachment of Generals and Politicians*, Odense 1975; C. BEARZOT, *Anomalie procedurali ed elusione del nomos nei processi per alto tradimento: eisanghelia e asebeia*, in *Processi e politica nel mondo antico* (*CISA*, 22), Milano 1996, p. 71-92.

[14] See F. LANDUCCI, *La legittimazione della vendetta nell'uccisione del tiranno*, in *Amnistia, perdono e vendetta nel mondo antico* (*CISA*, 23), Milano 1997, p. 201-216.

This content downloaded from
132.174.249.100 on Tue, 15 Sep 2026 18:30:03 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

Demophantos' decree and Eukrates' law, and provides regulations encouraging justifiable homicide in case of subversion of democracy attempted by an aspiring tyrant or by members of oligarchical movements. In the first part of the inscription (now lost) it was probably stipulated that people who attempted to overthrow the democracy, thus becoming public enemies deprived of legal protection, could be justifiably killed. In the following and better preserved part (ll. 19ff.), the law grants honours to the murderers and provides procedures for prosecuting collaborationists. It is interesting to note that even in the case of Ilion, as in Athens where Demophantos' decree and Eukrates' law coexisted with *eisangelia,* the law provided for both justifiable homicide of the aspiring tyrant (whose murderer is not only considered *hosios* and therefore unpunishable, but also praised as a benefactor) and legal procedures of prosecution against people involved in crimes threatening the security of the state. Similar encouragements to tyrannicide together with alternative procedures of legal prosecution are attested in other Greek cities of Asia Minor: this legislation seems to be connected with Antigonos' and Demetrios' rule, which was characterized by intense democratic propaganda of 'Athenian' inspiration. This may possibly explain references to Athenian legislation *de tyrannide* in the law of Ilion.

* * *

The idea that the murder of a tyrant (or of an aspiring tyrant) was to be considered justifiable, since it was a form of self-defence of the political community against people who did not accept the principles expressed by the *nomos*, underlies the idealization of tyrannicide as an expression of civic values exhibited in particular in the celebration of the Athenian tyrannicides Harmodios and Aristogeiton. In 514 the young aristocrats killed Hipparchos, brother of Hippias, who was Peisistratos' son and tyrant of Athens: according to the democratic legend, the murder of Hipparchos provoked the fall of the tyranny and the granting of *isonomia* to all Athenians. This is testified by a convivial song (*skolion*) celebrating the tyrannicides, preserved by Athenaeus (XV 695a-b):

> Ever shall your fame live in the earth, dearest Harmodius and Aristgeiton, for that ye slew the tyrant, and made Athens a city of equal rights[15].

[15] Translation by Ch.B. GULICK (Athenaeus, *The Deipnosophists,* I-VII, London–Cambridge [MA], 1950-1957).

This content downloaded from
132.174.249.100 on Tue, 15 Sep 2026 18:30:03 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

According to Athenian tradition, the tyrannicides freed Athens from oppression and created the necessary conditions for the birth of democracy. That was the message conveyed by a sculptural group by Antenor (487/6) and, after it was carried off by the Persians, by the new statues by Kritios and Nesiotes (477/6). Harmodios' and Aristogeiton's tomb was in the Kerameikos (Pausanias I 29.15); every year they were commemorated together with war casualties by the polemarchos (Aristotle, *Athenian Constitution* 56.1); tyrannicides' descendants were also granted certain privileges (*sitesis, proedria, ateleia*)[16].

In reality, however, the more ancient and authoritative historiographical tradition, represented by Herodotus and Thucydides, described these events in a different way; they made it their special point to deny the correlation between the murder of Hipparchos and the fall of the Peisistratid tyranny[17]. Herodotus (V 55-56, 62ff.) recalls that after Harmodios and Aristogeiton had murdered the tyrant's brother Hipparchos, Hippias' rule lasted for another four years and became increasingly harsh; the historian goes on to explain that the tyranny was overthrown by the Spartans and by the exiled Alcmaeonids. Thucydides presents a story to the same extent (I 20.1-2; VI 53.3-59): Harmodios and Aristogeiton had planned to kill Hippias but feared to be denounced; in any case, they wanted to achieve something great, and they murdered Hipparchos, upon whom they came. The murder seems to have been accomplished for private reasons (Harmodios refused the advances of Hipparchos and the latter, in revenge, offended the former's sister and insulted the honour of his family), although the democratic legend, as reflected in the later tradition and particularly in the Attic orators, emphasizes its political significance. Like Herodotus, Thucydides is aware of the fact that the tyranny was actually overthrown by the Spartans and the Alcmaeonids (VI 53.3, 59.4). He confirms, in turn, that after Hipparchos' death the tyranny went on for another four years, pressing even harder on the Athenians (VI 59.2 & 4).

It may be safely concluded that the killing of the tyrants happened for private reasons and a personal grudge among young aristocrats: it lacked political significance in the purposes of the murderers as well as in its direct consequences. The *isonomia* recalled in the *skolion* does not mean 'democracy', as in Herodotus (III 80); on the contrary, it expresses the

[16] See C. GAFFORINI, *I tirannicidi e i caduti in guerra*, in *Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori. La morte in combattimento nell'antichità* (*CISA*, 16), Milano 1990, p. 37-45.

[17] The sources are collected in M. BERTI, *Fra tirannide e democrazia. Ipparco di Carmo e il destino dei Pisistratidi ad Atene*, Alessandria 2004, p. 37ff.

This content downloaded from
132.174.249.100 on Tue, 15 Sep 2026 18:30:03 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

aristocratic claim to share the political power usurped by the tyrant and to enjoy equal rights. But, in spite of the efforts made by the historians Herodotus and Thucydides to dispose of the myth, the democratic legend prevailed and transformed the killing of Hipparchos into a political murder. The tyrannicide became the 'foundation myth' of Athenian democracy. Themistocles perhaps played some part in its creation, since he probably encouraged the heroic 'cult' of Harmodios and Aristogeiton. The statues of the heroes, at the centre of the *agora,* reminded the people of the noble act which had initiated the Athenian democratic experience, and promoted it as a model of civic conduct and as an identity factor[18].

Greek history recalls several murders of tyrants and it is impossible to deal with all cases here. Especially worth mention are the murders of Leontiades of Thebes (379) and of Iason of Pherae (370): they highlight the full legitimacy that was attributed to tyrannicide.

By 382 the Theban oligarchical leader Leontiades had handed over the Kadmeia, the akropolis of the city, to the Spartan Phoebidas in order to take control of Thebes under Spartan protection, and had Ismenias, the leader of the 'nationalist' party executed (Xenophon, *Hellenica* V 2.30, 35-36); he was himself finally killed in 379. His murder initiated the liberation of Thebes from Spartan control. The initiative was taken by Theban citizens who got in touch with some exiled Theban democrats in Athens. Led by Pelopidas, they entered Thebes at night and killed Leontiades and the other members of the oligarchical government unawares; then, they called the people to arms, expelled the Spartan garrison and established a democratic government.

One may wonder why in our tradition there is no trace of any disapproval of these treacherous murders. An explanation for this may be found in the way in which all our sources represent Leontiades and his friends. The local, democratic tradition voiced in Plutarch (*Life of Pelopidas* 5-6) portrays them as pro-Spartan tyrants who had enslaved their fellow citizens and destroyed the *patrios politeia,* the ancient constitution of the city: by representing the members of the oligarchical party as tyrants the sources quite obviously intended to legitimate their murder. Even

[18] See H. SCHLANGE-SCHÖNINGEN, *Harmodios und Aristogeiton, die Tyrannenmörder von 514 v.Chr.*, in A. DEMANDT, *Das Attentat in der Geschichte*, p. 15-35; A. MÖLLER, *Hipparchos. Athen, Juli 514 v.Chr.*, in M. SOMMER, *Politische Morde*, p. 29-36. Political motives in the killing of Hipparchos are highlighted by R. GANCI, *La morte di Ipparco*, Ὅρμος 2 (2000), p. 75-94.

This content downloaded from
132.174.249.100 on Tue, 15 Sep 2026 18:30:03 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

Xenophon, who is far from siding with the Theban democrats, repeats the accusation that Leontiades and his friends «had wanted the state to be in subjection to the Lacedaemonians in order that they might rule despotically themselves» (*Hellenica* V 4.1).

Similar conclusions can be drawn regarding the murder of Jason of Pherae. Between 385 and 370 he had reunified Thessaly under his leadership and had laid the foundations of his policy by exploiting Thessalian economic, military, and demographic resources. Dealing with the post-Leuktra events of 371 when Jason proposed to act as a mediator between Thebans and Spartans, Xenophon describes the former as «the greatest of the men of his time» (*Hellenica* VI 4.28). Immediately afterwards, Jason claimed control of Delphoi for the Thessalians, and so showed his ambition to become *hegemon* of the Greeks replacing the Spartans with the support of the Delphic Amphictyony; he intended to lead the Greeks in a war against the Persians. In 370, at the height of his power, Jason was murdered by seven young people; five of them were able to flee and, according to Xenophon, «in most of the Greek cities to which they came they were honoured. This fact, indeed, made it plain that the Greeks had conceived a very great fear lest Jason should become tyrant» (*Hellenica* VI 4.32). The threat of a tyranny ruling the whole of Greece gave full legitimacy to Jason's murder. Delphoi may have had some role in spreading the view of his murderers as 'tyrannicides' deserving to be honoured as benefactors.

* * *

The legislation on justifiable homicide of tyrants and of people who attempted to overthrow the democracy as well as the cases of 'tyrannicide' considered above lead us to conclude that political murder was not always condemned in ancient Greece. In some cases, it was seen as the legitimate response of the people against individuals (like the tyrant and the aspiring tyrant) who placed themselves above the *nomos, i.e* the principles which regulated the *polis* and granted its citizens *isonomia* and legal protection. In the 'constitutional debate' in Herodotus (III 80), one of the characteristic features of tyrannical behaviour is contempt of the *nomos* (*anomia*):

> Insolence (*hybris*) is created in him by the good things to hand, while from birth envy (*phthonos*) is rooted in man. Acquiring the two he possesses complete evil; for being satiated he does many reckless things,

This content downloaded from
132.174.249.100 on Tue, 15 Sep 2026 18:30:03 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

> some from insolence, some from envy. And yet an absolute ruler (*tyrannos*) ought to be free of envy, having all good things; but he becomes the opposite of this towards his citizens; he envies the best who thrive and live, and is pleased by the worst of his fellows; and he is the best confidant of slander. Of all men he is the most inconsistent; for if you admire him modestly he is angry that you do not give him excessive attention, but if one gives him excessive attention he is angry because one is a flatter. But I have yet worse to say of him than that; he upsets the ancestral ways and rapes women and kills indiscriminately[19].

People infringing the *nomos,* or refusing to accept it, can be similarly deprived of the protection ensured by the law, if the community revokes it in a self-defence reaction. Here lies legitimacy for political murder: the members of the community can resort to political murder when facing an attack to their security, such as the attempt to establish a tyranny and to overthrow the democracy.

II. ELIMINATION OF POLITICAL LEADERS

It is easy to recognize that political murder had a role in Greek factional strife: it was the easiest way to dispose of rivals to political leadership and to prevent political opponents from organizing themselves and from acting efficiently. From this perspective, political murder is an actual form of 'terrorism', aimed at paralysing the political action of leaderless men as proved by clear, however limited, cases in Athens.

We have scanty evidence on the backstage manœuvres that led to the murder of Stesagoras' son Kimon[20] by killers hired by Peisistratos' sons (Herodotus VI 103). The act probably originated, like the tyrannicide, from personal conflicts and desire for revenge among aristocrats. The first significant case is, in fact, the murder of Ephialtes, the democratic leader killed in 461, immediately after the reform of the Areopagos.

The background intrigues of this murder are not recoverable because of the disagreement of our sources. Antiphon (V 68; cf. Thucydides I 107.4 & 6) states that the killers were never found and rules out the possibility of identifying the political instigators of the act. Aristotle (*Athenian Constitution* 25.4) speaks of an oligarchical plot and also

[19] Translation by A.D. GODLEY (Herodotus, I-IV, London–Cambridge [MA] 1920-1925).

[20] Father of Miltiades, the victor of Marathon.

This content downloaded from
132.174.249.100 on Tue, 15 Sep 2026 18:30:03 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

mentions the alleged killer's name, Aristodikos of Tanagra. Plutarch (*Life of Pericles* 10) even reports the rumour according to which the murder of Ephialtes had been instigated by Pericles who aimed at taking his place at the head of the democratic party: as may be noted, some modern scholars do not exclude this hypothesis, sustaining that the murder may have actually originated within the democratic party. In any case, the murderer intended to decapitate the democratic party in order to either disorientate it in a particularly difficult moment or to pave the way to a new *prostates*[21].

After the murder of Ephialtes, Athens knew a long period of calm. We do not hear of political murders until 412, when Hyperbolos, the Athenian demagogue ostracized in 417 and the enemy of Alcibiades (Thucydides VIII 73.3), was killed during an oligarchical *coup d'état* in Samos. The murder of Hyperbolos, carried out by Samian oligarchs supported by some Athenians among whom the *strategos* Charminos, is presented by Thucydides as a *pistis,* a proof of loyalty demanded from the members of oligarchical clubs; more probably, however, the killing intended to eliminate a man who could be a leader for Samian democrats (he had perhaps purposely gone to Samos after his ostracism). The connections between Samian oligarchical plotters and antidemocratic Athenians seem to suggest that Hyperbolos was killed for being considered a dangerous, possibly influential leader for the Samian democrats. A similar reason probably explains the murder of Androkles (one among the *prostatai* of the *demos* and enemy of Alcibiades) and of other democrats which took place in Athens during the organization of the *coup d'état* of 411 (Thucydides VIII 65.2). Thucydides emphasizes the secrecy of these murders (*krypha)* which certainly contributed to a sense of insecurity among the people as these events were rather uncommon in Athens[22]. The murders of both Hyperbolos and Androkles, planned in the oligarchical clubs, are part of a process of a constitutional *metabole*. Their purpose was most probably to eliminate political leaders who could support the people in organizing their resistance against the oligarchical conspirators.

[21] See L. PICCIRILLI L., *L'assassinio di Efialte, ASNP* 17 (1987), p. 9-17; ID., *Efialte,* Genova 1988, p. 71ff.

[22] See G. CUNIBERTI, *La presenza ateniese a Samo e le uccisioni di Iperbolo e Androcle nell'VIII libro di Tucidide, AIIS* 14 (1997), p. 53-80, 72ff.; ID., *Iperbolo ateniese infame,* Bologna 2000, p. 140ff. (cf. particularly 74 and 142: these murders provoked «una sorta di vuoto di *prostasia*»). See also C. BEARZOT, *Atene nel 411 e nel 404. Tecniche del colpo di stato,* in *Terror et pavor. Violenza, intimidazione, clandestinità nel mondo antico* [Atti del Convegno, Cividale del Friuli 22-24 settembre 2005], Pisa 2006, p. 21-64.

This content downloaded from
132.174.249.100 on Tue, 15 Sep 2026 18:30:03 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

A different background can be intimated for the murder of the oligarch Phrynichos, perpetrated by a group of foreigners, among whom Thrasybulos of Kalidon and Apollodoros of Megara, at the time of the fall of the Four Hundred; the people granted honours for the murderers after the restoration of democracy in February 410 (cf. ML 85, dating back to the spring of 409; cf. Lysias 13.70-72). The fourth-century tradition, reported in Lykourgos (*Against Leokrates* 112-114), seems to consider the murder of Phrynichos as the people's revenge against one of the oligarchs responsible for the establishment of the Four Hundred. More probably the murder, which Thucydides (VIII 92.2) sets in the context of Theramenes' and Aristokrates' reaction against the Four Hundred, was inspired by Theramenes and Kritias (the proposer of the decree indicting the dead Phrynichos for treason) and reflected a 'showdown' among oligarchs. In this case, personal antagonism and desire for revenge prevails over the intention of eliminating a dangerous leader. A common feature between the murder of Phrynichos and the two cases discussed above could be the enmity between all the victims and Alcibiades[23].

Outside Athens there are several noteworthy cases: among these, that of Lykomedes of Mantinea. Lykomedes was a member of the privileged class of Mantinea who had embraced the democratic cause against Spartan interference; after the battle of Leuktra, he promoted the second synoecism of Mantinea and a new development of Arkadian federalism[24], and was one of the founders of Megalopolis. Xenophon (*Hellenica* VII 1.22-24) reports Lykomedes' speech addressed to the Arkadians. On the grounds that they were «the most numerous of all the Greek peoples and had the strongest bodies», he claimed for them the hegemony of the Peloponnesos: after the battle of Leuktra had put an end to the Spartan threat, he spoke against the Theban interference in the Peloponnesos, expressing the fear that Peloponnesian peoples might find «a new set of Lacedaemonians» in the Thebans.

[23] See C. BEARZOT, *A proposito del decreto ML 85 per Trasibulo uccisore di Frinico e i suoi complici*, *RIL* 115 (1981), p. 289-303; M.J. OSBORNE, *Naturalization in Athens*, II, Brussels 1982, p. 17ff.; EAD., *Lisia e la tradizione su Teramene. Commento storico alle orazioni XII e XIII del corpus lysiacum* (*Biblioteca di Aevum Antiquum*, 10), Milano 1997, p. 312ff.

[24] Cfr. Diod. XV 59.1: «About the same time, Lycomedes of Tegea prevailed upon the Arcadians to form a single confederacy (ἔπεισε τοὺς Ἀρκάδας εἰς μίαν συντέλειαν ταχθῆναι) with a common council (κοινὴ ἔχειν σύνοδον) to consist of ten thousand men empowered to decide issues of war and peace». Translation by C.H. OLDFATHER (Diodorus, I-XI, London–Cambridge [MA] 1976).

This content downloaded from
132.174.249.100 on Tue, 15 Sep 2026 18:30:03 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

According to his program, in 366 Lykomedes opposed the conclusion of the common peace that Pelopidas had negotiated with King Artaxerxes in Susa, and began to look at Athens as a possible ally (Xenophon, *Hellenica* VII 1.39-40). In the same year Lykomedes offered a defensive alliance to the Athenians: although his proposals were met with resistance in the Athenian assembly, the alliance was concluded, and this certainly weakened the role of Thebes as supporter of the federalist movements in the Peloponnesos (Xenophon, *Hellenica* VII 4.2). In any case, Lykomedes found death while returning from Athens; he was probably killed by Arkadian exiles of the oligarchical faction (Xenophon, *Hellenica* VII 4.3)[25]. His promotion of Arkadian federalism and his intention to join Athens against both Sparta and Thebes had exposed him to the violent reaction of those among the Arkadians who preferred autonomy to federalism and intended to maintain close relations with the Spartans. In the Arkadian league, split between Mantinea and Tegea, oligarchical and democratic parties, pro-Spartan and pro-Theban factions, the strong leadership of Lykomedes, intent on aggrandizing the role of the Arkadians in the Peloponnesos and on seeking Athenian support, must have provoked irritation among many of his fellow countrymen, who did not hesitate to eliminate him.

* * *

As Ford has emphasized, the resort to legal action (often without following the normal procedure) in order to eliminate political enemies may be sometimes considered an alternative to political murder. The Athenian history provides many examples to that extent. After the fall of the Four Hundred in 411 the oligarchs Antiphon and Archeptolemos were charged with treason and condemned to death (Onomakles, charged with his companions, was acquitted). Their trial must be placed under the oligarchy of the Five Thousand: although Thucydides speaks of popular initiative (VIII 68.2: but the text is uncertain), the most probable cause is a regulation of accounts among oligarchs, in the wake of the dissension opposing Theramenes and his colleagues on the subject of relations with Sparta (Lysias 12.67; [Plutarch], *Lives of the Ten Orators* 833a ff.)[26].

[25] See H. BECK, *Das Attentat auf Lykomedes von Mantineia*, *Tekmeria* 3 (1997), p. 1-6.

[26] On this case, see M.H. HANSEN, *Eisangelia*, p. 113ff., nos. 135-137; C. BEARZOT, *Lisia e la tradizione su Teramene*, p. 185ff. Also the trial against Peisander must perhaps be dated in the same period: Thucydides (VIII 98.1) sets the exile of the oligarch, who

This content downloaded from
132.174.249.100 on Tue, 15 Sep 2026 18:30:03 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

These cases tend to show that physical elimination was not uncommon even among members of a political faction: by the way, in 404/3 Theramenes, disagreeing with the Thirty's methods on matters of government, fell himself victim to a 'judicial' murder by Critias.

Even more interesting because of their preventive rather than punitive nature are the following cases of those democratic leaders, who, in the span of time between the battle of Aigospotamoi and the establishment of the Thirty Tyrants (405/4), were eliminated through legal action in order to facilitate the peace with Sparta and the *coup d'état* of the Thirty[27].

According to Lysias' speeches *Against Agoratos* (13.5-17) and *Against Nicomachos* (30.10-14), Kleophon, who promoted the anti-Spartan resistance after Aigospotamoi and denounced the antidemocratic plots, was the victim of a judicial plot carried out during Theramenes' three-month exploratory mission concerning the peace negotiations with Lysander (Xenophon, *Hellenica* II 2.16). In comparison with murder, legal action had the advantage of involving the people in prosecution and condemnation, and of making them responsible for the capital punishment. This method had already been successfully tested against the *strategoi* in the Arginousai trial, organized by Theramenes in order to eliminate part of the democratic leadership (Xenophon, *Hellenica* I 7)[28]. Kleophon was charged with an offence regarding his allegedly improper behaviour as a soldier. Lysias, however, believed that he was attacked under false pretences, the actual reason being Kleophon's public opposition to the conclusion of the peace with Sparta and his charges against the *boule* as an associate of Theramenes and of the other antidemocrats. The irregularity of the procedure — a special law was passed allowing the *boule,* irritated with Kleophon for his attacks, to take part in the trial — clearly reveals that Kleophon's enemies actually aimed at getting rid of a dangerous opponent who could become an perceptive popular leader (cf. Lysias 13.7; 30.11).

After the murder of Kleophon a judicial attack was launched against the democratic *strategoi* and *taxiarchoi* (Dionysodoros, Strombichides,

wanted to escape a condemnation, «immediately» after the fall of the Five Thousand; besides, the background of the trial fits well in this context. See M.J. JAMESON, *Sophocles and the Four Hundred, Historia* 20 (1971), p. 541-568.

[27] See C. BEARZOT, *Atene nel 411 e nel 404*, p. 42ff.

[28] On the Arginousai trial see P.A. TUCI, *La boulé nel processo agli strateghi della battaglia delle Arginuse: questioni procedurali e tentativi di manipolazione*, in *Syngraphé. Materiali e appunti per lo studio della storia e della letteratura antica*, 3, Como 2002, p. 51-85 (with bibliography).

This content downloaded from
132.174.249.100 on Tue, 15 Sep 2026 18:30:03 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

Nikias, Nikomenes, Eukrates, Aristophanes, Menestratos, including many other citizens) who opposed Theramenes on the constitutional implications of the peace treaty with Sparta (cf. Lysias 13.13ff.). The trial must be set at the time when the preparatives were made for the popular assembly which established the government of the Thirty Tyrants (Xenophon, *Hellenica* II 3.2).

According to Lysias, Strombichides, Dionysodoros and their companions expressed their disagreement with Theramenes after his return from Sparta. The bone of contention was the constitutional clause provided in the treaty according to which Athens should be governed *kata ta patria*. However willing to compromise over the treaty as a whole, the democrats perceived this particular clause as a real threat to the subsistence of Athenian democracy (cf. Lysias 13.15). Being aware of possible public resistance to their plans, Theramenes and his supporters decided to eliminate the opponents before the decisive assembly:

> so they resolved, before the Assembly met to consider the peace, to involve these men first in calumnious prosecutions, in order that there should be none to take up the defence of your people at the meeting (Lysias 13.17)[29].

The aim of Theramenes' plan, according to Lysias, was to eliminate any opposition in the assembly by depriving the people of its leaders.

The trial was initiated by Theokritos (cf. Lysias 13.19) who prompted a denunciation to the *boulé* by Agoratos and consequently an *eisanghelia* to the assembly by the *boulé*. In this way the *boulé* aimed at involving the people in the trial (cf. Lysias 13.32): the assembly decided that the *strategoi* and the *taxiarchoi* had to be judged by a people's court of two thousand jurors (cf. Lysias 13.32). In Lysias' account the imprisonment of the democrats brought the crisis to a head: after Lysander had entered the Peiraeus, the ships were handed over to the Spartans, the walls demolished, and the Thirty Tyrants established (cf. Lysias 13.34). Lysias emphasizes the direct relation between the elimination of the democratic opponents and the fate of Athens after the signing of the treaty negotiated by Theramenes: once the democratic leadership was annihilated, the leaderless people became uncapable of reaction. The trial ended under the Thirty (cf. Lysias 13.35-37) and it was judged not by a people's court, as the assembly had required, but by the *boulé*, whose members had been

[29] Translation by W.R.M. LAMB (Lysias, London–Cambridge [MA] 1930).

This content downloaded from
132.174.249.100 on Tue, 15 Sep 2026 18:30:03 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

personally chosen by the Thirty; other measures of intimidation were carried out, such as the presence of the Thirty on the seats of the prytanes and their request of a verdict by open vote. All the accused were condemned to death.

In 405/4 the antidemocrats under the leadership of Theramenes thus continued to systematically eliminate the democratic opposition, starting from Kleophon (during Theramenes' mission) up to the democratic representatives accused by Agoratos (before the assembly on the peace treaty was summoned). It is worth recalling with Lysias that it was indeed the confessed aim of the democratic leaders to oppose Theramenes' plans that caused their elimination:

> These men perceived that, although nominally we had the promise of peace, in actual fact it was the dissolution of the democracy, and they refused to authorize such a proceeding (Lysias 13.15).

The Athenian cases we have considered so far should not merely be explained as a result of the well-known Athenian fondness for trials. It is important to realize that such a method of political struggle was largely employed in other parts of the Greek world. A significant example is the trial of Ismenias of Thebes. According to Xenophon (*Hellenica* V 2.30, 35-36), after the Spartans took possession of the Theban acropolis, the Kadmeia, and the pro-Spartan party led by Leontiades took power in Thebes, Ismenias was arrested as *polemopoion*, put on trial and condemned to death by an international court controlled by the Spartans. Xenophon cannot be suspected of bias in favour of Ismenias: although he was able to purge himself of some charges, for example that of being pro-Persian and of having caused troubles in Greece, Xenophon notices that he failed to persuade the court against the generic charge that he was not a man of great (*megalopragmon)* and evil undertakings (*kakopragmon).* Xenophon shows his low opinion of Leontiades by considering him a traitor and an overzealous servant of the Spartans. Thus, the trial of Ismenias reveals itself to be a specious legal action aimed at eliminating a dangerous political leader who could organize the people's opposition against the newly established oligarchic government.

* * *

On this second point we may conclude, first of all, that the physical elimination of political enemies always aims at annihilating the opposing lead-

This content downloaded from
132.174.249.100 on Tue, 15 Sep 2026 18:30:03 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

ership[30], and consequently at disorientating political opposition. Such an aim seems to be particularly relevant in cases in which the oligarchical party is plotting against the people: the events of 411 and 404 show, as a matter of fact, that once the people is deprived from its leaders it proves unable to react and liable to intimidation. Personal hatred and revenge can be motives for tyrannicide, just as for the murder of Hipparchos and for the killing of Alexander, tyrant of Pherae. In the latter case we must mention, in addition to the political grounds, the indignation of Alexander's wife, Thebae, at her husband's cruelty and, apparently, also at his sexual advances towards her younger brother Peitholaos (cf. Plutarch, *Life of Pelopidas* 35.4-12); according to Xenophon (*Hellenica* VI 4.37), Alexander was also planning a new marriage. Family conflicts are frequently associated with strictly political reasons in the 'dynastic' murders, like those common at the Macedonian court; on the contrary, political conflicts in the *poleis* rarely provoked murders originating from personal quarrels (although we can find some similar cases in the oligarchical faction). Political motives — annihilation of political opposition — largely prevail.

Furthermore, it is noteworthy that political murder is very rare in Athens, where we have no evidence of such cases in the fifty years between 461 and 412. Modern scholars have invoked different reasons for this fact, such as the practice to resort to trials, ostracism (which permitted to remove citizens from the political scene who where considered as aspiring tyrants or a threat for Athenian democracy, expelling them from the city for ten years), or moderation by the Athenians[31]. Ostracism can surely reflect Athenian moderation in civic life[32]; however, procedures similar to Athenian ostracism are also known for Argos and Syracuse, often devastated by violent internal struggles that could not be mitigated by such procedures[33]. It may therefore be suggested that the internal cohesion of the Athenian political community reduced the number of political murders. The Athenians expressed this internal cohesion through the myth of autochthony, *i.e.* the belief to be born directly from the earth

[30] As already highlighted by G.M. CALHOUN, *Athenian Clubs in Politics and Litigation*, Roma 1964 (= Austin 1913), p. 111.

[31] Thus F.L. FORD, *Political Murder*, p. 59.

[32] See S. FORSDYKE, *Exile, Ostracism, and Democracy: The Politics of Exclusion in Ancient Greece*, Princeton 2005.

[33] On Argos see C. BEARZOT – F. LANDUCCI (edd.), *Argo. Una democrazia diversa* (*Contributi di storia antica*, 4), Milano 2007; on Syracuse see M. GIANGIULIO, *Gli equilibri difficili della democrazia in Sicilia: il caso di Siracusa*, in *Venticinque secoli dopo l'invenzione della democrazia*, Paestum 1998, p. 107-124.

This content downloaded from
132.174.249.100 on Tue, 15 Sep 2026 18:30:03 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

and, hence, not constitute a citizen body consisting of different people immigrated into Attica from abroad[34]. So Athens, in comparison with other Greek cities, can claim both a deeply homogeneous civic body and a harmonious civic life which find their highest expression in the democratic constitution. This is emphasized by Thucydides (II 36.1) in the Periclean *Epitaphios:*

> First of all. I will begin with our ancestors, since it is right and also appropriate on such an occasion as the present that the honor of this remembrance should be given to them. For it is the same men, always occupying the land through the succession of generations, who have handed it down in freedom until the present time because of their bravery[35].

In the same way, Lysias emphasizes the consequences of autochthony for freedom and democracy in Athens in his *Epitaphios* (2.17-18)[36]:

> Now in many ways it was natural to our ancestors, moved by a single resolve, to fight the battles of justice: for the very beginning of their life was just. They had not been collected, like most nations, from every quarter, and had not settled in a foreign land after driving out its people: they were born of the soil, and possessed in one and the same country their mother and their fatherland. They were the first and the only people in that time to drive out the ruling classes of their state and to establish a democracy, believing the liberty of all to be the strongest bond of agreement; by sharing with each other the hopes born of their perils they had freedom of soul in their civic life.

Finally, in his *Menexenos* Plato highlights that political and legal equality among Athenian citizens is a direct consequence of their equality of birth (238e–239a: the passage is probably ironic, but it undoubtedly reflects commonplaces in Athenian public opinion):

> And the cause of this our polity lies in our equality of birth. For whereas all other States are composed of a heterogeneous collection of all sorts of people, so that their polities also are heterogeneous, tyrannies as well as oligarchies, some of them regarding one another as slaves, others as masters; we and our people, on the contrary, being all

[34] See C. BEARZOT, *Autoctonia, rifiuto della mescolanza, civilizzazione: da Isocrate a Megastene*, in *Incontri tra culture nell'Oriente ellenistico e romano* [Atti del Convegno, Ravenna 11-12 marzo 2005], forthcoming.

[35] Translation by S. LATTIMORE (Thucydides, *The Peloponnesian War,* Indianapolis–Cambridge 1998).

[36] On Lysias' *Epitaphios* see C. BEARZOT, *La "vittoria dei barbari" nell'Epitafio di Lisia (II, 59)*, in *Vivere da democratici. Studi su Lisia e la democrazia ateniese*, Roma 2007, p. 177-198.

This content downloaded from
132.174.249.100 on Tue, 15 Sep 2026 18:30:03 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

> born of one mother, claim to be neither the slaves of one another nor the masters; rather does our natural birth-equality (*isogonia kata physin)* drive us to seek lawfully legal equality (*isonomia kata nomon)*, and to yield to one another in no respect save in reputation for virtue and understanding[37].

This cohesion of Athenian citizenship, which originated also from the 'merging' of various people by Kleisthenes' reform (Aristotle, *Athenian Constitution* 21.2)[38], gave rise to an elitist mentality. The myth of autochthony emphasized racial purity and it also found expression in Pericles' well-known citizenship law of 451/50 which limited Athenian citizenship to sons of both Athenian father and mother. At any rate, Athenian civic cohesion had a significant role, in my opinion, in controlling civil struggles, which elsewhere found expression in severe political and social fractures.

III. MASS MURDERS

Such political and social fractures often caused mass murders in Greek cities. This phenomenon was so frequent that its complete survey in this paper is impossible[39]. I will confine myself to a few observations.

As far as Athens is concerned, something can be said regarding the time of the crisis of democracy. In 411, at the time of the *coup d'état* of the Four Hundred, oligarchical revolution and re-establishment of democracy did not imply mass murder. Thucydides reports the murder of Androkles and of other democrats (VIII 65.2), and the elimination, «sudden and in some convenient way», of those who opposed the program of the oligarchical plotters (VIII 66.2). According to Thucydides himself (VIII 70.2), after the establishment of their tyranny, the Four Hundred killed «certain men, a rather small number, whom they found it convenient to have out of way, imprisoned others, and also banished some»;

[37] Translation by W.R.M. LAMB (Plato, I-XII, London–Cambridge [MA] 1925).

[38] See G. ANDERSON, *The Athenian Experiment. Building an Imagined Political Community in Ancient Attica, 508-490 B.C.*, Ann Arbor 2003.

[39] For such an overview see A. LINTOTT, *Violence, Civil Strife and Revolution in the Classical City*, Baltimore 1981, and H.-J. GEHRKE, *Stasis. Untersuchungen zu den inneren Kriegen in den griechischen Staaten des 5. und 4. Jahrhunderts v.Chr.* (*Vestigia*, 35), München 1985 (p. 234ff. for forms of physical violence, among which murders); ID., *La "stasis"*, in *I Greci. Storia cultura arte società*, 2. *Una storia greca*, II. *Definizione*, Torino 1997, p. 453-480.

This content downloaded from
132.174.249.100 on Tue, 15 Sep 2026 18:30:03 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

the historian seems to minimize the damages caused by the Four Hundred to the Athenian city and to emphasize the limited number of the victims[40].

In 404 the situation was certainly more serious. But the Thirty Tyrants took the greatest responsibility for the killing of a great number of citizens and metics by direct or judicial murder, often perpetrated for material gain and not for political reasons. According to differently biased sources, such as Lysias (XII 5) on the one hand and Xenophon (*Hellenica* II 3.12ff.) and Aristotle (*Athenian Constitution* 35.3) on the other, repression was very hard and caused about 1500 victims (cf. Isocrates VII 66-67, XX 11; Aeschines II 77, III 235). This is actually consistent with the opinion of Kritias who, against Theramenes' call for moderation, pleaded the case of the political necessity to have recourse to violence in eliminating the democratic political opponents who were especially dangerous in Athens, because the city was so densely populated and the people were accustomed to live in freedom (Xenophon, *Hellenica* II 3.24-26)[41].

Despite these few cases, we must admit that there is no tendency to mass murder in Athens: this is proved by the moderation showed by the people after the fall of the Thirty Tyrants. After this cruel tyranny, the people did not take revenge and observed the amnesty proclaimed by Thrasyboulos after the restoration of democracy in 403, even though the reconciliation agreement met with some opposition among the democrats[42]. This confirms the serene atmosphere of daily relations highlighted in Pericles' *Epitaphios* (II 37.2) as one of the most important characteristics of Athenian democracy:

> In public life we conduct ourselves with freedom and also, regarding that suspicion of others because of their everyday habitus, without getting angry at a neighbor if he does something so as to suit himself, and without wearing expressions of vexation, that inflict no punishment yet cause of stress. But while we associate in private without undue pressure, in public we are especially law abiding because of fear ....

It is worth noting that the situation is very different in other Greek democratic cities such as Argos. Unlike Athens, Argos was a weak and

[40] See C. BEARZOT, *Esilii, deportazioni ed emigrazioni forzate in Atene sotto regimi non democratici*, in *Emigrazione e immigrazione nel mondo antico* (*CISA*, 20), Milano 1994, p. 141-167, 142ff.; EAD., *La XX orazione pseudolisiana e la "prima restaurazione" della democrazia nel 410*, in *Studium atque urbanitas. Miscellanea Daris* (*Papyrologica Lupiensia*, 9), Galatina (LE) 2001, p. 85-99.

[41] See C. BEARZOT, *Esilii, deportazioni ed emigrazioni forzate*, p. 145ff.

[42] On the amnesty see Th.C. LOENING, *The Reconciliation Agreement of 403/2 in Athens. Its Content and Application* (*Hermes Einzelschriften*, 53), Stuttgart 1987; for the

This content downloaded from
132.174.249.100 on Tue, 15 Sep 2026 18:30:03 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

disunited democracy, built on the forced assimilation of people of lower status (perhaps even of different ethnic origin) and often undermined by a strenuous oligarchical faction[43]. So, in Argos the *demos* was always considered inferior, perhaps also because of the ethnic divisions typical of the Peloponnesos and unknown in Attica, whereas in Athens the unity of the civic body is part of collective consciousness and finds its expression even at an institutional level, since Kleisthenes' and perhaps also since Solon's reform. In particular, in Argos political and social conflicts periodically caused bloody civil struggles: the oligarchic revolution and the democratic restoration in 417 provoked an outbreak of violence[44] while the so-called *skytalismos* of 370/69 caused 1200 or perhaps even 1500 victims[45]. Describing the state of crisis of the Greek cities to Philip II in 346, Isocrates speaks of the home situation in Argos in the following terms (*To Philip* 51-52):

> They have been in a state of war with their neighbors from the day they founded their city, just as have the Lacedaemonians; but there is this difference, that the neighbors of the Lacedaemonians are weaker than they, while those of the Argives are stronger — a condition which all would admit to be the greatest of misfortunes. [...] But what is most deplorable of all is that, during the intervals when their enemies cease from harrying them, they themselves put to death the most eminent and wealthy of their citizens; and they have more pleasure in doing this than any other people have in slaying their foes[46].

This tendency to recur to the *phonoi emphylioi,* which rests on an irreconcilable social dividing lines, makes Argos' civic life very different from the peaceful atmosphere of Athenian society.

debate on its application see C. BEARZOT, *Lisia e la tradizione su Teramene,* p. 11ff., 86 ff.; EAD., *Lisia e l'amnistia: lo sfondo politico dell'orazione XXV,* in *Amnistia, perdono e vendetta nel mondo antico* (*CISA*, 23), Milano 1997, p. 59-77; EAD., *Criteri alternativi di applicazione dell'amnistia in Lisia,* in *Responsabilità, vendetta e perdono nel mondo antico* (*CISA*, 24), Milano 1998, p. 111-144; A. WOLPERT, *Remembering Defeat: Civil War and Civic Memory in Ancient Athens,* Baltimore–London 2002.

[43] See C. BEARZOT, *I douloi/perioikoi di Argo: per una riconsiderazione della tradizione letteraria, IncidAntico* 3 (2005), p. 61-82.

[44] See Thuc. V 76.2, 81-84; Diod. XII 80.1-3; Aen. Tact. 17.2-4; Paus. II 20.2. For further information see E. DAVID, *The Oligarchic Revolution in Argos, 417 B.C., AC* 55 (1986), p. 113-124.

[45] See Diod. XV 57.3-58; Plut., *Mor.* 814b. For further information see E. DAVID, *Aeneas Tacticus 11, 7-10 and the Argive Revolution of 370 B.C., AJPh* 107 (1986), p. 343-349.

[46] Translation by G. NORLIN (Isocrates, London–Cambridge [MA] 1980).

This content downloaded from
132.174.249.100 on Tue, 15 Sep 2026 18:30:03 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

Finally, it is worth recalling the *stasis* of Corcyra in the years 427-425, a particularly interesting example, notorious for both its violence and the attention that Thucydides has devoted to it. An attempt to overthrow the democracy on the island, triggered by the murder of the pro-Athenian Pythias, led to a civil war which caused 1500 victims and annihilated the oligarchical faction[47]. Thucydides (III 81.4-5) gives us some idea of the acts of violence which occurred during the civil struggle:

> The Corcyreans butchered those fellow-citizens they regarded as enemies, charging them with putting down the democracy, but some also died because of personal hatred and others at the hands of those who owed them money. Every form of death prevailed, and whatever is likely in such situations happened — and still worse. Fathers killed sons, men were dragged from the sanctuaries and killed beside them, and some were even walled up in the sanctuary of Dionysos and died there.

In III 82-83 Thucydides proposes general remarks on *stasis* and emphasizes two aspects of the phenomenon. First, he highlights the relation with external war: the *prostatai* of the *demos,* divided into pro-Athenian and pro-Spartan factions, had no pretexts to appeal to external powers in time of peace, while

> during war, with alliances available to both factions for damaging their opponents and at the same time strengthening themselves, occasions for bringing in outsiders were readily found by those wishing to make any change in government (82.1).

War (*polemos)* is a powerful factor of *stasis*. As a «violent teacher» (*biaios didaskalos)* it takes away the easy supply of daily wants and stirs popular passions; thus, mutual relations in the polis are distorted (82.2).

Secondly, Thucydides focuses on the reversal of values caused by *stasis:* «And in self-justification men inverted the usual verbal evaluations of actions» (82.4).

Thucydides' words, which have been thoroughly discussed by modern scholars[48], focus on the fading of common values. The meaning of words remains the same; it is the evaluation of the actions indicated by words that are liable to change. So,

[47] For the sources see H.-J. GEHRKE, *Stasis*, p. 88ff.

[48] For bibliographic references see C. BEARZOT, *Stasis e polemos nel 404*, in *Il pensiero sulla guerra nel mondo antico* (*CISA*, 27), Milano 2001, p. 19-36.

This content downloaded from
132.174.249.100 on Tue, 15 Sep 2026 18:30:03 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

> irrational recklessness was now considered courageous commitment, hesitation while looking to the future was high-styled cowardice, moderation was a cover for lack of manhood, and circumspection meant inaction, while senseless anger now helped to define a true man, and deliberation for security was a specious excuse for dereliction. The man of violent temper was always credible, anyone opposing him was suspect. The intriguer who succeeded was intelligent, anyone who detected a plot was still more clever, but a man who made provisions to avoid both alternatives was undermining his party and letting the opposition terrorize him. Quite simply, one was praised for outracing everyone else to commit a crime — and for encouraging a crime by someone who had never before considered one (82.4-5).

The predominance of club links on blood relationship (82.6), the establishment of a revenge ideology (82.7), and the growth of ambition (*pleonexia, philotimia*) deeply pervert the nature of political relations:

> For the leading men in the cities, through their emphasis on an attractive slogan for each side — political equality for the masses, the moderation of aristocracy — treated as their prize the public interest to which they paid lip service (82.8).

The neglect of common interest in favour of personal gain provokes neglect of justice and of civic interest: power becomes the sole aim.

By these general remarks on *stasis,* Thucydides aims at giving a key to the reading not only of the Corcyrean episode, but also of all Greek events of the last quarter of the fifth century:

> Later the rest of Hellas, almost without exception, was also in turmoil [...] So the condition of the cities was civil war, and where it came later, awareness of earlier events pushed to extremes the revolution in thinking [...] In this way, every form of viciousness was established in the Hellenic world on account of the civil wars, and the simplicity that is especially found in noble natures disappeared because it became ridiculous. The division into distrustful groups opposed in their thinking was very extensive (cf. 82.1, 3; 83.1).

Thus the historian's remarks, connecting degeneration of political struggle and consequent mass murders with perversion of civic life and values, are not occasional, but apply to most Greek cities. In this way Thucydides highlights that such undoubtedly pathological expressions of the life of the polis become physiological, if they occur so frequently. The Athenian case may be considered as absolutely exceptional, insofar as it shows the *polis* as a successful instrument of mediation among the different components of

This content downloaded from
132.174.249.100 on Tue, 15 Sep 2026 18:30:03 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

the community which, through social and economic integration, prevents personal and factional interest from prevailing[49].

CONCLUSIONS

Ancient Greece did not refuse political murder, neither theoretically (as proved by the tyrannicide and the justifiable homicide of those who attempted to overthrow democracy) nor in practice (with both direct and judicial murder). Political murder is sometimes legitimated, sometimes admitted as a fact: as recalled above, the words Xenophon ascribes to Kritias («all sorts of changes in government are attended by loss of life») acknowledge a common situation of conflict in Greek cities which was exacerbated by the general unrest of the Greek world, as Thucydides highlights in his analysis of the events of Corcyra.

However, the case of Athens shows that societies with strong internal cohesion were able to limit the recourse to murder as an instrument of political struggle against both individuals (fifty years passed between the murders of Ephialtes and Hyperbolos) and masses (the crisis of democracy at the end of the fifth century). Thus, the *polis* could find the resources to limit its recourse to political murder in the cohesion of its political community; on the contrary, fractures of different nature and origin made it more difficult to control this phenomenon, which became usual or even characteristic of the political life of some cities among which Isocrates' Argos.

Milano Cinzia BEARZOT

[49] See M. MOGGI, *Stasis, prodosia e polemos in Tucidide*, in *Fazioni e congiure nel mondo antico* (*CISA*, 25), Milano 1999, p. 41-72.

This content downloaded from
132.174.249.100 on Tue, 15 Sep 2026 18:30:03 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms