THE DÊMOS IN DÊMOKRATIA

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Abstract. Dêmokratia is widely glossed ‘rule by the people’ where ‘people’ (dêmos) is defined as ‘entire citizenry’. Yet from Homer to Aeschylos, démous indicated not the whole citizenry but a part: those who wielded political power through their participation in a collective agent—in the first instance, an assembly—as opposed to those who enjoyed political influence as individuals. First and foremost, démokratia signalled that supreme power had passed to this group, away from the leading men who had previously held sway. The implications for our conceptualization of democracy are profound.

There are many things we know we do not know about ancient Greek democracy. One is when the term démokratia was first coined. Its earliest appearance in our sources may be in an inscription tentatively dated to 447/6 BC, though only the letters d-e-m-o- are legible.3 It next appears in Herodotos’s Histories, dated 440-25; Pseudo-Xenophon’s Constitution of the Athenians, usually dated 443-24; Aristophanes’ Acharnians (425); Antiphon’s speech ‘On the Chorus-boy’ (418); and a fragment by the philosopher Demokritos (born c.460, died c.370).4

Based on this evidence, many historians have assumed that démokratia entered political discourse around or just before the mid-fifth century.5 But as Mogens Hansen has pointed out, ‘inscriptions antedating 450 are so few that possible (rare) attestations are likely to have been altogether lost’, while the literary texts just listed are in fact our earliest examples of every genre—history, polemic, comedy, oratory, and moral philosophy—in which we might hope to find the word, given that metrical considerations rule it out of earlier poetry.6 The name Demokrates, moreover, was in use in the 460s, while circumlocutions such as ‘the ruling (kratos) hand of the démous’ appear in Aeschylos’ Suppliants, written

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3 IG I 37.48 = R. Meiggs and D. Lewis, A Selection of Greek Historical Inscriptions to the End of the Fifth Century BC (Oxford, 1988), §47.48.
4 Hdt. 6.43.3, 131.1; Ps.-Xen. Ath. Pol. 1.4, 5, 8, 2.20, 3.1, 8, 9, 12; Aristoph. Ach. 618; Ant. 6.45; Democritus §251 in H. Diels, Die Fragmente der Vorsokratiker (Berlin, 1903), p. 450.
around 463. Accordingly, Hansen speculates that *dēmokratia* may have been in use as early as the late sixth century, though we cannot say for sure.

Also uncertain is when *dēmokratia* came into being as a political regime, whether or not it was known by that name. Here everything depends on what we take *dēmokratia* to have meant in practice. Eberhard Ruschenbusch interpreted it as ‘any system in which the people in assembly are involved in communal decision making’, in which case our first glimpse comes in the Homeric epics. Closer to the other extreme, Kurt Raaflaub has argued that democracy was realized only ‘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’. On that account, Athens became a democracy only after the reforms of Ephialtes and Pericles in 462/1 (and, we may add, no modern state has yet managed it). Other possible ‘start dates’ are the reforms of Solon in 594/3, those of Kleisthenes in 508/7 (favoured by Herodotos), or even, as Walter Eder has argued, the post-civil war legal reforms of 403/2.

Outside Athens things are equally debatable. Hansen and Nielsen, in their *Inventory of Archaic and Classical Poleis*, take a pragmatic approach: if a *polis* is identified as a *dēmokratia* in our ancient sources or possessed features said to be democratic, then it is classed as such. Eric Robinson, in his second book on ancient Greek democracy, adopts the same strategy, having employed a different one in his first. But even this may not settle the matter, since some sources are decades (Aristotle) or centuries (Diodoros, Plutarch) later than the times they de-

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13 Raaflaub, ‘Breakthrough’.
scribe, thus raising the possibility of anachronism. Again, the onus falls on the historian to make the case for what demokratia meant in practice.

Amid this uncertainty, one point that is not usually disputed is the basic meaning of demokratia. Dēmos means ‘people’, kratos ‘power’ or ‘rule’, hence demokratia is usually glossed ‘rule by the people’ or ‘people-power’.

A more elaborate interpretation of kratos as ‘the collective capacity of a public to make good things happen in the public realm’ has recently been offered by Josiah Ober, but the meaning of dēmos has not received similar treatment.

It is widely agreed to have indicated the entire citizenry, synonymous with polis, ‘body of citizens’ or ‘city-state’.

The clearest ancient Greek example of this interpretation appears in Thucydides, in a speech purportedly given by the democratic leader Athenagoras of Syracuse in 415: ‘I say dēmos names the whole (sympan), oligarchy only a part’.

Similar modern glosses include ‘the whole people’, ‘People (all the people, the citizen body as a whole)’, ‘the people as a whole (or the citizen body to be more precise)’, ‘the people as a whole (that is, everyone)’, ‘the whole body of citizens’, ‘the sum of all male adult citizens’, ‘all the people’, ‘the whole community, including the privileged few as well as the underprivileged many’, ‘the entire citizenry’, ‘the whole of the people’, ‘the whole citizen body’, and ‘all

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23 Cartledge, Greek Political Thought, p. 74 (though cf. p. 57).
25 Harrison, Democracy, p. 3.
31 M.H. Hansen, Athenian Democracy in the Age of Demosthenes (Norman, 1999), p. 125.
32 Sinclair, Democracy and Participation, p. 15.
residents of the state who are culturally defined as potential citizens, regardless of their class or status.33 There are evidently some differences among these interpretations, but all agree that the primary referent of dêmos was the entire citizen body, including both rich and poor, mass and elite.

This is not to suggest that dêmos was univocal. On the contrary, as is often observed, dêmos, like the English ‘people’, had several meanings.34 An important one was ‘common people’, synonymous with plêthos, ‘mass’ or ‘majority’, as seen, for example, in Pseudo-Xenophon, Thucydides, Plato and Aristotle.35 Used in this sense, dêmos indicated not ‘all citizens’ but a ‘sociologically delimited fragment’ of the citizen body, namely the poorer majority, the less educated, the lower class—in short, the mass as opposed to the elite, rather than a body encompassing both.36 In the modern scholarly literature, however, this usage comes with a major caveat attached. It is said to have had a ‘pejorative overtone’ and is ascribed only to elite anti-democrats who deprecated the inclusion of all citizens in the decision-making process.37 ‘Skilled democratic rhetoricians’ such as Perikles are said to have rejected it, instead deliberately taking ‘the dêmos that was sovereign in Athenian democracy’ to include ‘every voter, no matter how poor—or how rich’.38 And this judgment has important implications for the study of ancient Greek politics. According to Hansen and others, since the ‘partial’ or ‘exclusive’ usage of dêmos was simply a slur, any study of démokratia that aims to be faithful to democratic ideology ought to disregard all sources in which it appears—which amounts to all extant poetic, philosophical, historical and polemical works. Only inscriptions and speeches delivered before democratic bodies such as the Athenian assembly or courts are deemed safe to use in this context.39

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34 Hansen, ‘Concepts’, pp. 502-3; Finley, Democracy, p. 12; Harrison, Democracy, p. 3; Rhodes, Ancient Democracy, p. 19; Sinclair, Democracy, p. 15.
38 Roberts, Athens on Trial, p. 49. Cf. Wood, ‘Demos versus “We, the People”’, p. 127.
As well as ‘entire citizenry’ and ‘common people’, démos could also suggest ‘all citizens’, synonymous with pantes politai (i.e. the citizen body conceived as individuals rather than en masse),40 ‘democracy’,41 ‘democratic faction’,42 ‘ward’43 and ‘assembly’.44 But none of these usages has been thought to affect the meaning of démokratia. Dêmos indicating ‘all citizens’ is so close to démos that we may consider it a variation, while démos representing ‘democracy’, as in the phrase lysai or katalysai ton démon, ‘overthrow the democracy,’ seems a simple shorthand, uninteresting in itself. ‘Democratic faction’ is trickier. Though close in meaning to ‘common people’—indeed, Hansen regards it as a special case of that meaning—it does appear in some democratic sources, which as we have seen is not supposed to happen. Hansen, however, argues that since the relevant context is always stasis, factionalism or civil war, such cases lack general significance.45 The meaning ‘ward’, often rendered ‘deme’—the name of the local adminstrative unit given a prominent role in the Athenian political system by Kleisthenes—is also usually deemed irrelevant to the wider political setting.46

Perhaps most interesting from a political perspective is the meaning ‘assembly’, usually treated as synonymous with ekklêsia, ‘meeting’.47 As Hansen has emphasized, this is actually the most common usage of démos in our democratic sources, most obviously in the phrase edoxe tô démô, ‘decided by the assembly’, which appears in scores of inscriptions and speeches.48 It has also attracted the most scholarly controversy. Since the 1970s Hansen has insisted that the relationship between Athens’ courts (dikastêria) and démos was importantly different from the relationship between the assembly (ekklêsia) and démos. Used in its institutional sense, Hansen argues, the démos simply was the assembly, but démos never signified the courts. Rather, the courts were understood to represent the démos in some way.49

40 Hansen, ‘Concepts’, p. 503. Dem. 18.89; Dem. 20.106; Din. 1.99.
42 Hansen, ‘Concepts’, p. 503. Thuc. 1.24.5; Aristot. Pol. 1302a10-11; Lys. 18.5, 11, 26.16; Isoc. 18.17, 49, 62; Aeschin. 2.90; IG I3 127.3-4, 179.3-4; IG II2 1.3-4.
43 Hansen, ‘Concepts’, p. 503. IG I3 78.9; Hdt. 5.81.
This sets up a potentially antithetical relationship between the courts and the assembly that Hansen’s critics have found impossible to accept. Against Hansen it has been argued, most vigorously by Ober, that all the major institutions of government in democratic Athens, viz. the assembly, courts, council (boulê) and legislators (nomothetai), were equally identifiable with the démos, not in the sense of ‘assembly’ but in the prior sense of ‘entire citizenry’. Ober draws on the concept of synecdoche, ‘the figure of speech in which a part stands for or refers to a whole (or vice versa)’, to illuminate this relationship: ‘each of the various institutional “parts” of the citizen body…could stand for and refer to the whole citizen body’.

This interpretation seems plausible since democratic institutions were in principle open to all citizens, though in practice only a part would have been able to attend any given meeting. Hansen, however, has continued to deny that Athenian judges, councillors or legislators were ever conceived as the démos in the sense of the entire people; and as far as the assembly is concerned, he has recently suggested that the synecdoche actually ran the other way around. ‘Ideologically a meeting of the ekklêsia was a meeting of the entire people…it is the whole, viz. the fiction that the entire people is gathered on the Pnyx, that stands for the part, viz. the part of the citizens who actually attended a meeting’.

Hansen and Ober differ significantly in their approaches to ancient Greek democracy. Yet on this point we should note how far they agree. In both their accounts, the use of démos to mean ‘assembly’ is derived from the prior referent ‘entire citizenry’. It was because the assembly was identified with the entire citizenry that the same term, démos, could be used to name both entities. Moreover, however close the meanings ‘assembly’ and ‘entire citizenry’ are agreed to be, both Hansen and Ober believe that only ‘entire citizenry’ was implied in démokratia. Ober has explicitly argued that the original and primary meaning of démos, the meaning specifically assumed in démokratia, was ‘capital-D Demos’, the ‘imagined community’ of all citizens, an entity never seen in practice but, he argues, necessary to make sense of democratic political life. Hansen’s notional ‘entire people…gathered on the Pnyx’ is not so distant from this.

The ruling agent in the ancient democratic polis is thus agreed to have been the démos in its widest sense: the entire citizenry. And this has significant implications, ably spelled out by Ross Harrison, for our conceptualization of democracy. If the basic meaning of démokratia was ‘rule by the whole people’, what, we may

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ask, was the object of that rule? That object was also the people. ‘So the meaning of the word “democracy” can be given most perspicaciously as being that the people rule themselves’. Dêmokratia, on this view, was reflexive: the ruling agent ruled over itself. Within the scope of that rule, moreover, each part of the ruling agent—each citizen—bore the same relationship to the collective body as every other. All were equally subject to and constitutive of the body as a whole. Hence all parts of the ruling agent were also equal to one another.

This relationship between all and equal is held to have been a central feature of ancient Greek democracy. In the words of W.G. Forrest, what developed between 750 and 450 BC was ‘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’. This is certainly what the conventional account suggests. We may now ask if it makes the best sense of the evidence at hand.

I
Some puzzles

One weakness of the conventional account is that while it implies a conception of dêmokratia as self-rule, it is surprisingly difficult to find any such conception in our ancient sources. Forrest’s terminology is instructive. The crucial word in his sketch is ‘autonomy’, ‘giving oneself the law’, from the Greek autonomia. But being autonomos in the classical Greek sense did not mean that each citizen participated in ruling, but that the polis was not ruled by a foreign power. It indicated nothing about the system of government within the polis. Nor did any other Greek term perform an equivalent role.

This lack is curious—and there are other reasons to question the claim that dêmos meant primarily ‘entire citizenry’. As noted, it asks that we jettison all evidence for the meaning of dêmokratia found in our ‘elite’ texts as indicating nothing more than prejudice. This is a hard pill to swallow. Even if the use of dêmos to mean ‘common people’ in those texts was coloured by anti-democratic feeling, it does not follow that that usage can have had no more ‘objective’ basis, that is, that it could not have been used descriptively, or even with approbation, by a non-elite citizen. There is, after all, nothing intrinsically distasteful about the concept ‘common people’. The charge of elitism, moreover, though plausible for some...

55 Harrison, Democracy, p. 3.
56 Raaflaub, ‘Introduction’, p. 15; Vlastos, Greek State, pp. 50-1.
58 Aristotle’s idea of ‘governing and being governed in turn’ (en merei, ‘by parts’) comes close, but ruling by parts differs from ruling continually over oneself. Aristot. Pol. 1261b4, 1317b2.
authors, is less convincing for others, especially Aristotle. The identification of dêmos with plêthos or ‘poor majority’ in the Politics is not casual: it is a core premise of Aristotle’s analysis. To have intended the term disparagingly would contrast sharply with his usual approach, which is to develop arguments in keeping with widely held views.\footnote{See e.g. Aristot. \textit{NE} 1098b, 1145b; O. McLeod, ‘Aristotle’s Method’, \textit{History of Philosophy Quarterly} 12 (1995), pp. 1-19.}

Other misgivings arise. The claim that the assembly was called dêmos because it stood in a synecdochal relationship to the entire citizenry is undermined by the fact that dêmos (or the Doric damos) was used to mean ‘assembly’ across the entire Hellenic world, not only where assemblies were open to all citizens.\footnote{Hansen and Nielsen, \textit{Inventory}, esp. Appendix 12, pp. 1341-2.} The suggestion that the usage ‘ward’ is irrelevant to the wider meaning of dêmos also gives pause: one might expect the core sense of a term to contrast less with one of its supposed derivatives. The sheer proliferation of apparently distinct meanings also raises questions. We have encountered eight, which is rather a lot, but most striking is the degree of difference believed to subsist among some of them, particularly ‘entire citizenry’ and ‘common people’. Can one of these usages really have been nothing more than an ideologically motivated distortion of the other?

There are at least two reasons to think not. One is that at least some fourth-century democrats, some of the time, definitely conceived of the dêmos as a part rather than the whole of the citizen body, i.e. as synonymous with plêthos rather than with polis. It is difficult to see this from uses of dêmos alone, given its acknowledged ambiguity. But it is unmistakably implied by the adjective dêmotikos, ‘in favour of (or in the interests of) the dêmos’, found in many democratic speeches.\footnote{E.g. Dem. 21.134, 209; 22.51, 67; 24.24, 59, 69, 162, 174; Hyp. 1.10, 2.10, 3.21, 4.21, 5 fr. 3. Translation by Cartledge, \textit{Greek Political Thought}, pp. 49-50. Dêmotikos is often rendered ‘democratic’, but see Ste. Croix, ‘Character of Athenian Empire’, pp. 22-3.} Being in favour of one agent necessarily presupposes opposition to, or at least distinction from, another, and that is borne out by our evidence. Demosthenes, speaking before a judicial panel composed exclusively of ordinary citizens chosen by lot, described a certain politician as ‘a good man, dêmotikon, very eager in the defence of your majority (tô plêthos tô hymeteron)’.\footnote{Dem. 24.134.} Hypereides challenged another judicial panel thus: ‘Why should you spare this man? Because he is dêmotikos?’\footnote{Hyp. 2.10.} A line in 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 dêmotikon committing an offence, you will punish him, but pardon the insolence of a rich man’.\footnote{Dem. 21.183, trans. Vince.} In each case an exclusive interpretation is inescapable. The dêmos envisaged is not the entire citizen body but a part.
The other reason to question the accepted view is the evidence of our earliest sources. Pre-democratic texts are not normally mined for what they can tell us about the démos in démokratia, but that may be a mistake. Whenever démokratia was coined, it will have been with the then-current meaning of démos in mind, i.e. that established before the mid-fifth century (at the latest). That meaning must therefore be excavated, and the results are revealing.

From Homer in the eighth century down to Aeschylos in the second quarter of the fifth, the meaning of démos was remarkably stable. It had three essential features. A démos was a singular collective agent, numerous individuals conceived as a single entity, in contradistinction from the same individuals conceived as a multitude of disaggregated persons (Greek laoi). 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 (laos). And it was an exclusive agent, consisting not of the entire community but of the ordinary majority, in contradistinction from both those individuals who made up the political elite (hégêtores, hégêmones, basileis, gerontes) and the entire community, including both ordinary citizens and their leaders (polis or pantes politai).

Putting these points together, I suggest that, narrowly construed, the original and—well into the classical period—primary meaning of démos was not ‘entire citizenry’ but ‘assembly’, in explicit contradistinction from a king or ruling council. More broadly, it denoted those who wielded political power through their participation in a collective agent such as an assembly, as opposed to those who had political influence as individuals. In all times and places in the ancient Greek world those whose political agency depended on their participation in a collective agent formed a majority within their communities, and were thus also reasonably identified by the term plêthos, ‘mass’ or ‘majority’. This group is also rightly designated the ‘common people’. That usage was far from inherently anti-democratic. The démos, conceived as a collective, political, exclusive agent, existed long before démokratia, and what démokratia signalled first and foremost was that final power in the community had shifted to this group, away from the leading men who had previously held sway.

This is not to suggest that the meaning of démos did not change over time. It did. Most significantly, it expanded sufficiently to be used, on occasion, as a synonym for polis, ‘body of citizens’ or ‘city-state’, and pantes politai, ‘all citizens’. But our evidence suggests that this was a relatively late development, predicated on rather than preceding the collective agent’s hold on power. Only once démokratia existed as a political regime did démos and polis come to be interchangeable, because only in démokratia did the will of the démos, as opposed to that of a council or leading man, actually come to stand in for that of the polis.

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66 An important exception is Donlan, ‘Changes and Shifts’. See also, more generally, D. Hammer, The Iliad as Politics (Norman, OK, 2002).
There was nothing figurative about this process. Rather, the locus of decision-making power simply shifted in a straightforward way. The implications for our conceptualization of democracy are profound.

II

The dêmos was a collective agent

The single most important feature of dêmos is that it is a collective noun that takes a singular verb. As such it differs importantly from the English ‘people’, which even when used with the definite article typically 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 that is at odds with the usual modern conceptualization of ‘people’ as a mass of disaggregated individuals. ‘Corporate body’, however, is exactly what dêmos implies. Like ‘team’ or ‘state’, dêmos signified a collective entity made up of numerous individuals who act (or perhaps better, are conceived as acting) as a single agent.

This is significant because the ancient Greeks did not lack a term for ‘people’ conceived as numerous disaggregated individuals. That word was laoi, a plural noun that takes a plural verb. Other near-equivalents include stratiótai, ‘soldiers’ and politai, ‘citizens’. Yet laoi, stratiótai and politai share a feature that dêmos lacks. Though they are plural nouns, each is closely related to a singular collective noun, that is, respectively, laos, ‘people’, stratos, ‘army’, and polis, ‘body of citizens’ or ‘city-state’. There is thus a clear verbal relationship between these collective nouns and their constituent parts. A laos is made up of laoi, a stratos of stratiótai, and so on. But at least in our earliest texts, there is no term démôtai representing the disaggregated individuals who, when united, comprise a dêmos. The dêmos stands and falls as a collective entity. In fact, the word standardly used in Homer and other archaic texts to describe members of the dêmos conceived separately is not démôtai but laoi.

The relations between laoi, laos and dêmos are clearly revealed in Book 2 of the Iliad. Agamemnon tells the heralds to summon the Achaians to the place of assembly (agorén), and they (toi, a plural pronoun) begin to gather. The plural laoi is then used to describe the troops on their way to the gathering and as they arrive. Just as the meeting is about to start, however, a shift occurs. In the line ‘Hardly at the last were the people made to sit, and were stayed in their places,

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67 On laoi and the related laos, see J. Haubold, Homer’s People: Epic Poetry and Social Formation (Cambridge, 2000).
68 Dêmôtai does appear in later texts, e.g. Pind. Nem. 7.65; Hdt. 2.172. However, it refers to the people of a particular locality—what modern scholars would call ‘demesmen’—not to members of the ‘national’ dêmos.
69 Hom. II. 2.50-2.
70 Hom. II. 2.86, 96.
ceasing from their clamour’, ‘people’ is represented not by the plural laoi but by the collective singular laos. And this ‘people’ continues to be depicted as a single entity until the assembly is dismissed. The unitary representation is shown not only by laos but also by plêthos, démos and stratos, indicating a consistently singular conceptualization of the mass of assembled attendees.

These relations reappear in Book 18, in the description of the judgment scene pictured on Achilles’ shield. In the line ‘The people were gathering in the place of assembly’, ‘people’ is represented by the plural laoi. But when the poet switches to describing the meeting in full swing, those attending are identified first by démos and then by laos, suggesting that once they have gathered, they are conceived as a single entity. This conceptualization is briefly interrupted, but it is a case of the exception confirming the rule. The relevant line is ‘And laoi were cheering both [speakers], favouring either side’. Here, the audience is clearly not acting collectively; instead, different people are supporting different sides. A unitary conceptualization is thus impossible. When the group is re-presented from the perspective of the heralds keeping order, however, the collective laos returns.

Further examples appear in the Odyssey. As Telemachos enters the Ithakan assembly-place, those watching are described as laoi; when he explains that it was he who assembled them, laos is used; and when Mentor rebukes the gathering, he uses laoi to refer to the disparate individuals over whom Odysseus is lord, but démos to refer to those currently gathered together. Also instructive is the line ‘are you willingly thus oppressed or do the laoi throughout the démos hate you?’ Here again the word laoi expresses ‘people’ in the sense of separate individuals, démos the body that they make up.

These patterns continue in later sources. Solon, the early sixth-century law-giver whom Aristotle identified as the first to give the démos formal political standing, used démos rather than laoi when referring to his act of uniting the people: ‘But what did I leave unachieved, of all the goals for which I did unite the démos?’ Around a century later, the poet Pindar described how Pyrrha and Deukalion had, in Opous, founded a single démos composed of beings they called

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72 Hom. Il. 2.394-5.
73 Hom. Il. 2.142, 198, 207.
75 Hom. Il. 18.500, 503.
76 Hom. Il. 18.503.
77 The definite article is thus better avoided in translation. Murray gives ‘the people were cheering both’, but the meaning is arguably better conveyed by ‘people’.
78 Hom. Il. 18.503.
80 Hom. Od. 3.214, 16.95.
81 Other examples include Hom. Il. 7.175, 24.1; Od. 2.252; Theog. 53-60.
laoi,

while in Aeschylos’s Suppliants, King Pelasgos assemblesthe laoi to vote on the fate of the refugees, but once gathered in assembly, the voting agent is consistently identified as the démos.

Later still, the difference between laoi and démos continued to be reflected in the standard call-outs to the multitudinous people, akouête leô, ‘Hear ye, people’, used for example at festivals and plays, and deur’ ite, pantes leô, ‘o come, all ye people’. Plutarch claimed that the latter had originally been used by Theseus, the mythical founder of Athens, when he established the Athenian pandêmos, ‘whole démos’, by bringing into one city the people who had previously been scattered throughout the countryside. Once again, the disparate laoi, when united, were conceived as transformed into a singular collective agent, the démos.

### III

**The démos was a political agent**

Dêmos 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 laos, ‘people’, stratos, ‘army’, and polis, ‘city-state’. What then differentiated démos from these proximate terms?

One factor is whether the word was used in a military setting. Stratos was used almost exclusively in relation to war and suggests the physical presence of men under arms. For that reason, in Homer, it is often rendered ‘camp’. Stratos did occasionally appear outside a military setting, as in Pindar’s line ‘under every regime the straight-talking man excels: in a tyranny, when the boisterous straton rules, or when the wise watch over the city’. Another example is the chorus’s prayer, in Aeschylos’s Seven Against Thebes (467), for the polis to be saved and the stratos not to be destroyed by fire. Even in these authors, however, the military usage predominated.

The military factor also distinguished démos from laos. In the Iliad, laos is often translated ‘army’, as when Hector and his laos are prevented from taking the fight to the ships of the Achaians. ‘Army’ or ‘host’ may also be the right interpretation of the epithets poimena laôn, ‘shepherd of hosts’, and laossoos, ‘host-

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85 Aristoph. Ach. 1000, Peace 551, Birds 448; Knights 163, Peace 296.

86 Plut. Thes. 25.

87 Hom. Il. 1.318, 384, 2.779, 10.336, 385.


89 Pind. Nem. 8.11, 9.18, 10.25, Isthm. 7.28, Olymp. 9.96, 10.43, Pyth. 4.191, 6.11, 8.52, 10.8, 11.8; Aesch. Pers. 65-6, 91, 126, 241, 255, Seven 79, Ag. 638.

90 Hom. Il. 15.721.

91 Hom. Il. 10.3, 73, 405; Od. 4.24.
rousing’. Similar uses appear in the Homeric hymn to Athena, the description of the Greek army’s embarkation for Troy in Hesiod’s Works and Days, Pindar’s first Nemean ode, and Aeschylus’s Persians (472), where laos specifically suggests ‘infantry’. Dêmos never appears in this context.

A further distinction relates to territory. A laos in our extant texts is portable, attached primarily to its leader: the laoi of Agamemnon and other leaders attend them wherever they go. Dêmos, on the other hand, normally suggests more settled contexts. It often featured in connection with origins, as in the ‘catalogue of ships’ in Book 2 of the Iliad, where it identifies the people of Athens and Apasos respectively. Requests to tell one’s country (gaian), people (dêmon) and/or city (polin) are also common in the Odyssey, suggesting that these concepts were closely identified. Similar associations of people and place feature in the Homeric hymns, Hesiod, Pindar and Aeschylus.

This territorial aspect has often led dêmos to be translated ‘land,’ as in Murray’s description of Odysseus as reared ‘in the land of Ithaca’. This rendering is misleading if it causes dêmos to be confused with gê or gaia, ‘land’ in the sense of ‘earth’ or ‘country’. The dêmos is always a human agent, whereas gê alludes more literally to the soil. Yet it does usefully highlight another aspect of dêmos: its association with production. The phrase Delphôn es piona dêmon, for example, may be translated either ‘to the rich land of Delphi’ or ‘to the rich community of Delphi’. What supports both renderings is the dêmos’s productive function.

This function is particularly evident in the Odyssey. ‘Come now, let us give him a great tripod and a cauldron, each man of us’, urges Alkinous, one of the kings of the Phaiakians, ‘and we in turn will gather the cost from among the people (kata dêmon), and repay ourselves’. Similarly, after Odysseus kills Antinous, ringleader of the suitors, another suitor suggests that the rest could ‘go about the land (kata dêmon) and get you recompense for all that has been drunk and eaten in your halls’. To be sure, the dêmos may be milked too severely: consider, for instance, Achilles’ withering comment to Agamemnon, ‘People-de-

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92 Hom. Od. 22.210; Hes. Shield 3, 37.
95 Hom. Il. 2.545, 828; cf. 15.738-45.
99 E.g. Hom. Od. 5.398.
vouring king (*dēmobaros basileus*), since you rule over nobodies!\(^{104}\) Yet the fact that the gods are equally ready to dispose of the *dēmos’s* productive capacities, as Demeter does in one of the Homeric hymns addressed to her, suggests that this may not have been regarded as unfair exploitation.\(^{105}\)

Another difference between *dēmos* and *laos* concerns their relationships with leaders. A *dēmos* was a productive object ‘held’ (*eichon*) by its leaders and used by them as a source of wealth and power.\(^{106}\) This could easily be accompanied by hostility, as in Theognis’ line, ‘Trample the empty-headed *dēmos*, jab it with a sharp goad, and place a painful yoke around its neck’.\(^{107}\) The relationship between the *laos* and its leaders was more solidaristic, even intimate. When Priam’s people weep with him over Hector’s death, they are identified as *laoi* and *laos*, not *dēmos*.\(^{108}\) Similarly, when Telemachos bursts into tears while recounting his plight to the Ithakan assembly, those pitying him are called *laos*. The chorus in *Persians*, when it appeals to the ghost of king Darius, also identifies itself this way.\(^{109}\)

The fact that *laos* has a martial and a personal connotation while *dēmos* is associated more with settled agricultural activity and a degree of alienation from its leaders has important implications. A *laos*, 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 *dēmos’s* proximity to the means of production and *de facto* control of its own territory give it a measure of independence: small perhaps, but not insignificant. Because of this, one might expect to see *dēmos* associated with greater political voice and agency than *laos*, 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—the word *dēmos* is used. Its first appearance in the *Iliad* is, as we have seen, during the Achaian army’s headlong rush to the ships, while in the *Odyssey*, Odysseus claims that there was no way to refuse the journey to Ilion, ‘for the voice of the *dēmos* pressed hard upon us’.\(^{110}\) Similarly, Telemachos counts the fact that the ‘people at large’ (*pas dēmos*) bears him no grudge as a great advantage in his struggle against the suitors, while Penelope challenges Antinous, ringleader of the suitors, by reminding him that his father once ‘came to this house a fugitive in terror of the *dēmos*’.\(^{111}\)

The *dēmos’s* political significance is sometimes shown merely through passive disapprobation, as suggested by the line ‘in no way can there be good report

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\(^{105}\) Hom. *Hymn* 2.270-1.


\(^{107}\) Theog. 847-50.


in the land (kata dêmon) for men who dishonour and consume the house of a prince’.\(^{112}\) It is also important to note that some of the most insistent concerns about the ‘voice of the dêmos’ come from women, Penelope and Nausikaa, who are themselves politically marginalized.\(^{113}\) Yet the judgment of the dêmos is frequently depicted as well founded. The Achaians’ support for the return of Chryses’ daughter is entirely vindicated, as is Telemachos’s decision to take his case to the assembly. The dêmos is even expected to assert itself. Speaking before the Ithakan assembly, Mentor does not blame the suitors for wooing Penelope, but he does blame ‘the rest of the dêmos, in that you all sit there in silence, and utter no word of rebuke to make them cease, though you are many (polloi) and they but few’.\(^{114}\) Contrast that with the following line from the Iliad: ‘Each leader gave orders to his own men, and the rest marched in silence; you would have said that they who followed in such multitudes (tosson laon) had no voice in their breast, all silent as they were, for fear of their commanders’\(^{115}\).

In later texts, the political agency of the dêmos is reconfirmed in a striking way. It is always dêmos, never laos, that appears in compounds suggesting public actions (dêmopraktos, dêmokrantos),\(^{116}\) public provisions (domat’ dêmia, dêmio-plêthea)\(^{117}\) and public punishments such as stoning (leustêra demou, dêmoleustos),\(^{118}\) banishment for bloodshed (dêmélasian),\(^{119}\) and being driven into exile (syn phyge dêmêlatô).\(^{120}\) As Kreon observes in the closing lines of Aeschyllos’s Seven Against Thebes, ‘A dêmos that has escaped danger can be brutal’.\(^{121}\) By the second quarter of the fifth century, the dêmos’s capacity to make its will felt across the community had become embedded in the Greek language.

IV

The dêmos was an exclusive agent

A dêmos was thus politically significant in a way that a laos 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?

The most important feature of polis is that it suggested the outermost and hence most inclusive boundary of the political community. This is illustrated by

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\(^{114}\) Hom. Od. 2.234-44, trans. Murray.

\(^{115}\) Hom. Il. 4.428, trans. Murray.

\(^{116}\) Aesch. Supp. 942-3, Ag. 456.

\(^{117}\) Aesch. Supp. 957, Ag. 129.

\(^{118}\) Aesch. Seven 199; Soph. Antig. 36. Cf. Aesch. Ag. 1615.

\(^{119}\) Aesch. Supp. 6-7.

\(^{120}\) Aesch. Supp. 612-14.

\(^{121}\) Aesch. Seven 1042.
the fact that 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*.\(^{122}\) Apollo’s advice to the Spartans is given to the *polis*,\(^{123}\) divine epithets include *philopolis*, ‘city-loving’, *poliaoche*, ‘protector of the city’, and *rusipolis*, also ‘protector of the city’,\(^{124}\) and when the gods visit human communities those communities are described as *anthrôpòn poleis*, never *dēmoi*.\(^{125}\) Relations between communities also took place at the level of the *polis*. It is *poleis*, not *dēmoi*, that engage in war\(^{126}\) and in athletic competitions,\(^{127}\) and that hold festivals.\(^{128}\) Most significantly, *polis* is associated with what we would call national identity. The names used to link particular groups to places and ways of life—Merops, Phlyeges, Myrmidons, Lokrians, and so on—all designate *poleis*.\(^{129}\)

*Polis* could thus denote all members of a given community.\(^{130}\) Crucially, that included its leaders. In our archaic texts, there is in fact a special connection between a community’s leaders and the *polis*. Narrowly construed, *polis* referred to the physical *akropolis*, the walled citadel inside which the ruling elite lived, as distinct from the land outside the walls, where the working population mostly remained.\(^{131}\) This usage appears in Homer and elsewhere, but the association between the *polis* and the ruling class is particularly clear in Theognis.\(^{132}\) He describes his *polis* as ‘pregnant’ with the righteous man who will bring down its leaders (*hêgemones*), and holds those leaders directly responsible for the *polis*’s instability.\(^{133}\) Nausikaa, in the *Odyssey*, also suggests a close relationship between leader and community. Her father, Alkinous, is one ‘in whom is vested [italics mine] the power (*kratos*) and might of the Phaiakians’.\(^{134}\)

*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 nonetheless identified with the rest of the community in some way. The identification of a *polis*’s 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 out-


\(^{128}\) Pind. *Olymp.* 7.94.


\(^{131}\) See e.g. Thuc. 2.15.3.


siders. But in this respect, polis contrasts sharply with dēmos, which in our 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, while Hector himself is a ‘great joy’ to polis and dēmos alike.\(^{135}\) Athena visits the dēmos and polis of the Phaiakians, Odysseus those of the Kimmerians, and Hesiod writes that the sun ‘moves to dark men’s dēmos and polis in winter’.\(^{136}\) Such cases may be interpreted as pleonasm. Yet that seems unlikely in relation to Paris and Hector, and analogous pairings of polis and gaia, ‘country’ or ‘land’, are typically interpreted as representing city and country respectively, those inside and those outside the city walls.\(^{137}\) Theognis’ description of aretē, virtue, as ‘a common (synon) benefit for the city (polis) and all the people (panti te dêmô)’ leaves no room for doubt.\(^{138}\) Here, the word ‘common’ requires that we interpret polis and dēmos as distinct entities.

These examples look like cases of polis narrowly construed, that is, polis suggesting above all the ruling elite. In such instances, polis and dēmos appear to be complementary. But what about when polis suggested the entire community? Here too we find a distinction between dēmos and polis. In such cases, another group figures as the complement of dēmos, in relation to both of which the polis is a whole. This complement is the polis’s rulers: in Homeric language, the hégētores kai medontes, ‘leaders and counselors’, of the mass of ordinary men.

A disjunction between the dēmos and its leaders is evident from the first time dēmos appears in our sources. Odysseus’s aggression towards a ‘man of the people’ (dêmou t’andra) as he attempts to regather the Achaian army is explicitly contrasted with his gentle approach to a ‘king or man of note’.\(^{139}\) This disjunction continues throughout Homer and elsewhere.\(^{140}\) The chiefs of the Achaians are consistently ‘honoured by the dēmos as a god’\(^{141}\) (unlike minstrels and other respected figures who are typically honoured by the laos).\(^{142}\) And such honouring should ideally be mutual. According to Pindar, ‘a man who is ruler (hagêtēr)...can in honouring his people (damon) turn them to harmonious peace’.\(^{143}\) Indeed, the dēmos and its rulers are often depicted as mutually dependent. Odysseus links the status of the Phaiakian kings to the ‘dues of honour which the dēmos has given’.

\(^{135}\) Hom. Il. 3.49, 24.706, 527; cf. Od. 14.43.
\(^{138}\) Theog. 1003-6.
\(^{139}\) Hom. Il. 188-98.
\(^{141}\) Hom. Il. 10.32-3, 11.58, 13.218, 16.605, Od. 7.11.
\(^{142}\) Hom. Il. 8.472, Od. 13.28, 16.375, 22.132. An exception is Il. 5.76-8.
\(^{143}\) Pind. Pyth. 1.69.
while Polydamas accepts that a dêmos ought to increase its leader’s power (kratos). Accordingly, dêmoi are readily implicated in their leaders’ failings. Hesiod claims that Zeus will take vengeance on the dêmos for the wickedness of its kings, Theognis that the dêmos in his community is ‘in love with tyranny’, and Solon that the Athenian dêmos ‘increased the power’ (kratos) of the Pistratid 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 dêmos and hêgemones was maintained, the ‘milk’ kept separate from the ‘cream’.

The dêmos and its leaders were thus typically portrayed as complementary entities, and the community that they made up was the polis, broadly construed. That the dêmos was regarded as a subset of the polis thus conceived, rather than as equivalent to it, is confirmed by the conventional formula for identifying a dêmos. Throughout the archaic and classical periods the usual way to refer to (for example) the Athenian dêmos was ton dêmon tôn Athênaion, ‘the dêmos of the Athenians’, using the plural noun ‘Athenians’ in the genitive. This construction may be identified as a partitive genitive, showing that the dêmos is one part of all Athenians. An alternative formulation—the one naturally favoured by English speakers—would be ton dêmon ton Athênaion, ‘the Athenian dêmos’. This formulation, which leaves the relationship between dêmos and polis obscure, does appear in our sources, but it is both rare and relatively late.

The specific role played by the polis’s leaders 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 dêmos and protect the city’s (polêos) ramparts with straight judgments’. The six men then listed are distinct from the dêmos but part of the polis, living within its walls and ensuring its security. Another useful source in this context is the Spartan Rhêtra or ‘Great Pronouncement’, a much-debated text, preserved mainly in Plutarch, which lays out the form of government in Sparta. The polis is described as being in the care of the kings (basilêas), while the elders (gerontes) initiate counsel and certain dêmos-men (demotas andras) respond, avoiding speaking crookedly to the polis. Decision-making power (kratos) is assigned to the majority of the people (dêmou te plêthei), and the whole Rhêtra is summed up as ‘Phoibos’ revelation to the polis’. The identities of dêmos, polis and leading men are here unmistakable. The

145 Hes. WD 255, Theog. 849, Ps. Aristot. 12.5 (Solon fr. 37).
146 Ps. Aristot. Ath. Pol. 11.2-12.1; fr. 34.
147 E.g. Thuc. 4.46, 6.54; Aristoph. Thesmo. 301; Aeschin. 1.25, 85.
148 E.g. Aristoph. Knights 824.
polis is the entire community, comprising kings, elders, men of the démos and the démos itself. The démos is not the whole community but a part of it.

The best synonym for démos in the archaic period would thus seem to be plêthos, ‘mass’ or ‘majority’. Of course, since plêthos can suggest ‘majority’ in any context, the terms are not perfectly equivalent. But both plêthos and démos were regularly contrasted with hêgêmones and hêgêtores, 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 the Iliad opens with the admission that though the poet will tell of leaders and lords (hêgêmones kai koironoi), ‘the plêthun I could not tell or name’. Similarly, when Agamemnon orders his herald to ‘summon every man by name to the place of assembly,’ he means ‘leaders and counselors’ alone. The same pattern appeared in Aeschylus’s Persians. ‘Which of the leaders of the host (archeleiôn) must we mourn?’ asks Queen Atossa, and the messenger identifies them. But when the destruction of the mass of men is described, the only names given are laos and démos. Indeed, when otherwise undistinguished men are given individual roles in our texts, they are simply described as emerging ‘out of the démos’. No other title was deemed necessary, or perhaps possible.

V

The démos was the assembly

The démos before démokratia was thus a collective, political, majority agent, as distinct from a plural agent (laoi), a collective military agent (stratos, laos), the community’s leading men (hêgêmones, hêgêtores, basileis, gerontes), and the entire community (polis). Drawing these points together, I suggest that the original meaning of démos, narrowly construed, was ‘assembly’. More broadly, démos denoted all those whose political power was tied to their participation in a collective agent such as an assembly, in explicit contradistinction from those who were influential as individuals.

This claim is open to an immediate objection. Was not the proper Greek term for ‘assembly’ not démos but agora or ekklesia? In some circumstances, yes; but not, customarily, when indicating the assembly as an agent.

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151 See e.g. Hom. Il. 17.31, 20.197; Theogn. 691; Aristot. Pol. 1290a30.
154 Hom. Il. 9.10.
From its first appearance in the *Iliad*, when Achilles summons the *laos* to the *agorê*, *agora* signified primarily the place of assembly, and that usage continued into the fifth century.  

*Agora* could also signify ‘assembly’ in the sense of ‘meeting’, as when Hector or other leaders call an assembly, conveyed by *agorên poiesato*, ‘he made an assembly’, or dismiss one, conveyed by *lysen agorên*, ‘he dissolved the assembly’. But when the assembly was the subject of an action, not *agora* but *dêmos* or *plêthos* was used.

Something similar is true of *ekklêsia*, at least until rather late in the classical period. This may surprise some readers, since historians often refer to the Athenian assembly as ‘the Ecclesia’, author of numerous actions such as deciding policies and electing generals. But this does not reflect ancient Greek usage. *Ekklêsia*, from its earliest appearance in Herodotos, primarily indicated ‘meeting’, in line with its derivation from *ekkaleô*, ‘call out’ or ‘summon’. This is its sense in the opening scene of Aristophanes’ *Acharnians*, when Dikaiopolis identifies the upcoming meeting as the *ekklêsia kyria*, the main meeting of the month, and later asks for it to be adjourned on account of rain. *Ekklêsia* could also connote the place of assembly, as in the claim, in *Knights*, that the politician Paphlagon had ‘one foot in Pylos, the other in the assembly’ (*en t’ekklêsia*). But it did not denote the assembly as an agent until well into the fourth century and even then that usage was extremely rare. Rather, *dêmos* was used. As early as 625-600, the *damos* of the Kerkyraians pronounced its responsibility for a memorial to its ‘cherished Proxenos’ Menekrates of Oianthos, while a law from Chios, dated 575-50, refers to *rhetras of the dêmo*, that is, pronouncements of the *dêmos*, and to two demotic institutions, the *dêmo keklêmeno* or ‘called-out’ *dêmos* and the *bolê dêmosiê* or demotic council (evidently a supplement to the existing aristocratic one). By the time the prescript *edoxe tô dêmô*, ‘decided by the *dêmos*’, appeared in an Athenian inscription of the late sixth century, the *dêmos* was already

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160 E.g. Hom. *Il.* 15.295, 305;

161 As noted by Hansen, ‘Concepts’, p. 507.

162 Hdt. 3.142: Maiandrios ‘put together an *ekklêsien* of all the townsren’ (pantôn tôn astôn).


165 Hansen (‘Concepts’, p. 507) claims it is never found in Athenian speeches and inscriptions, but notes exceptions in Plato and Aristotle, e.g. *Ael.* I 114b and *Pol.* 1282a29. Meiggs and Lewis §5.23 is also important. This a 4th-century reproduction of what purports to be a 7th-century inscription on the founding of Kyrene, but I agree with Graham that ‘the actual words of the sanction formula are not original, though the existence of a formula with this meaning would not be a constitutional anachronism’. A.J. Graham, ‘The Authenticity of the *Orkion Tônoikistêrôn* of Cyrene’, *Journal of Hellenic Studies* 80 (1960), 94–111, esp. pp. 104–5.

widely established as a political agent.\textsuperscript{167} And this continued throughout the classical era. With very few exceptions, as Hansen has repeatedly emphasized, the entity responsible for decisions made in assembly-meetings was not ‘the ekklēsia’ but ‘the dēmos’.\textsuperscript{168} The two terms were not in fact synonymous: rather, the dēmos was the body that met in ekklēsiai (meetings).\textsuperscript{169}

Moreover, this conceptualization is visible well beyond inscriptions and speeches. We may consider two less likely sources, beginning with Aristophanes. The main character in \textit{Knights} is ‘Mr Demos of Pnyx Hill’, the Pnyx being the location of assembly meetings,\textsuperscript{170} and throughout his plays, it is the dēmos whose mind is changed in debates;\textsuperscript{171} which is addressed by politicians during meetings and which yells right back at them;\textsuperscript{172} which authorises decrees and is held responsible for the results;\textsuperscript{173} which works in tandem with the council;\textsuperscript{174} and a female version of which is produced when a group of women meet together.\textsuperscript{175}

In Aristotle’s \textit{Politics}, meanwhile, the governing officials in Hippodamos’s ideal state are all to be elected by an assembly (\textit{hairetas hypo tou dêmou}), while in Carthage, if they agreed, the kings (basileis) and elders (gerontes) could decide which matters to refer to that body (\textit{pros ton dēmon}).\textsuperscript{176} Most arresting is Aristotle’s casual statement 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 fit other regimes, ‘for in some there is no dēmos, nor do they hold an ekklēsia but only synekłówous’.\textsuperscript{177} This must startle any reader accustomed to reading dēmos as either ‘entire citizenry’ or ‘common people’; ‘assembly’ is surely required here, or more broadly ‘collective political agent’, but, significantly, Aristotle does not bother to clarify this. Another important point is the connection drawn to ekklēsia rather than synekłówous. A synekłówos was an \textit{ad hoc} or extraordinary meeting:\textsuperscript{178} dēmos thus seems to have been associated with the custom of regular rather than one-off gatherings. And this makes sense. Without regular meetings, the existence of the collective political agent might well have seemed in jeopardy.

The claim that dēmos primarily signified ‘assembly’, or more broadly those who met in assemblies, thus seems plausible; and further support is available inasmuch as it allows us to draw together and make better sense of dēmos’s other

\textsuperscript{167} Meiggs and Lewis §14.


\textsuperscript{169} E.g. Dem. 19.234, Aeschin. 1.26-7.

\textsuperscript{170} Aristoph. \textit{Knights} 42, cf. 751.

\textsuperscript{171} Aristoph. \textit{Ach.} 626.


\textsuperscript{173} Aristoph. \textit{Wasp} 594, \textit{Ass}. 204.

\textsuperscript{174} Aristoph. \textit{Wasp} 590, 395.

\textsuperscript{175} Aristoph. \textit{Thesmo}. 1145.

\textsuperscript{176} Aristot. \textit{Pol.} 1268a10, 1273a5-9.

\textsuperscript{177} Aristot. \textit{Pol.} 1275b5-12.

meanings. ‘Common people’ is justified by the fact that in all times and places in the ancient Greek world those who participated in politics through a collective agent were none other than the common people. ‘Democratic faction’ fits the thought that this group will have been more interested in preserving and extending its power than the elite. And ‘ward’ no longer seems a puzzling deviation from the meaning ‘entire citizenry’, but rather a simple reflection of the fact that the relevant collective agent could be a local entity rather than a ‘national’ one.

Next, the interchangeability of dêmos and démokratia highlights the primacy of the assembly within démokratia: what the assembly wanted was, in general, precisely what démokratia delivered. At first glance, this may seem an odd choice of verb: lyô literally meant ‘unbind’ or ‘dissolve’, katalyô ‘dissolve’ or ‘break down’ completely. It is not obvious why these terms should have developed the meaning ‘overthrow’, but if we interpret dêmôs as signifying primarily ‘assembly’ the puzzle begins to clear up. What is imagined is the dissolution of the ties that bind the dêmôs together, such as the practice of meeting together. Without such ties, the collective dêmôs dissolves back into the multitudinous laoi, making démokratia impossible. Here we may recall the line ‘He means to divide our dêmôs!’ in Aristophanes’ Wasps—division being the worst thing that can befall a collective entity.

Finally, interpreting dêmôs as ‘assembly’ in the first instance suggests a plausible explanation of its eventual synonymity with polis, ‘body of citizens’ or ‘city-state’, and pantes politai, ‘all citizens’. As we have seen, this sense is clearly implied in Thucydides, in Athenagoras’s claim that dêmôs ‘names the whole’. Other examples, collected by Hansen, include Pseudo-Xenophon’s description of Athens’ allies as ‘slaves of the dêmôs of the Athenians’ (44-25); the line ‘The allies crowned the dêmôs for courage and righteousness’ found in Demosthenes’ speech ‘Against Timocrates’ (c. 353), especially when compared to the mention of crowns ‘conferred on the polis’ in ‘On the Crown’ (330); Demosthenes’s observation, in ‘Against Leptines’ (355), that ‘there are honours among the Lakedaimonians that the dêmôs to a man (hapas ho dêmôs) would shrink from introducing

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179 In fourth-century Athens this was tempered by the political powers of the popular courts (see Hansen, Sovereignty of the People’s Court, and the modified argument in Hansen, ‘Political Powers of the People’s Court’). For an argument that Athens’ popular courts could by the late fifth century be regarded as more favourable to the collective common people than the assembly itself, see D. Cammack, ‘The Democratic Significance of the Athenian Courts’, in W. O’Reilly ed. Decline: Decay, Decadence and Decline in History and Society (Central European University Press, 2017).

180 E.g. Aristoph. Ass. 453; Thuc 1.107, 5.76, 8.65; Aeschin. 1.173, 191.


182 Aristoph. Wasps 40. Of course, it does not follow that the dêmôs has to agree on everything: a general willingness to accept the will of the group will do.

183 Thuc. 6.39.6.
here’; and Deinarchos’ claim that ‘you and the entire démos risk losing the foundations of the polis, the temples of your fathers, and your wives and children’ in ‘Against Demosthenes’ (323).184

These examples are largely fourth-century. The fifth century is represented only by Pseudo-Xenophon and Thucydides. There are further possible examples of equivalence between démos and polis in Sophokles and Euripides, but they are relatively scanty; and crucially, nothing similar appears before this.

In other words, as far as we can tell, the use of démos to refer to the entire citizenry post-dates the existence of démokratia, at least the term if not, with absolute certainty, the practice. And this, too, makes good sense. Consider the double meaning of polis under what we might call ‘aristocratic’ rule. As we saw, polis could indicate either the entire community or more specifically the political elite, and it was suggested that this was appropriate given that it was the elite that governed the rest of the community and represented it to outsiders. Claudius’ exclamation, ‘Do it, England’, in Hamlet, addressed to the English king, exemplifies the same idea.185 King and community are distinct, but inasmuch as he rules England, the king may be conceived as standing in for it.

The same, mutatis mutandis, holds true for démokratiai too. In ancient Greek democracies it was the démos—suggesting in the first instance the assembly—that held kratos, that is, superior power, rather than a council or leading man; it thus ‘stood in for’ the whole community in an entirely literal sense. Here we should recall Ober’s use of the concept of synecdoche to illuminate the relationships between the parts and the whole of the political system. The figure is entirely apt, only it 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 rather that the démos (part) came to be called polis (whole) when and inasmuch as it became the dominant institution in the polis. Another way to put this is to say that démos and polis became interchangeable when the démos gained power over its own leaders. It was the shift in the balance of power towards the assembly expressed in the term démokratia that enabled 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.

Support for this interpretation appears in our sources. Aeschyllos’s Suppliants (c.463) is particularly useful. This play is already celebrated for providing early evidence of the existence of the word démokratia in the form of a couple of metrically appropriate circumlocutions, but equally striking is its explicit dramatiza-

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184 Hansen, ‘Concepts’, pp. 502-3, quoting Ps. Xen. Ath. Pol. 1.18; Dem. 24.180, Dem. 18.89; Dem. 20.106; Din. 1.99 (translations mine). Hansen adds some pairs of inscriptions: IG II² 26.8-9 (394-87) with IG I³ 110.6-9 (408/7), and IG II² 97.6-8 with 116.27-8 (375/4). In each case, the first text features démos, the second polis in an equivalent position. I am not myself sure that all Hansen’s examples force the interpretations polis or pantes politai, but we may certainly proceed on that basis.

185 Hamlet IV.3.64.
tion of the question ‘Who speaks for the polis, king or démos?’ or more simply ‘Who holds kratos?’

The central issue of the play is whether to receive the chorus of refugee women and protect them or to turn them away, and the women themselves are adamant that the decision lies with Pelasgos, the king:

You are the polis, I tell you—you are the public (to damion).
A president (prytanis) not subject to judgment (akritos),
You rule (kratynei) the altar, hearth of the land,
By your vote and nod alone,
With your sceptre alone, on your throne
You determine every matter (pan epikraineis).186

Later, the chorus re-emphasizes the king’s grip on the community: ‘Do not look on while I am seized…you who hold all power (pan kratos) in this land!’187 Pelasgos hesitates, however, and calls the laoi to a meeting (synkalôn), hoping to make them friendly to the refugees.188 From this point all goes smoothly. The assembly—that is, the démos—decides that the refugees shall have the right of residence, the air ‘bristling’ with their right hands as the ‘entire démos’ (pandemia) approves the proposal; additionally, it is agreed that any citizen who fails to come to their aid in the case of attack shall be driven into exile.189

There are several signs, in these passages, that the démos, rather than the king, holds kratos. The most direct are the chorus’ reference to the démou kratousa cheir, the ruling hand of the démos, and its assertion that to damion, the public, rules (kratynei) the polis.190 Others include the use of the verbs dokeô, ‘seem’ or (as in the ratification formulae seen on inscriptions) ‘decide’, and krainô, ‘accomplish’, as well as Pelasgos’ statement that the refugees’ enemies ‘may not take them against their will. That is the unanimous vote that has been passed and enacted by the people of the city’.191

Yet there is also ambiguity. The Pelasgian démos is said to have ‘heard and obeyed’ (eupithês) the guidance of the orator, that is, the king, while the final outcome is attributed to Zeus.192 Most significant is how Pelasgos frames his decision to call the laoi together:

It’s not an easy judgment call. Do not make me the judge.

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I have already said I will not put this action into effect without the démos,
Even though I have kratos, lest at some point
—if things don’t turn out well—the laos should say,
‘By honouring aliens you destroyed our polis.’

The fact that the king affirms his possession of kratos, and only chooses, for pragmatic reasons, to call an assembly—a synklêton, we may note, not an ekklêsia—rather than being required to is deeply significant. Pelasgos wishes the démos to agree to his preferred course of action before he proceeds, and happily the démos obliges. But the essential question with respect to démokratia is: What would have happened had the démos disapproved? Would the démos have had its way, or would the king have had his? In this play, this issue is only raised, not resolved with confidence, suggesting that the balance of power between the two sides may not at this point have seemed entirely settled.

In the following decades, we find signs of greater confidence in the superior power of the assembly, beginning with the increasing association of démos and polis. In the opening speech of Sophokles’ Antigone (450s/40s?), an announcement is said to have been made to the pandêmô polei, the ‘all-démos polis’, a phrase also found in Sophokles’ Electra (420-10?). Also noteworthy is the question of Kreon, referring directly to an assembly: ‘Is the polis to tell me what orders I shall give?’ Importantly, here, the assembly is identified with the polis while the king plays a complementary role: in other words, it is a case of polis narrowly construed to refer to a part rather than the whole of the community, just as we saw with respect to the polis’s leaders under aristocratic government. The difference, of course, is that at this point, the institution representing the majority rather than the minority of the citizenry figures as the dominant partner. The fact that this interpretation is advanced by the king himself, and in the form of a complaint about the implied limit of his power, only adds to its interest.

The relationship between polis and démos is depicted more harmoniously in Euripides’ Suppliants (c.423). Again, polis is identified with the assembly, King Theseus as its complement: ‘Was it you alone or the whole polis that decided this?’, ‘I want the entire polis to ratify this decision’, ‘the polis gladly and willingly took up this task when they heard that I wished them to do so’, and ‘Freedom consists in this: who has a good proposal and wants to set it before the polis?’ Here, for the first time in our evidence, the synonymy of assembly and polis is confidently asserted. Indeed, Theseus claims outright that he has ‘established the démos as a monarch’ (katestês’ auton es monarchian) by ‘freeing the polis and

193 Aesch. Suppl. 397-401.
194 Soph. Antig. 7-8; Electra 981.
195 Soph. Antig. 734.
giving it equal votes’; more simply, he says that in his community, ‘the démos rules’ (anassei). 197

Neatly confirming both the synecdochal relationship of démos and polis and the primary identity of démos with the assembly rather than those who take a leading political role, the disbelieving foreign herald replies: ‘How can the démos, if it cannot even make a speech properly, know the right way to guide a polis?’ 198 Theseus does not directly answer this question. But there is no indication that he finds it troubling: a sign, perhaps, that by this point, the démos’ dominant position in the polis had become sufficiently taken for granted.

VI

Conclusion

Two quotations, from two great classicists, may be used to summarize the argument presented here. 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’. 199 This seems to me to be right, except for the claim that there was no ‘collective technical term’ for what Finley calls ‘the multitude’. That term was démos, referring most narrowly to the assembly, more broadly to all those whose political agency was tied to their participation in a collective agent such as an assembly in the second. And it was the increasing power of this body that was to prove the central political development of later centuries.

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 [démos] became the word used to designate the sovereign people in the records of votes in the assembly [ekklesia].’ 200 Again, there is something to this, but by framing the process in terms of a ‘name’ and a ‘word’ Larsen obscures the underlying institutional dynamic. More simply, the greatest victory for the common people was that their institution, the assembly, became the supreme political body in the polis. Or, more simply still: the greatest victory of the démos was that it achieved kratos.

Exactly when this was accomplished, in Athens at least, may still remain unclear, but the foregoing suggests a more precise way of articulating what we are looking for. If, as I have argued, démokratia first and foremost indicated rule by the assembly as opposed to rule by a leading man or men, then we seek the moment when the balance of power tipped towards the démos and away from the political elite. Pace Ruschenbusch, what is crucial will be not mere involvement in

‘communal decision making by the people in assembly’, but the assembly’s own final decision-making power; and pace Raaflaub, this need not have extended to ‘full control over the entire political process’, but it would surely have included control over both decision-making processes and over those who took a larger role in the initiation, advocacy and prosecution of laws, policies, and lawsuits, who represented the polis to outsiders, and who led it in war.

In Athens and elsewhere, the changes in balance of power between dēmos and elite during the archaic and classical periods were not unidirectional. We may think of a pendulum swinging back and forth, or scales tilting now to one side, now another, eventually to settle, for some eighty years after 403/2, in favour of the dēmos. The Aristotelian Athênaion Politeia summarized the process as follows.201 Solon was démôtikôs, favouring the dēmos, though the political system he sponsored, in which the dēmos had decision power principally in judicial matters, is nowhere described as démokratikos—i.e. the tipping point had not been reached. The Peisistratid tyranny signalled a retrenchment in demotic power, and the late sixth-century reforms of Kleisthenes, which boosted both the size of the dēmos (by adding slaves and foreigners to the citizen body) and its power relative to the great families of Athens (by reforms made to the demotic council), a decisive increase. Herodotos, writing in the third quarter of the fifth century, believed the Kleisthenic system amounted to démokratia, though the work of Aeschylos and Sophokles may suggest that the dēmos’ superior power was not deemed quite secure, perhaps owing to the resurgence of the old aristocratic council (the Areopagos) after the Persian wars. Greater confidence appears to have followed the reforms of Ephialtes and Pericles around 461, which systematically dismantled the political powers of the the Areopagos, distributing them among the assembly, demotic council and courts. Two bursts of reaction followed in the final decade of the fifth century, after which, according to the author of the Athênaion Politeia, the dēmos regained all its former power and more. The post-civil war settlement of 403/2 allowed the victorious dēmos to take its control over its leaders to a new level, chiefly through its control of the courts.202

The interpretation of dēmos I have suggested will not alter our sense of the significance of these landmarks. But it may change how we understand them. Pace Forrest, we need not associate these developments with the growth of an idea of ‘individual human autonomy’, equality or even freedom of all members of the political community. There is no evidence that the Greeks were thinking in terms of individual freedom or equality at all. Nor need we interpret this history in terms of any underlying sociological or even institutional change, except insofar as the basic political institutions—particularly the council and courts—were periodically tweaked to favour one side or the other. What is important is that the same two groups, dēmos and individual leading men, dominated the political

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202 Cammack, ‘Democratic Significance of the Athenian Courts’.
scene all the way from Homer to Aristotle. Indeed, démokratia may have been conceivable long before it actually appeared. It is not difficult, once one observes that the démos is the object of the elite’s rule, to imagine a community in which that situation is reversed. It requires only a change in the relative strength of the two existing bodies.

This may seem a disappointingly subtle shift. When démokratia finally arrived, there was no change in the main political agents: no uprising of laoi leading to new political forms. Rather, to the contrary, an institution of long standing simply gained the upper hand after flexing its muscles for many decades. From being a body that gathered merely to hear news and to take instruction from its rulers, the démos became what we might call a kingmaker, choosing between rival leaders (suggested by Herodotos’s description of Kleisthenes ‘taking the démos into his hetaireia’, something like ‘his fraternity’, when he found himself losing ground to Isagoras). From there, it was not a long journey to becoming the default arbitrator between rival policies, and to holding those who advocated them to account. Yet even if the advent was gradual, the eventual tilt into démokratia was still revolutionary. The conversion of the political elite from rulers to leaders—from hégémones to démagogoi, demagogues, literally démós-leaders—was not a minor development. To the contrary, for a political elite to lose its decision-making power and become mere advisers was a radical transformation, perhaps unrepeated since the classical era.

Several interesting theoretical implications arise from this account. First, it is worth emphasizing that we are talking about démokratia, not laoi-kratia. The démos, that is to say, was never a disaggregated multitude. It was, from the outset, a political institution, conceived as a body even when it was not physically gathered as one, and, at meetings, the practitioner of procedures—above all voting, either with its feet, by shouting, by hand or by ballot—that allowed for the assertion of a single will. It was not, that is to say, the amorphous mass envisaged by Sheldon Wolin and others. Nor was it the People envisaged in some accounts of populism: an entity unable to speak for itself, existing only through its representation by a charismatic leader. There was certainly an element of representation in the activities of the démos, in that those gathered at any particular meeting by default represented those who were not there. But the démos asserted its will independently of its leaders. Indeed, as the records of penalties exacted from politicians suggests, its usual stance towards them was one of suspicion.

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203 Hdt. 5.66.
205 See e.g. J-W. Müller, What is Populism? (Philadelphia, 2016).
Another point to consider is how the analysis advanced here relates to social concepts such as class and status. The démos I have sketched was neither, with Marx and Sainte-Croix, simply a socio-economic group, nor, with Weber and Finley, strictly a status category. Rather, it was in essential respects a political construct, that is, it reflected quite precise relations to decision-making power within the polis. Either a given citizen had political power (later influence) as an individual, in which case he was a member of the elite, or he was individually insignificant but could enjoy political agency as part of a collective agent, in which case he was a man of the démos. Membership in these groups clearly overlapped in significant ways with both class and status, and one way to capture the argument of this essay is simply to say that Aristotle was right: démokratia did mean rule by the poor, because the poor constituted the large bulk of those who were individually irrelevant politically. But the ancient concept démos is not reducible to either a class or status category. There was an institutional dimension at its core.

Beyond this, it may be worth giving a still more explicit statement of what I take to be the central implication of this essay. Démokratia was not self-rule. Rather, it was the rule of one part of the community, the common people instituted as a body, over the whole: that is, over itself, yes, but also, and more importantly—because requiring more effort to maintain—over its own leaders as well. In modern political science parlance, the possession of kratos, superior power, was a zero-sum, two-player game. Either the elite ruled and the démos was ruled, or the other way around; the severity of the regime might vary, but not the fact of domination by one side or the other. These two parties were mutually exclusive (though not unchanging: it was possible to move between them) and exhaustive with respect to the citizen body, though whichever side had the upper hand also ruled others within the polis’ territory who did not share in the political system, i.e. women (both citizen and non-citizen), children, foreign residents, and slaves.

Perhaps most importantly, the democratic polis was not conceived purely horizontally, that is, as one in which all members were equal. Some individuals were clearly more important politically than others: there was never a démokratia that lacked several layers of vertical stratification, however permeable or informal. What the démos wanted was that it, rather than the elite, should have the final say. Equal votes for all citizens gave the démos predominance, but it was this predominance, not the equality that preceded it, that I think mattered most.

Finally, how does this relate to the idea and practice of democracy today? In one respect, it reveals our distance from the ancient Greeks. Modern democracy is nothing like démokratia: not, in the first instance, because (as is commonly said) modern democracy is representative while ancient democracy was direct, but more precisely because modern democracy is what Aristotle would have called elective aristocracy, in that we elect those whom we suppose to be the ‘best’—the aristoi—to rule, i.e. to make decisions on our behalf.

In another respect, however, the argument presented here suggests our proximity to the ancient Greek political situation. Our communities also consist of
those who are politically influential as individuals and those who wield political power only as members of larger groups. And the goal of democrats is still to maintain the precedence of the latter over the former. This is easily obscured by the identification of democracy with self-rule, a standard which is thought to be met as soon as all citizens have an equal vote in elections. But beneath the celebration of democracy as the rule of all over all lies a less frequently acknowledged but no less familiar thought: what is exciting about democracy, even in its modern formulation, is that it includes all citizens, even the poor, the uneducated, the insignificant—not even the rich, the privileged, the powerful. Democracy still implies rule by the poorer majority—that can hardly be avoided.

The question is how to instantiate this, assuming more people than not would want to, and here, modern democrats face a problem. One implication of the foregoing is that démokratia requires a démòs; but how is it possible to construct a démòs today? We no longer need to assemble in order to hear news or take instructions from our rulers: everything we need to know can be delivered to us in the comfort of our own homes. Voting in elections or referenda are as close as we come, but on every other day of the political cycle, ordinary citizens do not constitute a démòs: they are only disparate laoi. We should recall Aristotle’s observation that ‘in some [political systems] there is no démòs, nor do they hold an ekklêsia but only synklêtous’.\footnote{\textit{Aristot. Pol.} 1275b5.} That seems an apt description of modern political communities, democratic or otherwise.