

## [Transcript] The Rest Is History / 334: Athens and the Birth of Democracy

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So Athens came to flourish, and to make manifest how important it is, not just on one level, but on all, for everyone in a city to have an equal voice.

For the Athenians, while subjects of attire and had been no more proficient in battle than any of their neighbours.

But then, once liberated from tyranny, they emerged as supreme by far, proof enough that the downtrodden, since their labours are all in the service of a master, will never willingly pull their weight.

Whereas free men, because they have a stake in their own exertions, will set to them with relish.

So that is the father of history, or the father of lies, depending on who you believe.

Herodotus, talking about how in 506 BC, the Athenians fought off an attempt by the Spartans and the Thebans, their rivals,

to throttle a radical new system of government in its cradle.

And that radical new system of government, Tom, was democracy, something that we all now think is splendid.

But the Spartans thought it was an absolute waste of space.

And the Thebans, too. I mean, basically, everyone did.

And the association of Athens with democracy, I guess it's probably, I mean, it's probably, if you talk to people about ancient Athens,

most people would think of it as the birthplace of democracy, and they would see it as a kind of democratic system.

And Athens is basically the place where the notion of democracy is born.

But I think that it's a treacherous word, because the question is, to what extent does what we mean by democracy

map onto what the Athenians meant by democracy.

And I think that there is a huge temptation on our part to assume that they're basically the same things.

And so we judge the Athenians by our standards.

And so the thing that people will always say about Athenian democracy is that our women didn't have the vote,

foreigners didn't have the vote, slaves didn't have the vote.

And underpinning that critique is, I think, the idea that democracy is founded on the idea of rights, that people have rights to votes.

And I think that actually the story of how democracy came to be born in Athens and what democracy meant is kind of stranger and weirder than that.

And it kind of requires us to try and essentially kind of wipe away our own understanding of what democracy is

and try and stand in shoes that are actually very strange.

Yeah, because obviously what we do, Tom, is either we say, so the sort of the children's book version of Athens is they're all wrestling,

smearing themselves with oil, talking about philosophy and being Democrats in contrast to the

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ferocious Spartans.

And then what people tend to do when they sort of hit 19 is they say, oh, the Athenians are actually terrible people.

They didn't let women vote.

So you're either sort of extolling them and raising them to the skies or you're saying, well, they don't measure up to 21st century standards.

And both of those are quite foolish, I would say.

Right, so I wrote about this in Persian Fire and it was one of the things that I wrestled with most intensely,

the sense of how alien and strange the ancient world was and how treacherous a language English was for trying to write about it.

You've heard me say I'm a stuck record.

I think we bring this kind of Christian idea that every individual being has a kind of value and that's essentially what underpins our ideal of democracy,

this idea that has an equal value, right?

Right, but for the Athenians, it's radically different.

And so I think the best way in a sense to get a sense of how radically different and the challenges of understanding exactly what was going on

is to give the story that the Athenians themselves came to understand.

So this is the story that an Athenian say by the fourth century BC would have told about how democracy came into existence over the course of the sixth century and into the fifth century.

So just before you do that, give us the very, very, for those people who are not familiar with ancient Greece, the broadest possible sort of context.

So Athens was founded...

Well, I'm going to be coming to this because it is a story that in the Athenian understanding goes right the way back to the beginning of the appearance of human beings.

Oh, golly. Okay.

So the story that the Athenians tell is that the goddess Athena, the god of war, the god of domestic crafts, the goddess of wisdom, the great patron of heroes, that her brother, Hephaistos, who is the smith, the artificer, this lame black smith, he is aroused by her and he reaches for her essentially to try and rape her.

And Athena brushes him off.

But not before in his excitement, he has left a physical mark on Athena, expressive of his excitement.

And she takes a scrap of wool and she wipes the feistos' mess of her thigh and she drops it down onto Attica.

Right.

And in Greek, the scrap of wool is called erion and the earth is called kthon.

And so when from this discarded tosrage, a human being with the tail of a snake emerges, he's called erichon.

So kind of fusing this idea of the scrap of wool and the earth.

In some way, there's a kind of divine origin here, but it's also bread of the earth.

And erichon is seen as the founder of the Athenian people and his body is entombed within the acropolis.

And so erichon in some way is the kind of the archetype of the Athenian people and he has a kind

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of weird relationship to Athena.

Athena, who is a virgin, isn't exactly his mother, but in some way is complicit in the process by which he has come to spring from the earth.

And that's why the Athenians said it was Erectheus who had instituted this great festival, the Athenae in honor of Athena, great procession going up to the acropolis.

Now, in some way that's never entirely explained by the Athenians, they think that they share in this quality of coming from the soil, from the kthonos.

And so they call it autochthony, the idea that they have sprung from the earth.

And so in that sense, the Athenian people, the Athenian demos are like the wheat or the olives or the vines or the figs that they literally spring from the earth.

And the Athenians claimed, although it was contested by other peoples in Greece, but the Athenians claimed that they were the oldest people in Greece and indeed the oldest people in the world.

And that they are all born equally from the earth.

What the Athenians called is a gonia, sprung equally, I say, is equally.

And the most famous articulation of this comes from Pericles in his speech as recorded by Thucydides,

where he says of the Athenians that the same ethnic stock, generation after generation, the same people, they have always lived in this, our native land.

And it is they by virtue of their qualities who have bequeathed it to us, a country eternally free.

And so this idea that the Athenian love of freedom, that the Athenian sense that they are all in it together is somehow tied in with the fact that they uniquely among the Greek people have sprung from the earth,

that that ancestry has never been diluted.

It's really fundamental part of how the Athenians see themselves.

Obviously, Athens didn't really come into being that way without being too skeptical.

So are they telling this story from the very beginning or is this a story created later on?

So we will come to this.

Oh, I'm jumping ahead.

So you're absolutely right to have fixed on that.

But just let's just keep that in mind.

So you have this guy Erectheus, he's kind of first of a line of kings.

Probably most people who have any interest in Greek mythology will remember the name of another king, Egeus, who gives his name to the Aegean and is the father of the most famous of all Athenian kings, Theseus.

Yes.

And the Athenians, for the Athenians, Theseus was famous principally not because of his Minotaur slaying, which he is for us, but as a key figure in their constitutional history.

So Theseus does two crucial things, the Athenian sync.

First of all, he gets all the various peoples of Attica and he joins them together so that they all become citizens of Athens.

And so that festival, the Athenea that Erectheus had instituted under Theseus, it becomes the pan Athenea.

Everybody say pan, meaning all everybody across the whole of Attica become Athenian citizens.

And Athens is very, very unusual among Greek cities in having so vast a citizen body.

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Attica is huge compared to, you know, Sparta or Argos or Corinth.  
Athens is a city, I mean, it's not so much a city as an entire people, an ethnos.  
And that's what makes it distinctive.  
And the Athenians say that Theseus is the key figure in this kind of process.  
The other thing that the Athenians say is that it is Theseus who founds the democracy, who founds a system in which the Demos have, Kratos have power.  
So Theseus is the founder of these two things that make Athens distinctive.  
The vastness of its citizen body and the fact that it has a democracy.  
Craigie, that eclipses any sort of interaction with Minotaurus, doesn't it?  
It absolutely does. Yes, it absolutely does.  
Right, so that's Theseus.  
And then you have the period of the Trojan War.  
And then after the Trojan War, you have this period of great convulsion where supposedly the descendants of Heracles come down in an enormous force.  
The ancestors of people called the Dorians and they become the masters of kind of most of Greece.  
But the one place that doesn't succumb to these invasions is Athens.  
So they maintain their independence.  
They maintain their autochthonous descent, so they say.  
So Athens stays kind of inviolate, but moving into, let's say the 9th, the 8th, the 7th centuries BC, Athens is a backwater.  
It's backwards, it's pro-keel.  
And you have the sense of a kind of a division between aristocracy and the vast mass of people who are basically on the verge of becoming peasants or serfs.  
That is the marker really of its backwardness relative to other cities like Argos or Corinth, which are kind of much more go getting, much more mercantile.  
It's backward, it's divided, it's like modern day New York.  
Yeah. And it's run by self-proclaimed masters of the universe.  
Well, there you go.  
Yes.  
Who are actually called Eupatrids, so people who are well-born.  
Right.  
And interestingly, these are people who claim kind of foreign descent often.  
So they're not buying into the autochthony. They're saying that they come from other cities.  
And they are oppressive and they're domineering.  
And there is no sense at all, really, of the Athenians as a single United people.  
And the measure of this is that the end of the seventh beginning of the sixth century BC, they get into a war with a much smaller city called Megara.  
And they're fighting over the island of Salamis, which is kind of midway between Athens and Megara.  
And the Athenians lose and it's completely humiliating.  
You know, it's like Premier League team being knocked out of the FA Cup by some kind of minnow.  
Aston Villa humbled by Warsaw.  
That kind of thing, yes.  
And basically, the Athenians seem to have decided that enough was enough, that this was

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embarrassing, that something had to be done.

And they're encouraged to do this by the appearance in the streets of Athens with spectral figures, kind of portents of doom, it seems.

And so they turn to a man who we have already mentioned on The Rest is History.

Listeners to our episode on Atlantis may remember Solon.

Oh, yes, the lawgiver who supposedly gets told the story of Atlantis by the Egyptian priests.

And the reason that he's in Egypt is that he's doing a tour for 10 years because he has basically reformed Athens.

And he has then left Athens to allow his laws to bed in and so that it won't seem like he's done the laws purely for his own benefit.

So he becomes what is called an archon, the kind of leading magistrate in Athens in 594.

And he is remembered by the Athenians as the man who basically he makes the Athenians equal before the law.

So previously it had all been done in custom.

Solon puts it down as laws that both rich and poor are equally children of the phrases, the holy land of Athena.

And this is remembered by the Athenians as a revitalization of their democracy.

But the reality is slightly redounded, perhaps slightly less to Solon's credit.

He is basically, I mean, he's a kind of centrist. He's a centrist dad.

You would love him, Tom.

Yeah, he's my kind of guy, I guess.

Yeah, he could be a guest on our sister podcast where they witter about politics.

Yes, exactly. He'd be very restless politics kind of guy.

So essentially he's trying to balance the interests of the rich and the poor.

He's not trying to dissolve the rich into the masses of edemos.

He's trying to preserve the ordinary Athenians from exploitation.

But he's also trying to keep the elites in the kind of position of authority that they've always had.

So we have kind of things that he wrote, kind of maxims, poems, scraps of poetry.

So one of them is that envied for their wealth though they were,

I sought to preserve the powerful from the hatred of the oppressed.

Taking my stand, I used my strong shield to protect both sides of the class divide, allowing neither to gain an advantage over the other that would be unjust.

So that's basically what the conservatives are doing in the 19th century, right?

I mean, into the 20th century, it's this idea that you best preserve the power of the elites by kind of folding the masses into it.

Yeah, it's very disraelian.

So very disraelian.

The reason that the rich buy into this isn't only because they can kind of recognize that it's in their own interest that Solon has a point,

but also that the enfranchisement of large numbers of people will give them a larger citizen body and thereby enable them to defeat Megara, which is what they promptly do.

As I say, it's a kind of very centrist approach.

But the consequence of this does seem to be that Solon, by guaranteeing liberty, freedom from enslavement and a kind of legal recourse against the oppression of the rich,

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that he is kind of seeding quite important ideas that will start to grow and grow over the decades that follow.

But at the same time, he is absolutely affirming that the rich have exclusive right to the magistracies,

that it's their job to run the city.

And so this is the kind of the balance that he's tried to strike.

And because he's done that, basically Athens remains the plaything of the upatriates, of the great families.

Because their power has been preserved by this arrangement.

Exactly.

So there are various kind of aristocratic dynasties that trace their origins a long, long way back, back to the kind of the mythical origins of the city.

That's why they're well bred, or they have kind of claim ancestry from foreign heroes.

And these are figures who, in the decades that follow Solon's reforms, remain absolutely domineering.

And there are probably three who play the key role.

One of these is a family called the Alcmionids.

And they trace their descent from a guy called Megacles, who had saved Athens from a coup.

An Olympic hero had come back from the games and had occupied the Acropolis and basically tried to seize power in the city.

He gets kind of put under siege, starves, negotiates a surrender, comes down into a place of sanctuary

where he's met by Megacles and Megacles kills him and all his followers.

And this is an absolute desecration.

Megacles could argue that he saved the city from a despotism.

But his opponents say he has committed sacrilege.

If he's not punished for this, then Athens will come under a curse because he's broken his word.

And there's kind of 30 years of kind of legal maneuvering.

You know, a bit like, I guess, people trying to bring down Trump in all cases.

And eventually, after 30 years, the Alcmionids get exiled.

The whole dynasty get exiled.

And in exile, they continue to flourish.

So Alcmion himself, who gives his name to the dynasty, he becomes a big pal with Cresus, as in riches Cresus, the king of Lydia, by word for fabulous wealth.

And Cresus says to Alcmion, you can go into my treasury and you can have as much gold as you can carry.

So what Alcmion does is he gets some very, very wide boots and puts on a woman's gown and he just stuffs himself.

So he comes out looking like the Michelin man with gold dust.

And this is the making of the Alcmionids.

They're now fabulously wealthy, but they're still in exile.

Then still back in Athens, you have a dynasty called the Bhutads,

who claimed descent from the brother of Erechtheus, the snake-tailed kind of son of Athena, kind of not.

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And because of this, they claim they have a kind of very proprietary claim to the Acropolis, which is the great center, not just of Athens, but of the whole of Attica. Because you do have these these kind of mountains in Attica with valleys and all the valleys, no matter where they are, they all kind of impinge on the Acropolis. So it's the great kind of center for not just the people living within the city of Athens, but the whole of Attica. And so the Bhutads by, you know, the claiming that they have a kind of ancestral hold on it, you know, that gives them absolutely pole position. So it's the Bhutads who really start to develop the Acropolis. They're the ones who seem to have built this great ramp that goes up to the summit, which is still there to this day that Taurus will go up if they're going to see the Parthenon. And then there's a third family who are a guy called Persistratus and his descendants, the Persistratids. And he is a guy who stages three coups over the course of his life, trying to make himself what the Greeks called a Tyranos, a tyrant. Somebody who has supreme control over the city. And to begin with, he is a kind of pawn in the rivalry between the Bhutads and the Artmyonids. He's kind of Tom Wamsgams. He's a kind of nobody who gradually worms his way in, marries, gets stabbed in the back, stabs other people in the back. Until finally, with his third attempt at a coup, he strikes lucky. He defeats his enemies and he establishes himself as the master of Athens. Tom, I want to go on record and just say, I think we should have far more Tom Wamsgams references on this podcast. OK, so people who haven't heard succession, sorry, but those of you who have, you'll know the reference. So what this whole kind of episode illustrates is that for the aristocratic families, it's kind of a zero sum game. You're either in charge or you're in exile. And it's very, very difficult to attain any stability. And this is true even for Persistratus once he's made himself tyrant. He has to balance kind of various interests. So he has to put out feelers even to the outmindeds. So the outmindeds allowed back into Athens on the assumption that they were back Persistratus. But he's also doing what, of course, say, Peron would be the kind of classic example. He's a kind of Peronist. He's having to keep the masses in order. He's having to give them treats. So he builds some kind of great buildings. So he does a huge temple of Zeus. He builds this great kind of central square in the middle of Athens, the Agora. So a populist to some degree. He's absolutely a populist.

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He institutes a series of dramas in celebration of Dionysus, which will become the great festivals of tragedy and comedy, for which Athens in due course will become famous. And he bribes the other members of the elites with kind of various magistracies and so on. But the whole thing remains incredibly rickety. Persistratus is very good at playing this game in a kind of Tom Wamsgan style. He's able to uphold his power and dies in his bed. He has two sons, Hipparchus and Hippias, who kind of share the tyranny between them, which simply makes the system even more rickety. So actually he's Logan Roy and they're Kendall and Roman. Isn't that right? Yeah, a bit. Yes, a bit. And the measure of how unstable it is, is firstly that the Altmanus gets sent back into exile. And the leader of the Altmanus by this point is a guy called Cleisthenes. So he gets kicked back out. And then Hipparchus gets assassinated, not by someone proclaiming that a love of liberty or anything like that, but because he'd been caught up in a lover's tiff. He'd seduced this guy who was the boyfriend of another guy. And so the two people who've been offended by this murder him. So this leaves Hippias, who by this point is in a very tyrannical mood. In the kind of the modern sense, he becomes increasingly oppressive. And so Cleisthenes, who's kind of sniffing around like a jackal on the margins of Attica, recognizes that he has an opportunity here to overthrow Hippias. So he launches an invasion and that fails. But Cleisthenes isn't going to give up. And so he pulls a brilliant stunt. He's got all this gold that he's inherited from Altman. And he's been lavishing a lot of this on Delphi, the home of Apollo, the god of prophecy. What he seems to have done is offered a bribe to Apollo to tell every Spartan emissary who came to Delphi that Sparta had to overthrow Hippias and free the Athenians. And this is a problem for the Spartans because they're actually allies of Hippias. But Apollo keeps saying, go and free the Athenians, go and free the Athenians, go and free the Athenians. And so eventually the Spartan king Cleomenes decides that this is what he'd better do. And so in 510, he marches on Athens. Hippias gets bottled up on the Acropolis. He surrenders. He gets sent into exile. And Athens is faced with the prospect of what is going to happen next.



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And basically there seem to be two options because Cleomenes and Cleisthenes, these two people who have combined to end the tyranny, have very different visions for what Athens should be. So Cleomenes wants Athens to be basically a client state of Sparta under the thumb of the Spartans. But that's not what Cleisthenes wants at all. Cleisthenes wants to set Athenian freedom on very, very solid foundations. And it's evident that while he's been in exile, Cleisthenes has been thinking a good deal about how this should be done. And essentially his plan is that the mass of the Athenian people should be given a stake in the running of the city that would have two effects. Firstly, it would further embed their sense of loyalty to Athens. And their willingness to kind of, because they now have skin in the game, they are now presumably more willing to fight for it. But the other thing he thinks is that by doing this, it will reduce the stakes for him and for other aristocrats. Because up to this point, you know, failure in this kind of game for political supremacy is terrible. You win or you die, you go into exile or whatever. But if you, as an aristocrat, come to be dependent, say, on the votes of the mass of your fellow citizens, then you can lose, but you're not going to go into exile. And so there's something there for the aristocracy as well as for the mass of the people. And so this is what he is looking to institute. But Cleomenes doesn't like this at all. And so there is a breakdown in relations between the two men. And this opens up a chance for other aristocrats to get up to their kind of traditional tricks. And the focus for this comes to be a guy called Isagoras, who basically sidles up to Cleomenes and says, look, if you back me over Cleisenes, I'll let you sleep with my wife. So he pimps his wife. It's said to Cleomenes. And in return, you know, you back me and I'll run the city for you. So Cleisenes finds himself under threat both from Cleomenes and from Isagoras. And so he ups the game. And so in 507, he openly turns for support to the mass of the people. He basically proposes to them this kind of revolutionary new state that power should absolutely be vested with the demos, that it should be a *democratia*, a democracy. And this is a program so startling, so radical that it's essentially without precedent. And it seems to completely kind of thrill the mass of the people who have been given this chance, even as it appalls Isagoras and Cleomenes. And so Isagoras appeals to Cleomenes, you know, got to come and sort this out. Summer of 507, a herald from Sparta arrives, says that Cleisenes should be expelled because of this ancient, outmined curse. Cleisenes gets the message, thinks shit, you know, Spartan army's coming,

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I better get out of here.  
So he scrams.  
Cleomenes rolls into town.  
He's very self-confident.  
He hasn't brought a huge army with him.  
He occupies the Acropolis, meets up with Isagoras.  
They start to kind of draw up their plans for Athens.  
But while Cleomenes is up on the Acropolis, he hears this kind of these chants, these shouts.  
He looks down.  
He sees that a great mob of people are besieging him, bottling him up,  
as so many people had previously been bottled up on the Acropolis.  
And he's forced to negotiate.  
He's basically forced to surrender.  
And Isagoras goes into exile.  
Cleisenes comes back.  
And Cleisenes and his backers are now in a position to institute this incredible experiment  
that Cleisenes has been proposing to institute democracy.  
Okay.  
Tom, let's take a break.  
Cleisenes has returned.  
Dramatic scenes.  
He's going to start this extraordinary experiment that hasn't been done before.  
Well, we will discuss after the break whether there are other routes of it.  
But we will return after the break with a very exciting reading, Tom.  
Is that right?  
That's right.  
So don't go away.  
We'll see you in a minute.  
Your father, now that he had taken Athens, sat on the Acropolis, drawing up his plans  
for the city.  
But then he heard the noise of chanting rising up from the streets below.  
Looking down at the entranceway to the Acropolis, he saw a huge crowd massed in front of it.  
At the sight of him, the demonstrators began to chant even louder and to howl and to cat-call.  
Your father summoned his bodyguard.  
But when the Spartans marched down the ramp to try to clear the crowd, they were pelted  
with stones and had to retreat.  
Then, abruptly, the whole city was engulfed in smoke.  
Fires seemed to be burning all over Athens.  
The smoke rose in dense black plumes that twisted and twined around one another.  
High into the sky they rose.  
Your father, watching them, saw how they were merging to fashion the image of a giant.  
Massive over Athens, the giant rose.  
Massive over Attica.  
Your father knew at once what he was seeing.

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For he had heard the Athenians talk about it often enough.

He was seeing, black against the sky, the image of everyone who had ever lived in Attica and who was destined to live there in times to come.

Demos, the Athenians call this giant, the people.

So that, Tom Holland, that purple prose was written by you.

So somebody is telling Gorgos, Spartan girl who is the heroine of your book, the wolf girl, the gods and the Greeks, or the Greeks and the gods, I can't remember which way around it is, but this beautifully illustrated children's book that you've done about Athens and Sparta and so on.

Somebody is telling Gorgos what happened in 507 when her father was besieged on the Acropolis by Cleisthenes and his democratic radicals, the great mass of the people.

Because, Dominic, what's intriguing is it's not Cleisthenes.

So Cleisthenes is still in exile.

Oh, right.

It's the mass of the Athenian people.

So there is a sense in which it's the people who are the key players in this process of revolution.

It's like a scene from Les Miserables, Tom.

So this sense that the democracy is springing up naturally from the soil, that's a very kind of Athenian idea.

They're very into the idea.

And is this Tosh, Tom?

Well, okay.

So it's absolutely evident that Cleisthenes and his aristocratic backers, I mean, they are the kind of the key players in this.

And it's evident that they're not motivated by, you know, belief that everyone has rights to votes or power or that a kind of shimmering notions of brotherhood with the poor or anything like that, that they have very, you know, they're hard-nosed pragmatists.

And their aim is the same as Solon's had been to increase and solidify Athenian manpower and to try and kind of lower the stakes for aristocratic players in the game.

To ensure that, you know, you can compete for power and for glory, but not be destroyed by it.

So that's the kind of the motivation.

And it's evident as well that the system of democracy that then gets instituted after Cleisthenes comes back when the Spartans have been kicked out, that it's been very, very carefully thought out and the whole system gets instituted with kind of incredible skill and brilliance because it is a very, very complicated system.

Because what Cleisthenes has worked out is that what makes Athens unstable is the existence within Attica of different clans.

All these aristocrats stand at the head of kind of enormous great clans and so therefore they can command, you know, the loyalty of these clans and the power of these clans has to be broken up.

So what Cleisthenes does is he slices up all the countryside of Attica, you know, all the towns, the estates, the villages into 150 different districts and these districts

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are called deems.

And basically it's from deems rather than from families, Cleisthenes says, that citizens of the democracy are obliged to take their second name.

So they're not, you know, it's not son of or daughter of.

It's the deem that defines where you come from.

And the only way that you can be enrolled as a citizen of Athens is first by being enrolled within a deem.

And so the effect of this is to completely kind of cut and slice and dice all these kinds of traditional loyalties and create entirely new ones.

And aristocrats can't afford to be snobby about this because it's the people of a deem who will choose the representatives who go to the assembly.

So if the aristocrat wants to be chosen as that, you know, he's got to play ball.

He's got to show respect to his fellow members of the deem.

And so inherently that then builds up a kind of a sense of equality of purpose.

But of course there's a risk with this that deems might be used as a kind of launch pad for tyranny.

So how do you stop that?

So Cleisthenes has a solution to that as well, which requires making the entire system even more complicated.

And I can imagine that listeners are cheering at this.

So basically what he does is he bunches the deems into organizations that are called thirds and Attica has been divided three ways.

And these in turn are then bunched into things that are called tribes.

And so the effect of this is basically to ensure that, you know, you have people from one area of Attica are joined with another area of Attica and another area of Attica in a third and then the thirds in turn are bundled into tribes of which there are 10.

So you have multiple loyalties and there is no kind of obvious center for anyone to try and construct, you know, an equivalent of a clan.

So it's a brilliant way of reframing and resetting traditional loyalties.

And the question is how is this going to work?

And really it depends on Cleisthenes convincing the Athenians that this very radical, this very novel, this very complicated constitutional framework isn't actually radical or novel at all.

That it's simply giving back to them what they'd always had, that Solon had previously given them and that Theseus had previously given them.

And the way that he kind of institutionalizes this is that he draws up a list of ancient Athenian heroes, including Erechtheus, including Aegius, people like that, people who had been involved with the kind of primordial beginnings of Athens.

And he gives this list of 100 names to Apollo and Delphi and Apollo chooses 10.

So there's a sense that this whole system is rooted in the ancient soil of Athenian history and has the approval of the gods and that Cleisthenes hasn't really had anything to do with it.

So Cleisthenes is not instituted as a kind of, you know, a Rosebierre or Cromwell or a Lenin.

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That's not how he, you know, the memory of him basically gets included.

It's ancient.

It's primordial.

It's ancestral.

It's always been what Athens is all about and it's God given.

So first of all, is this the first example in history of or the first known example of a political transformation being rooted in a kind of invented past?

You know, it's such a common thing, the Norman yoke in the 17th century in England or the idea that the founding fathers of the United States were actually being true to a kind of wiggish or post-revolutionary kind of English politics or, you know, the idea there's so common among reformers and revolutionaries that actually they're not doing anything new. They're just restoring the ancient liberties of the people.

Isn't that what Cleisthenes is doing in Athens and is this the first time it's happened?

I think every ancient people do this.

The Romans do it.

The Spartans do it.

The idea that you dignify radical change by saying it's a restoration of traditional ways of doing things.

Right.

So does it quite as boldly and brilliantly as Cleisthenes and his backers do on this occasion?

Is this the point, Tom, where they invent or they institutionalize the story about Athenians coming from the earth and all of that stuff or has that existed before?

Right.

So I think that's absolutely the key question.

How is it that this very complex system gets adopted so quickly?

Yeah.

And part of the reason is clearly that it actually proves to be incredibly successful.

So that passage from Herodotus that you read at the beginning of the episode, that is celebrating the fact that the Spartans are unable to snuff out the democracy even though they try to and that Thebans get beaten in battle.

And you know, Hurrah, the Athenian democracy has demonstrated not only that it can hold its own, but that actually it can go on the attack.

So there's a slight sense there of, you remember Goethe looking at the victorious armies of the French Revolution and thinking, you know, new forces have been unleashed by this process.

But there is no celebration of the fact that this is new.

That's the whole point.

And so the question then is, is Cleisthenes and everybody making this idea that the Athenians are a toxinus, that they're sprung from the soil up to kind of justify it?

Or is he going with the grain of things that the Athenians already believed?

And it's obviously quite difficult to do that because our sources are so scanty.

I mean, we have written sources, say, going back to Solon, not much before that.

We have archaeology that does show that in, say, the ninth century, divisions between rich and poor in Attica are growing much stronger.

But all the stuff about Theseus and Erectheus, I mean, this is clearly not true.

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So where is it coming from?

And I think that the difficulty that historians have in making sense of this is precisely that what I was saying at the beginning of this episode, that it's difficult for us to get back into a mindset where we can have any sense of what Deimos meant to the Athenians.

Because it's not the people in the way that we might use it today, the people's party or the people's choice or the people say this.

It's much, much weirder, I think, than that.

It always is with you, Tom.

It's never less weird.

I pine.

I look forward to the day when you do an episode and you say, the true story is much less strange and in no way weird.

So this is one of the key reasons why I ended up writing Dominion was the difficulty of getting to grips with what Deimos actually meant to the Athenians.

Because the whole idea that it's rights-based is an absolute nonsense.

But what does Deimos mean?

And the reason why it's hard for us to get back into and kind of understand it is that we don't believe in the Greek gods.

And we don't believe in the fact that there might be a kind of, dare I say, a sacral ecosystem in which the gods and the land and the people are kind of bound together.

And in which Athena, who is a virgin, is also a mother and a queen and a guardian.

And that this is somehow to the Athenians kind of real.

And so that passage that you read from the children's book, I think in that book I get closer to it than I did in Persian Fire, actually.

Because I think that the Deimos, it's the entirety of all the people in Athens who have been born, who are living and who will be born in the future.

Very Burkean idea there, Tom.

Kind of.

It's absolutely distinct from the flesh and blood Athenians who are going to the assembly or whatever.

It's more kind of spiritual than that.

Yeah.

But even spiritual is the wrong word.

We don't really have the vocabulary to describe it.

It's kind of like the turning of the seasons, that every year the season turns and the earth gives birth to vines and to wheat.

The same thing is happening with the people.

The people have that kind of relationship to the soil.

And I think the thing that illustrates this most interestingly is what the attitude of the democracy is to women, because it's the role of women that is traditionally the most controversial.

It's the thing that people always fix on, our women didn't have the vote.

And it's often said that women didn't rank as citizens in the democracy.

But this isn't true.

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So, polites is the Greek word for citizen.

But there is politis, which is the female form of it.

So there is absolutely a sense that women are kind of citizens as well.

And you say, but they're not citizens.

They don't have the vote.

They don't have the vote, but they still have a role that in the opinion of the Athenians is just as important as that of the men.

So the men have the vote because it is their responsibility to draw up the laws and to fight. That's their role.

Their role is to deal with the affairs of man, to keep the democracy functioning in terms of state relations, relations with enemies, building allowances, taking measures that will keep the democracy functioning.

But the role of women is just as important because without children, there is no Demos.

And so the legal definition of an Athenian is someone who is born from a male and a female Athenian.

And so the womb of an Athenian woman, it's a kind of simulacrum of the soil of Attica. It's where the Demos springs from.

Women are the closest approximation to the sacred earth of Attica.

That may not impress people today, but to the Athenians, I think it gave to women a sense of uncanniness.

And that sense of uncanniness is heightened by the fact that it is basically women rather than men who have responsibility for the dimension of the supernatural, for keeping the Demos in balance with the dimension of the gods.

And so the Panathenaea, which the Athenians traced back to the time of Thesias and then ultimately back to Erectheus, the founder of Athens.

It's women who take the lead role in this.

They are the people who stand at the head of the procession.

They are the ones who weave this great robe, which every four years has taken up and adorned the statue of Athena on the top of the Acropolis.

It's women who have responsibility for the cult of Erectheus, say, on the Acropolis.

And you may say, well, this is all just flimflam and mumbo jumbo, but to the Athenians it isn't.

So just to jump in and anticipate what some of the listeners may think.

So listening to you talking about this saying, oh, they don't have the vote, but they do all this.

So, you know, when there were the great controversies about women's suffrage at the turn of the 20th century in Britain and America and so on, people who opposed women's suffrage would often say, well, the vote and politics is properly the domain of men.

And women have their own things, which are just as important.

And let's not muddy the two, you know, women do lots of other.

So in other words, they would make those kinds of arguments.

But you're saying that there would be nobody you're saying in, you know, sixth century Athens or whatever.

There weren't women who were saying, this is all nonsense.

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And actually, I would like the vote and the vote is more important than being at the head of a processional or whatever.

Well, there might be.

I mean, we don't know.

So firstly, the difference between, say, the suffragette Britain and Athens is that nobody in Athens had any notion that a vote is reflective of a right.

I mean, that's what I've been saying throughout.

That's not what has motivated it.

And so that's not what's what's going on.

And secondly, people in Edwardian Britain might turn around and say, oh, well, you know, the home is the proper sphere of a woman that is that's just as important.

But that's not giving to women the incredibly potent role that the Athenians understand women as playing, because women by basically negotiating with the gods, the protection of the gods has, you know, it's kind of like an insurance policy.

And things have to be done correctly.

The correct rituals have to be carried out.

The gods have to be kept happy.

And if they're not, then the democracy will collapse and Athens will collapse.

Yeah.

And so men are engaged in dealing with the Thebans and the Spartans, and women are engaged in taking robes up to Athena on the Acropolis or going to Brown on a temple of Artemis on the coast and doing rituals there.

Many people who are very young, so girls, before they hit puberty go out there and it said turn into bears.

And that's one of the things that happens in my book.

And again, I think writing for children, you can make this kind of stuff much more vivid, because you can say that this actually happens, that the gods do actually exist.

And then at the moment you accept that the gods do exist, then the jeopardy becomes that much greater.

I think because we don't believe in the gods, but not just that we don't believe in gods, but we don't have the mindset that enables us to understand what it is to exist in the late sixth century and exist in a world where the dimension of the divine and the supernatural is all around you and has to be negotiated.

Yeah.

Because there'll be people listening to this who still will be saying, but the gods didn't exist.

The roles that were given to women were nonsense.

They should have had the votes.

It's a disgrace.

I suppose you're saying it's an unsatisfying and ultimately fruitless way to try and understand the world of the sixth century if you insist on asserting your 21st century mindset.

If you think of looking through a glass darkly back at this kind of ancient and obscure period there are two kind of great smears of dirt across the glass.

One is the fact that we don't believe in the gods anymore and increasingly people don't



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believe in have a very materialist approach.

The whole essence of writing history is fundamentally materialist.

We don't say, you know, this happened because the gods wanted it to happen or whatever.

Historians who are writing say at universities, whatever are entirely materialist in their approach.

And the second smear of dirt across the glass is this kind of Christian idea that every individual has a value by virtue of being created in the image of God.

And that is what underpins, I think, our ideal of democracy, the idea that people have rights to votes.

But the Athenians absolutely didn't think this.

They don't have that.

There's a book written by a great scholar called Greg Anderson, who read a wonderful book about the emergence of Greek democracy, but he then wrote a kind of altogether weirder book called *The Realness of Things Past*, which essentially is about exactly this theme, basically how the entire structure or the academic structure of writing history prevents us from getting to grips with how weird it was and how strange it was.

And obviously, it's one of the things, you know, that's absolutely one of the things that inspired me to write that children's book was that thinking that if I can write an account of it in which the gods exist, in a sense, I'm getting closer to explaining it, that I would by writing a kind of scholarly monograph that strips bare all the sources and deconstructs them.

So it reminds me a little bit of we had a guest on our podcast many moons ago who was talking about the Aztecs called Camilla Townsend.

She wrote a wonderful book about the Aztecs called *Fifth Sun*.

And there are sort of passages of almost imaginative prose in there where she tries to describe their world through their eyes.

And it's not very academic prose, you know, she's sort of, she's imagining they're almost a stream of consciousness chapters.

Yeah.

I guess that's what the children's book is to get yourself into the head, which I'll just try and strip away as much as possible for the baggage of a 21st century, fairly secular, as you say, materialist mindset.

One of the things that people will say, Tom Holland hasn't mentioned, and that's because he doesn't care about them, slaves.

There are slaves and there are foreigners.

So, but I think the thing that's interesting about, say, the emphasis that Athenians put on their autochthony, the idea that it's literally blood and soil, the idea that they have emerged from the earth, is that they never turn this into a kind of crusade.

You know, there's never a feeling that people shouldn't come to Athens because they don't share in this, say, like the Spartans do, I mean, the Spartans are famously xenophobic and keep foreigners out.

The Athenians are perfectly happy to allow foreigners to come, they call them medics, to live in the state, and they're perfectly happy to buy slaves.

Why wouldn't they?

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When slavery is taken for granted, everybody has slaves, wouldn't even cross their mind to, you know, I mean, it's kind of saying, oh, why wouldn't you have a mule or a cart or a...

Right, because they don't believe in human beings as being sacred individuals.

Yeah.

Human machines, Aristotle called them.

But obviously, none of these people would have, because they don't belong to the Demos, therefore, they don't participate in the democracy.

Of course, they don't, by definition.

Can I just ask a couple more small questions?

One, how does it work?

Like, how does the democracy actually...

It is very briefly described what I do.

If I'm a member of the Demos, do I go and vote every year or four years every...

Do I put a thing in a box?

Do I stone in a part?

I don't know.

How would I do it?

Well, so you have...

I mean, it works in kind of various ways.

You have an assembly where people go, absolutely go and vote, show of hands or pebbles or whatever.

We talked about the ostracism before, which again is a kind of a way of decompressing tensions that might otherwise split the democracy, so that if one person or the rivalry between two people, two powerful people in the democracy is becoming destabilizing, the people can decide, first of all, whether they should vote to ostracize one of them, i.e. kick them out for a period of time.

And then if they decide yes, then they decide which of two people should be expelled.

And all of this is aimed at making the Demos kind of vivid in a political form.

So politics comes from, again, from the Greek word, polis, meaning kind of a city.

So politics is a manifestation of the Demos in the workings of the city.

That's essentially what it is.

So a couple more questions.

We'll have a lot of people listening to this podcast.

I'm guessing, particularly a lot of our American listeners who will think history, the story of history really is the story of progress towards democracy.

If Donald Rumsfeld and Dick Cheney are listening, this would be there sort of with their Iraq war hats on, they would be saying, well, you know, democracy will one day sweep across the world.

It's sort of France's freaky armor idea, I suppose.

I know I'm describing it very simplistically.

Why doesn't this spread?

If this is such a brilliant idea, why doesn't, you know, and also if it makes you better at fighting, why don't the Spartans, the Thebans, all these other people adopt it?

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Why is it that Athens remains an outlier?

Well, two things to say on that.

First of all, the idea that, you know, the famous Martin Luther King quote that Obama was very fond of citing that the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends towards justice.

I mean, this is a very Christian idea.

And so in that sense, the idea of progress is something that is a legacy of Christianity.

Not of Athenian democracy.

Absolutely not.

Why doesn't it spread?

Because it gets weaponized by the Athenians and democracy comes to be associated with the Athenian Empire.

And Athens comes to impose democracies on subject cities as a way of essentially institutionalizing its own power.

But the other reason is that in the long run, it is felt by the kind of people who write the sources that have survived that democracy is a terrible thing, that actually power should be in the hands of people who are qualified to use it, people who are educated, and that the mass of the people are, you know, just a rabble.

To be fair, that's what most people have thought through most of history, right?

Completely.

And so the collapse of the Athenian democracy in the Peloponnesian War, and then again before the Macedonians, people turn around and say, well, we told you so.

So it comes to be seen as an experiment not worth repeating.

Right.

So that tears up brilliantly my last question, which is, we now think that there is a tradition, a story of progress.

So you know, Athens, then there's that business in Iceland, you know, England, the mother of parliament, the United States Congress, you know, Martin Luther King having his dream, that there is this story.

Is there any sense in which we can talk of a continuity, a living tradition that goes through history in which, no.

So basically you're saying that people pick up Athenian democracy later and try and pretend it's a model for them.

Athenian democracy, once people start reading about it in the Renaissance and after, again, it serves aristocratic elites as a terrible warning of what happens.

So in the 17th century, Thomas Hobbes says people shouldn't be reading about this because it just encourages them to have ideas above their station.

And he's thinking specifically about the English Revolution.

He feels that the example of Athenian democracy has fed into the kind of regicidal instincts of the radicals in the Civil War.

And the same thing happens with the French Revolution, that conservatives feel that the influence of the study of Greek democracy on the French Revolution has been wholly negative.

But as democracy in the modern sense comes to spread, so the understanding of democracy comes to improve and people look back at Athens and start seeing it as a kind of, you know,

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a shining city on a hill.

Yeah.

You know, this is the great model.

But this is an invention.

Our relationship with the past is always creative.

Right.

And it's got a kind of scopio effect in an era where systems of government have the name of democracy.

It's inevitable that attitudes to the original democracy are going to change.

But it's also inevitable that we will look back at that original democracy as a precursor to ours.

Yeah.

Whereas in fact, it's not at all.

It's something very different.

Brilliant.

What an interesting note on which to end, Tom.

It's a fascinating subject.

It's all about...

Because it's not just the story of democracies, it's the story of the invention of tradition.

The invention of ancient Greece as a model, I suppose, which, you know, most people listen to this, I think, will still think of the ancient Greeks as the birthplace of civilization, a model for all the lovely things we have today.

And it's fascinating to hear that in your trademark style, made stranger and more weird. Weirdness all around.

Yes.

Right.

Brilliant.

Thank you, everybody.

Tom, before you go, one more plug, please, for you.

This is very...

I mean, it's very unlikely, very unlikely.

So if people want to read a book in which the gods are real, Greece is weird, people turn into bears, what's the name of that book, Tom?

The Wolf Girl, the Gods and the Greeks.

Superb.

All right.

And on that bombshell, we'll say goodbye.

Goodbye.

Bye-bye.

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