

# The Best Books on Athenian Democracy

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**Aristotle, *The Athenian Constitution*, edited and translated with an introduction by P. J. Rhodes. Penguin Classics, 208pp.**

Nobody would claim that the treatise on the Athenian constitution written by Aristotle or one of his students is the most entertaining contemporary source for Athenian democracy, or the most philosophically insightful. For a raunchy, no-holds-barred sidelight on the democracy, we can turn to Aristophanes – though his zany humour makes using his plays as a historical source a complicated endeavour. For a beautifully-crafted historical narrative (and some editorializing from one of history's great cynics), we have Thucydides' account of the Peloponnesian War. But no text that survives deals with the democracy as fully or as directly as the Aristotelian one, written sometime in the late 4<sup>th</sup> century BC; when it was pulled out of the sands of Egypt in 1879, it increased our knowledge of the workings of the Athenian system at a stroke. About half of the text is a chronological overview of the various stages of the

Athenian constitution; the other half is a detailed description of the Athenian democracy's various institutions and officials. Packed with detail, it's an unrivalled source for how the Athenian democracy worked on a day to day basis – and for anyone with an interest in popular rule, that should be excitement enough.

**Moses I. Finley, *Democracy Ancient and Modern*, revised edition. Rutgers University Press, 208pp.**

Midway through the nineteenth century, the English banker George Grote published a twelve-volume *History of Greece* in which he dared to depict the Athenian democracy in a positive light. More than a hundred years after Grote broke with the anti-democratic tradition that had previously reigned supreme in the study of ancient democracy, the topic was still not getting the attention it deserved. Moses Finley's book went some way towards changing that. Finley was an American who was expelled from his home country during the McCarthy era on the basis that he was a member of the Communist Party. His book contains a number of short, sharp essays (originally lectures), often aimed at scholarly misconceptions about Athenian popular rule. One classic chapter, for example, explained how the much-maligned 'demagogues' were in fact part and parcel of the Athenian democratic system; and went on to point out the strangeness of the conventional view that classical Athens produced one of the greatest cultural flowerings of human history under the worst political system ever conceived. At this stage (1973), drawing attention to some of the inconsistencies of the conventional view of Athenian democracy as mob rule was still an important task, one that Finley carried out with élan.

**Mogens Herman Hansen, *Athenian Democracy in the Age of Demosthenes*. Bristol Classical Press, 464pp.**

Much of what we know about Athenian democracy has been built up over time by detailed and painstaking studies of institutions and procedure. One of the great masters of this type of work is the Danish scholar Mogens Herman Hansen, who has published dozens of hard-nosed, empirically-minded books and articles, most recently as head of the Copenhagen Polis Centre. This book, which appeared in 1991, is a distillation of the great mass of technical work that had been done on Athenian institutions up to that point, both by Hansen himself and by others. Assuming no knowledge of Greek, the book provides a clear and accessible overview to the workings of the Assembly, the Council, the courts, and much else besides, all while sticking close to the ancient sources. Ferociously well-informed of the scholarship and yet mindful of how to present material to newcomers, it remains unsurpassed as an introductory textbook on the topic. And it closes with a list of theses on Athenian democracy that continues to be a fertile source of controversy within the field.

**Josiah Ober, *Mass and Elite in Democratic Athens: Rhetoric, Ideology, and the Power of the People*. Princeton University Press, 408pp.**

Josh Ober has been one of the most influential and audacious scholars of Athenian democracy over the last thirty years. With such a range of important contributions (from the historical essays in the 1996 volume *The Athenian Revolution* to the social scientific analysis in 2008's *Democracy and Knowledge*) it's hard to decide which individual work to single out.

But this book, which appeared only two years after Hansen's, helped mark a watershed in the study of Athenian democracy. While Hansen's volume helped introduce students to the nuts and bolts of the Athenian system, Ober's took a different, bolder tack, turning to sociological approaches for new ways of characterizing Athenian popular rule. Ober took issue with the sociologist Robert Michels' 'Iron Law of Oligarchy,' according to which all societies were run by an elite. For Ober, the Athenian case falsified Michels' hypothesis, since though Athens did have a social elite, it did not rule. Instead, the people did; and it is the insistence that the masses really were in charge in classical Athens that has had a lasting legacy, even if the way Ober went about showing this (through an analysis of the way elite politicians shaped their speeches to conform with democratic ideology) has worn less well.

**Loren J. Samons II, *What's Wrong with Democracy? From Athenian Practice to American Worship*. University of California Press, 328pp.**

When Grote published his monumental history, almost nobody believed that the ancient Athenian system was anything more than mob rule. Almost two centuries later, thanks to the careful work of Finley, Hansen, Ober, and many other scholars besides, we now see ancient democracy in a different light. But the danger now is that our view of Athenian popular rule has become uncritically adulatory. This is what makes Loren Samons' 2007 intervention so valuable. Samons is author of a number of specialist works on technical aspects of Athenian history (notably imperial finances), but here he turns his hand to a more accessible style of writing. The result is a vigorous and sometimes polemical

critique of much current work in the field. Though most readers will find something to disagree with here (and some readers will find a lot to disagree with), Samons' writing is always clear, and his arguments always considered. Curiously enough, perhaps the most lasting impression left by this book is the interest and importance of the Athenian democratic experience, and the resources it can offer for projects of widely different political casts. ʘ