

### Athenian Diplomacy: Elite Actors and Popular Oversight

During the 180 or so years of *demokratia* at Athens during the Classical period, the Athenians found themselves engaged in warfare of some variety during two out of every three years. This nearly constant procession of wars required negotiation to secure allies, heal breaches, and end existing conflicts. These relationships were primarily managed by the exchange of ambassadors between Athens and its neighbors. The Athenians dispatched ambassadors approved by the *ekklesia* to make a case to the ruling governments of other *poleis*. Often, *proxenoi* (individuals from families inheriting a special relationship or status in a foreign polis) played a pivotal role in these negotiations. At the same time, *strategoi* (commanding officers) had broad latitude to negotiate with local towns to arrange markets and with their foreign equivalents to make truces to ensure that the dead were collected and exchanged. Major decisions had to be ratified by the *ekklesia*, the assembled demos where all adult Athenian male citizens could vote.

The problem that this system presents is that it is an example of the Athenian *demokratia* functioning in a way that seems out of step with modern notions of democracy. Every known *strategos* was someone who always had considerable wealth and often, especially during the 5<sup>th</sup> Century BCE, hailed from an aristocratic house. As for the *proxenoi*, they almost invariably came from the most elite families in Athens and the position of *proxenos* was typically passed down from father to son, having been granted in the first place by an outside power. While the ambassadors were chosen with the approval of the *ekklesia*, the debates before the demos were dominated by elite orators and it was almost always established orators, *proxenoi*, and *strategoi* who were selected to be a part of these embassies.

The complex interplay of *proxenoi*, elected ambassadors, and the votes of the citizens in the *ekklesia* in the field of diplomacy mirrors almost perfectly the functioning of the Athenian *demokratia* itself. Therefore, it is effectively impossible to fully understand Athenian diplomacy without taking into consideration how matters of war and peace were inextricably wrapped up in a larger political process. Further, I show that, as is the case with religion, the Athenians were willing to accept decidedly undemocratic inherited positions because of a respect for tradition and the international norms of diplomacy, which predated the Cleisthenic reforms of 508/7. Thus, I argue that if we understand Athenian *demokratia* first and foremost as a system designed to regulate elite activity rather than as a system designed to empower and liberate the masses that we can better understand why the Athenians themselves would not have regarded their method of conducting diplomacy as being undemocratic. It is my hope that this study of diplomacy will illuminate both the ideology and practice of *demokratia*.