

Robert J. Buck

Thrasylbulus and the Athenian Democracy

The Life of an Athenian Statesman

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ROBERT J. BUCK

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CONTENTS

Chapter 1

Introduction: Sources and Scholarship	7
The Age of Thrasybulus	8
Sources	12
Modern Scholarship	17

Chapter 2

Thrasybulus: His Early Life and Career, ca. 450–407 B.C.	19
Birth and Family	19
Revolution of the Four Hundred	21
Cynossema	31
Abydos	33
Cyzicus	36
Campaigns to 406: Notium	39
Thrasybulus' Character	47

Chapter 3

Arginusae and the Thirty, 407–403 B.C.	49
Arginusae	51
The Aftermath: the Shipwrecked Sailors and the Trial of the Generals .	53
The Peace and the Thirty	60
The Purges	63
Thrasybulus in Exile.....	64
Boeotia cools to Sparta.....	68
Boeotia and Athens.....	69

Chapter 4

The Overthrow of the Thirty and the Restoration of Democracy, 403–396 B.C.	71
Phyle	71
Logistics	73
First Skirmishes	74
Battle of Acharnae	74
Massacre at Eleusis	75
Battle of Munychia	77
The Ten	79
Spartan Intervention: Lysander and Pausanias	80

The Reconciliation (Sept. 403).....	82
Renewed Democracy: Archinus	84
Factions at Athens	86
Dominance of Thrasybulus	87
Relations with Sparta	88
Socrates	90
Thrasybulus the Moderate	91
Persia and Sparta	92
Chapter 5	
The First Two Years of the Corinthian War: Haliartus, Nemea, and	
Coronea, 395–394 B.C.	95
Timocrates of Rhodes	95
The Outbreak of War	96
The Athenian Alliance	96
Battle of Haliartus	98
The Congress and Alliance	100
Battle of Nemea	101
Battle of Coronea	103
Chapter 6	
The Corinthian War: Thrasybulus and the New Athenian Empire:	
393–389 B.C.	107
Conon Triumphant	107
The Downfall of Conon	109
The Situation in the Aegean	110
Affairs at Athens	113
The Campaign of Thrasybulus	115
After Thrasybulus' Death	118
Chapter 7	
Thrasybulus and Athens, 450–389 B.C.	121
Appendix	
Chronology	125
Bibliography	129
General Index	135
Index of Ancient Authors and Sources	141

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION: SOURCES AND SCHOLARSHIP

Modern historiography is grappling with the problem of how to place the individual in proper relationship to his community and his times, in both social and economic terms.¹ It is easy to over-emphasize the importance of an individual and to neglect the limitations imposed upon him by the framework of his society, by the economic situation, by the culture in which he lives, and by the *Zeitgeist*: e.g., to blame Hitler for all the evils of the Third Reich. It is equally easy to pass the responsibility from the individual to his times, to his society, to his upbringing, to various historical trends: to blame the world of the twentieth century for the rise of the Third Reich and its excesses.

Ancient history faces similar problems of interpretation. The problem is how to put any leader into his proper relationship to his community in the light of the limitations imposed by economics, by the *Zeitgeist*, by cultural and social constraints. Was Pericles the one who made Athenian democracy in its greatest period really work? Or did he simply lead the state in an exceptionally vigorous and democratic time? Was Cimon the architect of the Athenian Empire, or was he a prominent leader of a vigorous people at a fortunate time?

Thrasybulus son of Lycus,² of the deme Steiria,³ a politician of the end of the fifth century B.C. and the early fourth, is worthy of study in this regard. He is an exceptional individual who is credited with twice leading the democratic elements that defeated oligarchic regimes at Athens and restored democracy. He twice re-established Athenian authority in the north Aegean. He at least twice led the Athenians to brilliant victories over the Peloponnesians. He played a major and influential role in the turbulent politics throughout the period from 411 to 389 B.C. In his last years he made significant progress toward re-establishing an empire. For all these great deeds he should have been remembered and revered. But the ancient sources we have largely pass him by, possibly because of their anti-democratic bias, or possibly because they did not regard what he did as significant. He did not restore the Athenian Empire, and he did not even rebuild the fortifications of Athens that were demolished after the Peloponnesian War. The moderns have not done much

1 See, e.g., Kershaw 1993; Jäger 1994.

2 Paus. 9.11.6.

3 Xen. *Hell.* 4.8.25.

for him, either. He is a little late for the great days of the fifth century and a little early for the age of Demosthenes; but he still deserves study.

This essay will try to place Thrasybulus in the context of the lively history of the period between 411 and 389 B.C. It will look at his career critically and show his personal virtues and shortcomings, his remarkable contributions to Athens and his failures, to see why he was comparatively neglected. It will also look at the events and his role in them, what was happening to Athens at the time, that is, how he acted within the framework and limitations of the culture of the period, and when he did his deeds. The chronology of the period has not as yet been completely agreed upon, but it is well enough understood in its broad outlines. Only at a few points does it provide problems.

THE AGE OF THRASYBULUS

Thrasybulus was active from at least 411 to his death in 389, a little longer than the two decades around the turn of the fifth to the fourth century. It was very different from the time before the Peloponnesian War in which he grew up. The first decade or so saw revolutions at Athens, the collapse of the Athenian Empire, and the city go down to defeat before Sparta and her allies. It saw the Thirty Tyrants, civil discord, and the ultimate restoration of democracy under the leadership of Thrasybulus. It saw Sparta victorious and increasingly arrogant, and her allies increasingly disaffected, with Persia poised to recover its control over the Greek cities of Asia Minor. The second decade saw the partial recovery of Athens from its near death. It saw Athens and many of Sparta's erstwhile allies joined together with Persia in a bloody war against Sparta. It saw Athens make a determined effort to recover the Empire and fail.

Athens had previously suffered two appalling disasters, the great plague at the outset of the Peloponnesian War, in 430 and 429, and the utter destruction of the Sicilian expedition in 413. The plague, if it was as bad a pandemic as the Black Death, might have killed about one-third of the population;⁴ the Sicilian Expedition cost Athens itself 4,000 hoplites and cavalry plus an unknown number of Athenian sailors, plus thousands of allies, and some 200

4 For the plague, Thuc. 2.47–54 and Gomme et al. 1945–81, ad loc. See also, e.g., Hammond 1986, 351. No one knows what the plague was. Popular guesses include typhus, measles, and some lethal viral mutation of some childhood disease like chicken-pox on its first visit. For the level of fatalities in the Black Death, see, e.g., Platt 1996. No one knows the size of the population of Athens before the Peloponnesian War. Estimates vary, with Hornblower's (1983, 172) 258,000 below average, Gomme's (1933, 26) 315,500 about average, and Hammond's (1986, 329) 400,000 above average. A loss of one-third would be something around 100,000 people, very roughly.

ships.⁵ Athens continued to suffer a steady drain of its manpower until Aegospotami. These losses must have been traumatic to Athenian society. Virtually no family was spared, and some families simply disappeared. Casualties on such a scale must surely have shaken the morale of the population and the faith of many in the existing system.⁶ Socrates and the sophists would not have had such a profound influence in a serene, unshaken society, or aroused such hostile reactions among self-confident citizens.

In these two decades from 410 to 390 Athens was practically bankrupt. The reserves of about 9,700 talents accumulated by the state before the Peloponnesian War⁷ were virtually all disbursed by the end of the Sicilian expedition, except for the emergency fund of 1,000 talents, and this was spent by 411. There was no deficit financing, since no one would be insane enough to lend money to a state, even to Athens. The state eked out a hand-to-mouth existence, once the accumulated reserves were spent. It cost from half a talent to a talent a month, depending upon the pay offered the crew, to keep a trireme at sea, and so a fleet of eighty would cost anywhere from forty up to eighty talents a month.⁸ With the reserves gone, the exigencies of keeping a fleet in being explain the constant efforts of the various Athenian fleets to gather 'contributions' from allies and to loot rebel and Persian territory, efforts that have been called by later historians extortion, robbery, and racketeering, with some justice.

Loss of family, loss of security, loss of faith in this society and even in the gods, it is not surprising that there was loss of confidence in the institutions that many considered had brought Athens into its sad condition, its democracy and the polis structure itself – as well as the politicians. It may be unreasonable to blame democracy for the plague, or the ill-luck and misfortunes of the Sicilian campaign, but blaming governments for what cannot be helped is a human failing. After the death of Pericles Athens had been guided by such men as Cleon, a capable administrator but brutal, vulgar, vain and short-sighted; Nicias, who met his end in Sicily through his own indecision; Alcibiades, a genius whose egoism led him almost to destroy his country; such double-dealing, unscrupulous, and treacherous men as Theramenes and Andocides; and others, like Androcles, who put their own interests and passions before the welfare of the state. A man like Thrasybulus, honourable, honest, and sincere, is a considerable contrast, but one that must have given his contemporaries pause and made them wonder whether he was really what he seemed to be, or whether there was something wrong with him.

5 For the losses in Sicily see, e.g., Hammond 1986, 400.

6 See, e.g., Hammond 1986, 351; Bury 1955, 407f.

7 Thuc. 2.13.3; see also Meritt et al. 1939–53, 3:118–132.

8 Pritchett 1971–85, 1:4–29, for costs of keeping a trireme afloat and the problems of financing a navy.

Naturally, many people turned to examine other, and possibly better, modes of organizing society and state. The Spartans were obviously very successful; it seemed to some a good idea to copy their way of life and be like the Lacedaemonians. The Boeotian hoplite oligarchy had made that fractious people disciplined and victorious; some thought that an oligarchy on the Boeotian model would be good for Athens.⁹ The poor manned the navy but had to be paid for the various jobs assigned by lot at Athens, especially in the huge juries; some considered that they should be excluded from governing and deliberation because of the expense. There had been discontent with democracy among prosperous Athenians from at least the time of Ephialtes in the 460s, but this discontent did not gain wide support until after the Syracusan disaster.

The Athenians were quite capable of committing atrocities against their 'allies,' as Thucydides makes graphically clear, but their brutality reached its peak in the period from 411 to 403, when they turned savagely on one another, until Thrasybulus overthrew the Thirty and re-established law and order. I suspect that in the Athens of this period, in the Athens of Alcibiades, Andocides, and Theramenes, the Athens sliding slowly down to bankruptcy and defeat, Thrasybulus still saw in memory the glorious Athens of Pericles.

Athens of 410 to 390 was a violent place, where abrupt changes and sudden disasters of the type we see in Greek tragedy were all too common. Hunger and death were not very far away from most people. Infant mortality was high. If one survived the rigours of childhood, childbed for women and warfare for the men were serious hazards, even if, on the average, a battle killed only five per cent of the victors and about fourteen percent of the vanquished.¹⁰ Military writers tell us that any spear or sword thrust deeper than about four cm was well-nigh fatal, and wound infections were untreatable.¹¹ Prisoners, as the fate of the Athenians at Syracuse makes clear, had a bad time of it, and the diseases worried about in modern military handbooks on health in the field must have taken their toll, as they did until the development of modern field sanitation. There are numerous memorials for women who died in childbirth,¹² and several studies of skeletal remains indicate that females had a considerably shorter life-span than males, by about five to ten years.¹³

9 Buck 1981, 47–52.

10 Hanson 1989, 89, 209 and Krentz 1985, 18, make the case that deaths in battle were on the scale of 5% to 14%. This probably does not include fatalities later from wounds or sickness. Hanson, *loc. cit.*, makes the point that the chances were very good that a man would become a casualty eventually, since a hoplite could serve for over forty years, with a battle to be faced once every couple of years.

11 Vegetius 1.11, 12. Hanson 1989, 217f., for gravity of wound infections.

12 Pomeroy 1975, 84f.

13 Pomeroy 1975, 68f.

Athens at this period was heartily disliked by most of Greece as a tyrant state that kept its predominance over its allies by brute force. Pericles could call Athens the school of Hellas, but most Greeks regarded it as a kind of Dickensian Dotheboys Hall. The immediate neighbours of Athens, Boeotia and Megara, hated and despised her, and were in turn brutalized when the opportunity offered, as the comic playwright Aristophanes in the *Acharnians* makes clear for Megara, and as Thucydides indicates for Boeotia. Sparta was regarded by many as a liberator. The beauty of Greek art, architecture and literature should not blind us to other less comely aspects of life in the fifth century.

The late fifth century was the sort of time when beliefs became polarized and emotions became raw, just as Thucydides says in a famous passage about the way words were changing their meanings.¹⁴ Athens had been continuously at war, with long lists of casualties, grim even in their mutilated state,¹⁵ for just about all of Thrasybulus' adult life. And all the misfortunes, the plague and the Sicilian defeat, came to pass under the sign of democracy at Athens.

Democracy, as the Greeks thought of it, was the direct participation of all male citizens in setting state policy, law-making and in the work of the courts.¹⁶ It was a comparatively rare phenomenon in the Greek world of the fifth and fourth centuries, since most people, then as now, were normally quite willing to let someone else do it. The usual form of government was an oligarchy of one type or another. Democracies had a perennial problem with voter apathy, and Aristotle tells us that pay for attendance at the assembly was introduced to ensure a quorum.¹⁷ In fact, pay for public service was a hallmark of democracy from the time of Pericles' reforms in the middle of the fifth century. Oligarchies normally did not pay the members of the government, except occasionally for expenses. This made government cheaper, but led to corruption in high places as far back as Hesiod's 'gift-devouring kings.'¹⁸

Democracy as practiced at Athens was expensive, and a considerable proportion of Athenian income went to pay for public service. The annual income at the beginning of the Peloponnesian War was 1,000 talents,¹⁹ of which 600 was from the Empire in tribute or other payments, some of which could be used for war.²⁰ The remaining 400 was earmarked for games, festivals, and other internal government purposes, not for war. Thucydides says

14 Thuc. 3.82.

15 *IG* 1³. 1179–1192. The list from the battle of Cynossema (?) shows a Eupolis who may be the Comic poet, 1190, line 52, cf. Suidas, s.v. Εὐπολις.

16 Aristot. *Pol.* 1290b1–3.

17 *Ath. Pol.* 41.3.

18 Hes. *Op.* 263f., βασιλῆες ... δωροφάγοι.

19 Xen. *Anab.* 7.1.27.

20 Meritt et al. 1939–53, 3:333f. on Thuc. 2.13.3–5.

that at the time of the Sicilian expedition it cost about a talent a month to keep a trireme afloat and the crew paid.²¹ An Athenian fleet of 100 ships afloat for only two months would use up 200 talents, one-third of the Imperial income. Once all the reserves were exhausted there was no deficit financing available. The Empire, in other words, spelled the difference between carrying on a war and even accumulating reserves, and a desperate search for funds, failure in which meant being unable to fight at all. For the Athenian democracy to survive in the environment of war the Empire was believed essential. With no income from the Empire, the only way to make funds available was to cut funds at home. To cut sacred funds might insult the gods, something no one was desirous of doing, especially in wartime; to cut the pay of the naval crews, to abolish pay for juries and other government jobs would save a considerable amount; to abolish democracy would do even more. Hence a good democrat like Thrasybulus was also an ardent supporter of the concept of the Empire, while oligarchs were not nearly as enthusiastic for it.

It is true that democratic Athens in the fourth century got on without the Empire, but not very well. There were chronic shortages of funds, and desperate shifts and contrivances whenever war had to be carried on, as a reading of the speeches of Demosthenes makes all too clear. In fact, Thrasybulus lost his life in an effort to gather funds from a reluctant area. The Second Athenian Confederacy, and other Athenian efforts to revive the Empire, indicate the bent of Athenian democratic policy – to procure a source of disposable income.

SOURCES

Generally speaking, the ancient sources for the life and times of Thrasybulus are all too brief, and they are often contradictory. Their historical merits vary widely.

Thucydides tells us something about Thrasybulus in the context of the Revolution of the Four Hundred. Unfortunately his narrative breaks off before he does much more than give a brief outline of Thrasybulus' actions, with very little on his motives. He does depict him, however, as a firm and vigorous supporter of democracy and a competent admiral. What he says is unimpeachable, but all too little.²²

Xenophon, especially in the *Hellenica*, is one of the major sources for the life of Thrasybulus. From him we see a leader struggling to maintain the Athenian Empire, one who twice led the resistance against oligarchy, a com-

21 Thuc. 6.8.1; see Pritchett 1971–85, 1:4–29 for the changes in military pay.

22 See Gomme et al. 1945–81, 5.1–4, 264f.

petent general before being replaced in the limelight by Alcibiades and later by Conon. He is clearly a fervent patriot determined to see Athens keep her greatness. He extorts Xenophon's reluctant admiration, expressed in a comment on his death (*Hell.* 4.8.31) : μάλα δοκῶν ἀνὴρ ἀγαθὸς εἶναι, 'with the reputation of being a really good man.' This encomium on him is somewhat surprising, since Xenophon is normally not fond of democrats.

Xenophon as a historian is deeply flawed. His *Hellenica* has been criticized for being 'essentially memoirs,'²³ or political propaganda,²⁴ or, in parts, what we would now call docudrama, where events are bent to make a good story, and Xenophon is a superb story-teller.²⁵ Xenophon is, however, as far as we can observe, usually basically truthful in what he tells us, but unfortunately he omits a great deal, especially if he dislikes the people concerned, or if the happenings distressed him overmuch. He is often careless in checking his facts, relying too much on a faulty memory, and his interpretation of events is often biased by his obvious admiration for the Spartans. He normally leaves out, for instance, the name of any Spartan commander who gets disgraced. He is also anti-democratic and anti-Boeotian.²⁶ As an anti-democrat he is no great admirer of Thrasybulus' actions in restoring the democracy twice, though he seems to respect the man himself and his pan-Hellenism. As an anti-Boeotian Xenophon skims over many of the activities of a major player in the events of the times, although, to be fair, he does treat some incidents in considerable detail. He ignores, however, any links Thrasybulus may have had with Thebes, and he plays down the Theban support for the counter-revolt against the Thirty. Although he is guilty of bias, carelessness, and *suppressio veri*, he never, as far as we know, deliberately tells lies. There are distortions and lapses of memory, but no deliberate falsehoods.

Xenophon does try to bring out any moral element that he perceives in historical happenings, and this seems to be in consonance with his purpose in writing the *Hellenica*.²⁷ The *Hellenica* is, therefore, by any standard not a particularly good historical work, whatever its literary merits may be, and whatever the quality of its moral purposes. It is, then, a measure of the merits of the historical sources for this period that the *Hellenica* is one of the best we have. The general rule that I shall follow is that when there is a discrepancy in the facts as related to us by Xenophon and another historian, Xenophon is to be preferred, unless there are compelling reasons to the contrary. If there is a gap in the evidence as related to us by Xenophon, then the other historian may be used to supplement Xenophon's narrative, but with caution.

23 Cawkwell 1979, 28.

24 Tuplin 1977, 26f.

25 E.g., Henry 1967, 198f. and Krentz 1989b, *passim*.

26 See, e.g., Henry 1967, 205; but cf. also Skoczylas 1993, 22–24.

27 Gray 1989. Skoczylas 1993, 92–96.

Diodorus Siculus, the other main source, fills in many incidents in the career of Thrasybulus, giving us a slightly different picture, one of a decent and honourable man and a competent general, some of whose credit was stolen by Alcibiades, and who was pushed out of the picture by Conon. But Diodorus was a compiler of the first century B.C., who has to rely heavily on his sources, at least for the narrative. He has been undergoing a critical re-assessment, especially for his treatment of non-narrative material, and his stock, at least in this respect, has risen considerably.²⁸ His main source for the period concerned is Ephorus, a historian of the mid-fourth century, one prone to moralize.²⁹ Ephorus is careless³⁰ and sloppy,³¹ doubling incidents, for example, if he finds two slightly discrepant versions in his sources.³² He, like most of his own sources, was not particularly fond of democracy, and he relied over-much on tendentious fourth-century pamphleteers, particularly Isocrates.³³ But Ephorus does use as one of his sources the Oxyrhynchus Historian, commonly termed P for short, considered by many as quite competent. He wrote a history of Greece continuing from where Thucydides stopped, a *Hellenica*, of which we have fragments dealing with the period from 411 to 394.

Many authorities regard P as the principal exception to the rule that I have followed that Xenophon takes priority.³⁴ There is no agreement about who he is. In spite of nearly a century of efforts to identify him, he remains anonymous.³⁵ Whoever he was, many critics consider him a very good and careful historian, superior to Xenophon, although it must be emphasized that this view is not unanimous, especially among more recent researchers.³⁶ He is partial to the propertied class, and not averse to skewing interpretation in its

28 See, e.g., Sacks 1990, esp. 5, 19–22, 23–54.

29 Skoczylas 1993, 127–167; Cartledge 1987, 68; Sacks 1990, 19f., 26.

30 Ephorus was criticized for carelessness in Antiquity; cf. Strab. 7.3.9, Diod. 1.37.4, Josephus, *Contra Apionem* 1.67.

31 E.g., Ephorus' claim that Pericles started the Peloponnesian War to cover his embezzlements, Diod. 12.38–41; his attribution of the invention of coinage to Pheidon, Figueira 1991, 65–80; his mangling of the Oxyrhynchus Historian, Gray 1987, 72–89.

32 Buck 1979, 145–147.

33 Cartledge 1987, 68, refers to his style as 'frosted with the glitter of Isokratean rhetoric.' Sacks 1990, 32, with comment on how Diodorus adds certain sentiments not found in Isocrates or Ephorus.

34 Bruce 1967, for an excellent historical treatment. Most recently McKechnie and Kern 1988. Cartledge 1987, 66f., e.g., for a brief summary of the standard evaluation.

35 Bruce 1967, 22–27, Harding 1987, 101–104, and Shrimpton 1991, 183–195, suggest he might be Cratippus, as does Pesely 1994, 43f., but it is impossible to prove.

36 Cf. McKechnie and Kern 1988, 14–16; Gray 1979. For the older view, Bruce 1967, 20–22.