

How Democratic was Athens ?

Aristotle, Constitution of Athens, XLIII

The Prytanes (...) convene the meetings of the Council of the Five Hundred and the Assembly. The Council they convene every day, unless it is a holiday, the Assembly four times in each prytany. It is also their duty to draw up the programme of the business of the Council and to decide what subjects are to be dealt with on each particular day, and where the sitting is to be held. They also draw up the programme for the meetings of the Assembly.

One of these in each prytany is called the 'sovereign' Assembly ; in this the people have to ratify the continuance of the magistrates in office, if they are performing their duties properly, and to consider the supply of corn² and the defence of the country. On this day, too, impeachments are introduced by those who wish to do so, the lists of property confiscated by the state are read, and also applications for inheritances and wards of state, so that nothing may pass unclaimed without the cognizance of any person concerned. In the sixth prytany, in addition to the business already stated, the question is put to the vote whether it is desirable to hold a vote of ostracism or not; and complaints against professional accusers, whether Athenian or aliens domiciled in Athens, are received(...).

Questions

- 1) What kind of political structure is described here ? Justify your answer.
- 2) Aristotle presents 2 bodies of the Athenian Constitution : which ones ? Who were the members of all these bodies ? What was their function ? Do you know other bodies ?
- 3) If you consider the term « ward of state », can you say all the inhabitants were included in the « people » ?
- 4) What did the word 'Ostracism' mean ?
- 5) Using the document and your personal knowledge say how Democratic was Athens in the Vth century ?

Prytanes : prytanes. Magistrats représentant les 10 tribus, ils avaient le rôle de président de séance des assemblées chacun leur tour dans un mandat appelé « Prytanie »

to draw up the programme of the business : établir, fixer l'ordre du jour.

the supply of corn : approvisionnement en céréales (grain, blé).

Inheritance : succession

ward of state : fille pupille de l'Etat. La fille « épicière » était celle qui se trouvait seule descendante de son père. Selon la loi elle n'était pas héritière mais attachée à l'héritage et devait épouser son plus proche parent.