

THE LUXURIES OF ATHENIAN DEMOCRACY*

By DAVID BRAUND

In 424 B.C. or thereabouts,¹ an oligarchically-minded critic of the Athenian democracy observed:

And if account is to be taken of more minor matters, it is as a result of their mastery of the sea that the Athenians have mixed with various peoples in different areas and discovered a range of festive practices. In consequence, what is sweet in Sicily, Italy, Cyprus, Egypt, Lydia, Pontus, the Peloponnese or elsewhere has all been brought together in one place because of [sc.the Athenians'] mastery of the sea. (The Old Oligarch, 2.7)

Though critical of the democracy in principle, the Old Oligarch is strikingly positive here in one sense. This is no denunciation of the baleful and corrupting influence of luxuries imported from overseas. Rather, it is an explicit statement of an advantage of sea-power to the Athenians. A minor advantage, on this assessment, but evidently considered worthy of attention. Moreover, here as throughout his work, the Old Oligarch has in mind not a narrow elite, but the Athenian *demos* at large, the masses. On his analysis, the *demos*, through its sea-power, rules Athens and its empire effectively and in its own interest, which includes the acquisition and enjoyment of the best produce of the Mediterranean and Black Sea worlds. Under the democracy, it is claimed, the masses enjoy what may be termed luxury-goods.

The Old Oligarch is fundamentally opposed to the democratic system, despite (or perhaps because of) the internal logic that he finds in the actions of the Athenian democracy. However, it was not only in the context of criticism that the widespread availability of luxuries was claimed for democratic Athens. Much the same idea is found at much the same time in Thucydides' version of Pericles' Funeral Speech of 430 B.C.:

And on account of the greatness of the city everything comes in from all the world, and for us it is as natural to enjoy the goods of others as it is to enjoy our own local produce. (Thuc. 2.38; cf. 1.81.2 [Archidamus])

Like the Old Oligarch, Thucydides' Pericles is not referring to the enjoyment of foreign luxuries by a narrow elite. Rather, he is addressing the Athenian *demos*: his concern is the common experience of the

Athenians *en masse*. Further, and again like the Old Oligarch, Thucydides' Pericles offers an account and analysis of the principal features of the Athenian democracy in the course of which he too draws attention to the widespread enjoyment of imported luxury-goods. Both claim that the masses of democratic Athens have access to luxury goods.

It is the ideological function of that claim that is the concern of this discussion, not its historicity. Indeed, we are in no position to offer an adequate assessment of the consumption of imported luxuries in historical Athens. First, the very definition of luxury goods is problematic. To take an extreme instance, even wheat might be regarded as a luxury in a society where millet was the principal foodstuff.² Second, the identification of imports is also problematic. As Ehrenberg pointed out, the sources of many 'luxuries' are much less clear than they may seem: 'Syracusan' cheese might be made in Athens, rather as Cheddar in New Zealand, while the 'Persian bird' was the commonplace cock fowl.³ Even the exotic 'Phasian bird', the pheasant, seems to have been bred locally in Attica by the end of the fifth century B.C.:⁴ so too, it seems, the peacock. To that extent luxury goods were not exceptional to the norms of the Greek economy: where local production was practicable, it was practised. That is why men came from distant parts to obtain the eggs of the peacocks kept by Pylilampes and his family in fifth-century Attica: they sought eggs for breeding, not consumption.⁵ At the same time, cookbooks gave information on the preparation of such creatures and the creation of new dishes with more familiar ingredients: even Plato's Socrates knew that the Athenian who desired 'imported luxury' could turn for assistance to Mithaecus' *Opsopoiia*.⁶

The case of the peacocks casts an interesting sidelight on the claims made by the Old Oligarch and Thucydides' Pericles. The essence of that case seems to have been that peacocks were kept as a luxury for a very few, not for the masses. Accordingly, the possession of peacocks was taken to illustrate an anti-democratic tendency: the prosecution complained that the owner had kept them for himself and not put them on full public view within the polis for the enjoyment of all. In an extant fragment, the defendant seeks to justify his behaviour by drawing attention to the practical difficulties of public display and by claiming that he does allow some public access. He seems to have accepted the premise that widespread public enjoyment was desirable in principle: he could hardly do otherwise. Unfortunately, the legal basis of the indictment remains a matter of inference, but it seems clear enough that the defendant's monopolization of luxury had given significant offence: this could be perceived as overt

oligarchical behaviour, akin to the rearing of fine horse-flesh.⁷ To respond by stressing practical difficulties was to evade suspicions of oligarchy.

Two points deserve particular attention in this case. First, we seem to have another instance of the idea that luxury is to be shared widely in the Athenian democracy, though caution is required, since special factors may obtain. It may have been argued, for example, that the peacocks were in some sense acquired in the context of public business and that they were consequently public property. Nevertheless, whatever the precise legal position, it seems clear enough that the prosecution drew much of its force from the notion that luxury should not be the private preserve of a few. An anecdote told by Diogenes Laertius indicates public interest in the possession of unusual birds by the democratic state, or perhaps the presentation of such birds to the community. He writes that when Socrates inspired the general Iphicrates by showing him Meidias' fighting-cock, a bystander named Glauconides 'saw fit to acquire it for the polis, as if it were a pheasant or peacock'.⁸ There would have been nothing particularly remarkable, perhaps, about the acquisition of exotic birds for the community, whereas the fighting-cock was normally beneath consideration.

Second, the case of the peacocks exemplifies a conflict between the democratic ideal of shared luxury and the reality of wealth-differentiation and privilege within the Athenian democracy.⁹ Ppyrilampes and his family were evidently most extraordinary in their possession of peacocks. Others had their own special possessions: Leogoras, for example, seems to have been renowned for his possession of pheasants.¹⁰ There was an important gap between the rhetoric of Thucydides' Pericles and the Old Oligarch's theorizing, on the one hand, and the everyday experience of the Athenian poor. There may have been a greater variety of luxuries in Athens than in other Greek states, but most of them will have been well beyond the pockets of most Athenians.¹¹

The gap between the idea of luxury for all and everyday reality in the Athenian democracy could not escape the critical attention of those less sympathetic even than the Old Oligarch. Plato's *Menexenus* wickedly satirizes the Funeral Speech of Pericles and the genre in general: there Socrates is made to observe that when he hears such a speech, he no longer imagines himself to be a resident of Athens, but to be a dweller in the Isles of the Blessed.¹² For Plato's Socrates the idea of 'luxury for all' is part of a broader utopianism. Like the Old Oligarch, the oligarchic Plato had no regard for democratic aspirations. Unlike the Old Oligarch, he was also, of course, profoundly opposed to luxury in general: he preferred the austere

city, whose people feed on simple food and sleep on branches, to the luxurious city, with its fine repasts and costly couches. The luxurious city is never satisfied and is driven to expand by its unwarranted desires.¹³ For Plato, democratic Athens had much in common with the luxurious city. For him there is no great distance between unbridled democracy and the expansionist quest for luxury: the democratic man is one who has taken up his abode in the land of the Lotus-Eaters, driven by useless desires, among which is the desire for food more exotic than the bread and cakes necessary for sustenance.¹⁴ He complains that democratic politics at Athens gives no scope for true leadership: rather, it is akin to the presentation of titbits to children.¹⁵

For Plato, democratic notions of luxury for all were distinctly utopian: they conjured up the Isles of the Blessed or the land of the Lotus-Eaters. And there was indeed a strong flavour of utopia in the list of luxury goods imported to Athens presented by the comic playwright Hermippus, an older contemporary of Aristophanes:

Now tell me, Muses, dwellers on Olympus,
 which goods Dionysus brought here for men on his black ship,
 from the time when he traded over the wine-dark sea.
 From Cyrene, the silphium-stalk and ox-hide.
 From Hellespont, mackerel and every salted fish.
 From Thessaly, grits and ribs of beef.
 And from Sitalces, the itch for the Spartans.
 And from Perdiccas, lies by the ship-load.
 And the Syracusans furnish pigs and cheese.
 And the Corcyraeans – may Poseidon destroy,
 in their hollow ships, for they are eager for both sides.
 Then, these things. From Egypt, rigged
 sails and books. And from Syria, further, frankincense.
 And fine Crete provides cypress for the gods,
 and Libya ivory in plenty for sale.
 Rhodes, raisins and sweet-dream figs.
 Moreover, from Euboea – pears and fat apples.
 Slaves from Phrygia, and from Arcadia mercenaries.
 Pagasae provides slaves and brands.
 Paphlagonians provide the acorns of Zeus and shining
 almonds. For they are the ornaments of a feast.
 Phoenicia, further, palm-fruit and fine wheat-flour.
 Carthage, carpets and cushions of many colours.

(Hermippus, ap. Athen. 1.27e–28a = Kock 1. p.243, fr.63

= Kassel-Austin 5. pp.591–4, fr.63)

Such lists were the stuff of utopias and utopias were the stuff of comedy.¹⁶ That Athens should be depicted in comedy as utopian in terms of imports

need not surprise, when it can be presented as such even with regard to its own produce and by the sober Xenophon at that.¹⁷

The utopian dream offered an opportunity to opponents of the war with Sparta. While Plato could explain the democracy's failure to realise a utopia by reference to the essential impracticality and vanity of the ambition, opponents of the war seem to have blamed that failure upon the war itself. Although evidence is slight, such a strategy would accord well enough with the broader claim, familiar in the plays of Aristophanes, that the war has made life harder. This is the inversion of the line of argument pursued by Thucydides' Pericles, that available luxury should facilitate and encourage the personal war-effort. The inversion of that argument seems to have been central to Aristophanes' *Holkades* (*Merchant-ships*), produced in 422 B.C. Unfortunately, the play has survived only in fragmentary form, so that much remains uncertain. We know, however, that it had a chorus of merchant-ships and urged the benefits of peace: in that sense, it was perceived in antiquity as akin to its immediate predecessors, the *Acharnians* (425 B.C.) and the *Knights* (424 B.C.). Extant fragments include lists of goods (not all luxuries) and allusions to the Black Sea region.¹⁸ It may be inferred that the importation of luxury goods for all from far and wide, by merchant vessels, was presented as an attainable prospect, if only peace could be achieved. However, the inference requires some caution, for such an argument seems less than impressive given our usual assumptions about the dominance of Athenian sea power in the late 420s: we simply do not know enough about the political arguments of these years, with which the play was evidently much concerned. Yet, however that may be, it seems that democracy in itself escaped direct censure, for the time being at least. The cause of the failure to make utopia a reality was located not in the misguidedness of the democracy itself, but in the war.

We may recall the private peace and private market established together by Dicaeopolis in the *Acharnians*. The argument there is essentially the same: war has crippled trade, peace will bring a return to the good life. However, the trade of the *Acharnians* is trade by land, with Megara and Boeotia. The *Holkades* was a new departure in that it ranged far across the sea, as far as the Black Sea at least. The *Peace* by contrast has little to say of trade at all, whether by land or sea, but concentrates instead on the prospects for home-grown production in the event of peace. That the emphasis should change from play to play should not surprise: there was a need for a new angle for each new play, particularly where the familiar call for peace was repeated.

At the same time, for the Old Oligarch the utopia is a dystopia, the

dream a realistic nightmare. For him the problem is not the democracy's failure to make luxuries available to all, but its success in doing just that. In non-democratic states, luxuries were prestigious: their ownership and use expressed social differentiation and the superiority of the elite. In such states the masses could only taste luxury at the rich-man's table, grateful recipients of his euergetism in return for their independence and freedom. The nightmare for the Old Oligarch, with all its dreadful logic, was the power of the masses to demand the wealth of the rich as of right, not beg it as a favour. Moreover, the masses by virtue of their sea-power can acquire for themselves the wealth of the Empire at large: they are in control.¹⁹ In that awesome context, it is indeed a relatively 'minor matter' for the Old Oligarch that the masses can gain luxuries for themselves, through their sea-power, and that, he might have added, they do not need to crave them from their betters.

On the Old Oligarch's view, access to luxuries does not set apart the elite at Athens. Indeed, he is at a loss to find criteria for the differentiation of social strata: even slaves cannot be distinguished from citizens, he claims.²⁰ Of course, if the masses enjoy luxuries and if slaves are indistinguishable from the masses, then the slaves should, on this argument, also enjoy luxuries. The Old Oligarch is obligingly explicit:

And in case someone is surprised that they allow their slaves to live luxuriously (*truphan*) here, and some of them to enjoy an elite lifestyle (*megaloprepos diaitasthai*), they do have a reason for doing so.

(1.11)

At Athens, he contends, slaves, ordinary citizens, and apparently metics too are not only indistinguishable from each other in other ways, but they also enjoy the luxuries which in non-democratic states are the marks of an elite lifestyle.

The Old Oligarch's nightmare is the proud claim of Thucydides' Pericles. Equality is the principal horror for the Old Oligarch, while the collective might of the imperial democracy stands out in the Funeral Speech. Common access to luxuries was the antithesis of oligarchy: it was an overt expression of the social equality claimed for the Athenian democracy.²¹ In gaining access to luxuries, the masses have made themselves, by their own efforts, a mass-elite. Just as Thucydides' Pericles constructs the democracy in aristocratic terms with regard to its 'noble' origins,²² so, fleetingly, he characterizes the democratic lifestyle as a form of elite lifestyle. Aristocratic leisure is condemned, here as elsewhere,²³ but the goods characteristic of the rich are not. Instead, they are shared. In this guise, at

least, the Athenian democracy boasts an equality which is not a levelling-down into severe austerity, but a collective levelling-up into utopian prosperity and the enjoyment of luxury. It is in that sense that the attainment of luxury could be a goal of democratic thinking, however unrealistic it might be.

Further, the imagined luxury of Athenian life had a counterpoint, made all the more obvious and significant by the Peloponnesian War, namely Spartan austerity. Those Athenian oligarchs who played the Spartan by dressing in Spartan cloaks and wearing their hair long, may well have flirted with austerity too, however ludicrous and hypocritical such pretensions would have been among the rich and comfortable. The wealthy Xenophon, for example, was certainly an admirer of the traditional austerity of a Spartan lifestyle, while his observations of Spartan reality served also to illustrate the gap in Sparta too between image and everyday reality.²⁴ But the point is that the much-vaunted Spartan mirage was also an anti-democratic mirage: austerity stood at its centre, an expression of the severe restriction of individual freedom. It has been suggested in this paper that the opposite may also have been true, namely that luxury was central to an Athenian mirage, illustrative of social equality and personal freedom within the democracy at Athens. Of course, the construction or reconstruction of Athenian democratic ideology is notoriously hazardous, given the nature of our evidence, but the Old Oligarch, Thucydides' Pericles, and a little comedy seem to point the way.²⁵ On that argument, the Peloponnesian War was, in one sense, a conflict between an ideal of austerity and an ideal of shared luxury. That conflict both explains and informs the passing observation of Thucydides' Pericles and the ruminations of the Old Oligarch.

NOTES

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1. A convenient survey of possible dates and literature is P. J. Rhodes, *The Athenian Empire* (Greece & Rome New Surveys no. 17, Oxford, 1985), p. 44 n. 12.

2. On that issue, see D. C. Braund, 'Procopius on the economy of Lazica', *CQ* 41 (1991), 221–5.

3. V. Ehrenberg, *The People of Aristophanes* (London, 1943), pp. 137–8.

4. *Ar. Clouds* 109 with *Athen. 9.387a*. On puns on Phasis and its cognates, cf. R. Osborne, 'Vexatious Litigation in Classical Athens: Sykophancy and the Sykophant' in P. Cartledge, P. Millett, and S. Todd (eds.), *Nomos: Essays in Athenian Law, Politics and Society* (Cambridge, 1990), pp. 83–102, at p. 87, esp. n. 12.

5. *Athen. 9.397c–d* with Cartledge, 'Fowl Play: a Curious Lawsuit in Classical Athens' in Cartledge, Millett, Todd, op. cit., pp. 41–62, esp. p. 61; cf. *Plut. Pericles* 13.10.

6. *Gorgias* 518b: earlier condemned as a 'false art', 465.

7. Cartledge (n. 5) offers a plausible reconstruction of the case.
8. Diog.Laert.2.30.
9. See, in general, J. K. Davies, *Wealth and the Power of Wealth in Classical Athens* (New York, 1981).
10. See n. 4.
11. On harsh realities, see, for example, R. Osborne, *Classical Landscape with Figures* (London, 1987), pp. 108–12.
12. Plato, *Menex.* 235c.
13. *Republic* 372–3; cf. Xen.*Cyr.*8.2.5 on the importance of size, which may further illuminate Pericles' stress on size at Thuc.2.38.2.
14. *Republic* 559c–560c.
15. *Gorgias* 522a; cf. 518c–519b, where Plato sees fit to employ the language of luxury consumption for the condemnation of democratic leaders at Athens.
16. R. L. Hunter, *Eubulus, the Fragments* (Cambridge, 1983), pp. 164–5 on Eubulus, *Olbia* and other instances of the utopian list in comedy and elsewhere.
17. Xen.*Poroi* 1.3; cf. Ar.*Horae* fr.581, Kassel-Austin.
18. Ar.*Holkades* frs.415–43, Kassel-Austin, giving full ancient testimonia.
19. Old Oligarch, 1.14–20 and throughout.
20. Old Oligarch, 1.10.
21. N. Loraux, *The Invention of Athens: the Funeral Oration in the Classical City* (Cambridge, Mass., 1986), pp. 174–5 on equality, though she seems to overlook 'equality of lifestyle'; p. 410 n. 39 comes closest. The issue of luxury is hardly addressed in the substantial J. Ober, *Mass and Elite in Democratic Athens* (Princeton, 1989).
22. R. Thomas, *Oral Tradition and Written Record in Classical Athens* (Cambridge, 1989), pp. 213–21.
23. Loraux, op. cit., p. 179 is valuable on this.
24. The best treatment of the Spartan mirage remains E. Rawson, *The Spartan Tradition in European Thought* (Oxford, 1969); on the historicity of the mirage, Cartledge, *Sparta and Lakonia* (London, 1979), pp. 154–7. On the anti-democratic associations of long hair, see the passages listed in A. H. Sommerstein (ed.), *Aristophanes, Knights* (Warminster, 1981), pp. 175–6, though his associated remarks on tiaras are less sure. Note also A. J. Holladay, 'Spartan Austerity', *CQ*, 27 (1977), 111–26.
25. Note the (possibly too) bleak remarks of M. I. Finley, 'Athenian Demagogues' in his *Studies in Ancient Society* (London, 1974), pp. 1–25, esp. pp. 8–9. This article was completed before the publication of J. Davidson, 'Fish, Sex and Revolution in Athens', *CQ* 43 (1993), 53–66, with which it is in broad sympathy, but with which it has not proved possible here to engage.