

The Athenians: Another warning from history?

October 5 2009



(PhysOrg.com) -- The collapse of Greek democracy 2,400 years ago occurred in circumstances so similar to our own it could be read as a dark and often ignored lesson from the past, a new study suggests.

In a new history of the 4th century BC, Cambridge University Classicist Dr. Michael Scott reveals how the implosion of Ancient Athens occurred amid a crippling economic downturn, while politicians committed financial misdemeanours, sent its army to fight unpopular foreign wars and struggled to cope with a surge in immigration.

The book, entitled *From Democrats To Kings*, aims to overhaul Athens' traditional image as the ancient world's "golden city", arguing that its

early successes have obscured a darker history of blood-lust and mob rule.

Other reputations are also taken to task: The "heroic" Spartans of Thermopylae, immortalised in the film 300, are unmasked as warmongering bullies of the ancient world. Alexander the Great, for all his achievements, is described as a "mummy's boy" whose success rested in many ways on the more pragmatic foundations laid by his father, Philip II.

Perhaps more significantly, however, the study suggests that the collapse of Greek democracy and of Athens in particular offer a stark warning from history which is often overlooked.

It argues that it was not the loss of its empire and defeat in war against Sparta at the end of the 5th century that heralded the death knell of Athenian democracy - as it is traditionally perceived. Athens' democracy in fact recovered from these injuries within years. Instead, Dr. Scott argues that the strains and stresses of the 4th century BC, which our own times seem to echo, proved too much for the Athenian democratic system and ultimately caused it to destroy itself.

"If history can provide a map of where we have been, a mirror to where we are right now and perhaps even a guide to what we should do next, the story of this period is perfectly suited to do that in our times," Dr. Scott said.

"It shows how an earlier generation of people responded to similar challenges and which strategies succeeded. It is a period of [history](#) that we would do well to think about a little more right now - and we ignore it at our peril."

Although the 4th century was one of critical transition, the era has been

overlooked by many ancient historians in favour of those which bookend it - the glory days of Athenian democracy in the 5th century and the supremacy of Alexander the Great from 336 to 323 BC.

This, the study says, has led to a two-dimensional view of the intervening decades as a period of unimportant decline. Instead, Dr. Scott argues that this period is fundamental to understanding what really happened to Athenian democracy.

Athens was already a waning star on the international stage resting on past imperial glories, and the book argues that it struggled to keep pace with a world in a state of fast-paced globalisation and political transition.

In an effort to remain a major player in world affairs, it abandoned its ideology and values to ditch past allies while maintaining special relationships with emerging powers like Macedonia and supporting old enemies like the Persian King. This "slippery-fish diplomacy" helped it survive military defeats and widespread political turbulence, but at the expense of its political system. At the start of the century Athens, contrary to traditional reports, was a flourishing democracy. By the end, it was hailing its latest ruler, Demetrius, as both a king and a living God.

Dr. Scott argues that this was caused by a range of circumstances which in many cases were the ancient world's equivalent of those faced by Britain today. Athens, for example, committed itself to unpopular wars which ultimately brought it into direct conflict with the vastly more powerful Macedonia. Its economy, heavily dependent on trade and resources from overseas, crashed when in the 4th century instability in the region began to affect the arterial routes through which those supplies flowed.

The result was a series of domestic problems, including an inability to fund the traditional police force. In an effort to cope, Athens began to

create a system of self-regulation, described as a "giant Neighbourhood Watch", asking citizens not to trouble its overstretched bureaucracy with non-urgent, petty crimes.

Ultimately, the city was to respond positively to some of these challenges. Many of its economic problems were gradually solved by attracting wealthy immigrants to Athens - which as a name still carried considerable prestige.

Democracy itself, however, buckled under the strain. Persuasive speakers who seemed to offer solutions - such as Demosthenes - came to the fore but ultimately took it closer to military defeat and submission to Macedonia. Critically, the emphasis on "people power" saw a revolving door of political leaders impeached, exiled and even executed as the inconstant international climate forced a tetchy political assembly into multiple changes in policy direction.

The name of "democracy" became an excuse to turn on anyone regarded as an enemy of the state, even good politicians who have, as a result, almost been forgotten. Dr Scott's study also marks an attempt to recognise figures such as Isocrates and Phocion - sage political advisers who tried to steer it away from crippling confrontations with other Greek states and Macedonia.

"In many ways this was a period of total uncertainty just like our own time," Dr. Scott added. "There are grounds to consider whether we want to go down the same route that Athens did. It survived the period through slippery-fish diplomacy, at the cost of a clear democratic conscience, a policy which, in the end, led it to accept a dictator King and make him a God."

From Democrats To Kings is published by Icon Books.

Provided by University of Cambridge ([news](#) : [web](#))

Citation: The Athenians: Another warning from history? (2009, October 5) retrieved 9 May 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2009-10-athenians-history.html>

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