

The Fall of the Four Hundred

For the rise and fall of the oligarchical regime of the Four Hundred at Athens in 411 B.C. Thucydides is by far our fullest source. Our other sources are either limited in scope (such as the Decree of Andron preserved in [Plut.], *Life of Antiphon*), blatantly tendentious (such as Lysias' analysis of Theramenes' conduct in XII. 66-68) or of uncertain authenticity (such as the documents purportedly from 411 in Aristotle's *Athenaion Politeia*). Modern scholarly debate has largely focused on the discrepancies between Thucydides and Aristotle, on the supposed desire on the part of the oligarchs for a return to the *patrios politeia*, and on trying to determine the character of the regime which followed the fall of the Four Hundred, that of the Five Thousand.

For the downfall of the Four Hundred, we are largely dependent on Thucydides, which leads to the question of whether we should accept everything he says at face value. Thucydides was in exile in 411 and did not witness the events in Athens firsthand. Some of his information no doubt came from members of the Four Hundred who had fled Athens when the regime collapsed. Presumably he could have obtained additional information after the war when he was able to return to Athens. Very likely he knew some of the principal actors of 411 personally. Was he always impartial in judging people's motives? Did he make adequate allowances for the biases of his informants? The dissension within the Four Hundred played a significant role in the downfall of the regime. Thucydides portrays the leaders of the dissident faction as motivated by disappointed ambition (8.89.2-3). Was this a fair assessment? I will examine Thucydides' narrative of the events at Athens in 411 in an effort to gain a better understanding of what

motivated the various groups inside and outside of the Four Hundred and of the dynamic which led to the end of the regime.

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