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Critias and Democracy

Abstract: The majority of Critias' contemporaries and fellow citizens saw the leader of the most brutal regime in Athenian history as a ruthless oligarch, moreover as a tyrant. Many ancient sources share this view. It is somewhat surprising therefore to see the most famous of his victims, the controversial politician Theramenes, denouncing him as a supporter of democracy. This contradiction has given rise to different, even diametrically opposed, modern interpretations. It is this variety of interpretations and the importance of this question for understanding the political situation in Athens at the end of the fifth century BC, as well as the rise of tyranny in Thessaly, that has prompted us to take yet another look at this controversial issue.

Keywords: Athens, Thessaly, democracy, tyranny, the Thirty, Critias, Theramenes, Lycophron

Critias was born about 460 BC into one of the oldest and most distinguished Athenian aristocratic families; he was a relative of Plato and Charmides.¹ He obviously had the privilege of receiving an excellent education. He was taught by the most renowned sophists and was for a while a member of Socrates' circle.² The dramas, political, philosophical and cultural-historical writings attributed to him show a wide range of interests,³ but they

¹ Diog. Laert. 3.1; Plat. Tim. 20e–21b; Charm. 154b–155a; 157e; cf. J. K. Davies, *Athenian Propertied Families 600–300 B.C.* (Oxford 1971), 326–328. The titles of modern journals and ancient works are abbreviated after DNP: H. Cancik and H. Schneider, eds., *Der Neue Pauly. Enzyklopädie der Antike* (Stuttgart–Weimar 1996), vol. I, xxxix–xlvi.

² Plat. Prot. 316a; Tim. 20 a; Schol. Plat. Tim. 21a; Philostr. ep. 73; soph. 501–503; Xen. mem. 1.2, 12–18, 24–26, 29–39; Aischin. 1,37; cf. W. K. C. Guthrie, *A History of Greek Philosophy* (Cambridge 1969), vol. III, 299–300. For the view that Socrates' connection with Critias was a major, if not the major, reason why the famous philosopher was prosecuted in 399 BC, see P. Scholz, "Der Prozeß gegen Sokrates. Ein 'Sündenfall' der athenischen Demokratie?" in L. Burckhardt and J. v. Ungern-Sternberg, eds., *Große Prozesse im antiken Athen* (Munich 2000), 159–164.

³ For Critias' literary work, see M. N. Djurić, *Istorija helenske etike*, 2nd ed. (Belgrade 1990), 215–217; A. Lesky, *Geschichte der griechischen Literatur*, 3rd ed. (Bern–Munich 1971), 406–407; H. Patzer, "Der Tyrann Kritias und die Sophistik", in K. Döring and W. Kullmann, eds., *Studia Platonica*. Festschrift für Hermann Gundert zu seinem 65. Geburtstag (Amsterdam 1974), 3–19.

also show that he cannot be considered a sophist in the strictest sense.⁴ He maintained a long-standing friendship with famous and influential Alcibiades.⁵ Yet, Critias is best known for the role he played in the notorious rule of the Thirty in 404/3 BC.⁶ Of more than 2500 people murdered under that regime of collective tyranny about 1500 were Athenian citizens.⁷ During this reign of terror Critias stood out from among the Thirty for his lust for power and ruthlessness.⁸

The most puzzling about Critias' biography, however, is his political transformation from an apolitical aristocrat uninterested in public life into the unscrupulous leader of the most infamous regime in the history of Athens. On the one hand, it is unlikely that a philolacon and a bitter opponent of the rule of the demos such as Critias would have embarked upon a political career in Athens with a democratic regime still in place, in contrast to his friend Alcibiades. What is surprising on the other hand is that he remained outside politics even when the domestic scene began to grow ever more unstable. He was not involved in the mutilation of the

⁴ Unlike sophists, Critias did not teach. His philolaconism is in direct contrast to the typically sophistic relativism and reservations about all forms of government; cf. M. Dreher, "Die Sophisten – Parteigänger der Demokraten oder der Oligarchen?", *Studi e ricerche* II (1984), 63–88. Finally, not even the nature of most of his writing is typical of a sophist. It is therefore difficult to see Critias as a representative of the sophistic movement; cf. Guthrie, *Greek Philosophy*, 301; Patzer, "Tyrann Kritias", 3–4; A. Momigliano, "Lebensideale in der Sophistik: Hippias und Kritias", in C. J. Classen, ed., *Sophistik* (Darmstadt 1976), 466–467; G. B. Kerferd, *The Sophistic Movement* (Cambridge 1981), 52–53; J. de Romilly, *The Great Sophists in Periclean Athens* (Oxford 1992), 108–109, 216; H. Scholten, *Die Sophistik. Eine Bedrohung für die Religion und Politik der Polis?* (Berlin 2003), 228.

⁵ DK 88B 4–5; cf. W. Nestle, "Kritias. Eine Studie", in W. Nestle, ed., *Griechische Studien. Untersuchungen zur Religion, Dichtung und Philosophie der Griechen* (Stuttgart 1948), 253–320, 259–261; M. Ostwald, *From Popular Sovereignty to the Sovereignty of Law. Law, Society, and Politics in Fifth-Century Athens* (Berkeley–Los Angeles–London 1986), 403, 428, 464, 543.

⁶ Cf. P. Krentz, *The Thirty at Athens* (Ithaca–London 1982), 45–88; G. A. Lehmann, "Die revolutionäre Machtergreifung der 'Dreißig' und die staatliche Teilung Attikas (404–401/0 v. Chr.)", in R. Stiel and G. A. Lehmann, eds., *Antike und Universalgeschichte. Festschrift Hans Erich Stier zum 70. Geburtstag* (Munster 1972), 201–233.

⁷ Aischin. 3,235; Aristot. Ath. pol. 35,4; Isokr. or. 7,67; 20,11; Schol. Aischin. 1,39; cf. G. A. Lehman, "Überlegungen zu den oligarchischen Machtergreifungen im Athen des 4. Jahrhunderts v. Chr.", in W. Eder, ed., *Die athenische Demokratie im 4. Jahrhundert. v. Chr. Vollendung oder Verfall einer Verfassungsform?* (Stuttgart 1995), 145; Krentz, *Thirty*, 78–86.

⁸ Xen. Hell. 2.3,15–4,1; cf. Th. Lenschau, "Hoi triákonta", *RE* 6A/2 (1937), 2366–2368.

herms and the mockery of the Eleusinian mysteries.⁹ It is possible that he was a member of the Four Hundred, a short-lived regime which overthrew democracy in 411 BC, but his role must have been insignificant since he stayed in Athens after its downfall, obviously not fearing retribution.¹⁰ If he did take part in that regime, it is possible that his involvement was motivated by his friendship with Alcibiades rather than by political ambition. This seems to find corroboration in his motion that the corpse of Phrynichus, a radical oligarch and the main opponent of Alcibiades among the Four Hundred, be tried for high treason and, if found guilty, disinterred and thrown out of Attica.¹¹ Furthermore, Critias insisted that Alcibiades should be recalled from exile.¹² Finally, not even Critias' banishment from Athens about 407/6 BC, probably instigated by Cleophon, seems to have been the consequence of any particular political offence.¹³ Perhaps it may be explained by his friendship with Alcibiades,¹⁴ but such an explanation is at odds with two facts: firstly, once banished from Athens, Critias did not choose to join the exiled Alcibiades in Thrace and, secondly, all indications are that Critias was one of the instigators of Alcibiades' murder a few years

⁹ Andok. 1,47.

¹⁰ Xen. mem. 1.2,25; cf. D. Whitehead, "Sparta and the Thirty Tyrants", *AncSoc* 13/14 (1982/1983), 114–115; P. J. Rhodes, *A Commentary on the Aristotelian Athenaion Politeia* (Oxford 1981), 429; Lehmann, *Dreißig*, 210; Krentz, *Thirty*, 46; P. Krentz, *Xenophon: Hellenika II.3.11 – IV.2.8* (Warminster 1995), 126; Ostwald, *Popular Sovereignty*, 403 with note 229; 463–464. Diametrically opposed positions have been taken most prominently by H. C. Avery, "Critias and the Four Hundred", *CPH* 58 (1963), 165–167, and G. Adeleye, "Critias: Member of the Four Hundred?", *TAPA* 104 (1974), 1–9, the former explicitly arguing against and the latter for Critias' membership in the Four Hundred.

¹¹ Lycurg. Leocr. 113; cf. H. Heftner, "Phrynichos Stratonidou Deiradiotes als Politiker und Symbolfigur der athenischen Oligarchen von 411 v. Chr.", in U. Bultrighini, ed., *Democrazia e antidemocrazia nel mondo Greco. Atti del Convegno Internazionale di Studi, Chieti 9–11 aprile 2003* (Alexandria 2005), 89–108. Critias' motion is yet another proof that he did not hold a prominent position under the Four Hundred. It should also be noted that he played no part in the downfall of that regime, either.

¹² Plut. Alk. 33,1; cf. Lehmann, *Dreißig*, 210; Ostwald, *Popular Sovereignty*, 428, 464; Krentz, *Thirty*, 46.

¹³ Aristot. rhet. 1375b 31–35; Xen. Hell. 2.3,36; Mem. 1.2,24.

¹⁴ Cf. Krentz, *Thirty*, 46; Ostwald, *Popular Sovereignty*, 431; 464; K.-W. Welwei, *Das klassische Athen. Demokratie und Machtpolitik im 5. und 4. Jahrhundert* (Darmstadt 1999), 247; Lehmann, *Dreißig*, 210; P. J. Rhodes, *A History of the Classical Greek World: 478–323 B.C.* (Oxford 2006), 167.

later.¹⁵ Therefore, what seems to be a more probable explanation of his banishment from Athens is the activity of sycophants. Namely, after the fall of the Four Hundred the settling of scores with the oligarchs took on a life of its own, and many members of the Athenian elite became innocent victims of sycophantic abuse. Sycophantic abuse was seen as an inherent weakness of democratic government, which only deepened the animosity of many Athenians towards democracy as such.¹⁶

Briefly, there is no evidence of any kind for Critias' political engagement before 407/6 BC. But only a few years later, in 404/3 BC, Critias, as a leader of the Thirty, not only shows profound hostility towards democrats but openly uses the most extreme methods to strengthen the new regime.¹⁷ Such a dramatic transformation must have had a cause. As it coincided

¹⁵ Plut. *Alc.* 38,5–39,9; *Iust.* 5,8; *Nep. Alc.* 10; *Xen. Hell.* 2.3,42; *Diod.* 14.11,4); cf. Lehmann, *Dreißig*, 210 with note 24; D. Lotze, *Lysander und der Peloponnesische Krieg* (Berlin 1964), 59–60; Ch. D. Hamilton, *Sparta's Bitter Victories. Politics and Diplomacy in the Corinthian War* (Ithaca–London 1979), 77; Ostwald, *Popular Sovereignty*, 464; Krentz, *Hellenika*, 135; W. M. Ellis, *Alcibiades* (London–New York 1989), 95–97; M. Munn, *The School of History: Athens in the Age of Socrates* (Berkeley–Los Angeles 2000), 234.

¹⁶ Cf. *Lys.* 17,9; 20,6–7; 17–19; 25,3; 19; 24–27; *Xen. Hell.* 2.3,12; *Symp.* 29–32; *Aristoph. Ran.* 687 ff; 708 f; see J. Bleicken, *Die athenische Demokratie*, 4th ed. (Paderborn–Munich–Vienna–Zurich 1995), 420–421; Lehmann, *Dreißig*, 203–204; G. A. Lehmann, “Überlegungen zur Krise der attischen Demokratie im Peloponnesischen Krieg: Vom Ostrakismos des Hyperbolos zum Thargelion 411 v. Chr.,” *ZPE* 69 (1987), 40, 51; B. Bleckmann, *Athens Weg in die Niederlage. Die letzten Jahre des Peloponnesischen Krieges* (Stuttgart–Leipzig 1998), 609–613; E. Schütrumpf and H.-J. Gehrke, *Aristoteles, Politik IV–VI, Aristoteles Werke in Deutscher Übersetzung IX-3* (Berlin 1996), 478; 481–482; Welwei, *Athen*, 231; Krentz, *Hellenika*, 124–125; D. M. Lewis, “Oligarchic Thinking in the Late Fifth Century,” in R. M. Rosen and J. Farrell, eds., *Nomodeiktēs. Greek Studies in Honor of Martin Ostwald* (Ann Arbor 1993), 207–211; D. Harvey, “The Sykophant and Sykophancy: Vexatious Redefinition?,” in P. Cartledge, P. Millet and S. Todd, eds., *Nomos: Essays in Athenian Law, Politics and Society* (Cambridge 1990), 103–121, esp. 116–119, with a detailed list of sources on pp. 119–121; for the treatment of the members of the Four Hundred after 410 BC, see also A. Dössel, *Die Beilegung innerstaatlicher Konflikte in den griechischen Poleis vom 5.–3. Jahrhundert v. Chr.* (Frankfurt am Main 2003), 72–88. The fact that one of Critias' first measures was to do away with sycophants supports the likelihood that he had been one of their “innocent victims” (*Xen. Hell.* 2.3,12; *Aristot. Ath. pol.* 35,3; *Diod.* 14.4,2), and so does the claim of the Thirty that they want to restore justice in Athens (*Lys.* 12,5; *Plat. ep.* 7,324d).

¹⁷ All other figures holding important positions from the very outset of the coup, such as Theramenes, Charicles, Aristotle or Eratosthenes, had already been in politics or had been sentenced to exile because of their participation in the oligarchy of the Four Hundred. Charmides is not important here, since his kinship with Critias is probably what earned him a place among the Ten in Piraeus.

with his exile, it seems reasonable to assume that the two were somehow connected. Apparently, two factors were critical. One was his banishment from Athens. In such a proud and self-confident aristocrat as Critias was, the banishment could only deepen a strong resentment towards democracy, even more so as it was undeserved, i.e. it was not the consequence of any particular political offence. The other was his stay in Thessaly during the exile. The exiled Critias was very active politically and even seems to have taken part in local strife, which is especially interesting since his activities at the time have been brought into connection with the beginnings of one of the most important tyrannies of the classical period: the one in Pherae in Thessaly. A closer analysis of Critias' activities in Thessaly might therefore lead to some new answers, or at least help refute some of the earlier hypotheses concerning not only the political developments in Athens at the end of the fifth century BC, but also the origin of the most powerful tyranny in mainland Greece in the fourth century BC.

From Theramenes' last speech in Xenophon's *Hellenica* and a remark of Flavius Philostratus, we know that about 406/5 BC Thessaly witnessed an internal conflict, the first reliably attested conflict in that region in the last third of the fifth century BC.¹⁸ Unfortunately, neither source says anything about Critias' exact whereabouts in Thessaly, or who his fellow fighter Prometheus was, or what the two of them were fighting for. These lacunae have left room for different interpretations and hypotheses. Some historians link Critias' Thessalian exile to the establishment of tyranny in Pherae, some see the Athenian aristocrat as an advocate of democracy or, quite the opposite, of extreme oligarchy.

Arguing that Critias was involved in a conflict where the Thessalian *penestai* were used with the intention of breaking the power of the ruling aristocracy and introducing democracy instead, C. Mossé finds it likely that this activity was connected with the establishment of Lycophron's tyrannical rule in Pherae.¹⁹ H. Berve puts forward the hypothesis that Prometheus used *penestai* in an attempt to establish himself as tyrant.²⁰ According to E. Meyer, Prometheus might have been Lycophron's predecessor.²¹ H. D. Westlake believes that Lycophron's tyranny was established at the time Cri-

¹⁸ Xen. Hell. 2.3,36; Philostr. soph. 1,501-502.

¹⁹ C. Mossé, *La tyrannie dans la Grèce antique* (Paris 1969), 122 with note 3.

²⁰ H. Berve, *Die Tyrannis bei den Griechen* (München 1967), 283; H.-J. Gehrke, *Stasis. Untersuchungen zu den inneren Kriegen in den griechischen Staaten des 5. und 4. Jahrhunderts v. Chr.* (München 1985), 375; see also J. Ducat, *Les Pénestes de Thessalie* (Paris 1994), 61.

²¹ E. Meyer, *Theopomps Hellenika* (Halle 1909), 251.

tias and Prometheus were pursuing their subversive goals.²² M. Sordi contends that *penestai*, although free men from 457 BC, remained deprived of all political rights, which was exploited by Critias who used them in Larissa to support the Aleuadae and extreme oligarchy in order to topple the moderate oligarchic government.²³ H. T. Wade-Gery attributes to Critias the authorship of the oration *Peri politeias* and therefore argues that Critias and Prometheus were advocates of moderate democracy.²⁴

A more careful analysis of the ancient sources seems to give grounds for questioning some of these views that sway between two extremes, tyranny and democracy. Theramenes' attack on Critias in *Hellenica* should be examined first since it contains at once the most detailed and the most contradictory data. Before the speech itself is looked at, it should be said that it was given amidst the dramatic events unfolding in Athens. The "Thirty Tyrants" led by Critias had been waging a campaign of terror. On the other hand, a group of the exiled democrats had succeeded in seizing Phyle, a stronghold on the slopes of Mount Parnes in north-western Attica, which became a gathering place for the adversaries of the new tyrannical regime. Critias, well-aware that Theramenes disapproved of his extreme policy of repression and was not incapable of changing sides, as evidenced by his conduct in 411 BC, accused him of treasonous intentions before the Council. Theramenes' last speech was in fact a very astute reply to Critias' accusation and it almost saved him, but the leader of the Thirty resorted to overt intimidation and eventually succeeded in bringing about the execution of his opponent.

Theramenes hits back at his accuser by saying that during his Thesalian exile Critias, together with a Prometheus, pushed towards setting up

²² H. D. Westlake, *Thessaly in the Fourth Century B.C.* (London 1935), 47ff.; cf. also H. Beck, *Polis und Koinon. Untersuchungen zur Geschichte und Struktur der griechischen Bundesstaaten im 4. Jahrhundert v. Chr.* (Stuttgart 1997), 127 with note 42.

²³ M. Sordi, *La lega tessala fino ad Alessandro Magno* (Roma 1958), 106 ff, 141 ff, thinks that in 457 BC there was a revolt of the aristocracy, who lived in the cities, against the Aleuadae. During this the *penestai* acquired their freedom. Her reconstruction of the date of this supposed revolution is based on Thucydides, according to whom at the battle of Tanagra the Thessalian cavalry fighting for Athens changed sides and allied with the Lacedaemonians (Thuk. 1.107,7). Her view has been disputed by J. A. O. Larsen, "A New Interpretation of the Thessalian Confederacy", *CPh* 55 (1960), 229 ff, 240 ff; J. A. O. Larsen, *Greek Federal States* (Oxford 1968), 13 ff; K.-W. Welwei, *Unfreie im antiken Kriegsdienst*, vol. II *Die kleineren und mittleren griechischen Staaten und die hellenistischen Reiche* (Wiesbaden 1977), 6 ff with note 6, and esp. p. 8; Gehrke, *Stasis*, 186 ff.

²⁴ H. T. Wade-Gery, "Critias and Herodes", *CQ* 39 (1945), 19-33.

a democracy and thus armed the *penestai* to rise up against their masters.²⁵ Theramenes' words do not seem trustworthy for several reasons. To begin with, it is only natural for a person fighting for his life to make use of half-truths and lies. Theramenes' skill to misrepresent reality to his advantage is obvious from his involvement in the downfall of the Four Hundred in 411 BC, his controversial conduct during the Arginusae trial and his role in the capitulation of Athens in 404 BC. Even his contemporaries nicknamed him "Buskin" for it.²⁶

The demagogic nature of Theramenes' speech is indicated by the very way in which it is put together. Had he known anything really discrediting about Critias' activities in Thessaly, he would certainly have devoted at least as much attention to it as he did to the extreme measures that Critias and his clique used to consolidate the new regime in Athens. Instead, Theramenes tersely sums up "the truth about Thessaly", and immediately proceeds to warn that the same thing could happen in Athens. In that way he creates the impression that he is simply referring to something that is common knowledge in Athens and, consequently, that his statement matches reality. However, there are good grounds for doubting that the nature and scope of Critias' activities in exile were widely known in Athens. During those last years of the Peloponnesian War Athens was facing some of the greatest challenges in her history and was necessarily inward-looking. Thessaly, on the other hand, was neither a theatre of war operations nor the scene of any other event important enough to resonate beyond the local boundaries. Furthermore, Critias was not in Thessaly on an official mission, but as an exile, and not nearly as famous an exile as, for example, his friend Alcibiades, whose activities can be justifiably presumed to have been an object of interest to his fellow citizens. All this suggests that Critias' activities in Thessaly did not attract any particular attention in Athens, and that the information on him was available to few. This view finds corroboration in the words of Theramenes himself. Namely, he tries to refute Critias' criticism of his role in the Arginusae trial by claiming that Critias is ill-informed of the events because he was in Thessaly at the time.²⁷ If such an argument appeared

²⁵ Xen. Hell. 2.3,36; for the social and legal status of the *penestai*, see K.-W. Welwei, "Neuere Forschungen zur Rechtstellung der Penesten", in P. Mauritsch, W. Petermandl, R. Rollinger and Chr. Ulf., eds., *Antike Lebenswelten. Konstanz-Wandel-Wirkungsmacht*. Festschrift für Ingomar Weiler zum 70. Geburtstag (Wiesbaden 2008), 393-411; K.-W. Welwei, "Ursprung, Verbreitung und Formen der Unfreiheit abhängiger Landbewohner im antiken Griechenland", in E. Hermann-Otto, ed., *Unfreie und abhängige Landbevölkerung* (Hildesheim-Zürich-New York 2008), 7-14.

²⁶ Xen. Hell. 2.3,31, 47.

²⁷ Xen. Hell. 2.3,36.

applicable to one of the biggest scandals in Athenian history,²⁸ then how much more applicable it would have been to Critias' activities in a faraway region such as Thessaly. There is no doubt that Critias' return and rise in 404 BC increasingly aroused public curiosity about his past. Even so, it seems more likely that only his closest allies and friends had a more detailed insight into his Thessalian days. Namely, the total defeat of Athens in the war against Sparta, the establishment of the new regime and its campaign of terror, the short interval between Critias' homecoming and Theramenes' trial, as well as the fact that little had been known about the leader of the Thirty, seriously impeded the dissemination of accurate information, while creating fertile ground for spreading all sorts of rumours, including most incredible ones. The role of rumours in Alcibiades' downfall in 415 BC or in the coup in 411 BC shows how easily individuals exploited them and how readily the populace took them for granted. It is obviously this property of rumours that Theramenes counted on when he "mentioned" Critias' stay in Thessaly in his speech.

Further, it should be noted that the allegation that Critias was setting up a democracy in Thessaly is one of the main arguments Theramenes uses to rebut Critias' allegation that his egoism threatens the very existence of the regime.²⁹ Its purpose is to create the impression that it is in fact Critias who unscrupulously pursues his own self-interest, the impression he further enhances by expressing hope that what happened in Thessaly will never happen in Athens. This "warning" fully betrays the demagogic nature of Theramenes' statement as it is in contradiction not only to Critias' current political position but also to Theramenes' criticism of Critias' extremism in the continuation of the speech.³⁰

It follows that Theramenes' counterattack was a mere mixture of half-truths, rumours and exaggerations intended to discredit Critias and thus his accusations.³¹ Consequently, it cannot serve as conclusive proof that the conflict in Thessaly resulted from social tensions and that its goal was to establish a democratic system.³²

²⁸ See Bleckmann, *Athens Weg*, 509–571, and esp. 569–571; L. Burckhardt, "Eine Demokratie wohl, aber kein Rechtsstaat? Der Arginusenprozeß des Jahres 406 v. Chr.," in L. Burckhardt and J. v. Ungern-Sternberg, eds, *Große Prozesse im antiken Athen* (Munich 2000), 128–143, esp. 137; R. A. Baumann, *Political Trials in Ancient Greece* (London–New York 1990), 69–76.

²⁹ Xen. Hell. 2.3,30–33.

³⁰ Xen. Hell. 2.3,36–45, 47–49.

³¹ Cf. also Xen. Hell. 2.3,45–47; see also Nestle, *Kritias*, 307.

³² Cf. S. Sprawski, *Jason of Pherae. A Study on History of Thessaly in Years 431–370 BC* (Krakow 1999), 32, 34.

Theramenes' portrayal of Critias as a champion of democracy is contradicted by Xenophon himself.³³ In his *Memorabilia* he simply remarks that Critias in Thessaly associated with men who put lawlessness over justice. Since the context of Xenophon's remark is his defence of Socrates against the accusation of having been a bad influence on the future leader of the Thirty, Xenophon points out that it was in Thessaly that Critias first showed his true colours, theretofore kept under control owing to the famous philosopher.³⁴ Given that both *Memorabilia* and *Hellenica* portray the leader of the Thirty as ambitious, power-loving and violent, it seems safe to believe that Xenophon would not have missed the opportunity to point up Critias' lack of principle by drawing attention to his "fight" for democracy, wherein his Thessalian lawlessness-prone associates could have been used as an additional argument. Instead, Xenophon's Critias remains the ruthless leader of a regime which had tyrannical features, while his brutal removal of democrats is primarily attributed to his character.³⁵ Hence it seems justified to make a clear distinction between the content of Theramenes' speech and the stance held by Xenophon himself.

Philostratus' portrayal of Critias is even more difficult to reconcile with Theramenes' attack found in *Hellenica*.³⁶ According to this representative of the Second Sophistic, Critias even urged the Thessalian oligarchs to reinforce the oppression of the people, agitated against all democracies and slanderously attributed outrageous crimes to the Athenians. Although Philostratus makes no mention of Critias' involvement in a direct conflict, he believes that Critias corrupted the Thessalians more than they corrupted him.

Philostratus' account directly contradicts Theramenes' accusations, but it is not inconsistent with Xenophon.³⁷ Given that Theramenes' claims do not reflect Xenophon's personal stance, Xenophon and Philostratus cannot be said to diverge on the issue of Critias' attitude towards democracy. Besides, Xenophon in his *Memorabilia* does not see Thessaly as the foremost cause of Critias' moral fall.³⁸ Indeed, he states that Socrates' absence and other opportune circumstances merely helped bring out the vile traits of Critias' character. Such an interpretation is supported by the emphasis on Socrates' role in bridling Critias' ignoble passions. Philostratus' claim

³³ Xen. mem. 1.2,24; Philostr. soph. 1,501-502.

³⁴ Xen. mem. 1.2,12-18, 24-26, 29-39.

³⁵ Xen. Hell. 2.3,12, 14-16; Xen. mem. 1.2,12-16, 39.

³⁶ Philostr. soph. 1,501-502; cf. Ducat, *Pénestes*, 58-59.

³⁷ For the opposite view, see Ducat, *Pénestes*, 58-59.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 58.

that Critias limited his activity in Thessaly to advice-giving clashes with the picture we find in Xenophon.³⁹ Even though Xenophon is somewhat vague on this issue in *Memorabilia*, both that piece of writing and *Hellenica* portray Critias as vigorous, resolute and power-loving, a kind of person hardly expected to be satisfied with the role of an advice-giver.

This discrepancy calls for evaluating the trustworthiness of the sources. It seems obvious from Philostratus' understanding of the regime of the Thirty, the Thessalians, Critias' upbringing and Socrates, that his portrayal of Critias was strongly influenced by the long-embedded perception of the notorious Athenian.⁴⁰ Therefore, Philostratus may be used as a supplementary source, but it is by all means Xenophon that should be considered more credible.

The analysis of the sources conducted above gives clues to what seems to have been the most likely scenario: Critias and the Thessalian Prometheus were involved in an intra- or inter-polis conflict, and at some point in the conflict they used *penestai*. Social tensions and rivalries may have played a part, but that cannot be argued with certainty. What is certain is that Critias did not help set up a democracy anywhere in Thessaly. Another finding resulting from the analysis is that Critias' exile in Thessaly was a crucial factor in his political radicalization. This is obvious not only from the fact that none of the three sources says anything about his previous engagement in politics but also from Xenophon's insistence that it was in Thessaly that Critias' true nature first came to light.

It seems necessary to point out, therefore, that the view advanced by H. T. Wade-Gery, one of the few modern supporters of the hypothesis that Critias was setting up a moderate democracy, is disputable for three more reasons. Firstly, there is no way to prove that Critias authored *Peri politeias*.⁴¹ Secondly, Theramenes would never have criticized the constitution favoured in *Peri politeias* for being democratic since it was largely in agreement with his own political views.⁴² Thirdly, in that case it would be difficult to explain why Critias' activity in Athens differed from that in Thessaly, and why everyone, including Theramenes, Xenophon and Philostratus, describe him as a ruthless and power-loving person inclined to use extreme repression. On the other hand, even if we take as a fact that Critias did not fight for democracy in Thessaly, this cannot be used as a proof that he supported the establishment of a tyranny. Namely, had Critias helped either Prometheus or Lycophron to seize autocratic power, Theramenes would certainly have

³⁹ Ibid., 58–59.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 58–59.

⁴¹ Wade-Gery, "Kritias", 19–33, esp. 24–26; cf. Sprawski, *Jason of Pherae*, 34 ff.

⁴² Cf. Ducat, *Pénestes*, 59–60.

used such a piece of information against him. The focus of Theramenes' speech was the radicalism of the leader of the Thirty resulting in a shift from moderate oligarchy towards *dynasteia* or collective tyranny.⁴³ Tyranny was an object of loathing to oligarchs as much as it was to democrats, because both equated it with oppression and loss of political rights. Suffices it to say that the term *isonomia* was forged in aristocratic circles as an anti-tyrannical slogan.⁴⁴

As regards the thesis proposed by M. Sordi, the question arises as to how the violent replacement of a moderate oligarchy by an extreme one can be seen as a democratic undertaking.⁴⁵ Another question is why the *penestai* would fight for a system wherein their rights would be even fewer than before. Also, it is difficult to understand why the one who gave the speech *Peri politeias*, a supporter of moderate oligarchy, would bother himself about the common people in such a political situation.⁴⁶

The identity of the Thessalian Prometheus is yet another relevant question to this study, as it once again implies Critias' connection with a tyranny. All of the many and various modern attempts to uncover Prometheus' identity are based on three anecdotes. Plutarch reports of an attempted assassination of the Thessalian Prometheus. The assassin's sword struck Prometheus in the ulcer that was considered fatal and, by lancing it, saved the victim's life instead of taking it.⁴⁷ The same anecdote is told by Cicero and

⁴³ I. Jordović, "Did the Ancient Greeks Know of Collective Tyranny", *Balkanica* XXXVI (2006), 17–33; I. Jordović, *Anfänge der Jüngerer Tyrannis. Vorläufer und erste Repräsentanten von Gewaltherrschaft im späten 5. Jahrhundert v. Chr.* (Frankfurt am Main 2005), 180–202.

⁴⁴ G. Vlastos, "Isonomia", *AJP* 74 (1953), 337 ff; V. J. Rosivach, "The Tyrant in Athenian Democracy", *QUCC* 30/3 (1988), 47–57; W. Lengauer, "Die politische Bedeutung der Gleichheitsidee im 5. und 4. Jahrhundert v. Chr. – Einige Bemerkungen über isonomia", in W. Will and J. Heinrichs, eds., *Zu Alexander d. Gr.*, Festschrift G. Wirth (Amsterdam 1988), 53–87; M. Ostwald, *Nomos and the Beginnings of the Athenian Democracy* (Oxford 1969), 96–120, 180–182; H. Leppin, *Thukydides und die Verfassung der Polis. Ein Beitrag zur politischen Ideengeschichte des 5. Jahrhunderts v. Chr.* (Berlin 1999), 22–23; K. Raaflaub, "Einleitung und Bilanz: Kleisthenes, Ephialtes und die Begründung der Demokratie", in K. H. Kinzl, ed., *Demokratia: der Weg zur Demokratie bei den Griechen* (Darmstadt 1995), 49–51; Chr. Meier, *Die Entstehung des Politischen bei den Griechen*, 3rd ed. (Frankfurt am Main 1995), 293–294, 297 ff; P. Spahn, "Individualisierung und politisches Bewußtsein im archaischen Griechenland", in K. Raaflaub and E. Müller-Luckner, eds., *Anfänge des politischen Denkens in der Antike: die nahöstlichen Kulturen und die Griechen* (Munich 1993), 359–360.

⁴⁵ Cf. Ducat, *Pénestes*, 60.

⁴⁶ Cf. Meyer, *Theopomps*, 261, 276–277; Gehrke, *Stasis*, 375 with note 2.

⁴⁷ Plut. mor. 89c.

Valerius Maximus, except that in their versions the victim of the attempted assassination is the famous tyrant Jason of Pherae.⁴⁸

The similarity among the anecdotes has led to the early hypothesis that Prometheus was the nickname of Jason of Pherae,⁴⁹ which seems untenable for several reasons. Jason's name appears for the first time in the sources in connection with the year 379 BC.⁵⁰ In Xenophon, Jason is first mentioned in Polydamus' speech of 375 BC.⁵¹ Polydamus quotes and affirms Jason's assertion that he is able to endure as much strain as his mercenaries who are in their prime and exercising constantly.⁵² This portrayal of Jason as a man in the prime of life renders it doubtful that he could have risen to such prominence as to become the leader of a faction as early as 407/6 BC, or thirty years before.⁵³ If Jason of Pherae was indeed thus prominent and powerful as early as 407/6 BC, then the thirty-year silence of the sources becomes difficult to explain,⁵⁴ and so does their indifference to such an interesting issue as an alliance between two so famous and power-hungry figures as Jason of Pherae and Critias would have been.

D. Stephans's hypothesis that Prometheus was the nickname of Lycophron of Pherae⁵⁵ implies that both Cicero and Valerius Maximus confused Jason and Lycophron, which seems highly unlikely.⁵⁶

What shakes both hypotheses about the identity of Prometheus is that the Athenians would hardly have believed that a tyrant could be a democratic leader. Moreover, it would have been far more useful for Theramenes' to depict Critias as a tyrant's ally.

⁴⁸ Cic. nat. deor. 3,28; Val. Max. 1.8. ext. 6. According to Pliny the Elder, Jason's ulcer was lanced in a battle (Plin. nat. 7,51).

⁴⁹ F. Pahle, "Zur Geschichte der pheräischen Tyrannis", *NJPhP* 93 (1866), 532 ff; for other scholars holding the same view, see. J. Mandel, "Jason: The Tyrant of Pherae, Tagus of Thessaly, as Reflected in Ancient Sources and Modern Literature: The Image of the 'New' Tyrant", *RSA* 10 (1980), 52 ff, esp. 53 with note 21; see also Ducat, *Pénestes*, 55 ff; Sprawski, *Jason of Pherae*, 33 with note 68.

⁵⁰ Diod. 15.30,3. For chronology, see Gehrke, *Stasis*, 74 with note 7; Sprawski, *Jason of Pherae*, 3; Berve, *Tyrannis*, 285.

⁵¹ Xen. Hell. 6.1,4–16.

⁵² Xen. Hell. 6.1,5–6; cf. also 6.1,15–16.

⁵³ Mandel, *Tyrant of Pherae*, 52 ff; Ducat, *Pénestes*, 55 ff; Sprawski, *Jason of Pherae*, 32–33.

⁵⁴ On Jason's lust for power, see Aristot. pol. 1277a 24.

⁵⁵ D. Stephans, "Critias: Life and Literary Remains" (Diss., University of Cincinnati 1939), 38.

⁵⁶ Ducat, *Pénestes*, 56; Sprawski, *Jason of Pherae*, 33.

A most recent hypothesis, put forward by B. Helly, is that Prometheus was in fact Polydamus of Pharsalus.⁵⁷ Xenophon's approving portrayal of Polydamus in *Hellenica*, however, is in marked contrast to his low opinion of Critias' Thessalian friends given in *Memorabilia*.⁵⁸

The fact that personal names were seldom used as nicknames in ancient Greece may be an argument against the assumption that Prometheus was a nickname. The most famous examples of descriptive nicknames are Buskin and Olympian for Theramenes and Pericles respectively.⁵⁹ Moreover, how come that the sources say nothing about a Thessalian whose nickname is purportedly commonly known in Athens. Another noteworthy fact is that not a single ancient source directly associates Prometheus with Jason, Lycophron and Polydamus. Finally, as J. Ducat points out, much as it was rare, the name Prometheus is attested in the sources.⁶⁰

The research done so far suggests that Prometheus is a historical person, but who he was, which region or polis he was from and what his political beliefs were will apparently remain a mystery. What appears almost certain is that neither Prometheus nor Critias were revolutionaries exploiting social tensions to establish a democracy. Given that Theramenes referred to him by name and in conjunction with Critias, he was probably a member of the Thessalian aristocracy. The two of them were apparently involved in power struggles of various aristocratic factions, and they used *penestai* at some point.⁶¹ Nor can their role as Lycophron's allies be completely ruled out. A possible clue may be Critias' prominent role in the turbulent events in Athens in 404/3 BC, the role for which he had no previous political credentials. As there are indications that Lycophron had good relations with the Lacedaemonians at the time, perhaps some sort of collaboration with him had earned Critias such a credential. On the other hand, it is not impossible that the mysterious Prometheus was the one who had good connections with Sparta and shared some interests with her in Thessaly. Whatever the link between Critias and the ruler of Pherae might have been, Critias did

⁵⁷ B. Helly, *L'État Thessalien. Aleuas le Roux les tétrades et les tagoi* (Collection de la Maison de L'Orient Méditerranéen 25, Série Épigraphique 2) (Lyon 1995), 306–307, 350–350.

⁵⁸ Xen. Hell. 6.1, 2–3, 7–8, 13–14, 18.

⁵⁹ Xen. Hell. 2.3, 30–31; 47; Kratin frg. 73, 114, 118, 181, 258 K.-A.; Aristoph. Ach. 530; see V. Ehrenberg, *Sophokles und Perikles* (Munich 1956), 105–106; J. Schwarze, *Die Beurteilung des Perikles durch die attische Komödie und ihre historische und historiographische Bedeutung* (Munich 1971), 28–40, 59–60.

⁶⁰ Ducat, *Pēnestes*, 55.

⁶¹ Cf. Welwei, *Unfreie*, 6 ff, esp. 6 with note 6.

not play a significant part in Lycophron's rise. Had it been otherwise, the sources would not have failed to pay it due attention.⁶²

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⁶² Cf. Sprawski, *Jason of Pherae*, 34.