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## Remarks on the Ancient Evidence for Democratic Peace

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Responding to Eric Robinson, it is argued that evidence from ancient Greece is inadequate to provide reliable counter-examples to the democratic peace proposition, provided that the proposition is correctly defined. For the best-documented case, the Athenian invasion of Syracuse, the preponderance of evidence does make Syracuse a well-established democracy like Athens. But there is contradictory evidence not addressed by Robinson. More important, it is arguable that the decisionmaking body in Athens (the majority of the assembly) did not perceive Syracuse as behaving like a fellow democracy. That is what matters, according to an explanation of the democratic peace based not on institutional or normative causes but on the decisionmakers' perception of a shared democratic political culture. In more modern cases where such ambiguities can be checked against primary evidence, the proposition that this shared perception prevents war holds almost without exception. Other ancient cases cited by Robinson, including all those tabulated by Bruce Russett and William Antholis, involve either (1) regimes even less likely to have perceived each other as democracies, or (2) conflicts that apparently fell below the level of 200 combat deaths, which is a threshold for violence between democracies. Finally, Robinson fails to address the theoretically crucial finding that peace has also held with high consistency between oligarchic republics, from ancient times to the present.

### Evidence on Syracuse

What can we learn about war and democracy from the history of ancient Greece? As Robinson (2001) understands, the surviving information is so limited that at most we may find hints that could modify arguments based on more modern evidence. Robinson has attempted just that, moving the discussion forward usefully. However, he has missed some key points.

Discussions of the democratic peace in ancient Greece have mostly focussed, as Robinson does, on the search for counter-examples and particularly the single case of the Athenian expedition against Syracuse. Historians have long debated whether Syracuse should be classified as a 'democracy' in the Athenian sense, and most would agree

with Robinson's impressive case for a democratic Syracuse. Yet the case is far from certain, for all evidence from the period is flimsy.

Consider a single passage in Thucydides (6.32–41), which Robinson has not mentioned, although a significant fraction of the historians' debate has revolved around it. It is no firsthand account, but a literary reconstruction based on unknown sources (perhaps Thucydides' notes of talks with Spartans who recalled what they were told by Syracusans?). Weak as it is, this passage is the best, indeed the only, surviving description of political activity in Syracuse at the time of interest. The passage summarizes a session in the assembly of Syracuse after rumors arrived of Athenian plans for an invasion. A democratic faction argued that

no military preparations were needed, for the Athenians were friendly. Apparently open debate: score one point for democracy. The debate ended without any vote, and Syracuse's generals went ahead on their own authority to make military preparations. Apparent control by an elite: score one point for oligarchy. The other passages known to historians, all far briefer, add points for one side or the other, most but not all for democracy.

Robinson makes clear that using these sources (Diodorus Siculus, for example) puts us in the position of someone trying to understand 12th-century English politics using a 16th-century condensed history of the world, known to be unreliable. The pitfalls become visible by comparison with study of more modern cases. In respected secondary histories I have found mentions of several early modern conflicts that sound like counter-examples, but here one could inspect detailed primary sources. This closer inspection consistently finds that in the particular year when the war broke out, the democracy of one side or the other was very new and scarcely established (less than four years old), or else it had just that year fallen under some kind of autocratic or elite-junta control. Thus, a touch of historiographical modesty might curb confidence that the Athenian war against Syracuse is a sure counter-example to the proposition that 'well-established democracies do not make war on one another'.

But is the validity of that bald proposition the central question? Yes, according to some explanations of the democratic peace. Perhaps democratic executives don't go to war because they are constrained by fear the public will vote them out of office, or because legislatures drag their feet, or for some other *institutional* cause. Or perhaps democracies don't go to war because ordinary folks or their chosen leaders despise bloodshed, or some similar *normative* cause. In either case, the proposition stands or falls according to a sim-

plistic view of democracy, which there might be enough ancient evidence to support.

### Perceptions and Peace

I have argued that neither type of explanation for the democratic peace is valid. A more reliable explanation looks to the *political culture* of leaders, by which I mean their accustomed practices as shaped by both institutions and norms. Democratic leaders climb to power and stay there through negotiation and accommodation with their peers, rather than by forcing one another into exile, jail, or death. When such leaders are in conflict with foreign counterparts, they follow the normal human conservatism, well known to cognitive, behavioral, and social psychologists: they attempt first to solve the problem in their accustomed way, namely, peaceful negotiation. Violence enters only when they confront foreign leaders whom they believe do not themselves adhere to this political culture.

In my book *Never at War* (Weart, 1998, hereinafter *NAW*) I do not assert that democracies have never made war on their own kind. I assert that leaders of well-established democracies have never made war on leaders they *perceived* as their own kind, that is, sharing their culture of political behavior. The distinction holds high significance for understanding the causes of wars. A large part of *NAW* is given to studying how leaders decide whether the foreigners they confront can be dealt with as fellow-democrats. The key is always whether a foreign regime appears to be forcibly suppressing its domestic democratic opponents. In a few borderline cases where the other regime's domestic behavior was ambiguous, a democracy did indeed attack what some objective observers might call a fellow democracy.

Did the Athenians *perceive* the Syracusan regime as behaving democratically? Emotionally, the Athenians were motivated

partly by learning how their allies, the democrats of Leontini, had been brutally repressed by the regime of Syracuse in collusion with Leontini's oligarchic elite (Thucydides 5.4, 6.6, 6.19). In more practical terms, there is good evidence that the Athenians believed they would be welcomed and aided by a democratic faction within Syracuse itself. Indeed without that hope the invasion would have been entirely foolish, for invaders rarely got through the walls of a Greek city unless they were helped by internal dissidents. As it turned out, nobody did betray the city to the Athenians. Perhaps the pro-Athenian democratic faction was too weak. Or perhaps Syracuse was in truth a happy democracy and the Athenians were disastrously mistaken. Another old debate among historians asks whether Athenians were grossly ignorant about Syracuse, a place far distant by sea and politically complex. Perhaps Athens (that is, the decisionmaking body, the majority of the citizens in assembly) utterly misread the situation there. In any case, the evidence does not clearly refute, but tends if anything to support, the actual proposition in *NAW* – namely, that the decisionmakers in democracies do not go to war against people they believe act politically in their own fashion. Robinson's failure to address this key issue renders his discussion of *NAW* almost irrelevant.

### Other Cases

A still more important point that I would like to see Robinson address is the peace that held, not between democracies, but between oligarchic republics (regimes where members of an elite minority hold equal voting rights, but forcibly repress would-be democrats). The surprising discovery that oligarchic republics have practically never made war on their own kind, a central proposition in *NAW*, is perhaps the most theoretically significant thing to be learned from ancient

Greek history. This oligarchic restraint also prevailed in periods where the historical documentation is far better. The pattern of peace between similar republican regimes – but only between similar ones, for there have been many dreadful wars between democracies and oligarchies – undercuts both institutional and normative explanations of the democratic peace, but leaves the political culture explanation standing.

Robinson has also missed the key point in his discussion of work by Russett & Antholis (1992, 1993). These authors themselves emphasized a significant limitation of their work. Following the canons of statistical studies, they took a set of cases and demanded that each case be put in one of a very few mutual exclusive categories: democracy, oligarchy, or other? war or peace? They fully understood that in most cases the evidence was so scanty that the assignments had a high level of error. For statistical studies this is reasonable, in the hope that errors will cancel one another. I do not fault Russett & Antholis for forcing every case into a category. But we should not take their statistical results as demonstrating that extreme violence was common between democracies, or indeed existed at all. Russett & Antholis forced a 'conservative' interpretation, deliberately leaning toward a democratic reading, in order to avoid bias towards their preferred hypothesis. Such a procedure is not applicable to the kind of question we are asking here: can we be *certain* whether any Greek democracies went to war with one another?

To answer this question, I requested from Russett & Antholis their data, which they kindly furnished, and reviewed the ancient evidence. Russett & Antholis list 14 cases where one could argue that Greek democracies fought one another. As reported in *NAW*, on inspection the cases all turn out to fall into two classes. For some, the sources leave the nature of at least one regime highly

ambiguous – by an entirely reasonable reading, some look much more like tribal or monarchical regimes than democracies.

For cases where the regimes were less ambiguous, the hostility involved no serious recorded combat. For example, Russett & Antholis count as ‘war’ a case in which democratic Megara was formally at war with democratic Athens, but I could find no record of full-scale battle – only raids and skirmishes. Perhaps there were many combat deaths, so many that the conflict was as serious as anything we call war, but it is no less likely that there were not. Robinson has passed over the central issue. I apologize if I have misled by pushing a rhetorical point in writing that there have been no ‘wars’ between democracies, when the real issue is to determine exactly where the boundaries of violence lie. It turns out that democracies (and oligarchies) sometimes have indeed moved violently against their own kind. But this seems always to have halted around 200 combat deaths. That number is not arbitrary, but a limit set by extensive evidence. Looking from modern times back through the popular democracies of medieval Switzerland and on to ancient Greece, I repeatedly found cases of ‘wars’ between democracies where armies marched about but somehow managed to avoid killing more than a few dozen opponents.

Robinson rightly remarks that even 100 deaths could be a tragic blow to a small Greek *polis*. Yet if one insists on a relative scale, this is still a low level for the ancient Greeks: unlike more modern nations, they could fear that a lost war would mean the death of every last man plus enslavement of their women and children. I don’t mean to disparage clashes that kill scores of soldiers; the policy of even the huge USA has been diverted by such tragedies. But we must set a cutoff somewhere, and the important fact remains that history records scarcely any cases of conflict between unambiguous democracies (and

likewise oligarchies) that rise above the relatively low level defined by 200 deaths.

In Sicily, Robinson points out correctly, there were perhaps true bloody wars between true well-established democracies. Or perhaps not: we have reason to be wary. Time after time in my research into better documented cases, such as the oligarchic republics of Renaissance Italy or the Hanseatic League, a report in a reputable history of a war between republics faded away on examination of primary sources. In the rare cases where both sides actually had been comparable well-established republics in the year in question, the chronicles showed that the ‘war’ had been merely a matter of formal declarations and nearly bloodless skirmishes. Until such possibilities have been excluded for the Sicilian and other Greek cases – which would require the discovery of some vast trove of primary evidence – these cannot be accepted as reliable counter-examples.

## Conclusions

None of this says we can be certain that there never was a real war between two well-established Greek democracies (or oligarchies). I agree that Syracuse may have been such a case, and there may have been dozens more, scarcely recorded. Yet I do feel confident that Greece offers no stock of reliable counter-examples for those who would deny the democratic peace, provided the terms for that peace are carefully defined in terms of perceptions of political culture and the level of violence reached.

A more fruitful investigation might go deeper into how the Greeks perceived regimes. Russett & Antholis suggest that around the time of the Syracusan expedition (perhaps even in reaction to its destruction?), the Greeks became aware that fundamental differences of political behavior separated types of regimes. This would have marked the emergence into history of the forces that may

bring about peace among democracies. I agree with Robinson's skepticism about the role of generalized ideology, but this leaves open the more specific problem of how the Greeks classified regime behaviors and how such thinking shifted over time.

Robinson is surely right that we can learn much by studying ancient regimes precisely to the degree they were fundamentally different from modern ones. An explanation of the democratic peace that focuses on the political culture of leaders does need to be reconsidered for Greek democracies, where, as Robinson reminds us, mass votes were as important as decisions by any leadership elite. As Bruce Russett has pointed out to me, by comparison with modern structures the lack of institutional checks on the swift Greek assembly votes gave special weight to possible biases and misperceptions. Perhaps the surviving evidence is too scanty to allow us to see how outcomes were affected by the perceived tendencies of another regime to suppress opposition. Yet one pictures the democrats exiled from Leontini who begged the assembly of Athens for succor against the oppression of Syracuse, promoting the vote for war. Does this tell us anything in general about the

forces weighing upon decisions for war or peace?

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