CHAPTER EIGHT

‘AND YOU, THE DEMOS, MADE AN UPROAR’: PERFORMANCE, MASS AUDIENCES AND TEXT IN THE ATHENIAN DEMOCRACY

Rosalind Thomas

The Greek world was a world of open-air gatherings, festivals, processions and performances of all kinds, yet it is extraordinarily difficult to imagine what these might have been like in reality, how very large audiences of thousands might have behaved, or how they might have affected an event for which the only surviving evidence is a slight mention in a written text. While the performance contexts of tragedy and comedy have been much scrutinized, the great mass audiences of the Athenian democracy still remain hazy: the dynamics of citizen audiences, speakers and politicians, had tangible results, made concrete decisions, and yet it is frustratingly hard to reconstruct or envisage the atmosphere or behaviour of these huge audiences of citizens alongside the written documents which emanated from them. Nor does it help that we only hear about such audiences if they appear in some form in our written evidence, for it is therefore the written evidence which has the final say.1

It is not only performances that we are missing, but part of the very character of the Athenian democracy. Our picture of the Athenian democracy must continually change in accordance with new evidence that comes to light, as is very proper; yet an obvious point still needs making that more and more inscriptions appear while our impressions (and they are only impressions) of what went on without writing—the assemblies, juries, etc.—remains comparatively static.2 Some recent work on

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1 Thus, e.g., it is mainly from inscriptions that we hear about Hellenistic performances of literature or history, yet these inscriptions went up to record thanks or honours from the city: for a good example at Xanthos, see A. Chaniotis (2009).

2 Note the new archive found at Argos by Prof. Kritsas; and the thousands of lead tablets at Dodona which were on the verge of being published by Prof. Christidis at the time of his death.
literacy and written documents in Athens argues for far more writing, broader and higher levels of literacy and more sophistication in the use of writing than historians, including myself, have tended to accept. These recent studies tend to argue that oral modes of communication and elements which we might crudely label in short-hand as ‘archaic’ or ‘primitive’ do not really have a place in classical Athens; they also implicitly reject the possibility that degrees of complexity and sophistication existed in the use of writing. So while Athenian inscriptions attract ever greater attention and the finds increase, the space for performance, large audiences, and all that is implied by open-air politics, seems to get increasingly squeezed from the picture of Athenian political life. The results of some of this new work seem strangely modern, strangely anachronistic, as I will argue below: while we should certainly take into account the insights drawn from close study of the inscriptions, some claims seem to present an exaggeratedly contemporary image. Was politics in Athens driven by speeches and assemblies—as would appear from so much of our evidence—or by formalized written record and a bureaucracy reminiscent of modern administrative practice? Or a bit of both? An over-formalized picture of Athenian democracy with very extensive and sophisticated written records may not be incompatible with the behaviour of the mass citizen body which we will examine below, but we need to consider fully the combination, or the implications of such a combination, in order to attain a rounded picture of the democracy. We cannot look at the written records alone.

The situation in Athens was extreme by comparison with other poleis, with its enormous citizen-body, large assembly, mass jury-courts and large-scale participatory festivals, though some of this relatively rich evidence for Athenian audiences may help envisage other smaller city-gatherings. We concentrate here on the dynamics of very large audiences in Athens, what they imply for the importance of the written documents produced, stored, and displayed around the city, and therefore the character of the democracy. I start with some observations about the context of written documents.

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