

In recent scholarship, it seems customary to stress the importance of ostracism as a tool of the political supremacy of the *demos* in fifth-century Athens. Illuminating though it is, I think this approach offers little to explain the rationale behind the introduction of this institution. Neither do traditional interpretations of ostracism – emphasizing its role as a means to prevent tyranny – well account for what we know about the historical cases of ostracism. To say the least, having got rid of his main opponent, a leading statesman must have become more influential and so more threatening to the political system than before. The explanation I propose will rather draw, although in a paradoxical way, on another scholarly tradition, which takes ostracism as a means to fend off internal strifes, or *staseis*.

A comprehensive interpretation of the original purposes of ostracism must answer a series of disquieting questions about its procedure and its workings. These include, on the one hand, factual issues such as the twenty-year interval between the invention of ostracism (508/507 BC) and its first use in 488/487 BC as well as the relative rareness of securely attested cases before it fell into disuse in *ca.* 416 BC (even if we assume that a few *ostrakophoriai*, unattested in our literary sources, are suggested by the evidence of the *ostraka* themselves). On the other hand, we must explain the curious procedure involving a preliminary vote (*epicheirotomia*) in the sixth prytany and a decisive vote (*ostrakophoria*) before the eighth prytany, thus allowing for a long interval which must have been dominated by merciless struggles among the politicians most threatened by potential banishment. On a number of extant *ostraka* we find traces of what must have been a political campaign of slanderous propaganda. The question is why Kleisthenes should have introduced a procedure that might put the city on the verge of civil strife year after year.

My answer is that the *ostrakophoria* was originally intended not to be applied. Once the preliminary vote proved positive, one or another among the powerful leaders was doomed to banishment and nobody felt truly safe. So the idea was to make the quarrelsome Athenian elite to meet backstage and strike a deal. They only needed to make a unanimous stand against ostracism during the *epicheirotomia*. But to reach a reliable agreement there must have been a minimum of mutual trust all year long. This constitutional ploy originated from Kleisthenes' personal experience of his disastrous rivalry with Isagoras when precisely such a security mechanism was lacking in Athens. Accordingly, as long as the mechanism was effective, ostracism was not implemented; it took extremely intransigent leaders and/or unusually tense situations to hold one. This explains the twenty-year interval before the first ostracism and the overall rareness of its application.