

Solon and Peisistratos

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1. Greek Tyranny

To the Greeks, a "tyrant" was not necessarily an evil, greedy, arbitrary ruler, but was simply a monarch who seized power instead of gaining it according to custom. Or should we say seized power within recent memory? Although the origins of "legitimate" monarchy are cloudy, it's a safe bet to speculate that most of the "legitimate" dynasties were founded in power-grabs of one sort or another.

In saying this we would have to distinguish the king of an agricultural society from the chief of a nomadic tribe, who precisely doesn't rule or command the others in the tribe and who, were he to be "selfish," often would rather not be chief, since that entailed large expenditures of material goods and personal charisma in settling disputes via eloquence. Indeed, focusing on just those ways in which chieftdom drained the resources of those most likely to become king were they able, we can say that the tribe, far from "lacking" a king, was precisely a mechanism to prevent kings. A good place to start on these questions of "political anthropology" would be Pierre Clastres, *Society Against the State* (NY: Zone Books, 1989).

The 7th and 6th centuries BCE were the age of the Greek tyrants. To appreciate their historical role we have to distinguish the institution of tyranny from the motivations of individual tyrants. Many tyrants were no doubt psychologically motivated by the desire for gain and personal power, but such individual psychology isn't all that relevant to historical analysis. What is relevant, it seems to me, are three factors: 1) politics (control of the legal system: who is eligible for office and what they can do once in office); 2) economics (who owns the most important means of producing the necessities of life and who controls the most important means of appropriating surpluses); 3) force (who's got the weapons, the skill and will to use them, and the organization to use them in teamwork). Now all these are inter-related: 1) those who have the weapons can force others to work for them and can control the political process; while 2) those in control of the political process can keep others out of office and can set the rules for the "lawful" appropriation of surpluses and for the "legitimate" use of force; and 3) those with the most economic power can afford the most deadly weapons and the free time to train to use them and can also afford the time to devote to political office.

At the time of the tyrants, Greek society was divided in two between the aristocrats (big landowners) who controlled political power through hereditary restrictions on office, and the *demos* or commoners (everyone else). By this time the economic renaissance would have produced fairly wealthy commoners who wanted political power to protect their economic interests. The tyrants, who were either renegade aristocrats or members of this *nouveau riche* commoner class, worked to break the aristocratic monopoly on political power and thereby to protect the economic interests of all the commoners. Their military power in the takeover was based on the allegiance (or at least the forbearance) of the hoplite class (small to moderate landowning farmers, able to afford full armor) and to a lesser extent, the lightly-armed urban artisan class. (NB: in the 5th and 4th centuries BCE this last, sub-hoplite, class became known as the *demos*.) Once in power however they tended to engage a personal bodyguard and mercenaries rather than rely on the armed citizenry (since the nobles would have been untrustworthy and any citizen army would have to include them).

Once in power tyrants needed to keep their supporters happy, so we often see large-scale public works attributed to them such as sewers, marketplaces, city walls, ports, and temples. We will also see in the case of Peisistratos the institutionalizing of big public festivals. Thus in one sense they provide the material and cultural infrastructure of the *polis* as opposed to the *oikos*.

As time went by, the *demos* had less and less need of the institution of tyranny; by reaction to their increased resistance, the individual tyrants became more and more arbitrary and terroristic. The last Athenian tyrant was overthrown in 510 BCE.

2. Solon.

Solon was elected the sole *archon* of Athens in 594 to deal with a revolutionary crisis caused by discontent from poor farmers who were being enslaved by debt to large landowners. Solon's reforms cancelled existing debts and forbade any future use of the body as security for debts (thus ending the practice of debt enslavement in Athens forever). He refused however to undertake the most radical reform of the ancient world, land redistribution. (We will see this issue repeatedly in discussing Roman history.) The cancellation of debts allowed the hoplite class to be firmly established over against both the big landowning aristocrats (the lower edges of the hoplites having previously been threatened by debt to the big shots) and the urban artisanal masses (being land-based the hoplites had fundamentally different interests from the urbanites). This triangular balance of power stabilized the Athenian system for the next century, until the time of Themistocles, naval power, and classic 5th century democracy.

Solon's other reforms affected the political structure of Athens. He established economic qualifications for office (some say so that any embezzlement could be recovered from the personal estates of the richest officeholders), thus breaking the hereditary privilege of the aristocratic families. He also allowed foreign artisans to apply for citizenship, further diluting the aristocratic power base.

Solon's agricultural policies had far-reaching effects, ultimately setting up naval democracy and the upsetting of his triangular balance. He forbade the export of wheat and encouraged the export of olive oil. This encouraged farmers to switch to olive oil as a cash crop and turned Athens into an importer of wheat, largely from the Black Sea. Since Greek warships had only a twenty mile per day range (they were rowing ships, not sailing ships like commercial ships), Athens needed to set up naval depots all along the trade routes of the Aegean. This in turn prepares the way for conflict with Persia and for the 5th century empire. Since war ships need citizen rowers Athenian naval power had a strong democratic impetus.

3. Peisistratos

After failed attempts earlier, P. seized power in Athens in 546 and effectively reigned until his death in 527. He always worked within the structures of Solon's constitution however so in one sense he wasn't a tyrant at all. But effectively he was in solely in charge and his policies favored the *demos* at the expense of the aristocrats, so his effects were like that of the other tyrants. In particular, he's remembered for civic infrastructure (the marketplace, various temples) and for "cultural technology" (the establishment of big civic festivals that were community-building mechanisms, tending to the formation of Athenians out of people who earlier felt themselves to be tribe members first and foremost). One of the most interesting new ways of reading Athenian drama is to see them from the perspective of such "cultural technology", the formation of desiring patterns proper to the citizen (martial, patriotic, patriarchal). Of course great works are never simply mechanisms with predictable effects, especially in a complex, internally-differentiated city like Athens, as their multiple levels allow for challenge to existing trends of citizen-formation as well as for their reinforcement. Nonetheless, a focus on the bodily effects of attending a drama festival is a welcome antidote to the exclusive focus on the "meaning" of the plays. That the Greeks were well aware of such bodily effects is clear from the Platonic and Aristotelian suspicion of rhetoric, myth, and the "lies of the poets."