

Solon and the Early Athenian Government

Athens may be remembered as the first democracy, but its democratic government evolved very slowly, and only emerged after a long series of reforms. The Athenians attributed their democracy to the great lawgiver Solon. The system of government that Solon seems to have arranged was not a democracy strictly speaking, but one that gave the opportunity for greater political participation by all citizens in the government while still protecting the power of the Athenian aristocracy. Still, later on, when the Athenians overthrew a tyrannical government, the example of Solon provided the inspiration for the establishment of a truly democratic government.

The Development of the Athenian Government

While the Athenian democracy founded in the 460s BC was technically the earliest democratic government, the ideals behind it were nothing new. Throughout early Greek history there was a tendency for the people to demand a role in the government of their *polis*, whether that meant rising up together against oppressive rulers or participating in popular assemblies that had some voice in the government. Still, government tended to be concentrated in the hands of a few powerful aristocrats (in oligarchies) or a single person (in a monarchy or tyranny). In the *Iliad*, Homer's Odysseus famously exhorted "the rule of many is not a good thing. Let there be one ruler, one king."

The origins of the Athenian state are shrouded in myth and legend. Athens was clearly originally ruled by a king, but eventually his power gave way to that of the aristocracy around the eighth to seventh century BC. Similar developments were taking place across Greece at this time as monarchies gave way to *oligarchies*, governments ruled by a small group of aristocrats. In Athens, the king was not eliminated but had to share his power with two other officeholders. They were all called *archons* ("rulers"), and were in charge of civic, military, and religious affairs, respectively. Thus the king became known as the King Archon (*Archon Basileus*), and ruled along with the War Archon (*Polemarch*) and the Eponymous Archon (so-called because the years were named after the man who held this office). Each of these archons would rule for ten years. Later, six more archons were added, bringing the total to nine. Athens was governed by the Nine Archons, who not only made laws but also acted as judges, and by the Areopagus, a council made up of all former archons and named after the "Rock of Ares" where they had their meetings. Only *eupatridae*, or aristocrats, could become archons, and the status of *eupatridae* was hereditary, meaning that rule of the city was in the hands of a few powerful families. Over time, the term of office of an archon was reduced to one year, but their power remained fixed.

Most ancient Greek cities had a semi-historical lawgiver—a person from the past who may have been real, mythological, or some combination—to whom they attributed the formulation of their government. For the Athenians, the two major lawgivers were Draco and Solon. The first constitution and written laws of Athens were supposedly promulgated around 620 BC by an archon named Draco. While the government of Athens had existed before Draco, he wrote down the constitution for all to see. He also

is credited by Aristotle with having added a new branch of the government, the *boule*, or Council of Four Hundred. All men who could supply their own arms for military service were allowed to vote for the four hundred members who made up this body. While such men had to have some means in order to provide their own arms, they did not have to be aristocrats, and thus the *boule* was an important step toward a more representative government. In addition to his work on the constitution, Draco provided written laws so that everyone would know how they must behave. The laws of Draco were harsh, and most offenses were punishable by death. In addition, the laws allowed for debtors to be enslaved by those to whom they owed money. The word *draconian* derives from the harshness of Draco's laws.

The Crisis of Athens

While the Athenian economy had long been made up of large numbers of citizen farmers with small parcels of land, leading up to around 600 BC, the eupatridae, who dominated Athens both politically and economically, began to buy up much of the land and to edge out their more humble competitors. The small farmers often had to mortgage their land. Many could not pay off these mortgages and had to sell their land to the eupatridae. They became tenants on their former lands paying rent to the new landlords. In many cases they were unable to pay the rent and had to take out loans. According to Athenian law, however, if they were not able to pay back their loans they would be made slaves to their creditors. As impoverishment and the prospect of enslavement became a very real concern to a large portion of the population, civil unrest filled Athens. The aristocracy feared that the lower classes would overthrow them and institute a *tyranny* (a monarchy without hereditary claim to power), which had happened in many other Greek cities facing similar problems. In addition, they feared that the lower classes would use revolution as an opportunity to redistribute the land.

With all classes fearing what would happen, the aristocracy turned to Solon to mediate the matter and to fix the problems in the government and economy. Solon was a poet and an aristocrat, well respected by his peers for his dedication to Athens. He had gained fame among the Athenians during their war against the nearby city-state of Megara over control of the island of Salamis—the Athenians were losing the war and seriously considering giving up until Solon recited one of his poems that fortified the resolve of the Athenians to keep fighting. Soon after, they won the war. The solution to the growing civil and economic problems of Athens could not be solved with a poem, however, and Solon had to demonstrate firm leadership and a strong willingness to encourage compromise among the various interests at stake.

Solon's Economic Reforms

Solon made a number of reforms meant to remedy the economic problems, and these reforms are called the *seisachtheia*, "the shaking-off of burdens." He decreed that debtors could not be enslaved by their creditors, and that all who had been enslaved for failing to pay their debts were free. At the same time, he put a limit on the amount of land a single person could own, thus preventing the concentration of land into the hands

of a very few. Still, he left the lands of the aristocrats intact, not confiscating or redistributing them. Thus, he struck a careful balance in helping the poor farmers while protecting the interests of the aristocrats. Indeed, Solon himself was probably a major landowner. Still, he would brag in one of his poems that he plucked up the marking stones used to indicate that a tract of land had been mortgaged out.

Solon is also said to have instituted Athens' first currency, since the city had previously used coins from other cities. He supposedly set down standard weights and measures, and passed laws that encouraged the export of olive oil and pottery. He made reforms that made it easier to pursue professions other than farming, which not only gave new career opportunities for poor Athenians but led to the professionalization of Athenian craftsmanship. Perhaps as a consequence, Athens soon overtook Corinth as the leading producer of pottery in Greece.

Solon's Political Reforms

Solon broke up the power of the eupatridae by dividing the male citizens of Athens into four groups whose membership would be determined by their wealth as recorded in an annual census. The four classes were the *Pentacosiomedimnoi* (the wealthiest citizens, so-called because they had landed properties that produced 500 or more bushels of crops every year), the *Hippeis* (the citizens with enough wealth to own horses for battle), *Zeugitae* (the citizens with enough wealth to equip themselves as hoplites—that is, as infantryman—in battle), and *Thetes* (the poorer citizens, mostly manual workers or tenant farmers). Only the *Pentacosiomedimnoi* were eligible to hold the office of archon (the *Hippeis* might also have been allowed, yet it is uncertain), but the top three classes could serve in the *boule*. While the creation of the *boule* is sometimes attributed to Draco, others say that Solon formed the *boule*. Instead of holding elections for the 400 seats in the *boule*, Solon decreed that membership would be chosen from a lottery of all eligible citizens from the wealthiest three classes. The *thetes* were excluded from membership in the *boule*.

Despite the fact that Solon restricted the *thetes* from holding any political office, he also created a new body, the *Ecclesia*, or “Assembly,” where all citizens including the *thetes* could vote on state matters. The *Ecclesia* became the most important body in the government: it acted as a jury for important court cases, passed laws, and elected the higher officials. Thus the *Ecclesia* represents an important step toward the establishment of an Athenian democracy. Nonetheless, the constitution of Solon was not strictly democratic. The *Ecclesia* could only deliberate on matters set for it by the *boule*. It is not clear how laws were passed under Solon's constitution, but it seems that the Areopagus retained control over the laws. Indeed, the Areopagus would be the focus of future political action, and so it seems that real power still rested within this elite body. Solon's constitution gave all male citizens of Athens a say in their government, but it also retained a powerful ruling aristocracy.

Aftermath

Solon's reforms involved major compromise for all segments of Athenian society, and as a result he realized that none would be entirely happy with them. He made the Athenians swear to obey his laws and constitution for ten years to see if it worked. Then, according to legend, he left Athens for a decade of foreign travels in order to avoid being forced by angry Athenians into changing his constitution before the end of the trial period. He visited Egypt, Cyprus, and, according to the historian Herodotus, Lydia, where he taught a lesson to the famous king Croesus about the ever changing nature of fortune.

Solon's reforms, however, did not solve all of Athens' problems, and civil strife soon returned to the city. By the time Solon returned from his travels, he saw that it was inevitable that the government would be overthrown by a tyrant. The nobles were divided into several hostile factions, while the lower classes were still not satisfied with the economic reforms and wanted to see the redistribution of land. Solon warned that his friend Peisistratus, the general who had conquered Salamis from Megara, was intending to make himself tyrant, but the warnings fell on deaf ears. He probably died soon after his predictions came true.

In 560 BC, Peisistratus succeeded in seizing control of Athens. As tyrant, he overturned Solon's constitution and instead ruled as he pleased. He redistributed the lands of the wealthy to satisfy the poor. Still, he allowed the archons to retain their positions, though they had little real power. Peisistratus was much loved by a large portion of Athens' population and sponsored art, literature, and religious celebrations, but he was a threat to the very wealthy. The aristocrats succeeded twice in overthrowing him, though each time he returned to power (in one case, according to Herodotus, he employed a tall, beautiful woman to pretend she was Athena and accompany him back into the city in a chariot in order to convince the people that his rule was approved by the gods). Peisistratus exiled many of the aristocratic families that threatened his power. He died in 528 BC, still holding his position as tyrant, and with his reign being remembered as a time of peace and prosperity. He was succeeded by his sons Hippias and Hipparchus.

Hippias and Hipparchus continued to rule Athens much like their father. In 514 BC, Hipparchus was assassinated. As a result, Hippias became paranoid and more despotic in his rule. The Alcmaeonidae, one of the wealthy and aristocratic families exiled by Peisistratus, were determined to take back control of Athens. Led by Cleisthenes, they bribed the Oracle of Delphi into convincing the Spartans to aid them in their cause. Thus, in 508 BC, the Spartan army marched into Athens and captured Hippias. He was exiled from the city and fled to Persia. Cleisthenes was made the ruler of Athens.

Cleisthenes attempted to restore a government built on the model of Solon's reforms. Cleisthenes's reforms, however, went far beyond those of Solon and established a truly democratic government for Athens. Still, it was Solon's model—with its inclusive policy toward all Athenian citizens—that provided the inspiration for this new form of government. Athenians in later times referred to many of their laws as

having come down to them from Solon, even if many of those laws originated much later. Solon was forever remembered as the great lawgiver of Athens.

Summary

- Athens was originally ruled by a king, but later authority fell into the hands of powerful aristocrats who held the title of *archons*.
- Prior to Solon, the Athenian government was ruled by the nine archons and the Areopagus, a council made up of all previous archons, and only aristocrats could hold these offices.
- An early constitution and set of laws for Athens were established by Draco, but these were unduly harsh.
- Around 600 BC, Athens was facing a major problem of poor farmers being put out of work by the estates of major landowners, and indebted farmers were being forced into slavery.
- Solon was nominated to solve Athens' problems. He decreed that debtors could not be enslaved by their creditors, and that all who had been enslaved for failing to pay their debts were free. He put a limit on the amount of land a single person could own, but he did not redistribute the land already held by the rich.
- Solon established a new constitution, in which all citizens were broken into four classes based on their wealth (not on their birth), and only the three wealthiest classes could hold offices in the *boule*. Only the wealthiest could become archons.
- At the same time, he created the *Ecclesia*, or "Assembly," in which all citizens could attend or vote.
- Solon departed Athens so as to not be forced to change his constitution.
- Solon's constitution was overthrown in 560 BC by the tyrant Peisistratus. Peisistratus was generally considered a good tyrant. Peisistratus and his sons ruled Athens for the next fifty-two years, but once their rule was overthrown, Solon's constitution provided the model for the foundation of Athenian democracy.