

Democrat or Tyrant? A New Perspective on Solon's Seisachtheia

Solon of Athens is remembered as a poet, philosopher, fierce tyrant-hater, and non-partisan statesman who emerged in a time of crisis to resolve conflicts that were tearing apart the city-state; his reforms are only thought to have failed because the Athenians were too stubborn to follow measures set in place for their own benefit. Yet this complex characterization depends on a distressingly small body of evidence. No source survives from the sixth century except Solon's own poems, and his only extended appearance in the fifth century is in Herodotus, who privileges his persona as one of the Seven Sages to the exclusion of his political activities. By the end of the fifth century and throughout the fourth, however, source after source focuses instead on his constitutional reforms. In less than a century, Solon has changed from a wandering wise man to the political idealist whom the Aristotelian *Athenaion Politeia* credits with the foundation of democracy (41.2). He is cited as an authority on everything from virtue to politics to digestive ailments, acting as a sort of bellwether for the moral compass of Athens. Ancient and modern authors alike invoke his authority by choosing whichever aspect of the man best suits their purpose, often with confusing and contradictory results.

In this paper, I challenge the persistent notion that Solon was a moderate statesman by examining how his persona has been distorted by a too-heavy reliance on poetic self-justifications, which portray him as a persecuted political visionary. First I will explore representations of Solon as wise man, lawgiver, tyrant hater, and proto-democrat. I will also identify remnants of an alternative tradition inherent in this *melange*, in which Solon emerges as an associate of tyrants and an aristocratic partisan. The survival of this alternate tradition was the result of a deliberate white-washing by sources wishing to tie him to the rise of

democracy, who usually cite Solon's own poetry to back up their propagandistic claims. These less savory views, universally dismissed as slander, suggest that Solon's agenda was less geared toward isonomia and more in line with the political power-grabbing typical of aristocratic factions elsewhere in the archaic Greek world.

Further evidence of this can be found in his introduction of debt cancellation and abolishment of debt-slavery, initiatives which are usually viewed as evidence of his championship of the poor. The second part of the paper focuses on these reforms, exploring other instances of debt cancellation in the ancient world, demonstrating that every single other occurrence of this and similar measures were enacted by tyrants or other non-democratic forms of government. Finally, I explore the consequences of the abolition of debt-slavery, and propose that this measure was actually detrimental to the hektemoroi.

The nullification of debts would not have obviated the need for loans, and the elimination of debt-bondage would have stripped poor farmers of their only collateral. Further, wealthy lenders would likely have been unwilling to risk giving loans without assurance that no more financially devastating measures like the revocation of debts would pass.

Since so much of what we assume about the motivations for Solon's activities derives from Solon himself, we must look not at what he said he was trying to do, but at what he actually did. It seems clear that, whether or not Solon actually wanted to be a tyrant, he most emphatically did not want to be seen as one. Regardless of whether or not he sought the position or claimed the title, the sweeping economic and social reforms he instigated required the power and political support that only a tyrant could command, and were almost identical to reforms instigated by those who ruled overtly as such.

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