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The Beginnings of the Athenian Democracy: Who Freed Athens?

Introduction

Though the very earliest democracies likely took shape elsewhere in Greece, Athens embraced it relatively early and would ultimately become the most famous and powerful democracy the ancient world ever knew. Democracy is usually thought to have taken hold among the Athenians with the constitutional reforms of Cleisthenes, ca. 508/7 BC. The tyrant Peisistratus and later his sons had ruled Athens for decades before they were overthrown; Cleisthenes, rallying the people to his cause, made sweeping changes. These included the creation of a representative council (boule) chosen from among the citizens, new public organizations that more closely tied citizens throughout Attica to the Athenian state, and the populist ostracism law that enabled citizens to exile dangerous or undesirable politicians by vote. Beginning with these measures, and for the next two centuries or so with only the briefest of interruptions, democracy held sway at Athens.

Such is the most common interpretation. But there is, in fact, much room for disagreement about when and how democracy came to Athens. Ancient authors sometimes refer to Solon, a lawgiver and mediator of the early sixth century, as the founder of the Athenian constitution. It was also a popular belief among the Athenians that two famous “tyrant-slayers,” Harmodius and Aristogeiton, inaugurated Athenian freedom by assassinating one of the sons of Peisistratus a few years before Cleisthenes’ reforms – though ancient writers take pains to point out that only the military intervention of Sparta truly ended the tyranny. The vague, conflicting, or scanty testimony of the ancients has led modern scholars to clash over the question of exactly when Athens democratized, with some arguing that the most crucial steps took place not under Cleisthenes but decades earlier under Solon, or decades later in the time of the popular politicians Ephialtes or Pericles, or (more rarely) later still in the aftermath of the lost Peloponnesian War at the end of the fifth century.

The following selections begin with an ancient account of Solon’s reforms, usually dated to ca. 594 BC, and then provide varying perspectives on the later events which brought down the tyranny of Peisistratus’ sons and enabled Cleisthenes to enact his far-reaching
reforms (ca. 514–507 BC). Two modern scholars then offer contrasting analyses and conclusions regarding how truly democratic these later events were.

Aristotle, *Constitution of the Athenians* (5–12)

Aristotle was one of the greatest philosophers of ancient Greece. He lived in the fourth century BC and was not a native of Athens, though he spent much time there. He wrote on a vast array of subjects, from physics to biology to ethics and politics. This treatise (authored either by Aristotle himself or by one of his students) begins with a history of Athens’ political development and ends with a detailed analysis of features of the constitution in the fourth century.

The selection below recounts the efforts of Solon to reform the Athenian state in the early sixth century. It is valuable not just for Aristotle’s description of events, but for the inclusion of fragments of Solon’s own political poetry, which is available to us only in quoted passages such as these. (Source: Aristotle, *Ath. Pol.* 5–12, trans. J. M. Moore, from *Aristotle and Xenophon on Democracy and Oligarchy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975), pp. 150–6.)

**Solon**

V In this political situation, when the majority were the slaves of the few, the people opposed the leaders of the state. When the strife was severe, and the opposition of long standing, both sides agreed to give power to Solon as mediator, and entrusted the state to him; at that time he had written the poem which begins:

Grief lies deep in my heart when I see the oldest of the Ionian states being murdered.

In this poem he champions both sides against the other, and argues their position, and then recommends an end to the prevailing rivalry.

Solon was one of the leading men by birth and reputation, but “middle class” in wealth and position; this is agreed from other evidence, and Solon himself makes it clear in the following poem, where he advises the rich not to be greedy:

Restrain in your breasts your mighty hearts; you have taken too much of the good things of life; satisfy your pride with what is moderate, for we shall not tolerate excess, nor will everything turn out as you wish.

He always attaches the over-all blame for the strife to the rich; this is why he says at the opening of the poem that he is afraid of their “avarice and overbearing pride”; since this was the cause of the conflict.

VI When he had taken power, Solon freed the people both then and for the future by making loans on the security of a person’s freedom illegal; he passed laws, and instituted a cancellation of debts both private and public which men call the
seisachtheia, for they shook off their burdens. Some try to attack him in this context; it happened that when Solon was about to introduce his seisachtheia he told some of the leading citizens, and then (according to the democratic version of the story) he was outmanoeuvred by his friends, while those who wish to blacken his reputation say that he was a party to fraud. These men borrowed money and bought large areas of land; shortly afterwards, when debts were cancelled, they were rich. This is alleged to be the origin of those who later appeared to have been wealthy for generations. However, the democratic account is more convincing. It is unlikely that Solon would have been so moderate and public-spirited in other respects, that, when he had it in his power to subject the other group and become tyrant of the city, he chose to incur the hostility of both sides, and preferred what was right and the salvation of the city to his own advantage, but yet would have sullied himself with such a trivial and manifest fraud. That he had power to become tyrant is demonstrated by the perilous state of the city’s affairs at the time; he himself mentions it frequently in his poems, and all other sources agree. One must therefore conclude that this charge is false.

VII Solon established a constitution and enacted other laws; the Athenians ceased to use Draco’s code except for his homicide laws. Solon’s laws were inscribed on kurbeis set up in the portico of the King Archon, and all swore to observe them. The nine Archons used to take their oath on the Stone, and undertook to set up a golden statue if they broke one of the laws; hence the oath which they still take now. Solon made his laws binding for a hundred years and arranged the constitution in the following way. He divided the people into four property classes according to wealth, as had been done before; the four classes were: pentakosiomedimnoi, hippies, zexgitai and thetes. He distributed the other magistracies to be held by the pentakosiomedimnoi, hippies and zexgitai, allotting the nine Archons, the Treasurers, the poleis, the Eleven and the kolakretai to various classes in accordance with their property qualification. The thetes received only the right to sit in the ekklesia and the dikasteria. The property qualification for a pentakosiomedimnos was a minimum yearly return from his own property of 500 measures, dry or liquid. The hippies had a minimum of 300, and some say that the class was also restricted to those able to maintain a horse; they deduce this from early dedications, for there is a statue of Diphilos on the Acropolis with the following inscription:

Anthemion, the son of Diphilos, made this dedication to the gods, having risen from the thetes to the class of the hippies.

A horse stands by, showing the connection between the hippies and being able to maintain a horse. None the less, it is more plausible that this class should have been defined by measures of produce like the pentakosiomedimnoi. The minimum qualification for the zexgitai was 200 measures, wet and dry combined, while the remainder of the population formed the thetes and were not entitled to hold office. This is why even now, when they are about to cast lots for a magistracy and a man is asked what his class is, nobody would say that he was one of the thetes.

VIII Magistracies were selected by lot from a group previously elected by each tribe. For the nine Archons, each tribe made a preliminary selection of ten men, and they
cast lots among them; this is the origin of the practice which survives today by which each tribe picks ten men by lot, and then lots are cast again among them. Evidence that Solon instituted selection by lot in accordance with property classes is the law about the Treasurers which is still in force; this lays down that the Treasurers shall be selected by lot from the *pentakosionemidmoi*. These were Solon’s provisions about the nine Archons. In early times, the Areopagus had summoned the candidates and selected the man it judged suitable for each office itself and installed him for the year. Solon retained the four tribes which already existed and the four tribal Kings; within each tribe there were three *trittyes* and twelve *naukrariai*. The officers in charge of the *naukrariai* were called *naukraroi*, and they controlled contributions and expenditure; this is why many of the laws of Solon which are no longer in force contain the phrases “the *naukraroi* shall collect” and “shall be spent from the funds of the *naukrariai*”. Solon instituted a *Boule* of 400 members, 100 from each tribe, and he gave the Areopagus the duty of watching over the laws, analogous to its earlier position of guardian of the constitution. It had extensive supervisory powers over the important aspects of political life, and punished wrongdoers with full powers to inflict fines or other penalties; fines were deposited in the treasury, and there was no obligation to state the reason for the fine. The Areopagus tried those who conspired to overthrow the constitution under a law of impeachment which Solon introduced.

Solon realised that the city was often split by factional disputes but some citizens were content because of idleness to accept whatever the outcome might be; he therefore produced a specific law against them, laying down that anyone who did not choose one side or the other in such a dispute should lose his citizen rights.

IX The magistracies were reformed in this way. The following seem to be the three most [populist] features of Solon’s constitution: first and most important, that nobody might borrow money on the security of anyone’s freedom; secondly, that anyone might seek redress on behalf of those who were wronged; thirdly, the feature which is said to have contributed most to the strength of the [multitude], the right of appeal to the *dikasterion*, for when the people have the right to vote in the courts they control the constitution. The fact that the laws have not been drafted simply or clearly, but are like the provisions controlling inheritances and heirs, inevitably leads to disputes; hence the courts have to decide everything, public and private. Some think that Solon made his laws obscure deliberately to give the people the power of decision. This is not likely; the obscurity arises rather from the impossibility of including the best solution for every instance in a general provision. It is not right to judge his intentions from what happens now but by analogy with the rest of his provisions.

X Those were the [populist] aspects of his legislation; before introducing his laws, he carried out the cancellation of debts, and after that the increase of the measures, weights and coinage. For it was under Solon that the measures were made larger than the Pheidonian standard, and the mina, which formerly had a weight of seventy drachmae was increased to the hundred it now contains. The old coin was the two-drachma piece. He established weights for coinage purposes in which the talent was divided into sixty-three minae, and the three added minae were divided proportionately for the stater and the other weights.
XI After the reform of the constitution which has been described above, Solon was annoyed by people approaching him criticising some parts of his legislation and questioning others. He did not wish to make alterations or to incur unpopularity while in Athens, and so went abroad to Egypt for trading purposes and also to see the country, saying he would not return for ten years; he said it was not right for him to stay to interpret the laws but that everyone should follow them as they were drafted. He had incurred the hostility of many of the leading men because of the cancellation of debts, and both sides had changed their attitude to him because his legislation had been different from what they had expected. The common people had expected him to redistribute all property, while the wealthy had expected him to restore them to their traditional position, or at most only to make minor alterations to it. Solon had resisted them both, and, when he could have made himself tyrant by joining whichever side he chose, had preferred to be hated by both while saving his country and giving it the best constitution possible.

XII That this was Solon’s attitude is agreed by all authorities, and he himself comments on it in his poems in the following terms:

To the people I gave as much privilege as was sufficient for them, neither reducing nor exceeding what was their due. Those who had power and were enviable for their wealth I took good care not to injure. I stood casting my strong shield around both parties, and allowed neither to triumph unjustly.

In another passage he describes how the ordinary people should be handled:

The people will follow their leaders best if they are neither too free nor too much restrained, for excess produces insolent behaviour when great wealth falls to men who lack sound judgement.

In another passage he discusses those who wish for a redistribution of land:

They came to plunder with hopes of riches, and each of them expected to find great wealth; they thought that although I spoke soothingly I would reveal stern determination. Their expectation was vain, and now they are angry and look askance at me like an enemy. This is wrong, for with the gods I carried out what I said, and did nothing else foolishly; it does not please me to act with the violence of a tyrant nor to give equal shares of our rich country to worthless and noble alike.

He discusses the cancellation of debts and those who had previously been enslaved but were freed through the *seisachtheia* in the following passage:

Which of my aims did I abandon unattained, the aims for which I had assembled the people? My witness to this before the judgement of the future will be the great mother of the Olympian gods, dark Earth; I took up the markers fixed in many places – previously she was enslaved, but now is free. Many I brought back to Athens, their divinely founded city, who had been sold abroad, one unjustly, another justly, and others who had fled under compulsion of debt, men who no longer spoke the Attic tongue, so wide had their wanderings been. Those at home, suffering here the outrages of slavery and trembling at
the whims of their masters, I freed. This I achieved by the might of law, combining force and justice; I carried it out as I promised. I drafted ordinances equally for bad and good, with upright justice for each. Another man holding the spur that I held, a man of evil counsel and greed, would not have restrained the people. Had I been willing to indulge the enemies of the people or do to them what the people wished to do, the city would have lost many men. That is why I set up a strong defence all round, turning like a wolf at bay among the hounds.

Again, of the later attacks of both parties he says reproachfully:

If I must express my reproach of the people in clear terms, they would never otherwise even have dreamed of what they now possess. The greater and more powerful also should praise me and make me their friend,

for, he says, if anyone else had held his position,

he would not have restrained the people nor checked them before they squeezed all the cream from the milk. But I stood, as it were in no man’s land, a barrier between them.

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**Herodotus, *Histories* (5.62–78)**

The reforms of Solon (described above in the Aristotle selection) did not in the end save Athens from civil strife, and after years of disturbances Peisistratus established a tyranny. After his death, his sons Hippias and Hipparchus took up the reins of power. In ca. 514 an assassination attempt (described by other sources below) resulted in the death of Hipparchus. In the following selection, the historian Herodotus chooses this point in time to begin his account of the liberation of Athens, which resulted, he says, in democracy.

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62. Having thus related the dream which Hipparchus saw, and traced the descent of the Gephyreans, the family [to which] his murderers belonged, I must proceed with the matter whereof I was intending before to speak: the way in which the Athenians got quit of their tyrants. Upon the death of Hipparchus, Hippias, who was king, grew harsh towards the Athenians; and the Alemzoniadz, an Athenian family which had been banished by the Pisistratidz, joined the other exiles, and endeavoured to procure their own return, and to free Athens, by force. They seized and fortified Leipsydrium above Paeonia, and tried to gain their object by arms; but great disasters befell them, and their purpose remained unaccomplished. They therefore resolved to shrink from no contrivance that might bring them success; and accordingly they contracted with the Amphictyons to build the temple which now
stands at Delphi, but which in those days did not exist. Having done this, they proceeded, being men of great wealth, and members of an ancient and distinguished family, to build the temple much more magnificently than the plan obliged them. Besides other improvements, instead of the coarse stone whereof by the contract the temple was to have been constructed, they made the facings of Parian marble.

63. These same men, if we may believe the Athenians, during their stay at Delphi persuaded the Pythoness [the Priestess] by a bribe to tell the Spartans, whenever any of them came to consult the oracle, either on their own private affairs or on the business of the state, that they must free Athens. So the Lacedémonians [= the Spartans], when they found no answer ever returned to them but this, sent at last Anchimolius, the son of Aster – a man of note among their citizens – at the head of an army against Athens, with orders to drive out the Pisistratidae, albeit they were bound to them by the closest ties of friendship. For they esteemed the things of heaven more highly than the things of men. The troops went by sea and were conveyed in transports. Anchimolius brought them to an anchorage at Phalerum; and there the men disembarked. But the Pisistratidae, who had previous knowledge of their intentions, had sent to Thessaly, between which country and Athens there was an alliance, with a request for aid. The Thessalians, in reply to their entreaties, sent them by a public vote 1000 horsemen, under the command of their king, Cineas, who was a Coniaean. When this help came, the Pisistratidae, laid their plan accordingly: they cleared the whole plain about Phalerum, so as to make it fit for the movements of cavalry, and then charged the enemy’s camp with their horse, which fell with such fury upon the Lacedémonians as to kill numbers, among the rest Anchimolius, the general, and to drive the remainder to their ships. Such was the fate of the first army sent from Lacedémon, and the tomb of Anchimolius may be seen to this day in Attica; it is at Alopecæ (Foxtown), near the temple of Hercules in Cynosargos.

64. Afterwards, the Lacedémonians despatched a larger force against Athens, which they put under the command of Cleomenes, son of Anaxandridas, one of their kings. These troops were not sent by sea, but marched by the mainland. When they were come into Attica, their first encounter was with the Thessalian horse, which they shortly put to flight, killing above forty men; the remainder made good their escape, and fled straight to Thessaly. Cleomenes proceeded to the city, and, with the aid of such of the Athenians as wished for freedom, besieged the tyrants, who had shut themselves up in the Pelasgic fortress.

65. And now there had been small chance of the Pisistratidae falling into the hands of the Spartans, who did not even design to [besiege] the place, which had moreover been well provisioned beforehand with stores both of meat and drink, – nay, it is likely that after a few days’ blockade the Lacedémonians would have quitted Attica altogether, and gone back to Sparta, – had not an event occurred most unlucky for the besieged, and most advantageous for the besiegers. The children of the Pisistratidae were made prisoners, as they were being removed out of the country. By this calamity all their plans were deranged, and – as the ransom of their children – they consented to the demands of the Athenians, and agreed within five days’ time to quit Attica. Accordingly they soon afterwards left the country, and withdrew to Sigeum on the Scamander, after reigning thirty-six years over the Athenians. By descent they were Pylians, of the family of the Neleids, to which Codrus and Melanthus likewise belonged, men who in former times from foreign settlers became kings of Athens.
And hence it was that Hippocrates came to think of calling his son Pisistratus: he named him after the Pisistratus who was a son of Nestor. Such then was the mode in which the Athenians got quit of their tyrants. What they did and suffered worthy of note from the time when they gained their freedom until the revolt of Ionia from King Darius, and the coming of Aristagoras to Athens with a request that the Athenians would lend the Ionians aid, I shall now proceed to relate.

66. The power of Athens had been great before; but, now that the tyrants were gone, it became greater than ever. The chief authority was lodged with two persons, Clisthenes, of the family of the Alcmæonids, who is said to have been the persuader of the Pythoness, and Isagoras, the son of Tisander, who belonged to a noble house, but whose pedigree I am not able to trace further. Howbeit his kinsmen offer sacrifice to the Carian Jupiter. These two men strove together for the mastery; and Clisthenes, finding himself the weaker, called to his aid the common people. Hereupon, instead of the four tribes among which the Athenians had been divided hitherto, Clisthenes made ten tribes, and parcelled out the Athenians among them. He likewise changed the names of the tribes; for whereas they had till now been called after Geleon, Ægicores, Argades, and Hoples, the four sons of Ion, Clisthenes set these names aside, and called his tribes after certain other heroes, all of whom were native, except Ajax. Ajax was associated because, although a foreigner, he was a neighbour and an ally of Athens.

67. My belief is that in acting thus he did but imitate his maternal grandfather, Clisthenes, king of Sicyon. [...] With respect to the Dorian tribes, not choosing the Sicyonians to have the same tribes as the Argives, he changed all the old names for new ones; and here he took special occasion to mock the Sicyonians, for he drew his new names from the words “pig,” and “ass,” adding thereto the usual tribe-endings; only in the case of his own tribe he did nothing of the sort, but gave them a name drawn from his own kingly office. For he called his own tribe the Archelaï, or Rulers, while the others he named Hyataë, or Pig-folk, Oneataë, or Ass-folk, and Choerataë, or Swine-folk. The Sicyonians kept these names, not only during the reign of Clisthenes, but even after his death, by the space of sixty years; then, however, they took counsel together, and changed to the well-known names of Hyllæans, Pamphylians, and Dymanataë, taking at the same time, as a fourth name, the title of Ægialeans, from Ægialeus, the son of Adrastus.

69. Thus had Clisthenes the Sicyonian done. The Athenian Clisthenes, who was grandson by the mother’s side of the other, and had been named after him, resolved, from contempt (as I believe) of the Ionians, that his tribes should not be the same as theirs; and so followed the pattern set him by his namesake of Sicyon. Having brought entirely over to his own side the common people of Athens, whom he had before disdained, he gave all the tribes new names, and made the number greater than formerly; instead of the four phylarchs he established ten; he likewise placed ten demes in each of the tribes; and he was, now that the common people took his part, very much more powerful than his adversaries.

70. Isagoras in his turn lost ground; and therefore, to counterplot his enemy, he called in Cleomenes, the Lacedæmonian, who had already, at the time when he was besieging the Pisistratidae, made a contract of friendship with him. A charge is even brought against Cleomenes that he was on terms of too great familiarity with
Isagoras's wife. At this time the first thing that he did, was to send a herald and require that Clisthenes, and a large number of Athenians besides, whom he called “The Accursed,” should leave Athens. This message he sent at the suggestion of Isagoras: for in the affair referred to, the blood-guiltiness lay on the Alcmæonidae and their partisans, while he and his friends were quite clear of it.

71. The way in which “The Accursed” at Athens got their name, was the following. There was a certain Athenian, called Cylon, a victor at the Olympic games, who aspired to the sovereignty, and aided by a number of his companions, who were of the same age with himself, made an attempt to seize the citadel. But the attack failed; and Cylon became a suppliant at the image. Hereupon the Heads of the Naucraries, who at that time [held sway] in Athens, induced the fugitives [to leave] by a promise to spare their lives. Nevertheless they were all slain; and the blame was laid on the Alcmæonidae. All this happened before the time of Pisistratus.

72. When the message of Cleomenes arrived, requiring Clisthenes and “The Accursed” to quit the city, Clisthenes departed of his own accord. Cleomenes, however, notwithstanding his departure, came to Athens, with a small band of followers; and on his arrival sent into banishment seven hundred Athenian families, which were pointed out to him by Isagoras. Succeeding here, he next endeavoured to dissolve the council, and to put the government into the hands of three hundred of the partisans of that leader. But the council resisted, and refused to obey his orders; whereupon Cleomenes, Isagoras, and their followers took possession of the citadel. Here they were attacked by the rest of the Athenians, who took the side of the council, and were besieged for the space of two days; on the third day they accepted terms, being allowed – at least such of them as were Lacedæmonians – to quit the country. And so the word which came to Cleomenes received its fulfilment. For when he first went up into the citadel, meaning to seize it, just as he was entering the sanctuary of the goddess, in order to question her, the priestess arose from her throne, before he had passed the doors, and said – “Stranger from Lacedæmon, depart hence, and presume not to enter the holy place – it is not lawful for a Dorian to set foot there.” But he answered, “Oh! woman, I am not a Dorian, but an Achæan.” Slighting this warning, Cleomenes made his attempt, and so he was forced to retire, together with his Lacedæmonians. The rest were cast into prison by the Athenians, and condemned to die, – among them Timasitheus the Delphian, of whose prowess and courage I have great things which I could tell.

73. So these men died in prison. The Athenians directly afterwards recalled Clisthenes, and the seven hundred families which Cleomenes had driven out; and, further, they sent envoys to Sardis, to make an alliance with the Persians, for they knew that war would follow with Cleomenes and the Lacedæmonians. When the ambassadors reached Sardis and delivered their message, Artaphernes, son of Hystaspes, who was at that time governor of the place, inquired of them “who they were, and in what part of the world they dwelt, that they wanted to become allies of the Persians?” The messengers told him; upon which he answered them shortly – that “if the Athenians chose to give earth and water to King Darius, he would conclude an alliance with them; but if not, they might go home again.” After consulting together, the envoys, anxious to form the alliance, accepted the terms; but on their return to Athens, they fell into deep disgrace on account of their compliance.
74. Meanwhile Cleomenes, who considered himself to have been insulted by the Athenians both in word and deed, was drawing a force together from all parts of the Peloponnesus, without informing any one of his [intent]; which was to revenge himself on the Athenians, and to establish Isagoras, who had escaped with him from the citadel, as despot of Athens. Accordingly, with a large army, he invaded the district of Eleusis, while the Boeotians, who had concerted measures with him, took Oenoë and Hisia, two country-towns upon the frontier; and at the same time the Chalcideans, on another side, plundered divers places in Attica. The Athenians, notwithstanding that danger threatened them from every quarter, put off all thought of the Boeotians and Chalcideans till a future time, and marched against the Peloponnesians, who were at Eleusis.

75. As the two hosts were about to engage, first of all the Corinthians, bethinking themselves that they were perpetrating a wrong, changed their minds, and drew off from the main army. Then Demaratus, son of Ariston who was himself king of Sparta and joint-leader of the expedition, and who till now had had no sort of quarrel with Cleomenes, followed their example. On account of this rupture between the kings, a law was passed at Sparta, forbidding both monarchs to go out together with the army, as had been the custom hitherto. The law also provided that, as one of the kings was to be left behind, one of the Tyndarids should also remain at home; whereas hitherto both had accompanied the expeditions, as auxiliaries. So when the rest of the allies saw that the Lacedaemonian kings were not of one mind, and that the Corinthian troops had quitted their post, they likewise drew off and departed.

76. This was the fourth time that the Dorians had invaded Attica: twice they came as enemies, and twice they came to do good service to the Athenian people. Their first invasion took place at the period when they founded Megara, and is rightly placed in the reign of Codrus at Athens; the second and third occasions were when they came from Sparta to drive out the Pisistratids; the fourth was the present attack, when Cleomenes, at the head of a Peloponnesian army, entered at Eleusis. Thus the Dorians had now four times invaded Attica.

77. So when the Spartan army had broken up from its quarters thus ingloriously, the Athenians, wishing to revenge themselves, marched first against the Chalcideans. The Boeotians, however, advancing to the aid of the latter as far as the Euripus, the Athenians thought it best to attack them first. A battle was fought accordingly; and the Athenians gained a very complete victory, killing a vast number of the enemy, and taking seven hundred of them alive. After this, on the very same day, they crossed into Euboea, and engaged the Chalcideans with the like success; whereupon they left four thousand settlers upon the lands of the Hippobota, — which is the name the Chalcideans give to their rich men. All the Chalcidean prisoners whom they took were put in irons, and kept for a long time in close confinement, as likewise were the Boeotians, until the ransom asked for them was paid; and this the Athenians fixed at two minae the man. The chains wherewith they were fettered the Athenians suspended in their citadel; where they were still to be seen in my day, hanging against the wall scorched by the Median flames, opposite the chapel which faces the west. The Athenians made an offering of the tenth part of the ransom-money: and expended it on the brazen chariot drawn by four steeds, which stands on the left hand immediately that one enters the gateway of the citadel. The inscription runs as follows: —
When Chalcis and Boeotia dared her might,
Athens subdued their pride in valorous fight;
Gave bonds for insults; and, the ransom paid,
From the full tenths these steeds for Pallas made."

78. Thus did the Athenians increase in strength. And it is plain enough, not from this instance only, but from many everywhere, that freedom is an excellent thing; since even the Athenians, who, while they continued under the rule of tyrants, were not [at all] more valiant than any of their neighbours, no sooner shook off the yoke than they became decidedly the first of all. These things show that, while undergoing oppression, they let themselves be beaten, since then they worked for a master; but so soon as they got their freedom, each man was eager to do the best he could for himself. So fared it now with the Athenians.

Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War* (6.53–59)

An Athenian who fought in the war about which he wrote his brilliant history, Thucydides lived in the mid-to-late fifth century, a later contemporary of Herodotus. In his writing Thucydides demonstrates keen political insight, a great concern for precise reporting of events, and, in contrast to Herodotus, a tight focus on his main subject, which is the Peloponnesian War (431–404 BC) with its causes and consequences. Nevertheless, on rare occasion Thucydides will digress, as he does in the selection below. Interrupting his account of the year 415 and Athenian fears of political conspiracies, he goes back a hundred years to recall the Peisistratid tyranny and the would-be tyrant-slayers Harmodius and Aristogiton. (*Source:* Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War* 6.53–59, trans. R. Crawley.)

[... ] The commons had heard how oppressive the tyranny of Pisistratus and his sons had become before it ended, and further that that tyranny had been put down at last, not by themselves and Harmodius, but by the Lacedaemonians, and so were always in fear and took everything suspiciously.

Indeed, the daring action of Aristogiton and Harmodius was undertaken in consequence of a love affair, which I shall relate at some length, to show that the Athenians are not more accurate than the rest of the world in their accounts of their own tyrants and of the facts of their own history. Pisistratus dying at an advanced age in possession of the tyranny, was succeeded by his eldest son, Hippias, and not Hipparchus, as is vulgarly believed. Harmodius was then in the flower of youthful beauty, and Aristogiton, a citizen in the middle rank of life, was his lover and possessed him. Solicited without success by Hipparchus, son of Pisistratus, Harmodius told Aristogiton, and the enraged lover, afraid that the powerful Hipparchus might take Harmodius by force, immediately formed a design, such as his condition in life permitted, for overthrowing the tyranny. In the meantime Hipparchus, after a second solicitation
of Harmodius, attended with no better success, unwilling to use violence, arranged to insult him in some covert way. Indeed, generally their government was not grievous to the multitude, or in any way odious in practice; and these tyrants cultivated wisdom and virtue as much as any, and without exacting from the Athenians more than a twentieth of their income, splendidly adorned their city, and carried on their wars, and provided sacrifices for the temples. For the rest, the city was left in full enjoyment of its existing laws, except that care was always taken to have the offices in the hands of some one of the family. Among those of them that held the yearly archonship at Athens was Pisistratus, son of the tyrant Hippias, and named after his grandfather, who dedicated during his term of office the altar to the twelve gods in the market-place, and that of Apollo in the Pythian precinct. The Athenian people afterwards built on to and lengthened the altar in the market-place, and obliterated the inscription; but that in the Pythian precinct can still be seen, though in faded letters, and is to the following effect:

Pisistratus, the son of Hippias,
Set up this record of his archonship
In precinct of Apollo Pythias.

That Hippias was the eldest son and succeeded to the government, is what I positively assert as a fact upon which I have had more exact accounts than others, and may be also ascertained by the following circumstance. He is the only one of the legitimate brothers that appears to have had children; as the altar shows, and the pillar placed in the Athenian Acropolis, commemorating the crime of the tyrants, which mentions no child of Thessalus or of Hipparchus, but five of Hippias, which he had by Myrrhine, daughter of Callias, son of Hyperechides; and naturally the eldest would have married first. Again, his name comes first on the pillar after that of his father; and this too is quite natural, as he was the eldest after him, and the reigning tyrant. Nor can I ever believe that Hippias would have obtained the tyranny so easily, if Hipparchus had been in power when he was killed, and he, Hippias, had had to establish himself upon the same day; but he had no doubt been long accustomed to overawe the citizens, and to be obeyed by his mercenaries, and thus not only conquered, but conquered with ease, without experiencing any of the embarrassment of a younger brother unused to the exercise of authority. It was the sad fate which made Hipparchus famous that got him also the credit with posterity of having been tyrant.

To return to Harmodius; Hipparchus having been repulsed in his solicitations insulted him as he had resolved, by first inviting a sister of his, a young girl, to come and bear a basket in a certain procession, and then rejecting her, on the plea that she had never been invited at all owing to her unworthiness. If Harmodius was indignant at this, Aristogiton for his sake now became more exasperated than ever; and having arranged everything with those who were to join them in the enterprise, they only waited for the great feast of the Panathenaea, the sole day upon which the citizens forming part of the procession could meet together in arms without suspicion. Aristogiton and Harmodius were to begin, but were to be supported immediately by their accomplices against the bodyguard. The conspirators were not many, for better security, besides which they hoped that those not in the plot would be carried away by the example of a few daring spirits, and use the arms in their hands to recover their liberty.
At last the festival arrived; and Hippias with his bodyguard was outside the city in the Ceramicus, arranging how the different parts of the procession were to proceed. Harmodius and Aristogiton had already their daggers and were getting ready to act, when seeing one of their accomplices talking familiarly with Hippias, who was easy of access to every one, they took fright, and concluded that they were discovered and on the point of being taken; and eager if possible to be revenged first upon the man who had wronged them and for whom they had undertaken all this risk, they rushed, as they were, within the gates, and meeting with Hipparchus by the Leocorium recklessly fell upon him at once, infuriated, Aristogiton by love, and Harmodius by insult, and smote him and slew him. Aristogiton escaped the guards at the moment, through the crowd running up, but was afterwards taken and dispatched in no merciful way: Harmodius was killed on the spot.

When the news was brought to Hippias in the Ceramicus, he at once proceeded not to the scene of action, but to the armed men in the procession, before they, being some distance away, knew anything of the matter, and composing his features for the occasion, so as not to betray himself, pointed to a certain spot, and bade them repair thither without their arms. They withdrew accordingly, fancying he had something to say; upon which he told the mercenaries to remove the arms, and there and then picked out the men he thought guilty and all found with daggers, the shield and spear being the usual weapons for a procession.

In this way offended love first led Harmodius and Aristogiton to conspire, and the alarm of the moment to commit the rash action recounted. After this the tyranny pressed harder on the Athenians, and Hippias, now grown more fearful, put to death many of the citizens, and at the same time began to turn his eyes abroad for a refuge in case of revolution. Thus, although an Athenian, he gave his daughter, Archedice, to a Lampsacene, Aeantides, son of the tyrant of Lampsacus, seeing that they had great influence with Darius. And there is her tomb in Lampsacus with this inscription:

Archedice lies buried in this earth,  
Hippias her sire, and Athens gave her birth;  
Unto her bosom pride was never known,  
Though daughter, wife, and sister to the throne.

Hippias, after reigning three years longer over the Athenians, was deposed in the fourth by the Lacedaemonians and the banished Alcmaeonidae, and went with a safe conduct to Sigeum, and to Aeantides at Lampsacus, and from thence to King Darius; from whose court he set out twenty years after, in his old age, and came with the Medes to Marathon. […]

Aristotle, *Constitution of the Athenians* (18–22)

Aristotle’s account here of the fall of the tyranny and Cleisthenes’ reforms owes much to Herodotus, but also adds important details not found in the earlier histor-

XVIII Their position and age meant that the state was run by Hipparchus and Hippias; Hippias was the older, a natural politician and a wise man, and he presided over the government. Hipparchus was fond of amusements, and interested in love affairs and the arts – he was the man who sent for Anacreon and Simonides and their associates and the other poets. Thetelos was much younger, and violent and outrageous in his behaviour, which was the cause of all their troubles. He fell in love with Harmodius, and when his love was not returned; far from restraining his anger, he gave vent to it viciously; finally, when Harmodius’ sister was to carry a basket in the procession at the Panathenaia, he stopped her, and insulted Harmodius as effeminate. Hence Harmodius and Aristogeiton were provoked to their plot, in which many took part. At the time of the Panathenaia, when they were watching for Hippias on the Acropolis (for it so happened that he was receiving the procession while Hipparchus despatched it), they saw one of the conspirators greet Hippias in a friendly way. They thought that they were betrayed. Wishing to achieve something before they were arrested, they went down into the city, and, not waiting for their fellow conspirators, killed Hipparchus as he was organising the procession by the Leokoreion; thus they spoiled the whole attempt. Harmodius was killed immediately by the guards, but Aristogeiton was captured later, and tortured for a long time. Under torture he accused many nobles who were friends of the tyrants of complicity. At first enquiries had been unable to find any trace of the plot, for the story that Hippias had disarmed those in the procession and searched them for daggers is not true, for they did not carry weapons in the procession at that time – it was a later innovation of the democracy. The democrats say that Aristogeiton accused the friends of the tyrants deliberately in order to involve them in impiety and weaken their faction if they killed their friends who were innocent; others say that he was not making it up, but did reveal those who were in the plot. Finally, when, despite all his efforts, death eluded him, he promised that he would implicate many others; having persuaded Hippias to give him his hand as a pledge, he reviled him for giving his hand to the murderer of his brother. This angered Hippias so much that his fury overcame him, and he drew his dagger and killed him.

XIX After this the tyranny became much more severe; in avenging his brother, Hippias had killed or exiled many people, and was distrusted and hated by all. About three years after the death of Hipparchus, Hippias tried to fortify Munichia because of his unpopularity in the city of Athens; he intended to move his residence there, but while this was going on he was expelled by Cleomenes, the Spartan king, because the Spartans were repeatedly receiving oracles instructing them to end the tyranny at Athens. The reason was this. The Athenian exiles, who were led by the Alcmeonids, could not bring about their return unaided; a number of attempts failed. One of these unsuccessful attempts involved the fortification of Leipsudrion, a point
over Mt. Parnes; there they were joined by some supporters from the city, but the place was besieged and taken by the tyrants. This was the origin of the well-known drinking song about the disaster which ran:

Alas, Leipsudrion, betrayer of friends, what heroes you destroyed, men brave in battle and of noble blood; then they showed the quality of their families.

Having failed, then, in all other attempts, the Alcmeonids contracted to rebuild the temple at Delphi, and in this way they obtained plenty of money to secure the support of the Spartans. Whenever the Spartans consulted the oracle, the priestess instructed them to free Athens; finally she persuaded them, although they had ties of hospitality with the Peisistratids. The Spartans were swayed no less by the friendship between the Peisistratids and the Argives. First, they sent Anchimolos with an army by sea. He was defeated and killed because Kineas the Thessalian came to the help of the Athenians with a thousand cavalry. The Spartans were angered by this, and sent their king, Cleomenes, with a larger force by land; he defeated an attempt by the Thessalian cavalry to prevent his entry into Attica, shut up Hippias inside the so-called Pelargic wall, and besieged him with Athenian help. While he was conducting the siege, it happened that the sons of the Peisistratids were captured as they attempted to slip out of the city secretly. After their capture, the Peisistratids agreed, in return for the children’s safety, to hand over the Acropolis and leave with their own property within a period of five days. This was in the Archonship of Harpaktides when they had held the tyranny for about seventeen years after the death of their father; the whole period including their father’s reign had lasted forty-nine years.

**Cleisthenes**

xx After the fall of the tyranny, there was a struggle between Isagoras the son of Teisander, who was a supporter of the tyrants, and Cleisthenes, who was of the family of the Alcmeonids. When Cleisthenes lost power in the political clubs, he won the support of the people by promising them control of the state. The power of Isagoras waned in turn, and he called in Cleomenes again, for he had ties of friendship with him. He persuaded him to “expel the curse”, for the Alcmeonids were thought to be amongst those accursed. Cleisthenes retired into exile, and Cleomenes arrived with a few men and expelled seven hundred Athenian families as being under the curse. Having done this, he tried to dissolve the *Boule* [council] and to put Isagoras and three hundred of his friends in control of the city. The *Boule* resisted and the people gathered; the supporters of Cleomenes and Isagoras fled to the Acropolis. The people surrounded them and besieged them for two days; on the third they let Cleomenes and all those with him go under a truce, and recalled Cleisthenes and the other exiles. The people had taken control of affairs, and Cleisthenes was their leader and champion of the people, for the Alcmeonids had been the group probably most responsible for the expulsion of the tyrants and had stirred up trouble for them for much of the time. Even before the Alcmeonids, Kedon had attacked the tyrants, and therefore his name also figures in the drinking songs:
Pour a draught also for Icedon, boy, and do not forget him, if it is right to pour wine for brave men.

The people trusted Cleisthenes for these reasons. At that time, as their leader, in the fourth year after the overthrow of the tyranny which was the Archonship of Isagoras, he first divided all the citizens into ten tribes instead of the earlier four, with the aim of mixing them together so that more might share control of the state. From this arose the saying “No investigation of tribes” as an answer to those wishing to inquire into ancestry. Then he established a Boule of 500 instead of 400, fifty from each tribe; previously there had been 100 from each. His purpose in not splitting the people into twelve tribes was to avoid dividing them according to the trittues [thirds] which already existed; there were twelve trittues in the four old tribes, and the result would not have been a mixing. He divided Attica into thirty sections, using the demes as the basic unit; ten of the sections were in the city area, ten around the coast and ten inland. He called these sections trittues, and placed three into each tribe by lot, one from each geographical area. He made fellow demesmen of those living in each deme so that they would not reveal the new citizens by using a man’s father's name, but would use his deme in addressing him. Hence the Athenians use their demes as part of their names. He set up demarchs with the same functions as the previous naukrarioi, for the demes took the place of the naukrariai. Some of the demes he named after their position, others after their founders, for not all were still connected with a particular locality. He left the citizens free to belong to clan groups, and phratries, and hold priesthoods in the traditional way. He gave the tribes ten eponymous heroes selected by the Delphic oracle from a preliminary list of a hundred.

These changes made the constitution much more democratic than it had been under Solon. A contributory factor was that Solon’s laws had fallen into disuse under the tyranny, and Cleisthenes replaced them with others with the aim of winning the people’s support; these included the law about ostracism. It was in the fifth year after this constitution was established in the Archonship of Hermokreon, that they formulated the oath which the Boule of 500 still take today. At that time they selected the strategoi [generals] by tribes, one from each; the Polemarch was the overall commander of the army. Eleven years later, in the Archonship of Phainippos, the Athenians won the battle of Marathon. This made the democracy so confident that after a further two years had passed they first used the law of ostracism; it had been passed from a suspicion of those in power, because Peisistratus had started as leader of the people and strategos, and become tyrant. The first to be ostracised was one of his relations, Hipparchus, the son of Charmus, of Kollytos; it was the desire to expel him which was the primary motive of Cleisthenes in proposing the law. With the customary forbearance of the democracy, the people had allowed the friends of the tyrants to continue to live in Athens with the exception of those who had committed crimes in the civil disorders; their leader and champion was Hipparchus. In the year immediately following, the Archonship of Telesinos, they cast lots for the nine Archons by tribes from the five hundred previously elected by the demesmen; this first happened then after the tyranny; all their predecessors were elected. In the same year, Megacles, the son of Hippocrates, from Alopeke was ostracised. For three years they ostracised the friends of the tyrants, the original purpose of ostracism, but in the fourth year
they also removed anyone else who seemed to be too powerful. The first man to be ostracised who was not connected with the tyranny was Xanthippus, the son of Ariphron.[…]

### Aristotle, *Politics* (1275b34–39 and 1319b2–27)

The *Politics* is a more abstract work on Greek political theory and practice than the *Constitution of the Athenians*, though it occasionally mentions in passing useful historical detail. The two passages below preserve important information about the expansion and reorganization of the citizen body under Cleisthenes. (*Source: Aristotle, Politics* 1275b34–39 and 1319b2–27, trans. B. Jowett.)

#### 1275b34–39

[…] There is a greater difficulty in the case of those who have been made citizens after a revolution, as by Cleisthenes at Athens after the expulsion of the tyrants, for he enrolled in tribes many metics [resident aliens], both strangers and slaves. The doubt in these cases is, not who is, but whether he who is ought to be a citizen […]

#### 1319b2–27

The last form of democracy, that in which all share alike, is one which cannot be borne by all states, and will not last long unless well regulated by laws and customs. The more general causes which tend to destroy this or other kinds of government have been pretty fully considered. In order to constitute such a democracy and strengthen the people, the leaders have been in the habit of including as many as they can, and making citizens not only of those who are legitimate, but even of the illegitimate, and of those who have only one parent a citizen, whether father or mother; for nothing of this sort comes amiss to such a democracy. This is the way in which demagogues proceed. Whereas the right thing would be to make no more additions when the number of the commonalty exceeds that of the notables and of the middle class – beyond this not to go. When in excess of this point, the constitution becomes disorderly, and the notables grow excited and impatient of the democracy, as in the insurrection at Cyrene; for no notice is taken of a little evil, but when it increases it strikes the eye. Measures like those which Cleisthenes passed when he wanted to increase the power of the democracy at Athens, or such as were taken by the founders of popular government at Cyrene, are useful in the extreme form of democracy. Fresh tribes and brotherhoods should be established; the private rites of families should be restricted and converted into public ones; in short, every contrivance should be adopted which will mingle the citizens with one another and get rid of old connections. […]
The Athenian Archon List

Archons were the highest-ranking officials in Athens; nine men were chosen to serve every year. Texts and documents sometimes provide us with the name of the “eponymous” archon, the archon whose name was used to date the year. One fragment of an inscribed stone block, transliterated below, gives the names of several such archons datable to the years 527/6 to 522/1, years in which the Peisistratid tyrants still controlled Athens. (The Athenian calendar year ran roughly from July to June as we would reckon it, and is thus often represented as a combination of two of our years: 527/6, 526/5, etc.) Cleisthenes’ name is on this list (though a few letters must be restored to read it). This would seem to undermine Herodotus’ statements that Cleisthenes’ family, the Alcmaeonids, lived in exile throughout the tyranny of the Peisistratids, and raises the possibility that Cleisthenes the reformer had, at least early on, much closer relations to the tyrants than the literary traditions about him suggest. (Source: translation by Eric W. Robinson, based on the Greek text of R. Meiggs and D. M. Lewis, A Selection of Greek Historical Inscriptions (revised edn, Oxford, 1988), #6.)

Fragment C

[On]cro[rides] (527/6)
[H]ippias (526/5)
[C]leisthen[es] (525/4)
[M]iltiades (524/3)
[C]alliades (523/2)
[. . . . ]strat[os] (522/1)

Drinking Song Celebrating Harmodius and Aristogeiton

Literary sources from the fifth century and later refer to or quote from a drinking song probably originating in the late sixth century, which celebrated the heroism of the “tyrant slayers”, Harmodius and Aristogeiton (on whom see the selections in this chapter above). Such material is especially valuable since it may hint at what everyday, contemporary Athenians (i.e., not later historians or philosophers) thought about the liberation of their homeland in the late sixth century. (Source: Athenaeus 15.50, p. 695ab, with scholion to Aristophanes, Acharnians 980, trans. C. Fornara, from Archaic Time to the End of the Peloponnesian War, 2nd edn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), p. 39.)
(1) Athenaeus 15.50, p. 695ab

I shall bear my sword in a branch of myrtle/like Harmodios and Aristogeiton/when they killed the tyrant/and made Athens a place of isonomia [equality under law].

Dearest Harmodios, you are surely not dead/but are in the Islands of the Blest, they say,/where fleet-footed Achilleus is/and, they say, good Diomedes the son of Tydeus.

I shall bear my sword in a branch of myrtle/like Harmodios and Aristogeiton/when at the festival of Athena/they killed the tyrant Hipparchos.

Figure  The Tyrant Slayers. Sources tell us that as early as 510 BC the Athenians erected a statue group commemorating the tyrannicides Harmodius and Aristogeiton. The originals were lost during the Persian invasion of 480–479, though the Roman-era copies portrayed here probably accurately represent replacements made not long afterwards. (From the Archaeological Museum (Museo Archeologico Nazionale), Naples, Italy.)
Your fame shall be throughout the world forever, dearest Harmodios and Aris-
togeiton, because you killed the tyrant and made Athens a place of isonomia.

(2) Scholiast to Aristophanes, *Acharnians* 980 (426/5)

Aristoph. *Acharnians* 980: Nor shall he (War) sing the Harmodios (song) in my
company.

Scholion: In their drinking gatherings (the Athenians) sang a certain song called
that of Harmodios, the beginning of which was “Dearest Harmodios, you are surely
not dead.” They sang it for Harmodios and Aristogeiton because they destroyed the
tyranny of the Peisistratidai . . .

The Athenian Revolution of 508/7 BC: Violence, Authority, and the Origins of Democracy

Josiah Ober

In this influential but controversial article Ober argues that mass action by the Athen-
ian populace was essential in enabling Cleisthenes to bring forth a democratic
new order.

The periodization of history is, of course, a product of hindsight, and most historians
realize that any past era can accurately be described as an “age of transition.” Fixing
the end of the archaic period and the transition to the classical is thus a histori-
ographic problem, one that reflects contemporary scholarly inclinations more than it
does ancient realities. Nevertheless, since historians cannot work without periodiza-
tion, and since English-language historiography seems to be entering a post-Annales
phase characterized by a renewed interest in the significance – especially the symbolic
and cultural significance – of events, it may be worthwhile to look at a series of events
that can be taken as the beginning of a new phase of Greek history. The events we
choose to mark the transition will be different for any given region or polis, but for
those interested in Athenian political history, the end of the archaic and the beginning
of something new may reasonably be said to have come about in the period around
510 to 506 B.C., with the revolutionary events that established the form of govern-
ment that would soon come to be called *demokratia*. If the “Athenian Revolution” is a historically important event (or series of events), it is often described in what seem to me to be misleading terms. Historians typically

discuss the revolution in the antiseptic terminology of “constitutional development,”
and their narrative accounts tend to be narrowly centered on the person and inten-
tions of Cleisthenes himself. Putting Cleisthenes at the center of the revolution as a
whole entails slighting a significant part of the source tradition. And that tradition,
which consists almost entirely of brief discussions in Herodotus (5.66, 69–78) and
the Athenaión Politeia [Aristotle’s Constitution of the Athenians] (20–21), is scanty
enough as it is. The reconstruction of the events of 508/7 offered here is simultan-
eously quite conservative in its approach and quite radical in its implications. I hope
to show that by sticking very closely to the primary sources, it is possible to derive a
plausible and internally coherent narrative that revolves around the Athenian people
rather than their leaders. A close reading of the sources shows that the dominant role
ascribed to elite leaders in modern accounts of a key point in the revolution is
supplementary to the ancient evidence. All historians supplement their narratives
with assumptions, models, and theories; supplementation of the source material, in
order to fill in apparent gaps and silences, is an inevitable part of the process of even
the most self-consciously narrative (rather than analytical) forms of historical writing.
But such supplements (especially those that are widely accepted) must be challenged
from time to time, lest they become so deeply entrenched as to block the develop-
ment of alternative readings that may explain the source tradition as well or better.

Both of our two main sources state that during a key period of the revolution,
Cleisthenes and his closest supporters were in exile. They imply that the main
Athenian players in the revolt were corporate entities: the boulé and the demos. The
ascription of authoritative leadership in all phases of the revolution to Cleisthenes
may, I think, be attributed to the uncritical (and indeed unconscious) acceptance of a
view of history that supposes that all advance in human affairs comes through the
consciously willed actions of individual members of an elite.3 In the case of other
historical figures, for example Solon, proponents of this elite-centered Great Man
approach to history can at least claim support in the primary sources. But although he
is regarded by the sources as the driving force behind important political reforms,
Cleisthenes is not described in our sources as a Solon-style lawgiver (nomothētēs). The
Athenaión Politeia (20.4) calls him tou demou prostates (the leader who stands up
before the people) and, though the label is anachronistic for the late sixth century, it
seems to me a pretty reasonable description of Cleisthenes’ historical role: like later
Athenian politicians, Cleisthenes’ leadership was not dependent on constitutional
authority, but rather upon his ability to persuade the Athenian people to adopt and
to act on the proposals he advocated. In sum, I will attempt to show that though
Cleisthenes is indeed a very important player in Athens’ revolutionary drama, the key
role was played by the demos. And thus, dēmokratia was not a gift from a benevolent
elite to a passive demos, but was the product of collective decision, action, and self-
definition on the part of the demos itself.

Having advocated the study of historical events, and having simultaneously rejected
the individual intentions of the elite leader as the motor that necessarily drives events,
I shall go one step further out on the limb by suggesting that the moment of the
revolution, the end of the archaic phase of Athenian political history, the point at
which Athenian democracy was born, was a violent, leaderless event: a three-day riot
in 508/7 that resulted in the removal of King Cleomenes I and his Spartan troops
from the soil of Attica.
In order to explain the events of 508/7, we need to review the revolutionary period that began in 510 BC—a fascinating few years characterized by a remarkable series of expulsions from the territory of Attica and returns to it. The series opened with the ouster of Hippias, son of Peisistratos. In 510 the Spartans, urged on by multiple oracles from Delphic Apollo, decided to liberate Athens from the rule of the Peisistratid tyrant. A preliminary seaborne invasion of Attica was repulsed by the tyrant’s forces. King Cleomenes I then raised a second army, which he marched across the Isthmus into Athenian territory. This time Hippias’ forces failed to stop the invasion. With the Spartans in control of Attica, the tyrant and his family were forced to retreat to their stronghold on the Acropolis. The Acropolis was a formidable obstacle, the defenders were well supplied with food and drink, and the Spartan besiegers were initially stymied. Indeed, it looked as if they might abandon the attempt after a few days (Hdt. 5.64–65). But then Hippias made the mistake of trying to smuggle his sons past the besiegers and out of Athens. They were caught by the Spartans and held hostage. Hippias then surrendered on terms, and was allowed to leave Athens with his family. Thus ended the tyranny.

But the liberation raised more questions than it answered. Who would now rule Athens? One might suppose that the spoils of political authority would end up going to the victors. But as Thucydides (6.53.3; cf. Aristophanes Lysistrata 1150–56) pointed out, few Athenians had played much part in the expulsion. The victorious Spartans, for their part, had no interest in progressive political innovation. They surely intended Athens to become a client-state, with a status similar to that of their allies in the Peloponnesian League. This would presumably mean that Athens would be governed by a rather narrow oligarchy, the form of government that (at least in the mid-fifth century: Thuc. 1.19) Sparta mandated as standard for all members of the league. The Spartans did not permanently garrison Athens (this was not their style), but after withdrawing their forces they remained very interested in Athenian politics. In the aftermath of the “liberation,” King Cleomenes, the dominant figure in late-sixth-century Sparta, encouraged attempts by Isagoras and other Athenian aristocrats to establish a government that would exclude most Athenians from active political participation.

In the period 510–507 the political battlefield of Athens was disputed not between men who called themselves or thought of themselves as oligarchs and democrats, but rather between rival aristocrats. We cannot say exactly what sort of government Isagoras envisioned, but in light of subsequent developments it seems safe to assume that he intended to place effective control of affairs into the hands of a small, pro-Spartan elite. Isagoras’ main opponent was Cleisthenes the Alcmaeonid. Despite the fact that Cleisthenes himself had been willing to accept the high office of archon under the Tyranny, some elements of the Alcmaeonid family had probably been active in resistance to the Tyrants. Cleisthenes, obviously a leading figure among the Alcmaeonids by 508/7, may have felt that his family’s antityrannical activity had earned him a prominent position in the political order that would replace the Tyranny. But that position did not come automatically. Indeed, Isagoras, with his Spartan connections, was gaining in influence and was elected archon for 508/7 BC. Thus, as Herodotus (5.66.2) tells us, Cleisthenes was getting the worst of it. In response, Cleisthenes did a remarkable thing: τὸν δὲμον προστηρίζεται. I will leave this phrase untranslated for the time being, for reasons that will become clear later. At
any rate, because he had in some way allied himself with the demos, Cleisthenes now began to overshadow his opponents in the contest for political influence in Athens (Hdt. 5.69.2).

It is worth pausing at this point in the narrative to ask what the social and institutional context of the struggle between Isagoras and Cleisthenes would have been. Herodotus and the author of the *Athênaion Politeia* employ the political vocabularies of the mid-fifth and late fourth centuries, respectively. But we must not apply the model of politics in Periclean or Demosthenic Athens to the late sixth century. Isagoras and Cleisthenes had recourse to few if any of the weapons familiar to us from the political struggles of those later periods – ideologically motivated *betairetai* (aristocratic clubs), ostracism, the *graphe paronomon* (a legal procedure for use against those proposing illegal decrees) and other public actions in people’s courts, finely honed orations by orators trained in the art of rhetoric. What shall we imagine in their place?

Late-archaic Athens was surely more dominated by the great families than was Athens of the fifth and fourth centuries. On the other hand, it would be a serious mistake to suppose that the scion-of-a-great-family/ordinary-citizen relationship can be seen in fully developed patron/client terms – for late-archaic Athens, the model of Roman republican politics is as anachronistic as is that of democratic politics. The reforms of Solon had undercut the traditional authority associated with birth. The policies of the Tyrants themselves had gone a long way in breaking down the traditional ties of dependence and obedience between upper- and lower-class Athenians. Moreover, Solon’s creation of the formal status of citizen – a result of prohibiting debt slavery and of legal reforms that made Athenians potentially responsible for one another’s welfare – had initiated a process whereby the demos became conscious of itself in forthrightly political terms. The Tyrants had encouraged political self-consciousness on the part of the masses of ordinary citizens by the sponsorship of festivals and building programs. The upshot was that by 510–508 BC the ordinary Athenian male had come a long way from the status of politically passive client of a great house. He saw himself as a citizen rather than as a subject, and at least some part of his loyalty was owed to the abstraction ‘‘Athens.’’

And yet, the political institutions in which an Athenian man could express his developing sense of citizenship were, in early 508, still quite rudimentary and were still dominated by the elite. We may suppose that the traditional ‘‘constitution,’’ as revised by Solon, still pertained. Thus there were occasional meetings of a political Assembly that all citizens had the right to attend. But it is unlikely that those outside the elite had the right or power to speak in that Assembly; nor could they hope to serve on the probouleutic council of 400, as a magistrate, or on the Areopagus council. Cleisthenes, as a leading member of a prominent family and as an Areopagite, surely did have both the right and the power to address the Assembly. It seems a reasonable guess that it was in the Assembly (although not necessarily uniquely here) that he allied himself to the demos, by proposing (and perhaps actually passing) constitutional reforms. The masses saw that these reforms would provide them with the institutional means to express more fully their growing sense of themselves as citizens. By these propositions and/or enactments Cleisthenes gained political influence, and so Isagoras began to get the worst of it (Hdt. 5.69.2–70.1).
But if Cleisthenes now had the people on his side, Isagoras was still archon, and moreover he could call in outside forces. No matter what measures Cleisthenes had managed to propose or pass in the Assembly, a new constitutional order could become a practical political reality only if the Assembly’s will were allowed to decide the course of events. Isagoras, determined that this would not be allowed, sent word of the unsettling developments to Cleomenes in Sparta. Cleomenes responded by sending a herald to the Athenians, informing them that, ostensibly because of the old Cylonian curse, they were to expel (exeballe) Cleisthenes and many others from the city (Hdt. 5.70.2). Cleisthenes himself duly left (autos upexesche: Hdt. 5.72.1).

Even after Cleisthenes’ departure, Isagoras and/or Cleomenes must still have felt uneasy about the Athenian situation. A smallish (ou... megali cheiri) mixed-nationality military force, featuring a core of Spartans and led by Cleomenes, soon arrived in the city (paren es tas Athênas: Hdt. 5.72.1). Cleomenes now, on Isagoras’ recommendation, ordered further expulsions; Herodotus (5.72.1) claims that a total of 700 families were driven out (age latee). The archon Isagoras and his Spartan allies were clearly in control of Athens. That could have been the end of what we might call the progressive movement in Athenian politics. Athens might well have become another Argos—an occasionally restive but ultimately impotent client-state of Sparta. After all, the Spartans were the dominant military power in late-sixth-century Greece, whereas Cleisthenes and the other leading Athenians who opposed Isagoras were now powerless exiles.

But, of course, that was not the end of it. What happened next is the moment of revolution I alluded to earlier. According to Herodotus, Isagoras and Cleomenes next (deutera) attempted to abolish the boule (tên boulên katalucin epeivato), and to transfer political authority to a body of 300 supporters of Isagoras. But when the boule resisted and refused to obey (antistathes de tês boulês kai ou boulomenês peithethai), Cleomenes, together with Isagoras and his supporters, occupied the Acropolis (katalambanouai tên akropolín). However, the rest of the Athenians (Athênaion de boi loipoi), who were of one mind (ta auta phvonzantes) [regarding these affairs], besieged them [on the Acropolis] for two days. But on the third day a truce was struck and the Lacedaemonians among them were allowed to leave the territory [of Attica]. (Hdt. 5.72.1–2)

In the aftermath of the expulsion of the Spartans, at least some of the non-Spartan members of Cleomenes’ army (perhaps including Athenian supporters of Isagoras, although not Isagoras himself), who had been detained in Athens, were summarily executed (Hdt. 5.72.4–73.1). After these events (meta tauta) the Athenians recalled (metapempsamenoi) Cleisthenes and the 700 families (Hdt. 5.73.1). A new constitutional order (presumably resembling the order proposed by Cleisthenes or enacted on his motion before he was expelled) was soon put into place.12

Meanwhile, Cleomenes felt that the Athenians had “outraged” him “with both words and deeds” (periubristhai epesi kai ergoisi: Hdt. 5.74.1). I would gloss Herodotus’ statement as follows: Cleisthenes had been outraged by “the words” (of the bouleutai when they refused the dissolution order) and “the deeds” (of the demos in its uprising against the Spartans and the Athenian quislings). The Spartan king wanted revenge. He still planned to put Isagoras into power in Athens, but his counterattack of 506 fizzled due to a lack of solidarity in the Peloponnesian ranks
on the one side and Athenian unity and military discipline on the other (Hdt. 5.74–77). Within just a few years, Athens had moved from the position of Spartan client-to-be to that of a powerful, independent polis. Athens twice had been occupied by an outside power, and the Athenians had rejected the rule of a narrow elite in favor of a radical program of political reforms, risen up successfully against their occupiers when the reform program was threatened, institutionalized the reforms, defended the new political order against external aggression, and begun on the road that would soon lead to democracy. It is an amazing story, and Herodotus (5.78) points out to his readers just how remarkable was the Athenian achievement. This, then, was the Athenian Revolution.

Herodotus’ account is quite closely followed, and perhaps in a few places amplified, by the account of the Aristotelian *Athenaion Politeia*. I will focus on three aspects of the story that seem to me particularly notable. Two are familiar topoi of Cleisthenes scholarship; the third is not.

The first peculiarity is that Cleisthenes, an Areopagite and a leading member of a fine old family, was willing in the first place to turn to the demos—the ordinary people, who, as Herodotus points out, “formerly had been held in contempt” (*proteron aposomenon*: Hdt. 5.69.2). The second striking thing is that after his recall from exile, Cleisthenes fulfilled the promises he had made to the demos (in the form of proposals or enactments of the Assembly). He fully earned the trust they placed in him by establishing a form of government that, at least in the long run, doomed aristocratic political dominance in Athens. Much ink has been spilled over Cleisthenes’ apparently peculiar behavior. Since Cleisthenes’ actions seem to fly in the face of the aristocratic ethos (“Thou shalt not mix with the lower sort”) and to contradict a common assumption about human nature itself (“Thou shalt always act in self-interest”), sophisticated explanations have been devised to explain what he was up to. Among views of Cleisthenes in the scholarly literature, two dominate the field, at least in the English-speaking world. One, well represented by David M. Lewis’ influential article in *History*, is what we might call the “cynical realist” view, which holds that Cleisthenes was no true friend of the Athenian demos, but instead he benefited (or at least intended to benefit) the Alcmaeonids by extraordinarily clever gerrymandering in his establishment of the demes. Lewis’ “realist” view was advanced to counter the other dominant view: the “idealist” view of an altruistic Cleisthenes. This second viewpoint is perhaps best exemplified by the work of Victor Ehrenberg, who saw Cleisthenes as a selfless democratic visionary.

I would not want to deny that Cleisthenes embraced a vision of a new society (see below) or that he hoped for a privileged place for his own family in that society. Yet neither the “realist” view of Cleisthenes the diabolically clever factional politician, nor the “idealist” view of Cleisthenes the self-consciously altruistic Father of Democracy, adequately accounts for the third peculiarity in Herodotus’ story—the uprising that doomed Isagoras and his partisans by forcing the surrender and withdrawal from Attica of the Spartans. Although the sparing accounts of Herodotus and the *Athenaion Politeia* do not give us a great deal to work with, it appears that a spontaneous insurrection against Isagoras and the Spartans followed in the wake of Cleomenes’ attempt to abolish the *boule* and his occupation of the Acropolis. Without the uprising, the Cleisthenic reforms would have remained empty words: proposals or enactments voided by the efficient use of force by an outside power.
We will probably never know the details of what actually happened between Cleomenes’ attempt to dissolve the boule and his surrender on terms, but we can at least say what did not happen, and this may be useful in itself. First, and perhaps foremost, we should not imagine the siege of the Spartans on the Acropolis as an organized military campaign. Whatever may have been the form of the pre-Cleisthenic Athenian military forces, there is no mention in Herodotus or the Athenaiōn Politeia at the siege of military leaders, or of any other sort of formal leadership – no reference to a polemarch or to stratēgoi, no naukraroi calling in their clients from the fields. Now, the silence of our sources is a notoriously slippery ground for argument, but (as demonstrated by their accounts of, e.g., Cylon and the naukraroi, Solon and the Eupatrids, and Peisistratos and the Alcmaeonids) both Herodotus and the author of the Athenaiōn Politeia were very interested in aristocratic leadership – whether it was individual or collective and institutional. I find it hard to believe that the presence of aristocratic leaders at the insurrection could have been forgotten or their identity fully suppressed in the sixty years or so between the revolution and Herodotus’ arrival in Athens. Surely this brave resistance to the Spartan occupiers of the Acropolis is just the sort of thing that aristocratic families would remember for several generations. And it was just this sort of family tradition that formed the basis of much of Herodotus’ Athenian narrative. One cannot, of course, exclude the possibility that Herodotus intentionally covered up the role played by leaders. But why would he want to do so? To further glorify the Alcmaeonid Cleisthenes? Yet even if Herodotus did favor the Alcmaeonids (which is far from certain), the hypothetical leaders would have been Alcmaeonid allies, since Cleisthenes was immediately recalled and his constitutional reforms enacted. In the end, positing aristocratic leadership for the action that expelled the Spartans is an ignotus per ignotum argument, a modern supplement that relies for its credibility entirely on the unprovable (and elitist) assumption that aristocratic leadership in such matters would have been sine qua non. It is preferable in this case to trust our only sources and suppose that Herodotus and the Athenaiōn Politeia mention no leaders because Athenian tradition recorded none, and that Athenian tradition recorded none because there were none – or at least none from the ranks of the leading aristocratic families.

Moreover, there is no mention in Herodotus or the Athenaiōn Politeia of Athenian hoplites at the siege of the Acropolis: according to Herodotus, it is Athenaiōn hoi loipoi (the rest of the Athenians) who, united in their view of the situation, do the besieging. Athenaiōn Politeia (20.3) mentions to plethos and hō demos. This does not, of course, mean that no men wearing hoplite armor took part in the siege – but it is noteworthy that there is no suggestion in either source that anything resembling a “regular” army formation was called up. This might best be explained by the hypothesis that no “national” army existed in the era before the carrying out of Cleisthenes’ constitutional reforms. If there was no national army properly speaking, then archaic Athenian military actions were ordinarily carried out by aristocratic leaders (presumably often acting in cooperation with one another): men who were able to muster bodies of armed followers. If this is right, the mass expulsion recommended by Isagoras and carried out by Cleomenes (which no doubt focused on aristocratic houses) would have completely disrupted the traditional means of mustering the Athenian army – and this may well have been among their motives for
the expulsion. It is not modern scholars alone who doubt the ability of masses to act without orders from their superiors.

The action that forced the surrender of the Spartans was evidently carried out in the absence of traditional military leaders and without a regular army. How then are we to visualize this action? The Athenian siege of the Acropolis in 508/7 is best understood as a riot – a violent and more or less spontaneous uprising by a large number of Athenian citizens. In order to explain Cleomenes’ actions, we must assume that the riot broke out very suddenly and was of relatively great size, intensity, and duration.17

After their occupation of the Acropolis, Cleomenes and his warriors were barricaded on a natural fortress, one that had frustrated the regular Spartan army during the siege of Hippias only a couple of years earlier. Yet on the third day of the siege the royal Spartan commander agreed to a humiliating conditional surrender – a surrender that left his erstwhile non-Lacedaemonian comrades to the untender mercies of the rioters. Cleomenes’ precipitous agreement to these harsh terms must mean that he regarded the forces arrayed against him as too numerous (throughout the period of the siege) to contemplate a sortie. Why could the Spartans not simply have waited out the siege, as Hippias had been prepared to do? Given the undeveloped state of archaic Greek siegecraft, it is unlikely that the Spartans feared a successful assault on the stronghold. It is much more likely that (unlike Hippias) they had not had time to lay in adequate supplies. This suggests that Cleomenes had occupied the Acropolis very quickly, which in turn probably means that he was caught off guard by the uprising. This inferential sequence supports a presumption that the uprising occurred quite suddenly. What, then, was the precipitating factor?

Herodotus’ account, cited above, describes the action in the following stages:

1 Isagoras/Cleomenes attempts to dissolve the boule.
2 The boule resists.
3 Cleomenes and Isagoras occupy the Acropolis.
4 The rest of the Athenians are united in their views.
5 They besiege the Spartan force.
6 Cleomenes surrenders on the third day of the siege.

If we are to follow Herodotus, we must suppose that steps 1, 2, 3, 5, and 6 are chronologically discrete and sequential events. Step 4 cannot, on the other hand, be regarded as a chronological moment; word of events 1–3 would have spread around Athens through the piecemeal word-of-mouth operations typical of an oral society. Presumably those living in the city would have learned what was going on first, and the news would have spread (probably very quickly, but not instantaneously) to the rural citizenry.18 Herodotus’ language (ta auta phronésantes – “all of one mind”) supports the idea of a generalized and quite highly developed civic consciousness among the Athenian masses – an ability to form and act on strong and communal views on political affairs.

If we take our lead from Herodotus’ account, two precipitating factors can be adduced to explain the crystallization of opinion and the outbreak of violent anti-Spartan action on the part of the Athenian demos. First, the riot may have been sparked by the Spartan attempt to dissolve the boule and the boule’s resistance (thus the demos’ action would commence as a consequence of steps 1 and 2, but before
step 3). According to this scenario, Cleomenes and Isagoras will have been frightened by the sudden uprising into a precipitous defensive retreat to the nearby stronghold of the Acropolis. Alternatively, the riot might have broken out only after the Spartan occupation of the Acropolis (thus after step 3). On this reading of the evidence, the riot would be precipitated by the Spartan’s offensive (in both senses of the term) takeover of the sacred Acropolis. This second hypothesis would certainly fit with Herodotus’ (5.72.3–4, cf. 5.90.2) story of Cleomenes’ sacrilegious behavior and disrespect to the priestess of Athena. Yet this scenario is not, to my mind, fully satisfactory. It does not explain why Cleomenes felt it necessary to bring his entire force up to the Acropolis. Why did Isagoras and his partisans (ho te Kleomenes kai ho Isagoras kai boi stasiotai autou: Hdt. 5.72.2) go up to the Acropolis with Cleomenes? And if the occupation of the Acropolis by Spartan forces was a deliberate and unhurried act of aggression, how are we to explain the failure to bring up enough supplies to last even three days? 19

It is certain that Athenaión Politeía (20.3) saw Cleomenes’ move to the Acropolis as a defensive response to a riot: when “the boule resisted (tes de boules antistases) and the mob gathered itself together (kai sunathroisthentos tou pléthous), the supporters of Cleomenes and Isagoras fled for refuge (katephugon) to the Acropolis.” 20 Here the move to the Acropolis is specifically described as a defensive reaction to the council’s resistance and the gathering of the people. Athenaión Politeía’s statement has independent evidentiary value only if its author had access to evidence (whether in the form of written or oral traditions) other than Herodotus’ account – on which he obviously leaned heavily. This issue of Quellenforschung cannot be resolved in any definitive way here, but it is not de facto unlikely that the author of Athenaión Politeía, who certainly had independent information on Cleisthenes’ actual reforms, could have read or heard that Cleomenes and Isagoras fled to the Acropolis when a mob formed subsequent to the unsuccessful attempt to dissolve the boule. At the very least, we must suppose that Athenaión Politeía interpreted Herodotus’ account of the move to the Acropolis as describing a flight rather than a planned act of aggression. 21

Finally, let us consider the only other classical source for these events: Aristophanes’ Lysistrata (lines 273–82). Here the chorus of Old Athenian Men, girding themselves for an assault on the Acropolis (held by a mixed-nationality force of women), urge each other on “since when Cleomenes seized it previously, he did not get away unpunished, for despite his Laconian spirit he departed giving over to me his arms, wearing only a little cloak, hungry, dirty, hairy-faced . . . that’s how ferociously I besieged that man, keeping constant guard, drawn up seventeen ranks deep at the gates.” This is not, of course, history, but a poetic and comic description. Cleomenes’ surrender of arms and his hunger are plausible enough, but the overly precise reference to “seventeen ranks” is unlikely to reflect historical reality. Nevertheless, as Rosalind Thomas points out, the Aristophanes passage probably does represent a living popular tradition about the siege. 22 And that tradition evidently focused on the military action of the people rather than on any doings of their leaders.

Although certainty cannot be achieved in the face of our limited sources, I think it is easiest to suppose that a spontaneous riot broke out when the boule resisted. Caught off guard, Cleomenes and Isagoras retreated with their forces to the Acropolis stronghold to regroup. Rapidly spreading news of the occupation of the
Acropolis further inflamed the Athenians, and so the ranks of the rioters were continually augmented as rural residents took up arms and streamed into the city. From Cleomenes’ perspective, the bad situation, which had begun with the resistance of the *boule*, only got worse as time went on. Stranded on the barren hill without adequate food or water, and with the ranks of his opponents increasing hourly, Cleomenes saw that his position was hopeless and negotiated a surrender. This scenario has the virtue of incorporating all major elements of Herodotus’ account and the two other classical sources for the events, explaining Cleomenes’ behavior in rational terms, and accommodating the means of news transmittal in an oral society.

If, as I have argued above, the Athenian military action that led to the liberation of Athens from Spartan control was a riot, precipitated by the refusal of the *bouleutai* to obey Isagoras’ or Cleomenes’ direct order that the *boule* dissolve itself in favor of the 300 Isagoreans, how are we to explain the relationship between the *boule*’s act of defiance and the uprising itself? In the absence of direct textual evidence for either the motives of the *bouleutai* or their relationship to the demos, I offer, for comparative purposes, the example of another famous revolutionary refusal by a political body to dissolve when confronted with authority backed by force. Although such comparisons are supplementary, and not evidentiary in a formal sense, they are useful if they expand common assumptions about the limits of the possible, in this case by showing that an act of disobedience could indeed precipitate a revolution.

On June 17, 1789, the representatives of the Third Estate of the Kingdom of France, a body originally called together by the king, declared themselves to be the National Assembly of France. This act of self-redefinition was not accepted as valid by the existing, and heretofore sovereign, authority of the kingdom. Six days later, on June 23, King Louis XVI surrounded the assembly hall with some 4,000 troops and read a royal proclamation to the self-proclaimed Assemblymen in which he stated that the Third Estate’s act in taking the name “The National Assembly” was voided; all enactments of the so-called National Assembly were nullified. Louis concluded his speech with the words, “I order you, gentlemen, to disperse at once.” But the National Assembly refused either to disperse or to renounce its act of self-naming.23

According to the brilliant interpretation of these events by Sandy Petrey, the Third Estate’s renaming of itself, and Louis’ declaration that the renaming was void, set up a confrontation between speech acts – both the Third Estate and Louis made statements that were intended to have material effects in the real world of French society; both sides were attempting to *enact* a political reality through the speech act of naming (or, in Louis’ case, “unnaming”). In the normal environment of prerevolutionary France, the king’s statement would have been (in the terminology of J. L. Austin’s speech-act theory, on which Petrey’s interpretation is based) “felicitous” or efficacious – the Assembly would *be* dissolved because a sovereign authority had stated that it was dissolved. Yet, as Petrey points out, in a revolutionary situation, speech acts are not, at the moment of their enunciation, either felicitous or infelicitous *ipso facto*. Rather, their felicity or efficacy is demonstrated only in retrospect. In this case, the National Assembly did not dissolve when so ordered. By refusing to acknowledge the power of the king’s speech to create real effects in the world, the Assembly contested the legitimacy of the king’s authority.24
The confrontation of speech acts was not the end of the story. Louis subsequently attempted to enforce his will through the deployment of military force. This attempt was frustrated by the outbreak of riots in the streets of Paris. In the words of W. Doyle, in the weeks after the confrontation of June 23, “nobody doubted that the King was still prepared to use force to bring the Revolution to an end. The only thing that could prevent him was counterforce, and as yet the Assembly had none at its disposal. It was saved only by the people of Paris.” And thus the French Revolution was launched. Because the revolution succeeded, it turned out that the Third Estate’s act of renaming had been felicitous and Louis’ proclamation of nullification infelicitous; if the proof of the pudding is in the eating, the proof of the revolutionary speech act is in the rebellion.

Although the efficacy of its speech acts were as yet undemonstrated, the self-redefinition of the Third Estate as the National Assembly on June 17 and the refusal of the Assemblymen of France to acknowledge the force of the king’s proclamation of dissolution on June 23 helped to precipitate a revolution because they contested the “inevitability” or “naturalness” of the power of the king’s speech to create political realities. Once the king’s official proclamations were no longer regarded as expressions of sovereign authority, political discourse ceased to be a realm of orderly enactment and became a realm of contested interpretations. The success of any given interpretation was no longer based on its grounding in eternal and universally accepted truths about power and legitimacy; rather, success in interpretation was now contingent upon the subsequent actions of the French people acting en masse – in this case, by rioting and besieging the Bastille.

The parallels between the early stages of the French and the Athenian revolutions are certainly not exact, but both similarities and differences may be instructive. First, it is much less clear in the Athenian case where, at any point in the story, sovereign authority lay – or indeed, if we should be talking about sovereignty at all. Isagoras was archon in 508/7, and so the dissolution order issued to the boule could be seen as carrying the weight of legitimately sanctioned authority. But the archon of Athens did not (I suppose) command the absolute sovereignty claimed by Louis XVI, and the perceived legitimacy of Isagoras’ authority was probably not enhanced by his employment of foreign military support. What of the comparison of the Athenian boule to the National Assembly? This will depend on what body Herodotus meant by the word boule. There are three choices (and all have had supporters among modern scholars) – the Areopagus Council, the Solonian Council of 400, or a newly established Council of 500. The parallel to the National Assembly is closest if we follow the hypothesis, recently revived by Mortimer Chambers, that the boule in question was (perhaps a pro tem version of) the Council of 500, set up according to Cleisthenes’ proposals and the Assembly’s enactment before the arrival of the Spartans. This hypothesis would go far in explaining both Cleomenes’ interest in eliminating the council and the brave determination of the councilmen to resist. But Chambers’ argument, based in part on his rejection of the existence of a Solonian Council of 400, must remain for the time being an attractive speculation. In any event, we cannot be sure exactly what powers the boule claimed or its constitutional relationship to the archon.

Yet despite these caveats and uncertainties, several relevant factors in the French and Athenian cases seem quite similar. Herodotus’ revealing comment that a king was
“outraged by both words and deeds” (5.74.1) fits the French Revolution as well as the Athenian. In both cases, because of a verbal act of defiance by a political body, “official” political discourse – previously regarded by all concerned as authoritative and stable, as productive of acts of establishment, as a thesmos – became a battleground contested by two mutually exclusive interpretations regarding the source of legitimate public authority. Isagoras (or Cleomenes) said the boulê was dissolved. The bouleutai denied, by their resistance, the validity of this statement. As in the case of the French Revolution, it would be the actions of the ordinary people in the streets that would determine which of the opposed interpretations was felicitous and efficacious – rapidly evolving realities would decide whether the statement of Isagoras or of the bouleutai conformed to reality. In both revolutions, the official authority’s recourse to military force was stymied by superior unofficial force in the form of mass riots. Both revolutions featured short but decisive sieges (the Acropolis and the Bastille) by leaderless crowds of citizens; both sieges ended in a negotiated surrender by the besieged leaders of organized military forces. Furthermore, both uprisings featured summary (and, I would add, morally reprehensible) killings of individuals identified as enemies of the revolution. The Athenian Revolution, no less than the French, was baptized in the blood of “counter-revolutionaries.” Yet the difference between Athens and France in this regard is also salient: the decade after 507 saw no equivalent to either Jacobinite Terror or Thermidorian reaction.

In terms of assigning credit (or blame) for the uprising and its aftermath, it is important to note that though the brave action of the bourgeois gentlemen of the Third Estate in naming themselves the National Assembly helped to foment the French Revolution, those gentlemen did not take the lead in storming the Bastille, and they were not able subsequently to control the direction of the revolution. Nor were the bouleutai in control of the Athenian Revolution. Neither Herodotus nor Athenaión Politeía assigns the boule a leadership role in the insurrection after its refusal to disperse: according to Herodotus, after the boule refused to obey the dissolution order, Cleomenes and Isagoras occupied the Acropolis, and ta auta phronësantes, Athenaión hoî loipoi besieged the Acropolis – taken literally, this comment would seem to exclude the bouleutai from any role at all. For Athenaión Politeía (20.3), it was when “the boule resisted and the mob gathered itself together” that “the supporters of Cleomenes and Isagoras fled to the Acropolis,” and subsequently it was ho démôs that besieged them. Both authors seem to agree on the importance of the boule’s act of defiance, but both also agree in seeing the key event as the uprising of the Athenian masses.

Finally, how are we to interpret the political implications of this riotous uprising and its relationship to the subsequent Athenian political order – to the “constitution of Cleisthenes”? Once again, a comparative approach may offer some clues. The highly influential work of E. P. Thompson on food riots in eighteenth-century England, and that of Natalie Z. Davis on religious riots in sixteenth-century France, has led to the development of a useful approach to the historical assessment of rioting. This model is discussed in some detail in a recent article by Suzanne Desan, who points out that, according to Thompson and Davis, violent collective actions in early-modern England and France were not merely random outbreaks indicative of generalized popular dissatisfaction. Rather, these riots are best read as acts of collective self-definition, or redefinition. The English peasants were, for example, rioting in support
of the reenactment of what Thompson described as a “moral economy” – a view of
the world that was actually quite conservative in that it assumed the legitimacy of
paternalistic (or at least clientistic) relations between peasantry and local aristocracy.31

The riot of 508/7 can thus be read as a collective act of political self-definition in
which the demos rejected the archon Isagoras as the legitimate public authority. As
Herodotus’ account suggests, the riot was the physical, active manifestation of the
Athenians having come to be “of one mind” about civic affairs. This reading clarifies
the general role of Cleisthenes in the Athenian Revolution and the scope of his
accomplishments. More specifically, it helps to explain the relationship between
Cleisthenes and the demos in the months before and after the definitive moment of
the riot.

Let us return to the problems of the context and meaning of Herodotus’ famous
and problematic comment (5.66.2) that Kleisthenes ton demon prosetairizetai. This
phrase is often taken to be a description of a straightforward event with a straightfor-
ward subject and object. A. de Sélincourt’s Penguin translation is typical: “Cleisthe-
nes... took the people into his party.” But we need not give the middle form
prosetairizetai quite such a clearly active force, nor need we imagine it as describing
an event that occured in a single moment. I would suggest as an alternate (if inelegant) translation: “Cleisthenes embarked on the process of becoming the
demos’ trusted comrade.”32 Herodotus’ account certainly implies that Cleisthenes
had developed a special relationship with the demos before his expulsion from Athens.
That relationship, which I have suggested above was characterized by proposals or
enactments in the Assembly, was evidently the proximate cause of Isagoras’ calling in
of Cleomenes. But there is no reason to suppose that the process referred to by the
verb prosetairizetai was completed before Cleisthenes was expelled. In short, I would
suggest that Cleisthenes did not so much absorb the demos into his
hetairoi, as he
himself was absorbed into an evolving, and no doubt somewhat inchoate, demotic
vision of a new society, a society in which distinctions between social statuses would
remain but in which there would be no narrow clique of rulers.

The sea change in Athenian political practice implied by Cleisthenes’ new relation-
ship with the demos was not signaled by an act of noblesse oblige – opening the doors
of the exclusive, aristocratic hetairoi to the masses. Rather, it was a revolution in the
demos’ perception of itself and in an aristocrat’s perceptions regarding his own
relationship, and that of all men of his class, to the demos. Cleisthenes acknowledged
the citizens of Athens as equal sharers in regard to the nomoi (laws), and under the
banner of isonomía the men of the demos became, in effect if not in contemporary
nomenclature, Cleisthenes’ hetairoi.33 We must remember that Herodotus’ termin-
ology is that of the mid-fifth rather than the late sixth century. But in the fifth
century, when Herodotus was writing his Histories, Athenian hetairoi were expected
to help one another, and to seek to harm their common enemies. The demos looked
out for Cleisthenes’ interests by attacking the Spartans and by recalling him immedi-
ately upon their departure. Political friendship is a two-way street, and Cleisthenes
had no real option other than to look after the interests of the demos by devising and
working to implement (through enactments of the Assembly) an institutional frame-
work that would consolidate and stabilize the new demotic vision of politics. That
vision had grown up among the Athenian citizen masses in the course of the sixth
century and had found an active, physical manifestation in the riot that occurred
during Cleisthenes’ enforced absence from the scene. The “constitution of Cleisthenes” channeled the energy of the demos’ self-defining riot into a stable and workable form of government.

In sum, Cleisthenes was not so much the authoritative leader of the revolution as he was a highly skilled interpreter of statements made in a revolutionary context and of revolutionary action itself. This is not to deny any of his brilliance, or even his genius. But it is to see his genius not in an ability to formulate a prescient vision of a future democratic utopia, nor in an ability to hide a selfish dynastic scheme behind a constitutional façade, but rather in his ability to “read” – in a sensitive and perceptive way – the text of Athenian discourse in a revolutionary age, and to recognize that Athenian mass action had created new political facts. Cleisthenes saw that the revolutionary action of the Athenian demos had permanently changed the environment of politics and political discourse. After the revolution there could be no secure recourse to extra-demotic authority. If Athens were to survive as a polis, there would have to be a new basis for politically authoritative speech, but that basis must find its ground in the will of the demos itself. Having read and understood his complex text, Cleisthenes knew that there could be no turning back to rule by aristocratic faction – or at least he saw that any attempt to turn back the clock would bring on a bloodbath and make effective resistance to Sparta impossible. And so, acting as a good hetairos, well deserving of the pistis (good faith) placed in him (Athênaion Politieia 21.1) by his mass hetuereia, Cleisthenes came up with a constitutional order that both framed and built upon the revolution that had started without him.

NOTES

1 See the introduction to Hunt 1989.
2 This is a traditional breaking point: Burn (1960, 324), for example, ends his narrative of archaic Athenian history with the expulsion of Hippias. Hansen (1986) argues that démokratia was the name Cleisthenes used from the beginning. The relevant ancient sources are conveniently collected, translated, and annotated in Stanton 1990, 130–67.
3 For representative statements of the centrality of Cleisthenes’ role, see Zimmern 1961, 143–44: “Cleisthenes the Alcmaeonid, the leader of the popular party, . . . made a bid for power. [After the Spartan intervention and the occupation of the Acropolis,] Cleisthenes and the councillors [my emphasis] called the people to arms and blockaded the rock . . . [upon the surrender of the Spartans] Cleisthenes was now master of the situation.” Murray 1980, 254: “Cleisthenes ‘took the people into his party’ . . . proposed major reforms, expelled Isagoras [my emphasis], and in the next few years held off the attempts of the Spartans and their allies to intervene.” Forrest 1966, 194: “Finally, with the demos’ firm support, he was able to rout Isagoras [my emphasis] together with a Spartan force.” Other textbooks do point out that Cleisthenes was in exile, e.g., Sealey 1976, 147; Bury and Meiggs 1975, 36; and especially M. Ostwald in The Cambridge Ancient History, 2d ed. (1988), 4:305–7. The modern account of the revolution closest in spirit to the one I offer here is perhaps Meier 1990, 64–66.
5 The government would not have been called an oligarchy because the word had not yet been invented; for the history of the term, see Raaflaub 1983.
6 Accommodation and resistance of Alcmaeonids to the tyranny: Lewis in *The Cambridge Ancient History*, 2d ed. (1988), 4:288, 299–301. But cf. the skepticism of Thomas (1989, 263–64), who argues that the Alcmaeonids may have made up the tradition of their antityrannical activity and the story of their exile under the Peisistratids from whole cloth.

7 Isagoras as archon: *Ath. Pol.* 21.1. The attempt by McCargar (1974) to separate Isagoras, opponent-of-Cleisthenes, from the archon of 508/7 on the grounds that *some* archons in this period were evidently relatively young (perhaps not much over thirty) and Isagoras *may* have been relatively mature seems to me chimerical, especially in light of the extreme rarity of the name. *Ath. Pol.* 22.5 claims that after the institution of the tyranny, and until 487/6, all archons were elected (*bair Erots*). The Tyrants had manipulated the elections to ensure that their own supporters were in office (see Rhodes 1981, 272–73); exactly how the elections would have been carried out in 509/8 (and thus what Isagoras’ support consisted of) is unclear. We need not, anyway, suppose that Isagoras’ election was indicative of a broad base of popular support; more likely his support was centered in the (non-Alcmaeonid) nobility. On the power of the archaic archon, see *Ath. Pol.* 3.3, 13.2 with the comments of Rhodes 1981, ad locc.


9 Solonian constitution: Ober 1989, 60–65, with references cited. For the Areopagus from the time of Solon to Cleisthenes, see Wallace 1989, 48–76.

10 Cleisthenes’ connection with the demos is underlined by Hdt. 5.69.2 and by *Ath. Pol.* 20.1. Since Wade-Gery’s seminal article (1933, 19–25), it has been widely accepted that the Assembly was the arena in which Cleisthenes won the favor of the people; cf. discussion by Ostwald 1969, 149–60.

11 The implied subject of the verb *epeivato* is either Cleomenes or Isagoras. The grammar seems to point to Cleomenes, although presumably it was Isagoras (as archon) who gave the official order to the *boulê*. The point is in any case merely procedural: Herodotus’ narrative demonstrates that Cleomenes and Isagoras were working hand in glove throughout.

12 Herodotus (5.66.2) implies that at least some of the reforms were put into place before Cleomenes’ arrival; *Ath. Pol.* (20–21) discusses the reforms after giving the history of the revolution proper. I think it is most likely that some reforms were proposed and perhaps actually enacted by the Assembly before Cleomenes’ arrival, but presumably there would not have been time for all the details of the new constitution to have been put into place. See below for the question of when the Council of 500 was established. For a review of the chronological issue, see Hignett 1952, 331–36; Rhodes 1981, 244–45, 249; Chambers 1990, 221–22.

13 Lewis 1963.

14 Ehrenberg 1973, 89–103: In 510 Cleisthenes was “a man of new and radical ideas” (89); in 508 he gained support “by revealing plans of a new democratic order” (90); “his reforms were . . . the first examples of democratic methods” (91). Cleisthenes was not primarily interested in personal power, rather “power was to him a means of creating the constitutional framework for a society on the verge of becoming democratic” (91). For Ehrenberg, then, Cleisthenes is both selfless and a strong leader whose place is “at the helm” (102). Cf. Ehrenberg 1950.

15 For a detailed discussion of the role of oral traditions (of family and polis) in Herodotus’ construction of his account of the revolution, and a vigorous attack on the hypothesis that Herodotus was an Alcmaeonid apologist, see Thomas 1989, 144–54, 238–82.


17 I am assuming throughout that Cleomenes was an experienced and sane military commander, and that his decisions were made accordingly. On the dubious tradition of the
madness of Cleomenes, see Griffiths 1989. It is interesting to note how the demos’ action simply disappears in some respectable scholarly accounts, e.g., Ehrenberg 1973, 90: “Cleomenes and Isagoras met, however, with the resistance of the council . . . which they had tried to disband and which was most likely the Areopagus . . . The Spartans withdrew, Isagoras was powerless, and many of his followers were executed.”

On how information was disseminated in Athens, see Hunter 1990.

Herodotus’ statement that Cleomenes seized the Acropolis and was subsequently thrown out along with the Lacedaemonians (ἐπεξερήση τε καὶ τότε πάλιν ἤξεπιτι ὑ ἦμετα τῶν Λακεδαμίων: 5.72.4) makes it appear likely that the whole force had gone up to the Acropolis together, had been besieged together, and had surrendered together. It is unlikely that a significant part of Cleomenes’ forces joined him on the hill after the commencement of the siege, and Herodotus says nothing about any of his men being captured in the lower city before the surrender. It is worth noting that Cylon (Hdt. 5.71; Thuc. 1.126.5–11) and Peisistratos (twice: Hdt. 1.59.6, 60.5) had earlier seized the Acropolis, each time as the first stage in an attempt to establish a tyranny. Cleomenes’ case is different in that his move came after he had established control of the city.

Stanton (1990, 142, 144 n. 6) translates συναθροίσθητος τοῦ πλήθους as “the common people had been assembled,” on the grounds that “the verb ‘had been assembled’ is definitely passive.” But I take the (morphologically) passive participle συναθροίσθητος as having a reflexive rather than a passive meaning; on the distinction, see Rijksbaron 1984, 126–48. For a reflexive meaning for the passive participle of συναθροίσθη: Xen. Anabasis 6.5.30; of athropize: Thuc. 1.50.4, 6.70.4; and especially Aristotle Pol. 1304b33.


Thomas 1989, 245–47.

“Je vous ordonne, Messieurs, de vous séparer toute de suite.” For the resolution of the Abbé de Sieyès renaming the Assembly, and the response of Louis at the “Royal Session” of June 23, see Wickham Legg 1905, 18–20, 22–33. For a narrative account of this stage of the revolution, see Doyle 1980, 172–77.

Petrey 1988, esp. 17–51. Petrey’s work is based on the ground-breaking linguistic theory of Austin 1975.

Doyle 1980, 177.

Chambers 1990, 222–23.

For the siege of the Bastille, see Godechot 1970, 218–46. The Bastille was a formidable, if dilapidated, fortress, guarded by a small force of eighty-four pensioners and thirty-two Swiss mercenaries. For the week before the assault of July 14, its commander, Governor de Launey, had refurbished the defenses to withstand an assault. Yet “he had only one day’s supply of meat and two days’ supply of bread, and moreover there was no drinking water inside the fortress . . . de Launey may . . . have thought that if he were attacked by an unarmed or ill-armed crowd the assault would not last longer than one day and that at nightfall the rioters would disperse” (219). It is tempting to suppose that Cleomenes thought along similar lines.

On the killing of Governor de Launey and seven other defenders of the Bastille on July 14, and of other agents of the Old Regime in the days thereafter, see Godechot 1970, 243–46. The Athenian Killings have been questioned on the grounds of the wording of Ath. Pol. 20.3 (κλεομένην μὲν καὶ τοὺς μὲν’ ἀστόχα πάντας ἀφείσασαν υποστόδους), but
as Ostwald (1969, 144 with n. 6) points out, this need only refer to the Lacedaemonian troops; cf. Rhodes 1981, 246–47.

For the composition of the crowd (mostly artisans from Paris) that stormed the Bastille, and the absence of Assemblymen or any other formal leaders, see Godechot 1970, 211, 221–26, 230, 237–39.

Cf., for example, Hammond 1959, 185–86: “The Council resisted. It raised the people against Cleomenes and Isagoras, who seized the Acropolis and found themselves besieged”; Ostwald 1969, 144: “The Council refused to be intimidated and, with the support of the common people, besieged the acropolis”; Stanton 1990, 144 n. 6: the council in question must have been the Areopagus, since unlike the councils of 400 or 500, it “would have been sufficiently permanent and would have contained a sufficient accumulation of politically experienced men to organize resistance to a military force. A major thrust was the assembling of the common people... and this could have been achieved by the influence which ex-arkhon clan leaders in the Areopagos held over their retainers.” The Areopagus leadership theory would need to explain how Cleomenes’ force could be strong and decisive enough to “drive out” 700 families dispersed through Attica (cf. Stanton [1990, 141 n. 14], who questions the number 700), but too weak to stop at most 100–200 men (numbers of Areopagites: Wallace 1989, 97 with n. 23; Hansen 1990 – from which we must deduct those expelled with the 700), who were presumably gathered in one place to hear the dissolution order, from organizing a resistance.

It is important to keep in mind that the terminology is in any event Herodotus’, not Cleisthenes’. It was probably not in use in Cleisthenes’ day, and reflects rather the political vocabulary of the mid-fifth century: Chambers 1990, 221.

On isonomia and its meaning, see Ober 1989, 74–75, with literature cited.

REFERENCES


Revolution or Compromise?

Loren J. Samons II

Samons criticizes Ober’s approach and the democratic nature of Cleisthenes’ offers a more skeptical interpretation of reforms.

[... ] Reaction to the so-called elitist theory stimulates much of Ober’s work in these essays [in *The Athenian Revolution*] and (along with “naïve positivism”) brings forth his most polemical passages. The study of Athenian democracy, in Ober’s view, has been dominated by an (often unspoken) adoption of Robert Michels’s “Iron Law of Oligarchy,” as reflected by Ronald Syme in *The Roman Revolution* and transmitted through Syme’s immense *authoritas* to scholars of Greek history. Syme asserted (for Ober infamously) that “in all ages, whatever the form and name of government, be it monarchy republic, or democracy, an oligarchy lurks behind the façade,” and Ober repeatedly complains that Greek historians, imbibing Syme’s dictum with their mother’s milk, have allowed a kind of Romanized vision of *clientela*, great houses, and *fiantones paucorum* to cloud the picture of Athenian democracy. Thus proponents of the “elitist theory” seek to study the relatively small group of leaders who in their view are necessary for the function of any government and the real power active in any “democracy.” “In place of an analysis of institutions and prosopography” (emphasis added) Ober prefers an “ideological” approach that “demands close study of political language, in order to show what it was that constituted the will of the demos, and in order to trace how the popular will was translated into individual and collective action within the evolving framework of institutionalized political structure” (133–34 with n. 21). Moreover, this method is distrustful of “common sense” arguments, which assume “that the Athenians tended to think pretty much like us” (134), replacing these with admittedly ideological models “not native” to the ancient world (14), but which if handled self-consciously (we are told) will be able to provide a “meaningful and useful” representation of the past (15; cf. 6, 13).

Ober draws on such models freely, noting the influences of the “Cambridge school” of intellectual history (123), “revisionist Marxism” (141), and “game theory” (163), but especially acknowledging debts to Foucault’s treatment of power as “discursive” (8, 10, 88–90) and to J. L. Austin’s “speech-act” theory, which treats speech as “performativ” (that is, capable of bringing something into being: 151): “The felicity [i.e., success] of the speech act is demonstrated by perlocutionary effects: the subsequent behavior of the relevant members of a society” (152).

Models may perhaps be helpful in the study of ancient societies when crucial evidence is lacking or ancient practices appear alien to modern eyes. But models are themselves the creations of modern scholars (and are often developed for analysis of post-ancient societies), and their use clearly implies a belief that in fact the ancient

Athenians *did* tend to think and act in ways similar to those for whom (and by whom) the models were originally developed. Thus naïveté attributed to those who do not employ models often is most evident in those who adopt them readily and then defend them on the grounds of some putative superiority to “source-based” analysis. Such a fundamental objection may serve as an appropriate introduction to several problematic areas noted in Ober’s methods and conclusions. […]

At times Ober’s method does not appear so foreign to the eyes of the naive positivist, for he sometimes provides the reader with a glimpse into the results his preferred approaches might offer for the study of an actual historical event, and the case of Cleisthenes’ role in the foundation of Athenian *demokratia* serves (from this perspective) both as the eponymous paper and centerpiece of the volume. Moreover, here we have the Oberian method in panoply: the shield of the straw man to be demolished is introduced at the outset (“the Great Man as the motor driving Athenian history,” a model “employed by Greek historians since the early 1960s to explain the behavior of Cleisthenes the Alcmaeonid, the figure often credited with ‘founding’ Athenian democracy,” 32), followed by the actual weapon of the more or less conventional argument itself, which is then crested with a methodological flourish – here the “speech-act” model of J. L. Austin. Let us take each piece of equipment in turn.

Ironically, among the few scholars who employ a kind of “Great Man” approach to Cleisthenes’ reforms are P. Lévêque and P. Vidal-Naquet, who focus on the reformer’s Alcmeonid heritage and supposed geometric and mathematical principles, but whose work is nonetheless praised by Ober as a “classic” (33). Perhaps, therefore, he means Herodotus himself, who wrote that it was Cleisthenes who “established the tribes and *demokratia* for the Athenians” (6.131.1). Many scholars since the 1960s have hardly seen Cleisthenes as a “Great Man,” unless we mean by that simply a member of one of the most important families in Athens who in some way introduced major political reform to the Athenian polis. Some have seen this as a (partially) self-interested attempt at gerrymandering and an attack on local cult ties (Lewis), an effort to smash the regional power of other aristocrats and ensure dominance of the city-aristocracy (Sealey), an attempt to grant all citizens the right of equal political participation in order to end previous aristocratic feuds and utilizing the banner of *isonomia* (Ostwald) which represented a real movement toward democracy (Ehrenberg), or as a way to defeat political rivals by (in part) uniting Attica and reuniting the supporters of the Peisistratids, but which had unforeseen consequences (including the fall of Cleisthenes himself: Fornara and Samons). Any living proponents of the “Great Man” theory need not fret, however, for one finds in Ober’s own analysis that such men apparently did exist and play important historical roles before the creation of democracy. Thus Solon and the tyrants, we are told, were responsible for the creation of a politically self-conscious citizenry (38), while their actions would seem to have robbed Cleisthenes of any but superficial credit for the regime associated with his name.

Ober’s analysis of the ancient evidence for the reforms of Cleisthenes advances along very conventional lines. In fact, Ober himself claims “that by sticking very closely to the primary sources it is possible to derive a plausible and internally coherent narrative that revolves around the Athenian people rather than their leaders” (34). The generous reader of this sentence will not conclude that Ober’s
goal was merely to establish if such a “plausible” interpretation was “possible” given the evidence, but rather that an honest attempt was made to evaluate the evidence before any conclusions were drawn. However, these conclusions may give this reader pause: Ober maintains that “the point at which Athenian democracy was born, was a violent, leaderless event: a three-day riot in 508/7 that resulted in the removal of King Cleomenes I and his Spartan troops from the soil of Attica” (36).

To arrive at this conclusion difficult and important historical questions are simply neglected. Thus Cleisthenes’ Alcmeonid background and his clan’s problematic relationship to the Peisistratid tyrants is swept away in two sentences and a footnote (37 with n. 6). The family’s connection rested on more than Cleisthenes’ archonship in 525 during the tyranny: Cleisthenes, after all, was the homonymous grandson of the tyrant of Sicyon, and his sister had been married to Peisistratus himself; moreover, after the revolution of 508/7 Cleisthenes’ government sought some kind of arrangement with Persia (Hdt. 5.73) and years later the Alcmeonids were accused of plotting to help the Persians (with whom Peisistratus’ son Hippias had taken refuge). Now Ober recognizes that the model of democratic politics from the Periclean or Demosthenic age will not apply to the late sixth century (37–38). And yet the ideology that developed during those ages was apparently already a historical factor to be reckoned with: thus Cleisthenes’ proposed reforms were enacted (probably through the Assembly) because “[t]he masses saw that these reforms would provide them with the institutional means to express more fully their growing sense of themselves as citizens” (38). Here the model of mass self-consciousness and unity calls forth the evidence of its own existence. The only other evidence Ober musters is Herodotus’ statement that the Athenians were all “thinking the same things” after the Spartans under Cleomenes seized the acropolis (see below).

Ober argues for contextualization elsewhere (see Chapter 10), and it may be well to consider the context of Greece in the late sixth century and the Alcmeonids’ arguably unique position in Athenian society and politics. The Athenians of 508/7 lived in a world where two kinds of poleis predominated: those ruled by more or less broad timocratic oligarchies (see Hanson) and those ruled by tyrannies. Demokratia was not part of the political landscape, thus when Cleisthenes “took the demos into partnership” after the experience of three or four years of narrow oligarchic rule and factional fighting (Hdt. 5.66.2), how were the people of Athens to interpret his action? Many, undoubtedly, described the movement in the only terms they possessed: Cleisthenes, the erstwhile ally (but late enemy) of the Peisistratids, will now likewise champion us (the people) against the aristocrats. To the Spartans, moreover, this new regime will have resembled nothing so much as a reinstitution of a Peisistratid-style tyranny by one of the clan’s former compatriots, and probably this is how Isagoras sold Cleomenes on another expedition to the north. The innovation of Cleisthenes (on this view) was his ability to combine an existing tyrannic tactic (championship of the demos against the aristocrats) with the basic structure of timocratic polis government (including property qualifications for office, and working council/assembly/magistrates), while making residence in Attic demes (as opposed to membership in clan-controlled phratries) the deciding criterion for citizenship.

The chronological issues of precisely when Cleisthenes actually made his proposals, and whether they were partially or fully enacted before the Athenian resistance to
Cleomenes and the Spartans, are brushed aside (40–1 with n. 12; 48), but only an answer to these questions will assure us of what the resisting Athenian boule and demos believed they may have been fighting to protect – leaving aside the very obvious possibility that they had no positive program in mind, but rather simply sought a removal of the particular aristocrats led by Isagoras (his stasiotai: Hdt.) and the invading force of their Spartan allies. The same can be said for the putative name of Cleisthenes’ regime (a very vexed question): since Ober utilizes democratic “ideology” in his explanation, he presumably assumes that the name demokratia existed in 507, or that it was created shortly thereafter by this act of “self-definition on the part of the demos itself” (35).

Perhaps most troubling is the view of the Athenian resistance to the Spartans’ attempt to overthrow the boule (probably Cleisthenes’ new boule of five hundred, although Ober is agnostic: 48). For Ober this was a leaderless and spontaneous “riot” of Athenian citizens after the Spartans under Cleomenes failed to dismantle the boule and seized the acropolis (43–46). Herodotus’ report that the Athenians were “all thinking the same things” for Ober “supports the idea of a generalized and quite highly developed civic consciousness among the Athenian masses – an ability to form and act on strong and communal views on political affairs” (44). But even if this ambitious exegesis were accepted it could not obscure the fact that there is absolutely no suggestion (much less an indication) of a mob or a riot in the accounts of Herodotus and Aristotle. Herodotus’ account (upon which Aristotle relied) is never presented as a whole by Ober, and it taken together suggests conclusions very different from those he draws.

...Cleomenes having arrived in Athens with a small force banished seven hundred families of the Athenians, which Isagoras had suggested to him. And having done these things, next he tried to dissolve the boule, and he was placing the official powers (archai) in the hands of three hundred partisans (stasiotai) of Isagoras. (2) But after the boule resisted and did not wish to obey, both Cleomenes and Isagoras and his partisans seized the acropolis. The remaining Athenians, having the same things in mind (ta auta phrowmenantes), besieged them for two days. On the third day, however many were Lacedaemonians departed from the country under treaty. (Hdt. 5.72.1–2)

In Aristotle the plethos is said to have been “collected together,” and the Spartans besieged and then allowed to leave the Athenian stronghold after three days under truce (Ath. Pol. 20.3). Now since Greek has perfectly good words for “mob” and “violent uprisings,” and since Herodotus and Aristotle did not use those terms, why should we infer their existence? Surely not even the “speech-act” theory requires the assumption of phantom mobs and riots?

It will perhaps be best to leave aside the issue of whether a “riot” (never testified to have occurred) of a “mob” (never testified to have existed) could have been “leaderless” (36). Yet one may note that Ober here relies on an argument from silence (Herodotus does not name any leaders: 42) buttressed by a historical example of another putative leaderless mob action: the French Revolution (48–50). The facts that the Athenian boule resisted the Spartans before the people expelled them and that the Third Estate/National Assembly refused to be disbanded by Louis XVI before the Bastille was stormed, are stripped of their causal significance.
In all this the effect of Austin’s speech-act theory is hardly palpable (cf. 47). But it perhaps reappears in the conclusion, where Cleisthenes is described as “not so much the authoritative leader of the revolution as...a highly skilled interpreter of statements made in a revolutionary context and of revolutionary action itself,” whose effectiveness rested “in his ability to ‘read’ – in a sensitive and perceptive way – the text of Athenian discourse in a revolutionary age, and to recognize that Athenian mass action had created new political facts” (52). Enough has been said about the evidence to show that this formulation bears it no resemblance, whatever its relationship to the “speech-act” model. [...]

In the end, the precise nature of Cleisthenes’ reforms and the reasons behind them may resist any compelling reconstruction, whether model-driven or not. Our sources simply do not provide enough information to paint a clear picture of the events. As much as it may surprise moderns steeped in the tradition of democracy, the Athenians apparently evinced very little interest in Cleisthenes and his reforms in the century or so after they occurred. As we have seen, Herodotus tells us little more than that Cleisthenes reformed the Athenian tribes and gave Athens 

\[
\text{demokratia} - \text{a term he uses rarely and in problematic ways}.15
\]

By the time fourth-century authorities like Aristotle became interested in Athens’ constitutional history and Athenian democracy per se, most important facts about Cleisthenes and the later reformer Ephialtes – the individuals moderns usually consider the crucial actors in the creation of Athenian democracy – simply could not be recovered. (Compare the fulsome traditions surrounding the tyrant Peisistratus and the lawgiver Solon.) The virtual vacuum of information about Cleisthenes that existed in antiquity suggests that extreme caution must be exercised in attempting to reconstruct the events of ca. 507 (much less the motives behind them).

Confronted with this situation, scholars attempting to analyze Cleisthenes’ reforms have tended to adopt one of two lines of inquiry. Either they have endeavored to infer the nature of the reforms from the name or banner ostensibly attached to them (isonomia or demokratia), or they have attempted to characterize Cleisthenes’ or the Athenians’ actions by pulling apart the ancient descriptions of the political reforms themselves.

Analysis of the possible name of the Cleisthenic regime for some time centered on the theory that Cleisthenes or his supporters put forward his reforms under the banner isonomia, and that this term reflected a putatively democratic concept (on this view) of something like “equality of the law.” Yet recent scholarship has suggested that we cannot confidently associate the term isonomia with Cleisthenes’ regime, nor, even if we knew Cleisthenes had employed this term, could we conclude that the polyvalent slogan tells us anything significant about the reforms. A term that sounded well in many contexts, isonomia could describe an aristocratic regime with “equal distribution of privileges” as well as serve as an epithet for demokratia.16

The term demokratia, which the Athenians used regularly after the mid-fifth century to describe their regime, has the best a priori support as the name Cleisthenes gave to his new government (assuming for the moment that he attached any banner to the reforms). However, we have no direct testimony to the existence of this term before about the 470s–460s, and the partisan or pejorative connotations of the term well into the second half of the fifth century make its adoption by Cleisthenes or his supporters less than attractive.17
In light of these facts, analysis of the reforms themselves would seem to offer the most potentially fruitful method for approaching the events of ca. 507. P. J. Rhodes, the foremost student of the Aristotelian Constitution of the Athenians (our best source for the reforms), provides a useful summary of such work:

There have been many attempts to make political sense of Cleisthenes' reforms by explaining why his tribal system should have been constructed as it was: the most fruitful are those which are based firmly on detailed knowledge of that construction . . . Cleisthenes will at least have “mixed up” the people, and have encouraged the unification of the state, by combining in one tribe men from different parts of Attica (it may be significant that the asty [= “city center”], where most of the families active in politics must have lived, was distributed through all ten tribes) . . . The old network of influences was one in which the Alcmaeonids were not well placed, and Cleisthenes could claim that he was doing away with unfair channels of influence . . ., while doing his own family a good turn; since their homes to the south of the city were assigned to three tribes, and the coastal strip towards Sunium, where they may have had land and dependants . . . was assigned to the same three tribes, it seems that in addition they were well placed in the new system and could count on seeing familiar faces in the meetings of their tribes.  

Such a view of the reforms provides some explanation for them without exceeding the meager testimony of our sources. In attempting to draw any further conclusions about the events ca. 508/7, one must be wary of allowing knowledge of Athens’ later democratic government to influence interpretations of the reforms’ motivations in the late sixth century: one cannot simply assume that Cleisthenes could have foreseen (much less that he would have approved of) the later changes that would give Athens a radically democratic regime. It is questionable whether Cleisthenes’ Hellas knew anything of state payment for public service or full citizenship without property qualifications, elements that would become virtually synonymous with Athenian demokratia after the mid-fifth century. As already noted, late sixth-century Greece offered only two basic alternatives for the organization of polis government: (1) a regime based on a more or less sovereign body of citizens (at least usually restricted to those holding some amount of property) and governed by magistrates selected from the more wealthy or aristocratic elements in the society 19 or (2) the repression of these traditional polis powers (elite magistrates and an assembly of citizens) via the rule of a tyrant or a narrow clique (dynasteia). Such tyrants could often rely on the support of the poorer elements of the commons (demos) to the extent that they protected or championed them in the face of aristocratic domination, a technique clearly employed (for example) by the Peisistratids in Athens. 20

When viewed within their context and not through the distorting lens of what Athens would become after 462/1, Cleisthenes’ reforms resemble nothing so much as an attempt to combine elements of tyrannic championship of the demos with traditional polis government. For the Athenian demos now gained power through Cleisthenes’ new boule of 500 (who would be chosen by lot from all citizens and who would prepare the business for the sovereign assembly) and perhaps through the ten new tribal assemblies. As Rhodes notes, the tribes themselves were microcosms of Attica since they comprised “thirds” (trittyes) drawn from three areas of Attica, and they served as the organizing force for much of the new Athenian regime, including the military and the selection of important officials like archons. Since the new tribes were created out of
whole cloth, they bypassed existing social and religious structures, and perhaps thereby offered more political scope to individuals inhibited by those structures.  

Yet Cleisthenes’ reforms also ensured that wealthier Athenians continued to enjoy important political privileges through the retention of Solon’s system of property qualifications for major magistracies (if not for service on the boulê itself).  

Moreover, although aristocratic power at the local level may have been weakened through the Cleisthenic regime’s “mixing” of different regional elements and its emphasis on the common demesmen’s role in determining citizenship (as opposed to its control by the presumably aristocratically dominated phratries), the aristocrats retained their property and their control of important cults.  Elite Athenians would therefore continue to wield significant influence in the regions where they held property as well as in the central government in Athens.

After the expulsion of the Peisistratids in 511/10, Athens had swung from a tyrannic regime based on championship of the demos and repression of (certain) aristocrats to an elite regime seemingly dominated by a few aristocratic clans. Cleisthenes arguably “split the difference” between these two political forms, offering something both to the common members of the demos and to wealthier Athenians, while avoiding what either group feared most: domination by certain elites in the absence of a champion to defend them (in the case of the demos) or domination by a tyrant who usurped aristocratic authority and prestige (in the case of the elites).

To the extent that Cleisthenes offered institutional power to a demos that previously had looked to the Peisistratid tyrants as defenders, one might conclude that his reforms had characteristics that (in retrospect) could be described as “democratic.” To the extent that he made no effort at massive economic or social reforms (especially the cancellation of debts or redistribution of land) and in fact retained a system of property qualifications that assured elite control of important offices, he might be seen as a more conservative reformer than Solon. For despite its popularity in ancient (and modern) accounts of Athens’ constitutional history, Solon’s radical cancellation of all debt had risked an elite revolt as well as an economic catastrophe, and ultimately had created (or at best not alleviated) the conditions that the Peisistratids exploited.

Cleisthenes sought a solution to Athens’ political problems and his own failure to dominate the current aristocratic environment by combining existing political principles and institutions in novel ways. That he ultimately intended for these reforms to improve the position of his own clan, in part by making the Alcmeonid family the obvious patrons of the newly empowered demos, is a reasonable if not provable assumption. If so, he apparently failed in his attempt, for the credited founder of demokratia disappears from history soon after his reforms, and the Alcmeonid clan suffered a series of political setbacks until Cleisthenes’ nephew Pericles found a new way to champion the demos.

NOTES

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3 Vidal-Naquet modifies this position slightly in the preface to the new English edition of the work, but the text remains unaltered: Cleisthenes the Athenian, trans. D. A. Curtis (New Jersey 1996), xxxiv–xxxv.


5 Other “Great Men” appear elsewhere in Ober’s work, including Themistocles (64) and even Pericles (65–66, but cf. 54). Pericles’ insights are nonetheless limited to the military sphere and the invention of “grand strategy” – no such credit is given to him in the arena of politics. Athenian leaders are elsewhere allowed to create military strategies while “the polis of Athens” is credited with discovering “in democratic politics a way to broaden the base of the social order” (70).

6 This is true elsewhere as well. In Chapter 8 Ober writes as if he finds the method of M. H. Hansen objectionable (109), but in fact his substantive criticisms often involve practice (115–117), i.e., what conclusion should be drawn from a given piece of evidence. In Chapter 7 (93–94) he engages in conventional analysis to show that Demostenes 21 Against Meidias was actually delivered. Here, however, he never treats the possibility that Demostenes might have finished the speech without ever delivering (or even intending to deliver) it publicly. (Such an act would be understandable if he actually took a bribe not to prosecute Meidias, as Aeschines 3.51–52 implies (cf. Plut. Dem. 12).) We are instead presented in the text with the false alternatives of an unfinished and unpublished speech, or a finished and delivered speech (but cf. his notes 16 and 17).

7 This initiative cannot be attributed to “the people,” since they seem to have rejected such a Persian connection when it was put before them (Hdt. 5.73.3).

8 Ober’s confidence in the existence of this ideology also provides a unique solution to the problem of the lack of extant texts describing democratic theory from ancient Athens. Ober opines that “the simplest hypothesis is . . . [that] few such texts ever existed,” and that such texts were unnecessary in Athens because “democratic ideology so dominated the political landscape that formal democratic theory was otiose” (147–48). The “simplest hypothesis” is of course that no such texts existed, though it is ingenious to argue from the absence of evidence for a given ideology’s theoretical support that the ideology pervaded the “political landscape.” Can we, after all, complain about the scanty evidence for Cleisthenes’ reforms (34) only to postulate a “growing sense of themselves as citizens” among the Athenians?

9 Instead, they are treated as just another “fine old family” (40). But the Alcmeonids apparently stood outside the narrow Eupatridai who controlled cults (among other things), and moreover are the only Athenian family known to have suffered from a curse. See Fornara and Samons (note 4), 1–24.

10 For tyrants (including Peisistratus) as champions of the farming class, see Hanson, 114–15, 471–72 (n. 21), with literature.


The passage perhaps deserves quotation: “With the *boule* having offered resistance and the people having been collected together (*sunathvoisthentos*), those around Cleomenes and Isagoras fled into the acropolis, and the *demos* sitting down (*proskatbezomenos*, i.e., in before the acropolis) besieged (*epoilovzet*) them for two days. On the third day they released Cleomenes and all those with him under treaty (*hupospondous*).” The military flavor of this passage suggests a picture far different from a riot. Ober wishes to read the passive participle *sunathvoisthentos* reflexively, i.e., the “mob gathered itself together”: 45 with n. 20.


Hdt. 5.69, 6.131.1 (*demokratia*). Herodotus employs the noun *demokratia* in only one other passage (6.43.3); there he describes Persian-imposed regimes that replaced tyrannies in Asia Minor that can hardly have been “democracies” in the Athenian sense. These passages, Herodotus’ failure to use *demokratia* in his famous debate on forms of government (3.80–82), and his rare use of the verbal form of the term (4.187.2, 6.43.3) suggest that the meaning of *demokratia* had yet to crystallize (at least outside Athens) by the time of Herodotus’ composition.

See Fornara and Samons (note 4), 41–8, 166–7 with bibliography.


Such regimes are sometimes referred to as “democracies,” since they accepted the principle of popular control of the state (via the vote in citizen assemblies) and may have had relatively low property qualifications: cf. E. Robinson, *The First Democracies: Early Popular Government outside Athens*, Historia Einz. 107 (Stuttgart 1997). However, no evidence suggests that the term *demokratia* developed elsewhere before its emergence in (early fifth-century?) Athens, and Athenian *demokratia* eventually possessed a combination of specific qualities (the absence of a property qualification for citizenship, heavy reliance on the lottery for selecting officials, and extensive use of payment for public service) that would help define *demokratia* and would distinguish Athens’ classical regime from other popular governments.

The Peisistratids apparently enjoyed popular support throughout their reign, a fact that deserves emphasis since it illustrates the difference between the political environments of sixth- and fifth-century Hellas. Opposition to the Peisistratid tyrants came from (some) Athenian aristocrats and the Spartans, while the Athenian *demos* failed to rise up against the family even after Hippias became “harsh” (one may infer that only the aristocrats felt the severity of his rule after his brother’s assassination in 514). The association of “tyrants” with aristocratic/oligarchic forces or political ideals developed later (in the fifth century), when *demokratia* could be characterized as a force opposing both tyranny and oligarchy.

However, one must remember that the tribal assemblies met in the city of Athens itself, and families with strong city-center connections (including the Alcmeonids) probably benefited from this arrangement.

For the qualifications for service on the *boule* and the possibility of property qualifications for service before ca. 462/1, see P. J. Rhodes, *The Athenian Boule* (revised ed.; Oxford 1985), 1–16.

In fact, the major religious structures in Athens (including the four old Ionian tribes) remained in place after Cleisthenes’ reforms.
25 For the Alcmeonid family’s subsequent history, see Fornara and Samons (note 4), esp. 17–36.

Further reading


