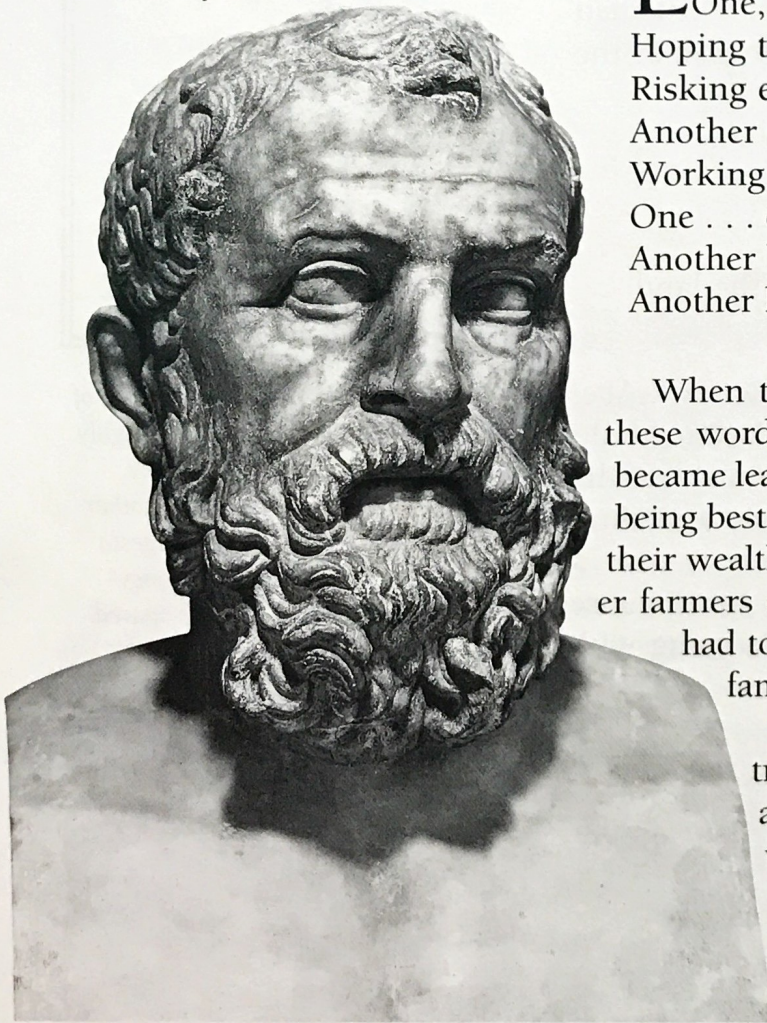


CHAPTER 8

WHO'S IN CHARGE HERE? THE RISE OF ATHENS

“ SOLON,
HERODOTUS, AND
A POPULAR
ATHENIAN SONG

“ Solon, *Elegies*, early sixth century BCE



Each man exerts himself differently:
One, tempest-tossed, travels the fishy sea
Hoping to bring some profit home,
Risking exhaustion, even death.
Another plows the wooded land year in, year out,
Working for hire, caring for the curved plows.
One . . . earns his living with his hands,
Another becomes wonderfully wise;
Another has become a prophet thanks to Lord Apollo.

When the Athenian poet and politician Solon wrote these words, his hometown was in sorry shape. People became leaders by being born into the ruling class, not by being best able to govern. With their political power and their wealth, the rich leaders could easily drive the poorer farmers out of business. Bankrupt farmers sometimes had to sell themselves into slavery in order for their families to survive.

The people of the middle classes—craftsmen, traders, and prosperous farmers—weren't quite as badly off as the bankrupt farmers, but they were kept out of the government and resented their exclusion.

In some Greek *poleis*, problems like these had led to revolutions and tyrannies. The Athenians were worried that the same might happen in their *polis*, so they took an unusual step: in about 600 BCE they decided to entrust one wise, honest man with the task of straightening things out. This man would be allowed to do whatever he thought was necessary, without having to get approval from anyone else. They settled on

Solon (who later became known as one of the “Seven Wise Men of Greece”) as the best man for the job.

Solon’s immediate concern was the economy. One of his first accomplishments was to cancel the land debts that had forced people into slavery. This didn’t make Solon many friends in the upper classes, but he had more important matters to deal with than the anger of a few rich landowners.

Next, Solon passed a law freeing all the Athenians who had become enslaved. He later wrote of this accomplishment with obvious pride:

I brought back to their native city, god-built Athens,
Those who had been sold, . . . and as for those
Who suffered shameful slavery here at home
And trembled daily at their masters’ whims,
I made them free too.

Another of his important acts was to encourage trading. This was the start of Athens’s importance as a trading center.

Solon also developed a system based on dividing society into four classes. How much income a man made determined which class he and his family were in. Men from the two highest classes could hold the most important government positions. Men from the third class could hold lower offices.

Up until then, class was determined by birth: if your father was upper class, so were you, no matter how much (or how little) money you earned. And what was truly revolutionary was Solon’s declaration that free men from *all* social classes could vote and serve on juries. (It didn’t occur to anyone that women should be allowed to vote. That came much



The scene on this krater, a jar or a vase, shows a pottery workshop, where skilled artisans made pots, dishes, and vases. Well-made pottery was so highly prized that people requested wares made by a specific craftsman and painted by a certain painter.

“ Solon, *Elegies*, early sixth century BCE

Athena is the goddess of war and patron deity of Athens. As goddess of war, she wears a helmet.



demos + cratia =
 “people” + “rule”
 “Democracy” means “rule
 by the people.”

later—thousands of years later, in most countries.) The jury system meant that the community was more involved in legal decisions than in the old system, where a single judge could decide guilt or innocence and punishment.

Modern definitions of the word **democracy** tell us that in this system, people of different social classes and income levels all have the same rights. So it might seem that Solon’s reforms didn’t really lead to democracy. But before Solon, when all that mattered was what family you came from, there was no chance for a poor man to move up in the world. Solon’s system, which was based on income instead of birth, gave people a reason to work harder: to get a bigger role in politics.

Not everyone was thrilled with Solon’s reforms. Many aristocrats were angry that somebody from a lower social class could catch up to them politically. And throughout history, people from all sections of society sometimes have difficulty with change, even if the change looks as if it will make their lives better.

So other forms of government were tested in Athens and elsewhere. During the transition between the rule of the oligarchs and the growth of the *poleis*, many times it wasn’t

clear who was running things. In some cases, a powerful man seized power from the oligarchs, often with the support of the middle and lower classes. He was known as a *tyrannos*, or “tyrant.” Today, the word “tyrant” means a ruler who governs in an oppressive, unjust, or cruel way. But to the Greeks, a *tyrannos* was originally just a ruler with absolute power—one who came into power by seizing it, not by being born into it or elected.

The tyrant didn't have to obey any rules. The Greeks didn't think that there was necessarily anything bad about this. Naturally, some tyrants abused their power. This wasn't always the case, however, and some tyrants were apparently good rulers. Some Greeks were relieved to have the oligarchs out of the way and gladly supported a tyrant who got into power because of his personality and strengths, not by just happening to be born into the right family. They also knew that a tyrant had to keep the people happy, or they would stop supporting him and either establish a different form of government or help another tyrant take his place.

One of the most successful tyrants was a clever Athenian named Peisistratus. He first got into power by wounding himself and his mules and then asking for bodyguards to protect him from his (imaginary) enemies. He used these bodyguards to help him seize power. He ruled Athens for about five years and then was kicked out. This was always a risk for tyrants—they made enemies easily. But he came up with a plan to get back into power: he got a tall, beautiful woman to dress in armor, and she drove a chariot into Athens. The historian Herodotus wrote in his *Histories*:

As they approached the city, the criers . . . shouted, “Athenians! Give a warm welcome to Peisistratus! Athena has honored him above all other men and is herself bringing him back to her own acropolis!” . . . [T]he city dwellers, in the belief that this woman was the goddess herself, worshiped a human being and welcomed Peisistratus.

“ Herodotus, *Histories*, mid-fifth century BCE

Herodotus said that he could hardly believe that people as smart as the Athenians fell for such a ridiculous trick.

THE SWORD OF DAMOCLES

One powerful tyrant was Dionysius of Syracuse in Sicily, who was so free from the customary rules of Greek society that one day he married two women in a single ceremony. When his friend Damocles expressed jealousy of a tyrant's freedom, Dionysius set before him a beautiful table filled with delicious food. At first Damocles was delighted, but when he looked up, he was horrified to see a sharp sword dangling over his neck attached only to a thread. This way Dionysius, who had many enemies, showed that having great power also placed a man in great danger.

As the symbol of Athena, the owl was a wise choice for an image on this Athenian coin of the late sixth or early fifth century BCE.



As tyrant, Peisistratus was most interested in building up the Athenian economy. He loaned money and even gave away land to people who needed it. He encouraged the export of pottery, one of the greatest Athenian crafts. Athenian pottery from the age of Peisistratus has been found as far away as Spain and Syria. This increased trade helped Athens become even more powerful.

Peisistratus or one of his sons was the first ruler to mint the silver coins with the face of Athena on one side and an owl on the other that became the most trusted money in the Greek world. People knew that this coin was pure silver and worth as much money as it was supposed to represent, so many preferred Athenian coins to any other.

Peisistratus also supported the arts. He paid for temples to be built and for plays to be performed. During his reign, vase painters reached one of their highest points as artists.

After Peisistratus died in 527 BCE, his sons Hippias and Hipparchus took over as tyrants. But the Athenians were starting to resent the absolute rule of the Peisistratus family, and in 514 BCE, Hipparchus was assassinated by two men named Harmodius and Aristogiton. The two tyrannicides were declared heroes. A popular song celebrated their action:

I will carry my sword in a bough of myrtle
Just as Harmodius and Aristogiton did
When they killed the tyrants
And put Athens on a just footing.

Hippias was forced to flee Athens a few years later.

As an Englishman said more than 2,000 years after the rise of the Greek tyrants, "Power tends to corrupt and

“ A popular Athenian song, about 514 BCE

absolute power corrupts absolutely.” It is very tempting for someone who isn’t governed by any laws to get a little relaxed about the difference between right and wrong. Some Greeks resented these absolute rulers and the word *tyrannos* took on the negative meaning that “tyrant” has today.

But oddly, the tyranny of Peisistratus proved to be a first step toward democracy, or government by the people. During his rule, elections continued to be held (although the tyrant’s friends got elected in suspiciously large numbers) and juries kept hearing cases. So once Peisistratus and his sons were gone, the Athenians were able to take the next steps toward full democracy.

It was as a prosperous democracy that Athens entered the fifth century BCE. The Athenians would need prosperity and a strong government to face the challenges ahead of them.



MEANWHILE IN SOUTH ASIA . . .

Prosperity wasn’t important to everyone in the ancient world. Born in the Kosala kingdom, near the border of modern Nepal and India, Prince Gautama was raised in luxury. He grew disturbed at the thought of illness, old age, and death, and left his wife and son to search for truth and the meaning of life. By fasting, meditating, and living simply, he reached the understanding he was seeking.

He became known as the Buddha, or enlightened one, and encouraged his followers to find peace by rejecting material comforts. The belief system known as Buddhism, based on the Buddha’s teachings, spread from India to the rest of Asia and is now practiced all over the world.



Harmodius and Aristogiton assassinated the tyrant Hipparchus in 514 BCE. Harmodius (right) was killed during the assassination, and Aristogiton (left) was captured and tortured to death.