

Cleisthenes

The Family Curse behind Athenian Democracy

THE ATHENIANS WHO TRIED SOCRATES for impiety in 399 BCE and found him guilty were heirs to a set of democratic practices that had been in existence for a little over a century. The breakthrough to what we would recognize today as a democratic form of government had come around the year 507, when an Athenian aristocrat named Cleisthenes suddenly emerged as a leader and guided the Athenians through a series of reforms. But Cleisthenes was not the first democratic reformer; he was building upon foundations laid by generations of Greeks before him.

As is the case with most figures in Greek history, especially Greek history before the wars with Persia in the first half of the fifth century, we can know very little about Cleisthenes as an individual, just as we know little about how he persuaded the Athenians to implement the changes he proposed. The limited knowledge we do have about Cleisthenes stems from what is probably best considered an oral tradition of Athenian history that encompasses both fact and fiction. It was fifth-century Greek historians such as Hecataeus and Herodotus who first recorded the oral traditions about the more distant Athenian past; the historical genre was further developed by Thucydides, who mainly reported contemporary events but sometimes paused to digress about well-known stories from the past that illuminated the present. The main story connected to Cleisthenes preserved in Thucydides and Herodotus concerns his lineage, an aristocratic

family that had long been accursed. Cleisthenes and his family—the Alcmaeonidae—lived under a shadow of suspicion because of an act of impiety committed by a distant ancestor. The tradition related how, at a pivotal moment in the history of Athens, two opposing political groups came face to face at a shrine sacred to the city’s gods. In the ensuing clash, members of one faction killed some men who had taken refuge at a public altar. The egregious act of impiety had serious political repercussions, and it resulted in what came to be known as the “curse of the Alcmaeonidae” (Herodotus 5.70–72; Thucydides 1.126).

The details of this episode as reported by Herodotus and Thucydides may not be entirely trustworthy, and we will never know for certain what exactly happened in the middle of the seventh century, the traditional date for when the curse was initially called down. But the larger story behind this curse and the way the curse reportedly came about does reveal a good deal about the world the Greeks inhabited, and their assumptions about this world. An analysis of these assumptions can then uncover the very human hopes and fears of the Athenians who over time fashioned what later generations would come to know as democracy. This chapter provides a first glimpse into that ancient world.

THE LAY OF THE LAND

The Athens that we are familiar with today is the sprawling, sunny Mediterranean metropolis near the Aegean. It spreads itself out below the remains of temples perched high atop the Acropolis. The city recently remade itself into a cosmopolitan international destination as it prepared for the twenty-eighth modern Olympic games in 2004. But this modern urban center has a continuous history of human settlement that stretches back without break for at least 3,500 years, as construction projects for the new underground subway revealed. The period that brought democracy to the world occurred more than 2,500 years ago, in the fifth century. The emergence of democracy in Athens was not an inevitable outcome but rather the result of countless decisions made over many generations—the responses of real people to real and pressing situations. The all-too-human impulses of fear and sometimes greed motivated them to make the decisions they did, as did the wish to enjoy life in the present while ensuring that their families and descendants would thrive in generations yet to come.

But in the changeable environment of the ancient Mediterranean it was not easy to establish a stable government. A traveler to Athens and

its neighbors in the fifth century would have seen a landscape dominated by mountains, islands, and the sea, looking much as it does today. Isolated harbors and valleys sheltered small villages and encouraged the development of localized dialects and customs. Mountains made regular travel over land difficult, or at least inefficient and time-consuming, while the jagged coastline of islands, gulfs, and harbors offered safe anchorage for ships that regularly sailed the surrounding waters. The Athenians, like many other Greek-speaking peoples, relied on the sea for their livelihood. As much as the political and social circumstances changed during the course of the fifth century, the connection to the sea remained essential for Athenians.

Patterns of settlement and land use on the mainland and the islands of Greece were dictated by the landscape and its relationship to climate. Mainland Greece and the islands received little rainfall, and Attica, the name for the countryside surrounding the city of Athens, was among the driest areas, with as little annual rain as falls in some of the drier regions of the U.S. desert Southwest. The prevailing Mediterranean wind came in from the west, and Attica, being on the east side of a mountain range, received even less rainfall than some of its immediate neighbors. The arable land in the plains of Attica stretched between the mountains and the sea, and it was highly valued for the cultivation of grains—primarily barley, but wheat and rye were also grown. Wheat was the preferred cereal because it was a finer grain when milled, but barley was the preferred crop because it was more drought tolerant. When the rains did arrive, they came in November or December and fell until early March. During these wet winter months farmers planted and cultivated the grain crops, and sailors stayed off the stormy seas. During the long, windy, and dry summers the sailors, traders, and itinerant craftsmen turned to their ships, while farmers tended their principal warm weather crops: figs, olives, and grapes.

Because the availability of good, arable land was so limited, the plains were not used for pasture. Consequently, there were precious few herds of cattle, an important fact with implications for both diet and religious life that will be discussed in more detail in chapter 2. Only the richest aristocrats kept and bred horses. Sheep and goats were much more common, and these herds were pastured above the plains in the uplands, and even further up in the mountains during the warm summer months. Herd animals were bred and maintained primarily for the goods they produced year-round—wool and milk—and only secondarily for their meat. The demands of animal sacrifice were stipulated in the traditional civic calen-

dar of religious festivals, and they were based on the implicit recognition that resources were scarce.

The deities in the polytheistic system of the ancient Greeks ranged from the most powerful and widely recognized gods to lesser known, local spirits. The gods and goddesses of ancient Greece mirrored both the natural environment that the people relied on to make their living and the social world that governed the daily lives of real men and women. Some were gods whose power over the natural world lay in those agricultural resources that the Greek diet so heavily depended on—for example, Demeter, the goddess of cereal crops; Athena, who oversaw the cultivation of the olive; and Dionysus, the god of the vine and the production of wine. There were also lesser deities like Pan, who oversaw the work of shepherds, and the innumerable nymphs who imbued the springs that streamed from the hills and snowy mountaintops.

While the gods that the Greeks worshipped can reveal to us the resources that they valued, at the same time we can today discern a good deal about human social relations in ancient Greece by analyzing the interactions among these gods. A whole panoply of deities was arranged into an elaborate and interconnected family headed by the supreme patriarch Zeus, “father of gods and men” as he was called by the traditional poets Homer and Hesiod. Zeus the divine patriarch had authority over all the immortals (with the notable exception of three ancient goddesses called the Fates) and over all the earthly mortals. Zeus ruled the other deities not because he was the oldest, or the wisest, and not because he had a special connection to the land and the natural environment of Greece. Zeus ruled because he had successfully wrenched power from his father, Cronus. Cronus had once done the very same thing when he became ruler over his father, Uranus. This mythic pattern of an intergenerational power struggle between male deities and their fathers occurs in neighboring eastern Mediterranean cultures; contemporary scholars call it the Succession Myth. As heir to the Succession Myth, which required the son to dethrone his father (often with the duplicitous assistance of his mother), Zeus modeled a pattern of behavior that was unconsciously and consciously imitated by generations of Greek men. Certainly mortals did not kill their fathers (or even wish to), but in the natural order of things the son grows up and takes the father’s place in the world and thus symbolically defeats him.

This mythic social order that Zeus modeled placed power in the hands of a few who needed the obedience and labor of many others to maintain the status quo and keep the world from returning to a primeval state of

chaos. Viewed within the economies of archaic and classical Athens, the pattern manifested itself in the small fraction of men—those of a hereditary, aristocratic class—who governed everybody else. The category “everybody else” embraced many different subcategories, including less well-to-do ordinary citizens, some of whom were small landholders and independent farmers, while others worked as sharecroppers in a semifeudal system, cultivating land belonging to a wealthier class. The most unfortunate became debt bondsmen, who lost their liberty and citizen privileges until they could repay their debt. “Everybody else” also meant noncitizen but free resident aliens called metics, many of whom were specialized and professional craftsmen who worked in Athens or its port. Finally, all the slaves, regardless of where they labored, all the women, and all children counted as “everybody else,” too. There were far more people in this category of “everybody else” than there were actual citizens. At best only 25 percent of the total population of classical Athens were citizens with full political privileges.

Because running farms was labor-intensive, many people lived in the countryside villages of Attica; but by the end of the sixth century, Athens was a small urban center that existed in a mutually dependent and beneficial relationship with the outlying rural districts, called demes. Athens was the recognized name for the larger autonomous civic entity called the *polis* (city-state), and it was a large town that contained the seat of centralized government for that *polis*. The surrounding countryside of Attica encompassed hills and mountains as well as the broad plains with their scattered districts, villages, and towns extending from the Aegean Sea in the south and east to the mountains in the north and west. When scholars speak of Athenian democracy, Athenian citizens, or the Athenian empire, they are referring both to the urban center of Athens and to the rural districts of Attica. Neither could exist without the other.

Athens as a city looked like many other cities in archaic and classical Greece. It lay in a broad plain between two ranges of hills. The plain was no more than 10 miles wide, and in the middle of the plain stood a small cluster of hills. An outcropping of bedrock, the Acropolis, towered above the hills and the plain (figure 1). An acropolis, literally the “peak of the city,” had the obvious advantage of being an easily defensible height and a natural fortress; acropolises were sites of palace complexes as far back as Mycenaean times, before the thirteenth century. Other major urban centers in Greece had this same topographical feature—cities such as Corinth to the south of Athens, and Thebes to the north. Athens and the Acrop-



Figure 1. Athens: the Acropolis with the Parthenon viewed from the south. Photo by author.

olis had the further natural advantage of being situated only 4 miles due north of the harbor of Phaleron, and only 5 miles from a complex of three natural harbors to the southwest, collectively called the Piraeus. In the fifth century, Athens and its harbors were physically linked by the construction of defensive walls. These walls would play an important role in the course of the Peloponnesian War later in the fifth century.

The overall picture, then, might well resemble a walled city in medieval Europe. Classical Athens was a well-fortified but small (by our standards) urban center with temples, markets, and the seat of the democratic institutions alongside urban neighborhoods with their homes, businesses, and workshops. Further suburban neighborhoods and businesses developed outside the fortifications. Cemeteries and other sacred precincts were also traditionally found outside the city walls. Farms and villages in the outlying districts of Attica were all interconnected, but these villages maintained direct contact primarily with Athens, since the city housed the central markets, the assemblies, and the law courts that formed the backbone of Athenian democracy. The most important public shrines of the gods

were also located in the center of Athens. This relationship between one city and the surrounding countryside created a type of centripetal energy that moved toward Athens. Such an arrangement was unusual among Greek cities, which more often organized themselves along an axis with two or more public centers—one center for cultic activity and another for commercial and political activity.

RESOURCES, COLONIES, AND CULTURAL CONTACTS

For all the natural advantages enjoyed by Athens, life in the archaic and classical city still entailed hard work. More often than not the majority of residents were familiar with poverty, privation, and the ever-present threat of hunger. Starting with Hesiod's seventh-century poem *Works and Days*, Greek literature explored the themes of man's never-ceasing labor and the suffering that accompanies human existence. Alongside the toil Hesiod also presented traditional tales of the Olympian gods and goddesses, and the very different sort of existence that they led. Hesiod remained a favorite poet of the Athenians throughout the fifth century; along with Homer, Hesiod was often quoted by Socrates.

But the Greeks were well aware that human life need not always be so tough. While the farmers throughout Attica maintained their rough, traditional way of life for many generations, by the late sixth century the commercial center of Athens had developed a thriving import and export economy, and a merchant class became acquainted with new prosperity. Athens' chief export products were wine, the finest olive oil, and exquisitely rendered ceramic ware, the famous black-figure and red-figure vases that were so prized during antiquity throughout the Mediterranean basin. Athens was also fully exploiting natural resources from its silver mines at Laurium, in the southern hills in the direction of Cape Sounion. With this silver the *polis* minted hard currency (a relatively recent innovation) and used that money in foreign trade.

Even with all the wealth generated by these various resources, famine remained a continual threat. Although the plains of Attica were fertile enough when the rains fell, some years brought drought, and there simply was not enough consistently arable acreage to feed a burgeoning population. The Athenians were faced with constant pressure to import grain, and to export residents to colonies around the Mediterranean basin. The need to colonize and expand had been a factor in the larger Greek world since at least the tenth century. At that time Greeks began to settle other lands

around the Mediterranean, founding cities such as Corcyra (modern Corfu), Cyrene on the North Africa coast (today's Libya), Syracuse in Sicily, and Naples in Italy. Even a city as far west as Marseilles on the coast of France started out as a Greek colony. To the east, Greek settlements spanned the entire coast of Asia Minor (now Turkey) around to Byzantium (Istanbul), famously situated along the trade route to the Black Sea. Athens was not prominent among the colonizers of the Archaic period; Corinth and the Euboean cities of Chalcis and Eretria took that honor. But colonization of a new sort would become an Athenian focus later in the fifth century.

When centuries of colonization did not fully alleviate the pressure of the growing population of Attica, the Athenians started importing considerable amounts of grain. The importation of this staple had unforeseen economic and social repercussions. The continual need to import grain kept pressure on the silver mines at Laurium, which made possible the hard currency that could be used to purchase foreign cereals. Mining at Laurium in turn maintained the demand for expendable slave labor—the mines at Laurium were notorious for their cruel conditions. The institution of slavery itself depended on vigorous foreign trade, and slave dealers exploited foreigners from overseas markets. But the need to import so much grain had important implications for Athenian foreign policy as well. Some grain came from Greek colonies in Sicily and southern Italy, which were considerably less arid than mainland Greece and far more fertile. But most imported grain came from what the Greeks considered the breadbasket of their world: the expansive and fertile plains north of the Black Sea in the area that today constitutes Ukraine. Grain was shipped from Black Sea ports, through the straits of the Bosphorus and the Hellespont, and then across the Aegean Sea. The constant need to import grain encouraged the growth of an energetic maritime industry, and it also meant that Athens felt a compelling interest to preserve open trade routes.

Wherever the Greeks went as colonists and traders, they carried with them their institutions and their distinct culture. This meant first of all the Greek language and the oral traditions that stretched back generations into the heroic past of the Homeric warriors who had fought at Troy. Hand in hand with this mythology went the ancestral customs of religion and cult practice, the regular and obligatory rituals through which Greeks maintained contact with their ancestral gods. Finally, tightly interwoven with religious customs were the political and legal structures. In fact, the same word, *nomos*, designates religious custom as well as civil law. Although these

two concepts are considered quite different in today's Western democracies, throughout ancient Greece the customs, or *nomoi*, of civic governance and ritual observance reinforced each other. This complete interdependence of religious and political institutions is perhaps for us today the most strange and unexpected feature of democratic Athens. Accustomed as we are to a post-Enlightenment form of democracy with its separation of church and state, we take for granted that the daily functions of government stand well apart from the priestly functions of ritual and prayer. Yet for any Greek *polis*, from the most traditional monarchy to the most radical democracy, such a separation was simply inconceivable. This interdependence was as strong in the later centuries of Mediterranean antiquity as in the earliest, and many famous episodes in Greek history bear witness to it.

Polis is a Greek word most often translated as "city-state." *Polis* is the ancestor of such English words as "politics," "political," and "politician." A *polis* was, quite simply, an independent and autonomous body of citizens, or *politeis*. Some *poleis* (plural) were ruled by hereditary kings or tyrants, some were oligarchies ruled by an ancestral aristocracy, and by the early fifth century a very few were self-ruling democracies. In the fifth century there were literally hundreds of *poleis* in the Greek world. Most were small municipalities, indeed more like large market towns than nation-states. Athens was exceptional for its large size: 930 square miles, nearly the size of the state of Rhode Island (1,045 square miles). Athens' principal rival, Sparta, was likewise an unusually large *polis* in terms of land area, though nowhere near as large as Athens in its combined citizen/resident population.

The political boundaries of Athens developed in slow stages from the eighth to the sixth centuries. Like much of Hellas after the fall of the Mycenaean palace culture in the twelfth century, Attica before the eighth century was a collection of insignificant and impoverished villages that were beginning to come together and establish a distinct identity. The continual scarcity of resources over the generations created a polarized society that was composed of a small class of elite nobles and a much larger class of less well-to-do citizens who competed with the aristocracy for political power. The aristocracy drew its strength from lands in the outlying rural districts in Attica while ruling from the chief urban center of Athens. Border disputes with neighboring *poleis* were common.

Establishing and maintaining conspicuous religious sites throughout Attica became a way for Athenians to mark the frontiers of the *polis*. Rural villages often contained sanctuaries—land, altars, temples, and sometimes

entire building complexes set aside for the traditional worship of the gods. Long before Athenian power in the Mediterranean reached its peak in the fifth century, Athens took control of sanctuaries near other *poleis* in the rural countryside of Attica. Examples of significant border sanctuaries in Attica include the sanctuary of Artemis at Brauron on the eastern coast, the sanctuaries of Athena and Poseidon at Cape Sounion on the southern tip of the Attica peninsula, the sanctuary of Demeter at Eleusis on the western border with Megara, and the much-contested sanctuary of Amphiaras on the northern border between Attica and Boeotia. Chapter 4 will examine one of these sites, the sanctuary of Demeter at Eleusis, in fuller detail, and chapter 6 will describe the complex interaction of religion and politics surrounding a religious tradition that was associated with a “foreign” god, Dionysus, who reportedly entered Athens from the borderlands to the north and east.

In earlier times these sites on the frontiers of Attica had housed local cults that were politically independent of Athens; but as Athenian territory grew and its borders became better defined, both political and religious power became centralized in Athens. While rites continued to be celebrated at border sanctuaries as they had always been, the official homes of these cults were transferred to new civic sanctuaries constructed in the civic center of Athens. One conspicuous example is the city’s Eleusinion, an urban sanctuary sacred to the goddess Demeter, whose main cult site was located on the western border of Attica in the town of Eleusis. The reorganization of these border sanctuaries during the Archaic period enabled political and religious authority to radiate out from the center to the margins of the *polis*. The *polis*’s political boundaries were sharpened and defined by Athens’ official religious and political connections to ancient rural cults.

THE REFORMS OF SOLON AND THEIR POLITICAL AFTERMATH

Although the political boundaries of Athens probably had stabilized by around 700, Athenian democracy did not emerge whole and fully formed; Athenian democracy was not the inevitable outcome of what scholars call the synoecism of Attica, or the union of its separate communities to form a single, larger sovereign community. The classical *polis* of fifth-century Athens, with all its political and religious institutions for which we now have so much physical and literary evidence, was the result of centuries of

slow change punctuated by a few moments of major innovation. In some ways the stress of these slow changes left indelible marks that even the most radical expressions of democracy could not erase. The most visible of these marks points to the gap between the various economic classes of Athenians. The distinctions between the elite aristocrats and the common people were preserved in the rituals, offices, and hierarchies of the *polis*.

For the generations leading up to the Classical period, the main distinctions recognized among the male inhabitants of Attica highlighted the links between civic, military, and economic status. A typical citizen in the *polis* of archaic Athens was an adult freeborn male who owned land in Attica and was not a debt bondsman working on someone else's land. Some of these citizens were quite successful, while others might live more precariously, subject to changeable weather and the unpredictable success of crops, but they at least maintained enough wealth to own the weapons and armor of a warrior. Their limited resources enabled them to serve as hoplites, or armed infantrymen. A small number of poor citizens owned no land at all and could not afford even the most basic armor; these men, called *thētes*, worked purely as hired laborers and their civic roles in the *polis* were the most restricted. There were also citizens with considerably more wealth. A small number of elite families owned enough land to raise horses, and these nobles served in the citizen army as "horsemen," *hippeis*, or knights. This three-tiered citizen body made up the foundation of most *poleis* in archaic Greece, not just Athens.

Where Athens began to diverge from the other Greek *poleis* in the Archaic period was in its slow development of governing procedures that gradually gave political power, *kratos*, to the common citizens, called the *dēmos*, in English "the people." Combining these two words produces *dēmokratia*, hence our word "democracy"—the "power of the people." The first round of significant pre-democratic changes came during the rule of Solon early in the sixth century. Solon was a traditional aristocrat, but during his year of elected rule as archon or chief executive magistrate (traditionally dated to 594/3) he initiated the passage of a series of laws that had a profound and lasting impact on Athenian society. While many details of the changes remain lost to us today, we know their broad outlines: the Solonian laws encompassed fundamental changes to the life of all inhabitants of Attica, changes that affected areas ranging from religious rites to homicide laws to a new definition of citizen status. Recognizing the corrosive effects that debt had wrought on the common citizens—particularly since debt was so easily incurred by farmers trying to cultivate crops in the

unpredictable climate of Attica—Solon banned debt slavery and freed any existing debt slaves. Solon then banned all agricultural exports, with the notable exception of olive oil, thereby encouraging better use of the available arable land.

Religious reforms were central to the Solonian reform program. Solon pushed through sumptuary legislation that limited the extravagance of funerals, which had become elaborate public events designed to display power and were potentially disruptive, especially when a member of the aristocracy was buried and the streets were full of grieving crowds and wailing women. Solon then revised and published a new, standardized civic calendar of religious festivals for the residents of Attica, and he redefined the distribution of ritual privileges among the economic classes. Again, the inclusion of this sort of religious reform runs counter to our notion of the role of government in public life, and we are reminded that *nomos* in Athens encompassed both of the modern categories “church” and “state.” Public life in the Greek *polis* demanded citizen participation in ritual, and eligibility for religious offices was the first step to power and political authority in the *polis*. Solon brought about great social and political change when he reformed laws relating to worship of the gods.

By far, the most influential changes Solon instituted involved the creation of four citizen property classes that defined four distinct, graduated degrees of political and ritual rights. The wealthiest aristocrats still had the sole access to the most powerful civic offices, but now the mass of non-aristocratic people, newly freed from the threat of slavery and debt bondage, had a limited voice in the Assembly, the *ekklēsia*. Balanced against this Assembly was the *boulē*, the Council of 400 citizens (perhaps from the upper classes) who deliberated the laws. He may have given limited citizen privileges to craftsmen and hired laborers, some of whom were foreign born. Though these craftsmen owned no land at all, they worked in growing numbers in the urban center of Athens. This evidence suggests that Solon’s reforms tied political privileges to economic class rather than to birth. While the richer citizens continued to have more political opportunities, the lower classes for the first time had some voice in how the city was to be governed.

Solon was also responsible for innovations in the judicial system: he instituted a new appeal process, and he invented what in Athenian parlance was called a “public” action to supplement the more customary “private” forms of legal recourse. This reform allowed any citizen, not just the injured party or his family, to prosecute certain kinds of injury. Moreover,

Solon reviewed the oldest written Athenian laws, the law code of Draco, which had been published just a few decades before his own archonship (perhaps in 621). Solon abolished much of the harsh Draconian code with its reliance on capital punishment, and retained only those laws that addressed homicide. But one aspect of Draco's tradition that Solon did keep was the commitment to making the *nomoi* visible to all. Solon had his new laws, including the laws regulating cult practices and the worship of the gods, inscribed on big wooden tablets and publicly mounted in the Agora, where citizens of all property classes could refer to them. The beginning of public accountability is evident in the publication of the Solonian reforms. Even if basic literacy was not yet widespread among all classes of Athenians, this action marked the beginnings of the notion that the law remained the same regardless of who was in power and implied that the educated nobles were now being held accountable by those who could not necessarily read the laws as published.

Athenian tradition relates that Solon went into a self-imposed ten-year exile once he had completed his full program of reforms—but only after making the Athenians promise that they would not tinker with the reforms during his absence. Solon declined any offers to stay in power; he insisted that the Athenians live with the reforms and give them a chance to work. Solon's reforms broke the monopoly on political power long held by the noblest and wealthiest families, but at the same time his laws failed to please any single group completely. His new political compromise between the privileged aristocrats and the more humble working poor did not bridge the structural gap that Athenian society was based upon, and no type of political reform could change the arid climate of Attica and the unpredictable environment that helped maintain the economic gaps. But Solon's reforms did give a boost to those who had less wealth than the landed aristocracy.

Political tensions between the classes remained and even increased in the years after Solon stepped down, eventually resulting in a period of aristocratic "tyranny" when the noble-born Pisistratus first seized power around 560. Pisistratus's initial bid to become sole ruler, or *tyrannos*, in Athens did not go smoothly. Despite alliances with political factions and other noble families, Pisistratus was forced out of Attica twice before he actually succeeded in establishing a stable tyranny in 546. "Tyranny" in today's sense of a harsh and oppressive despotic rule overstates the situation as it existed in archaic Greece. Tyranny at that time was a common form of extra-constitutional monarchical rule, based perhaps on political models found

to the east in Lydia, located in modern-day Turkey. Indeed, the Greek word *tyrannos* is not native to the Greek language but is a loan word from Asia Minor. In the ancient model of tyranny an aristocrat became tyrant when he seized power in a coup, or inherited power that had been so seized. In sixth-century Greek usage, *tyrannos* came to mean something close to our word “king”—Oedipus was *tyrannos* in the city of Thebes in Sophocles’ famous tragedy *Oedipus the King*, whose Greek title is *Oedipous Tyrannos*.

In sixth-century Athens, Pisistratus the *tyrannos* ruled mildly. He enjoyed the support of certain aristocratic families and gained popular approval through his sponsorship of major civic and religious festivals. During his reign Athens became an important Greek city with grand public sanctuaries and civic festivals for the goddesses Athena and Demeter. Pisistratus constructed new buildings and commissioned artwork for sanctuaries on the Acropolis, and he built an altar to the twelve gods in the Agora. Dramatic festivals for the god Dionysus probably became popular during the rule of Pisistratus and his sons. Pisistratus used traditional cult practices to consolidate his power and advance a sense of cohesion and civic identity among the Athenians. An anecdote in Herodotus illustrates how Pisistratus’s sense of political theater eased his first return from exile: he found an unusually tall and beautiful woman, and dressed and armed her like Athena. This image of the goddess rode into Athens on a chariot announcing that she was bringing Pisistratus back to rule. When a rumor of Athena’s appearance reached the rural villages of Attica, townspeople rushed to Athens to see the performance and welcome Pisistratus back (Herodotus 1.60). The earliest theater produced in Athens in the sixth century likewise relied on a dramatic conceit in which costumed actors impersonated the gods; Pisistratus simply played off this traditional cultural pattern, and let the *dēmos* participate alongside him in the civic drama.

Pisistratus apparently intended to establish a hereditary aristocratic dynasty, and rule passed to his son Hippias at his death in 527. The case of Pisistratus and his sons shows us how democratic impulses in Athens developed slowly and unevenly. The innovative reforms of Solon gave way to the renewed energies of the elites, led by the Pisistratid family for more than fifty years. After the death of Pisistratus, public sanctuaries and civic festivals continued to play a crucial role in the history of Athens. When an uprising against the Pisistratid tyranny did finally occur, it unfolded during a *polis*-wide annual festival honoring Athena. The celebration called the Panathenaea was famous for its elaborate and lengthy religious procession

through the Agora and up the Acropolis; priests, civic magistrates, and armed warriors accompanied the sacrificial animals to the altar of Athena. Hippias, like his father, used such civic festivals as a public stage to display his civic power. Visibly leading the worship of Athena, the divine guardian of Athens, provided Hippias with a good opportunity to connect with the *dēmos*, display his largesse, and demonstrate his piety.

Behind the scenes, elite resentment was growing against Hippias and his younger brother Hipparchus, and a small conspiracy was hatched among some aristocratic families. A group of Athenian men attending the Panathenaea armed themselves as though they were part of the procession, but in fact their target was Hippias. The attempted coup was unsuccessful. In the confusion before the procession started, Hippias dodged the assassin's knife, but the weapon found its mark in his brother Hipparchus (Herodotus 5.55; Thucydides 6.54–59; cf. Thucydides 1.20). The public murder of Hipparchus in 514 provided Hippias with the impetus to live up to the modern meaning of the title tyrant and he instituted a far more repressive regime. This new regime would be short-lived. Two conspirators, Harmodius and Aristogeiton, lost their lives at the Panathenaea that day, but the two “tyrant slayers,” as they later came to be known, would be honored by coming generations as the liberators of Athens. Statues of the two were set up in the Agora, where the *dēmos* went about its daily business of honoring the gods and governing the *polis*.

THE CAREER AND DEMOCRATIC REFORMS OF CLEISTHENES

Like the tyrants Hippias and Pisistratus, the democratic reformer Cleisthenes came from an aristocratic family, indeed one of the most famous families in archaic Greece. His father's family had a long tradition of political service to Athens, and had funded public building projects in Delphi. His maternal grandfather, also named Cleisthenes, had been *tyrannos* in the nearby *polis* of Sicyon in the Peloponnese, and members of his family had married into the ruling family of Pisistratus. In Athens it seems that the aristocratic Cleisthenes distinguished himself as leader in a different way. He gave real political power to the ordinary citizens, the *dēmos*, while creating a political advantage for his own family. Cleisthenes went about preparing for political reforms in a particularly militaristic fashion. As an aristocrat with close family and political ties to *poleis* beyond Athens, Cleisthenes used his influence to enlist the aid of Cleomenes, king of Sparta. The Spartans were known to resist tyrants in their own *polis* and to

dislike them in neighboring *poleis*. Cleomenes marched to Athens with a small contingent of Spartan infantry and overthrew the tyranny of Hippias. Following the coup, Cleisthenes struggled with another Athenian leader for power, and he came out on top.

While Solon had paved the way for a fairer distribution of wealth several generations earlier, it is Cleisthenes who is perhaps best credited with instituting the reforms that mark the beginning of a true, recognizable Athenian democracy. Like Solon before him, Cleisthenes realized that democratic power was closely tied to the rural villages of Attica, even if the democratic institutions—the assembly places, council houses, and law courts—were housed in the urban center of Athens. Keeping in mind the Athenians' ties to the traditional rural way of life, Cleisthenes gave power to the ordinary citizens in Attica by distributing power throughout the villages or demes of the *polis*. More importantly, he redefined the very notion of what constituted a deme. Originally “deme” simply was the word for any of the towns, villages, and rural districts in the countryside of Attica. But after Cleisthenes a deme became the smallest political unit in the *polis*. The deme became the building block for clustering citizens into manageable units that could function easily in a preindustrial society that lacked the Internet, telephones, or newspapers. Demes were grouped to form two larger political units—namely, the thirty sections (*trittyes*) and the ten new tribes (*phylai*) into which the *trittyes* were then folded.

Traditionally, every male citizen born and living in Attica was a member of a *phratría*, an ancient word that designated social groups that followed lines of male descent and had control over who was and was not recognized as a legitimate member of the Athenian citizen body. “Phratry” is cognate to the English word “brother” (compare the words “phratry” and “brother” to the Latin *frater* and German *Bruder*), and as hereditary brotherhoods the phratries had worked for generations to maintain blood ties and political power among the aristocrats. Phratry members worshipped the gods together at state-sponsored festivals, and they dined together on certain civic and religious holidays. Active phratry membership was essential for enjoying political privileges in the archaic *polis*.

Cleisthenes' reforms kept the institution of the phratries, and then cleverly supplemented them by transforming the deme into the smallest constitutional unit that shared with them some of the same political, social, and religious functions. Rather than designating a mere rural or suburban village as it had always done, the deme became the foundation supporting the whole democratic apparatus. Cleisthenes' reforms officially recognized

139 demes, and deme membership became a component necessary for Athenian citizenship, in addition to traditional phratry membership. Membership in one of the demes, like that in a phratry, was inherited through the paternal line. But the new Cleisthenic deme no longer simply designated a physical place. The deme name was not necessarily an indication of the village where a citizen resided; it suggested which village his ancestors came from. After Cleisthenes, the deme was a political unit, and Athenian male citizens came to be identified by their deme name in addition to their father's name—for example, Socrates' full Athenian name was "Socrates, son of Sophroniscus, from the deme of Alopece."

One strength in Cleisthenes' plan was that demes and phratries reinforced each other. They remained separate social groups, but they shared important social, ritual, and political functions. Since official written record keeping did not yet exist, citizens relied on each other and on their communal groups to determine citizenship in the *polis*. The *polis* sponsored life-cycle rituals that celebrated the birth, political maturation, and marriage of phratry and deme members. Deme and phratry members worshipped the gods together on a regular and predictable schedule of civic festivals. Membership in a phratry and deme thus meant that peers in a citizen's communities witnessed him taking part in civic festivals and public feasts. In this way demes and phratries shared a common purpose: both were social and political groups that defined membership through active participation in civic rituals that also fulfilled a religious function.

As a consequence of the new civic and religious roles of the deme envisioned by Cleisthenes, every citizen had multiple and overlapping peer groups that both established and continually validated his civic status. The complex and interdependent bonds of civic identity in Athens were revealed even more starkly in the combinations of demes to form the larger social networks of citizens, namely the thirty sections and the ten tribes. Cleisthenes grouped each village (deme) with neighboring villages to constitute a section, or a *trittys*; he defined thirty sections in all, roughly equal in population. Three sections were then grouped to constitute one of the ten tribes (the word for section, *trittys*, literally means "a third"). The ten tribes were in part a holdover from more ancient times, but Cleisthenes also reworked the archaic notion of "tribe." Before him there had been four tribes, the so-called Ionian tribes that had performed certain ritual functions, and he left them intact for some cultic purposes; he handed over other religious rites and nearly all the political functions to ten newly created tribes, each named after a different semi-mythical hero, such as Cecrops or Aegeus.

The great innovation in Cleisthenes' plan was in the composition of each of the ten tribes. The politics of Attica had been growing increasingly complicated because of local tensions that were arising between three geographically identifiable interest groups: the people of the coastal region, the inland agrarian residents, and the growing number of urban dwellers in and around Athens. To combat the potentially crippling effects of fractures along geographical lines, each of the ten tribes was composed of three sections, drawn equally from each of the three regions of Attica. In this way the ten Cleisthenic tribes had a geographically scattered membership, and regional special interests could not rule the day.

If the demes are viewed as the building blocks for the foundation of Athenian democracy, then these ten new tribes are what provided a working structure for the Cleisthenic system. Public offices of every imaginable sort were filled either by direct election or, more commonly, by a lottery system within each tribe. A combined process of election and lottery was used to select the important officers known as archons (*archontes*, "leaders"). The archonship was an ancient office that predated the Solonian and Cleisthenic reforms. After Cleisthenes' reforms, nine archons and a secretary were selected annually, one official from each tribe, for one-year terms as magistrates with religious and judicial duties. The process of selecting the archons in the new system involved first direct election of a pool of candidates, and then a lottery. This procedure apparently layered the older aristocratic method beneath the newer Cleisthenic idea. Upon leaving office all ex-archons were eligible to serve on an ancient advisory board called the Council of the Areopagus, which retained judicial powers for certain legal proceedings including homicide and some religious cases. This council was one of the oldest institutions in Athens—it existed long before the reforms of Solon and Cleisthenes—and though its duties were gradually reduced over time, its core responsibilities illustrate a deep-seated assumption that the religious and political aspects of the state overlapped.

After the reforms of Cleisthenes, decision making and legislative powers were located in two democratic bodies. The body called the *ekklesia*, or Assembly, was open to all citizens, and it met about every ten days on a hillside in Athens called the Pnyx (figure 2). Athens probably had tens of thousands of citizens, but judging from the size of the Pnyx a maximum of 6,000 to 8,000 attended the meetings. In some instances the Assembly also functioned as a large jury. The smaller Council of 500 called the *boulē* replaced the earlier Council of 400 established by Solon, and it met more



Figure 2. Athens: the Acropolis viewed from the hill of the Pnyx. Photo by author.

often than the *ekklēsia* to take care of legislative and judicial business. Each of the ten tribes supplied an annual quota of fifty citizens for the *boulē*, chosen by lot from all but the lowest property classes. It was assumed that every citizen would sit on the *boulē* at least once during his lifetime, and service on the *boulē* was limited to two years total for each citizen. Each tribe's committee of fifty was given the responsibility of presiding over the *boulē* and *ekklēsia* for a portion of each year called a prytany. During that time the citizens were known as the fifty *prytaneis*, or presidents, and for one-tenth of the year (a little longer than a lunar month) they performed the executive functions and daily governance of the *polis*. The fifty presidents were required to live in the city, and they dined at public expense in a public building called the Tholos. The office of the fifty *prytaneis* rotated by lot through the ten tribes established by Cleisthenes, and even the daily chairmanship of the fifty presidents, the office of the *epistatēs*, was selected by lottery each day.

The ten Cleisthenic tribes fulfilled other duties for the *polis*. Quotas of hoplites for the infantry were determined on an equal basis for each of the

ten tribes. Each tribe annually elected one of the ten generals, the *stratēgoi*, who made the military decisions for that year. The office of general was one of the few in democratic Athens that was elected directly and not selected by lottery. Boards of magistrates were also selected equally from the ten tribes. Each tribe even sent competing teams of athletes, singers, and dancers to represent it at *polis*-sponsored festivals.

The direct democracy of Cleisthenic Athens described here is more radical than the modified forms of representational democracy in place today. Athenian democratic institutions as they existed after Cleisthenes and into the age of Pericles in the fifth century ensured that every citizen could regularly participate in communal decision making. The only impediments to participation were practical: a combination of time, distance from the city, and money. If a citizen could afford to take a day off from work, then he could go to Athens and exercise his political privileges by serving on a jury, attending the Assembly, or participating in a civic religious rite.

According to one tradition Cleisthenes also implemented the institution of ostracism (another theory dates it a few decades later). Every year the *dēmos* as a body was given the opportunity to send away one citizen deemed to be potentially too powerful or dangerous for the good of the *polis*. First the Athenians determined whether they wished to hold an ostracism vote; if an ostracism was held, citizens met in the Agora two months later and voted by scratching the name of a candidate onto an *ostrakon*, or broken piece of pottery—the ancient equivalent of a piece of scrap paper. Whoever received a plurality of the votes was banished from the *polis* for a period of ten years. In this way the democracy placed a check on the political influence of powerful leaders. Before the institution of ostracism, Athenians had relied on the wisdom of their leaders to limit their own political power by voluntarily going into exile, as Solon had done at the end of his period of rule. Even after ostracism became official, few men actually received enough votes to be ostracized, but it did occasionally happen. Because Cleisthenes abruptly falls out of the historical record following the year of his reforms, some scholars have proposed that Cleisthenes himself was immediately ostracized upon leaving office; others suggest that he left Athens on his own, in the tradition of Solon.

The democratic reforms of Cleisthenes instituted in the last decade of the sixth century were put into place against a backdrop of broader changes that were occurring all throughout the Greek-speaking *poleis* of the eastern Mediterranean. Greek cities continued to experience economic growth as trade expanded, and this growth led to the increasing importance of port

cities that took full advantage of their excellent natural harbors. Athens is only one of the cities that followed this pattern; others included Corinth, which lay at the strategic isthmus between mainland Greece and the Peloponnese, and Miletus in Asia Minor. The mounting influence of port cities also renewed tensions between residents of urban centers and rural areas—between those men whose wealth depended on the aristocratic connections to land and those who could build wealth despite being landless. Often these tensions were played out in the development of religious practices within cities. While the response to these changes took a democratic form in Athens, democracy was not the only possible outcome. Indeed, Athens was considered unusual by its peers, and the governments of most other *poleis* either continued with the traditional forms of kingship and aristocratic rule or experienced tyranny, the extra-constitutional form of monarchy.

The *polis* that Cleisthenes left to the Athenians was far different from the other Greek city-states in the year 500. In Athens even men of modest means were free to speak out and disagree with the wealthy and powerful. The *dēmos* took an active role in helping to make decisions that would be in the interest of everyone, not just of the wealthy aristocrats. Common citizens ruled their peers, and in turn were ruled by them. Ancestral tribal forms of community and worship continued as always and were even augmented and elaborated on. The brilliance of Cleisthenes was that he used the traditional political and cultic communities and religious customs to reinforce new institutions that gave more power to the *dēmos*. His reforms created an ever greater degree of accountability among all citizens. Politics and civic religious practices both played an important role in the systems of accountability.

Cleisthenes himself had perhaps a curious familiarity with a brand of civic accountability that looked to both the man and to the community from which the man came. He was a member of an old and well-established noble clan called the Alcmaeonidae, or the heirs of Alcmaeon. According to Athenian oral tradition, the Alcmaeonidae family had long been tainted by a curse. In the days of Cleisthenes' great-grandfather Megacles in the mid-seventh century, an Athenian aristocrat named Cylon, flush with a recent victory at the Olympic games, gathered a group of friends and allies and attempted a coup d'état. According to the historian Herodotus, Cylon had married into the powerful ruling family in the neighboring *polis* of Megara, where the aristocrat Theagenes was then *tyrannos*. This was well before the rises of Pisistratus, and Cylon had his eye on establishing the first tyranny in Athens. With his supporters Cylon seized the Acropolis. At this time Mega-

cles was probably serving as archon, and under his leadership the Athenians swiftly put an end to Cylon's coup. When a group of Cylon's allies took refuge at an altar on top of the Acropolis, Megacles and his supporters promised to let them go if they would hand over their weapons. Cylon's men did so—but Megacles and his followers did not live up to their part of the agreement, and in their outrage and fury they murdered some followers of Cylon. Cylon, the man who wanted to be the first tyrant in Athens, managed to escape the carnage.

Violating the sanctity of an altar of the gods was deadly serious business. Murder was a capital crime, but spilling human blood on ground holy to the deathless gods was doubly intolerable and could taint a family and a whole city for generations to come. For this crime Megacles and his entire family were found guilty of impiety and expelled from Attica. But it was not only Megacles and his sons who were forced into exile. The Athenians were so offended by Megacles' impious actions against the *polis* and its religious traditions that at a later time they expelled even the bones of Megacles' ancestors, and cursed all of Megacles' descendants. When Megacles' son Alcmaeon and his sons (the Alcmaeonidae) later returned to Attica and to public life, they too were haunted by the curse and the loss of their ancestral ties to the land, symbolized in the exiled bones of the ancestors (Herodotus 5.71–73; Thucydides 1.126; Aristotle *Athenian Constitution* 1).

Alcmaeon's son Megacles felt the effects of the curse when trying to marry off one of his daughters. The tyrant Pisistratus agreed to marry her, but because of the curse on the family he reportedly would not run the risk of having children by her, and they apparently never had intercourse. When Megacles learned of this he became enraged. It was left to his son Cleisthenes to finally escape the taint of the "curse of the Alcmaeonidae." As a grandson of Alcmaeon and one of the family of the Alcmaeonidae, Cleisthenes also lacked the ancestral ties to Attica common among Athenian citizens. Cleisthenes' early career shows him serving as one of the archons under the tyrant Hippias, perhaps in an effort to fit in and cooperate with Athenian aristocrats who supported the tyranny, but later he went into exile and encouraged the Spartans to overthrow the tyranny of Hippias. When the Spartan general Cleomenes forced Hippias from power, he feared the rise of another *tyrannos*, namely Cleisthenes. So the Spartans again reminded the Athenians of the curse that dogged the Alcmaeonidae.

But here Cleisthenes outsmarted the Spartans: he counteracted the curse on his family's ancestors by symbolically aligning himself with the Athenian

dēmos, and against tyrants and aristocratic governments that would use any means available to restrict the opportunities and power of the common citizens. As a result, the Alcmaeonidae in generations to come were known in Athens as the “tyrant haters.” According to Athenian oral and later written tradition, democracy emerged in Athens when the heir of an accursed aristocrat who had lost the security of his ties to his homeland established new ties to the *polis* by empowering the *dēmos* and reenergizing the political and religious life of the communities of Attica.