PLUTARCH

Lives That Made Greek History

Edited, with Introductions and Notes, by
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Contents

and disciplined individual; or rather, just as the poets say of Heracles that with only his club and lion's skin he traveled the world punishing the lawless and savage tyrants, so the city of Sparta, with only a staff and threadbare cloak, ruled over a Greece ready and willing to be so ruled, deposing the unjust dynasties and tyrannies in her various states, acting as a mediator in wars, and bringing civil strife to an end, often without putting a single spear in motion, but merely by sending one ambassador, whose orders everyone instantly obeyed, just as bees, when their ruler appears, swarm to him and array themselves in order. To such a degree did the city's good order and just dealing inspire respect.

[31] But it was not Lycurgus' chief purpose then to leave his city in command of a great many others; he thought rather that the happiness of an entire city, like that of an individual, depends on moral excellence and inner harmony. His aim, therefore, in all his arrangements, was to make his fellow citizens free-minded, self-sufficient, and self-controlled, and keep them so for as long as possible. For Plato took this to be the purpose of Lycurgus' form of government, as did Diogenes and Zeno and all who are praised for their treatises on these matters,[44] though these men left behind them only letters and speeches. But Lycurgus, because he produced not letters and speeches but an inimitable polity, and because he gave to those who assume that the so-called disposition to wisdom is imaginary an example of an entire city in love with wisdom, has fairly surpassed in renown all who have ever created polities among the Greeks. And that is why Aristotle says that Lycurgus obtained fewer honors than he deserved in Lacedaemon, though he enjoys the highest. For there is a shrine in his honor, and they sacrifice there every year as to a god.[45]

44. All three of these philosophers wrote treatises describing the ideal composition of a Greek city-state. Diogenes and Zeno both lived slightly later than Plato, in the late fourth century BCE; Diogenes belonged to the Cynic school of philosophy, whereas Zeno is considered the founder of Stoicism.

45. Herodotus 1.66.

Solon

Solon's political career at Athens, in the first decades of the sixth century BCE, falls much later than that of Lycurgus at Sparta. Athens already had written laws and a highly developed constitution in Solon's time, but these had ceased to function well as a result of economic and social strains in the evolving city. Solon was called upon to fix these problems, and should thus be seen as a political reformer rather than, as Lycurgus was (if he in fact existed), a true lawgiver.

Although Solon (c. 640–560) apparently possessed moderate wealth and came from a noble family, he rose to political prominence, to judge by Plutarch, on his reputation for wisdom and fairness. These qualities certainly shine through in his preserved poems (many of which are known only from quotations in this Life*), and also in the unforgettable portrait painted by Herodotus near the outset of his* Histories *(1.29–33). The Greeks classed Solon among the Seven Wise Men, the great sages of the archaic world.*

[2] Because Solon's father, as Hermippus[1] tells us, had depleted his estate by various philanthropic projects and charities, Solon would not have lacked persons willing to assist him. But since he was ashamed to accept help (belonging as he did to a family that had been accustomed to helping others), he embarked, when still a young man, on a career in trade. Yet some say that Solon traveled more for the sake of wide experience and knowledge than for profit, since by common consent he was a lover of wisdom; for even when he was elderly he would say that he "grew older each day, and learnt something new." And he did not admire wealth. He even said that the two men were equally wealthy, both the man

> who has plenty of silver
> And gold and plains of wheat-bearing land,
> Horses and mules, and he who possesses the mere comforts
> Of food, clothing, and shoes,
> Delight in his child and wife, when these blessings come,
> And a suitable span of years in which to enjoy them.[2]

1. One of many writers now lost whom Plutarch consulted. Hermippus of Smyrna was a Greek biographer of the third century BCE.

2. The verses are Solon's own composition. Solon was a poet as well as a political leader.

[3] That he classed himself among the poor rather than the wealthy is evident from these verses:[3]

> Many of the wicked are rich, while the good are often in need;
> But we shall not exchange our virtue for their riches,
> Since virtue endures, while wealth is always changing hands.

At first Solon assigned no importance to his poetry; he seems to have treated it as an amusement and a diversion for his leisure hours. Later, however, he put his philosophical views into verse, and incorporated many of his political ideas in his poems, not simply to record and preserve them, but because they contained justifications of his acts, and occasional exhortations, warnings, and rebukes for the Athenians.

[8] When the Athenians had worn themselves out fighting a long and difficult war with the Megarians over the island of Salamis,[4] they passed a law forbidding anyone, on pain of death, to write or say that the city should lay claim to Salamis. Indignant at the disgrace, and seeing that many of the young men wanted someone to start the war, but lacked the confidence to initiate anything themselves because of the law, Solon pretended to be out of his mind, and a rumor spread from his household to the city that he was showing symptoms of insanity. After secretly composing an elegy and practicing it so that he could recite it from memory, he rushed out suddenly to the marketplace with a cap on his head. When a large crowd had assembled, he mounted the herald's stone and recited the elegy that begins,

> As a herald come I from lovely Salamis,
> With a stately song in place of a rant.

This is the poem "Salamis," an utterly charming composition of one hundred lines. When the ode had been chanted and Solon's friends had begun to sing its praises, and Pisistratus in particular was cheering the citizens on and urging them to be persuaded by Solon's words, they repealed the law and resumed the war under Solon's command.

[11] In the aftermath of these events, Solon grew famous and powerful.

3. Plutarch says only that Solon claimed to be poor, not that he actually was so. In chapter 14 Plutarch mentions that he was in fact prosperous.

4. Lying in the Saronic Gulf between Attica and the Peloponnese (see Map: The Greek World), Salamis was contested by cities on both shores.

[12] The curse of Cylon[5] had for a long time perturbed the city, ever since the archon Megacles[6] had persuaded Cylon and his confederates, who had approached the goddess Athena as suppliants, to come down and stand trial. These men fastened a linen thread to her statue and clung to it.[7] But when they reached the temple of the Furies on their way down, and the thread spontaneously broke, Megacles and his colleagues rushed to arrest the suppliants, claiming that the goddess was rejecting their prayers. Some of the band were stoned to death outside the precinct, and those who fled for refuge to the altars had their throats cut. Only those who appealed to the archons' wives were set free. Thereafter the archons, who were called "the accursed," were hated. And when the survivors of Cylon and his confederates again became powerful, they continued to quarrel with the descendants of Megacles.[8]

When the current civil strife had become severe and the citizens had taken sides, Solon, who was now held in esteem, stepped in with the noblest of the Athenians, and by entreating and enjoining "the accursed" persuaded them to stand trial and accept the verdict of three hundred jurors of noble birth. Prosecuted by Myron of Phlya, the men were convicted. The living were banished, and the corpses of the dead were dug up and thrown beyond the city limits.[9]

[13] When the disturbance caused by Cylon had been brought to an end and "the accursed," as has been noted, had departed, the Athenians resumed their age-old quarrel about their form of government, the city being split into as many factions as there were

5. About 636 BCE, Cylon, an Athenian nobleman, tried to take over Athens by force and establish himself as sole ruler. He and some supporters seized the Acropolis, but after popular support failed to materialize, Cylon found himself besieged. The subsequent events are related by Plutarch. Thucydides' *Peloponnesian War* gives a slightly different account of the episode at 1.126.

6. An archon is an Athenian magistrate. Megacles, the grandfather of a more famous man also named Megacles, was a member of the Alcmaeonid family, the wealthy, politically active clan that later included Cleisthenes and Pericles.

7. Touching the altar of a god, either directly or through some linking medium, was thought to grant divine protection to a suppliant.

8. The curse of Cylon was felt to be still alive in 432 BCE, two centuries after it began, according to Thucydides (1.126).

9. Ejection of the dead was a way of cleansing the city, which was thought to be tainted by the mere presence of their bodies.

differences in its terrain. The hill-men leaned toward democracy, the plains-men toward oligarchy;[10] and the third party, the coast-dwellers, by espousing a moderate and mixed form of government, hindered the other two and prevented either from gaining the upper hand. At that period, as the disparity between rich and poor had reached a critical point, the city was in danger on every front. It seemed that its turmoil would only be calmed and brought to an end if a tyranny[11] came into being. For all the common people were in debt to the rich. They either farmed their land, paying a sixth of what they produced . . . or, having borrowed money by pledging their own persons,[12] were liable to be delivered into slavery by their creditors, some serving as slaves at home, others being sold abroad. And many were forced to sell their own children (since no law prevented it) and to flee the city because of the cruelty of their creditors. The majority and the ablest-bodied stood together and encouraged one another not to permit this, but to choose a trustworthy man as their leader, liberate the defaulters, redivide the land, and thoroughly reform the government.

[14] At that point the wisest of the Athenians, noting that Solon alone had kept clear of misconduct and was associated neither with the injustice of the rich nor the exigencies of the poor, asked him to step forward and put an end to the city's strife. . . . He was elected

10. Since almost every Greek city except Sparta had eliminated hereditary monarchy, the two remaining choices of government, according to ancient thinking, were oligarchy and democracy. The first system concentrated power in the hands of a few wealthy individuals; the second diffused it widely among a larger spectrum of participants (though still excluding women and noncitizens). Athenian political sentiment was at this time closely linked to geography, as indicated by the names of the rival parties.

11. Our word "tyranny," conveying as it does a cruel and despotic regime, does not translate the Greek word *tyrannis*, but there is no better word, just as "tyrant" often has to serve for *tyrannos*. (If we could use "prince" as Machiavelli did, rather than conveying the idea of a king's son, that word might work for *tyrannos*, an experiment tried by David Grene in his translation of Herodotus.) Greek political thought allowed that sole rule by an individual who was neither elected nor empowered by constitutional authority might, in certain circumstances, be acceptable or even beneficial. Thus a *tyrannos* was not inherently evil.

12. That is, by mortgaging their own freedom against their debts, a common practice at this time.

archon after Philombrotus[13] and made mediator and legislator as well, the rich ready to embrace him because he was prosperous, the poor because he was honorable. It is said that a comment of his which had gone the rounds earlier, to the effect that equality breeds no war, pleased both the affluent and the indigent, the former expecting to enjoy an equality based on rank and prestige, the latter on proportion and number. Since hope was high on both sides, the party chiefs pressed Solon to accept an absolute sovereignty, recommending that he seize the city more boldly now that he had it in his power. And many citizens of moderate views, seeing that it would be a toilsome and difficult business to effect change by argument and law, were not reluctant to put one man, the most just and wise, in charge of their affairs.[14] . . . Solon reportedly told his friends that a tyranny was a lovely spot, but there was no route down from it. And in the poems written to Phocus he says,

> If I spared my
> Country, and stayed my hand from tyranny and implacable violence,
> Declining to defile and disgrace my good name,
> I am not ashamed; for thus shall I
> Win greater renown from all mankind.

[15] Though he had rejected absolute rule, his manner of governing was not especially mild. He was no faint-hearted legislator: he neither yielded to the powerful nor courted the pleasure of those who had elected him. Where existing institutions were excellent he introduced no correction or innovation, fearing that if he dismantled everything and unsettled the city, he would lack the strength to restore and harmonize its institutions on the soundest basis. But where he hoped to find the citizens amenable or submissive, he achieved his ends, as he himself said, "by a combination of force and justice." Accordingly, when he was asked later on whether he had written the best laws for the Athenians, he replied, "The best they would accept."

Solon . . . called the cancellation of debts a "shaking off of burdens." For his first public measure was the enactment that canceled all current debts and prohibited future loans secured on the person of

13. Solon's election to the archonship can be dated precisely to 594 BCE, but there is some question as to whether his reforms of Athens' laws came well after this, perhaps in the 570s. Plutarch speaks as though Solon enacted his reforms during his one-year archonship.

14. Perhaps influenced by the example of Sparta; see *Lycurgus* in this volume.

the borrower.[15] But some writers—Androtion is one—have said that the poor were relieved not by a canceling of debts, but by a lowering of the interest rate on those debts, and that *that* was the benefaction they referred to as the "shaking off of burdens," together with the augmentation of measures and the revaluing of money that accompanied it. For he made the mina, previously worth seventy-three drachmas, worth one hundred, so that by paying back an identical amount of money, but the money itself being worth less, those who had heavy debts were benefited, while those to whom the debts were repaid suffered no harm.[16]

[16] Yet Solon satisfied neither side. He displeased the wealthy by canceling their loan contracts, and vexed the poor even more, since he did not effect a redistribution of land as they had expected him to do, nor did he make everyone's way of life level and equal, as Lycurgus had done. But Lycurgus, who was an eleventh-generation descendant of Heracles,[17] and had reigned over Lacedaemon for many years, had great prestige, friends, and influence, which served him well when he set about reforming the commonwealth. Resorting to force more than persuasion (to the extent that he even lost an eye in the struggle),[18] Lycurgus made the city surpassingly secure and harmonious by seeing to it that no citizen was either poor or rich. Solon, on the other hand, since he was a moderate and a man of the people, did not aspire so far in his polity, though he did not act short of his real power, depending as he did solely on the wishes of the citizens and their willingness to trust him.

[17] He began by repealing the laws of Draco[19] (except for all the homicide laws) because of their harshness and the stiff penalties they imposed.

[18] Next, wishing to leave all the magistracies in the hands of the wealthy, as they already were, but to give the rest of the government,

15. That is, loans that resulted in enslavement in the case of default.

16. Inflating one's way out of debt is a strategy still used by many nations today.

17. Spartans believed that their kings, and indeed all people of Dorian stock, could trace their ancestry back to Heracles.

18. See *Lycurgus* 11.

19. Draco apparently lived in the late seventh century BCE, if he is more than a mere legend. Athenians thought he had been their first official to set down laws in writing and that he had set up stern penalties for criminal offenses (in many cases, the death penalty).

in which the common people had had no share, a mixed character, Solon instituted a valuation of the citizens' property. He assigned to the first class those citizens whose lands yielded five hundred measures, both dry and wet, and called them *pentakosiomedimnoi.*[20] The second class consisted of those citizens who were able to maintain a horse or whose land yielded three hundred measures; these citizens he called knights, as they paid a knight's taxes. Citizens of the third class, whose land produced two hundred measures, both wet and dry, were called *zeugitai.*[21] All the other citizens were called *thētes.*[22] *Thētes* were not permitted to hold any office; they participated in the government only as members of the assembly and as jurors.[23] The latter privilege at first seemed insignificant, but later proved to be immensely important, since the majority of disputes ultimately came before the jurors,[24] and all the lawsuits the magistrates were permitted to try could be appealed in court if anyone so desired.

But still thinking he should do more to remedy the weakness of the multitude, he granted to each citizen the right to file suit on behalf of anyone who had suffered an injury. So if a man was beaten, wronged, or injured, anyone who had the ability or desire could indict the malefactor and prosecute him, the legislator rightly accustoming the citizens, like members of the same body, to identify and sympathize with one another. And a saying of Solon's that is consistent with this law is remembered. It seems that when he was asked what city was best to live in he said, "That in which those who have suffered no injury, no less than the injured, prosecute and punish malefactors."

20. A *medimnos* is a Greek measure of grain, roughly twelve gallons, sometimes translated (inaccurately, regarding quantity) as "bushel." The *pentakosiomedimnoi* owned enough land to produce five hundred of these per annum. Later, after more Athenians became wealthy through trade and manufacture, a cash equivalent was presumably substituted.

21. A *zeugos* is a yoke, such as that used for a team of oxen; the *zeugitai* were sufficiently well-off to own such a team.

22. Related to the Greek word for a hired laborer.

23. Later, in the fifth century BCE, other offices were extended to the *thētes* as well. The archonship, which later led to membership in the Council of the Areopagus (see next chapter), was restricted in Solon's time to the top two property classes.

24. After the reforms of Ephialtes in 461 BCE (see *Pericles* 7), which gave vastly greater jurisdiction to the court system. Athenian juries were huge by modern standards.

[19] After establishing the council of the Areopagus,[25] all of whose members had served annual terms as archons (on which account he himself, having so served, was a member), Solon observed that the common people had grown restless and confident as a result of their release from debt, and he therefore established a second council, called the boulē, choosing one hundred men from each tribe (of which there were four),[26] whom he ordered to frame resolutions before they were debated by the people,[27] and to allow no measure to be introduced in the assembly that had not first been submitted to the council. He made the upper council an overseer of all public affairs and a guardian of the laws, as he supposed that the city, moored by two councils as by anchors, would be less subject to rolling, and would keep the people calmer.

[21] He also enacted a law that restricted women's processions, their mourning, and their festivals, with an eye to preventing any disorderly or unbridled behavior. He forbade women to go out wearing more than three garments, carrying food or drink worth more than one obol,[28] or holding a basket more than a cubit high.

[22] Seeing the city constantly filled with people streaming into Attica from all sides for security,[29] and noting that most of the land was barren and poor, and that seafarers were not in the habit of shipping merchandise to people who had nothing to give in return, he directed the citizens toward manufacture of goods,[30] and wrote a

25. Plutarch goes on to say, in a passage not included here, that he has contradictory evidence on this point, some of it suggesting (as is in fact the case) that the council of the Areopagus predated Solon's time. The Areopagus ("hill of Ares") was the place where the council met to consider judicial verdicts and make other policy decisions.

26. The boulē (pronounced as two syllables, *boo-lay;* literally, "council"), later to become Athens' most powerful organ of government, was expanded to five hundred under Cleisthenes, compared to Solon's four hundred.

27. That is, to compose the motions that would come before the assembly. Because it controlled the deliberations and votes of the assembly, the boulē was the closest the Athenians had to an executive branch.

28. An obol was the smallest unit of Athenian currency. Six obols equaled one drachma.

29. Thucydides' *Peloponnesian War* (1.2) notes that Attica, being undesirable on account of its poor soil, experienced less strife than other parts of Greece and so became a haven for refugees.

30. "Manufacture" is a very imprecise translation of the Greek word *technē*, denoting all sorts of craft and production. Athenians early on developed an

law stating that a son who had not been taught a trade was under no obligation to support his father. It was one thing for Lycurgus, who inhabited a city free of a crowd of foreigners, and who possessed a country "large for many, ample for twice as many," as Euripides says[31]—a country, moreover, that harbored a mass of helots,[32] whom it was better not to leave at leisure, but to keep constantly occupied and humbled by hard toil—it was all very well for *him* to release the citizens from laborious and menial pursuits, and to keep them occupied with arms and devoted to that trade only. But Solon, who was adapting his laws to his circumstances, not his circumstances to his laws, and who saw that the produce of the country, scarcely nourishing the farmers, could not support an idle and leisurely throng, conferred prestige upon the tradesmen and ordered the council of the Areopagus to examine how each man made his living and to punish the idle.

[23] But on the whole, Solon's laws pertaining to women seem very odd. For the man who caught an adulterer was permitted to kill him; but if someone abducted and raped a free woman, he was merely required to pay a fine of one hundred drachmas; if he had seduced her, the fine was twenty drachmas, unless the woman was one of those who sell themselves openly (that is, the prostitutes, who consort openly with men who pay for their favors). Moreover, a man is forbidden to sell a daughter or sister unless he finds that she is not a virgin.

[25] All of Solon's laws were meant to be in force for one hundred years. They were written on *axones*, wooden tablets that revolved in oblong frames, small fragments of which have been preserved to this day in the Prytaneum.[33] . . .

After the laws had been published, people took to visiting Solon day after day, either to commend or criticize his wording, or to recommend insertions or deletions, though most of his visitors came to question and interrogate and to urge him to explain and clarify each law's meaning and purpose. Seeing that it would be absurd to do so, but that to refuse would create ill will, and wishing to extricate

expertise in pottery, producing famously beautiful vases that were exported far and wide. The income from such trade enabled Athens to buy (or barter for) the food it could not grow on poor native soil.

31. The source of the quote is not known.

32. See *Lycurgus* 24 with n. 35. Helots were Sparta's enslaved agricultural laborers.

33. A state building set aside for use by the boulē.

himself from these difficulties entirely and to escape the citizens' displeasure and their delight in finding fault (since "in important affairs it is hard to please everyone," as Solon himself has said), he made his possession of a ship an excuse for traveling, and sailed away after asking the Athenians for a ten-year leave of absence.[34] For he expected that in that period they would become accustomed to his laws.

[29] While Solon was abroad, the citizens again fell to quarreling amongst themselves. Lycurgus[35] led the party of the plain, Megacles son of Alcmaeon the party of the coast,[36] and Pisistratus the hill-dwellers,[37] the latter party including most of the *thētes*, who were particularly vexed by the rich. As a result, though the city still abided by Solon's laws, everyone now expected a revolution and longed for a change of government. People no longer hoped merely for equality, but looked to gain more power by the change and to get the better of their opponents in everything. Affairs were in this state when Solon returned to Athens. Though honored and revered everywhere, he was no longer as able to speak and act in public as formerly, nor did he wish to do so, since he was now an old man. But he met privately with the heads of the parties and tried to reconcile and unite them. Pisistratus appeared to pay him more heed than the others. For Pisistratus' conversation had a flattering and good-natured character. He was ready to help the poor and was reasonable and moderate in his enmities. As for the qualities in which he was naturally deficient, by imitating them he was more trusted than men who actually embodied them. He was seen as a circumspect and well-behaved man, one who loved equality above everything and would be vexed if anyone disturbed or sought to change the existing order. In these matters he thoroughly deceived the multitude. Solon soon discerned his true character and was the first to detect his designs.

34. It was during this ten-year sojourn abroad, according to Herodotus (1.29), that Solon came to the court of Croesus at Sardis in Lydia, though the chronology of Solon's life makes an actual meeting with Croesus unlikely.

35. A different person from the Spartan lawgiver of the same name.

36. On Megacles and the Alcmaeonids, see note 6 above.

37. According to Plutarch's own formulation in chapter 6, these three parties represent the supporters of oligarchy, mixed constitution, and democracy, respectively. Pisistratus, here portrayed as the people's champion, would one day (as so many people's champions have done) become an autocrat, founding a dynastic tyranny that endured for most of the sixth century BCE.

He by no means hated Pisistratus, but he tried to temper the man's character and admonish him, and he told him and others that if anyone could extract from Pisistratus' soul the passion to be preeminent, and cure his desire for absolute rule, no other man would have a greater aptitude for virtue, or be a better citizen.

Thespis[38] at that time was inventing tragedy, which on account of its novelty was attracting many spectators, though it had not yet become a matter of competition. Solon, who was naturally fond of hearing and learning, and in his old age gave himself up even more to leisure and amusement, not to mention wine and music, went to see Thespis performing in one of his own plays, as was the custom among the ancients. After the performance, Solon accosted Thespis and asked him whether he was not ashamed to speak so falsely before so large an audience. When Thespis declared that there was nothing so terrible in saying and doing such things in play, Solon struck the ground fiercely with his cane and said, "Yet if we praise and honor this sort of play, we may find it in our covenants."

[30] When Pisistratus, after wounding himself, was brought to the marketplace in a chariot,[39] and sought to incite the people by claiming that he had been plotted against by his enemies because of his policy, and soon had many people angry and shouting, Solon approached, stood beside him and said, "You are not playing the part of Homer's Odysseus very well, son of Hippocrates. For when *he* wounded himself he was tricking his enemies, whereas *you* are misleading your fellow citizens." The multitude was now ready to fight on Pisistratus' behalf, and the citizens gathered in the assembly. When Ariston had proposed that Pisistratus be given a bodyguard of fifty club-bearers, Solon spoke against the measure. He rose and made many points similar to those he had made in his poems:

> You look with admiration upon the language and words of a wily man.
> Each of you follows in the footsteps of a fox,
> Empty-minded, all of you.

Seeing that the poor were in an uproar and eager to gratify Pisistratus, while the rich, flinching from danger, were running away, Solon departed, saying that he was wiser than the former, though braver than the latter: wiser than those who did not understand what was

38. A person about whom little is known, and who may in fact be a legend. Our word "thespian" comes from his name.

39. See Herodotus 1.59 for this episode, though Herodotus' account does not give a role to Solon.

being done, and braver than those who, though they understood, were afraid to oppose the tyranny. When the people had ratified the measure, they set no miserly limit on the number of Pisistratus' club-bearers, but let him keep as many as he liked and lead them about in public, until he seized the Acropolis.

When this was done, and the city was thrown into confusion, Megacles quickly fled with the other Alcmaeonids. But Solon, though he was then quite elderly and had no protectors, came out to the marketplace and argued with the citizens, partly reproaching them with their thoughtlessness and softness, partly spurring them on and urging them not to lose their liberty. It was then that he made the remark that has come down to us, that it had lately been quite easy for them to thwart the tyranny while it was still taking form; but it would be greater and more glorious to sever and destroy it now that it was rooted and growing. As no one was brave enough to listen to him, he went home. And on taking up his weapons and placing them on his porch, he said, "I have done what I could to aid my country and its laws."

[31] When, in light of this, many people warned him that he would be put to death by the tyrant, and asked him what it was he trusted to that he had lost all sense of fear, he replied, "Old age." Yet when Pisistratus had seized control of the government, he won Solon over so completely by honoring him, treating him affectionately, and sending for him, that Solon became his adviser and approved of many of his acts. For Pisistratus preserved most of Solon's laws, abiding by them himself and requiring his friends to do likewise.

Themistocles

Themistocles *opens after a gap of nearly a century after the end of* Solon. *Plutarch's surviving* Lives *do not include any figures from the middle and late decades of the sixth century BCE. This was the time of the tyranny at Athens founded by Pisistratus and continued by his son Hippias, and of the coup that overthrew Hippias (508 BCE), and of the democratic reforms of Cleisthenes—events narrated in brief by Herodotus,* Histories *5.62–70. Plutarch's* Lives *give us little insight into these events, or into the rise of the Achaemenid Persian empire and its first conflicts with the Greeks, the subject of Herodotus' first five books. At the start of* Themistocles, *those Perso-Greek conflicts are already well under way, and Athens stands directly in the cross-hairs of the Persian war machine, having helped the Greeks in Asia launch a revolt from Persia in 499.*

Plutarch took his cue from Herodotus and Thucydides in his portrait of Themistocles (c. 528–462). Both historians admired Themistocles as a self-made man, a political climber, and a brilliant strategist whose sole determination to fight the Persian navy at Salamis in 480 turned the tide of the conflict. But both were also aware that Themistocles' patriotism could not be easily disentangled from his intense interest in self-advancement and self-enrichment. Plutarch's portrait of Themistocles, like those of his two main sources, reveals a complex blend of heroism and self-serving machination.

[1] The family of Themistocles was too obscure to enhance his reputation. His father was Neocles, a man of no great distinction at Athens. . . . And as these lines tell us, Themistocles was the son of a foreign-born mother:[1]

> Abrotonon, a Thracian born and bred, though I
> Claim to have borne the Greeks mighty Themistocles.

Since the offspring of foreigners used to gather at Cynosarges, a gymnasium of Heracles outside the gates (for Heracles, too, was not native-born among the gods, but was held to be of foreign birth because his mother was mortal), Themistocles persuaded some of the well-born youths to go out to Cynosarges and exercise with him; and

1. These humble origins would have made a political career unthinkable for any ordinary Athenian at this time. Despite the reforms of Cleisthenes in 508 BCE, when Themistocles was around twenty, leadership of Athens was still heavily dominated by the aristocracy.