594 b.c. he was summoned under the constitutional title of “ archon ” to undertake the work of sweeping political reforms, which, in consequence of bitter party strifes and the poverty and indebtedness of the small farmers or proprietors of Attica, were sorely needed. The Athenian like the Roman debtor had often sunk, under the legalized oppression of his creditor, into an actual slave, and had from time to time been sold and exported. Many poor creatures had fled away from home, and were supporting themselves by the labour of their hands in foreign countries. Many men who still clung to their little pro­perties could, with all their pinching, barely keep their heads above water. The governing classes themselves felt that a crisis was at hand, and they appealed to Solon and made him practically dictator. Had he chosen to work on the popular discontent, he might have easily crushed the aristocracy and become a despot, or, as the Greeks called it, a tyrant, as many had done in other states of Greece by coming forward as champions of the people against the great ruling families. Solon obeyed a nobler impulse and aimed at saving his country without too violent a revolution. His first step was to give immediate relief to the poor debtor, to the wretchedly impoverished small farmer or proprietor, and to interpose between him and his creditor and landlord. On very many of the little properties of Attica were to be seen stone pillars with the name of the mortgagee and the amount of the mortgage inscribed on them. By a relief law, “ a shaking-off of burdens ” (σεισαχθεία), he annulled all mortgages, justifying no doubt so extreme a measure by the harshness of the contracts imposed by mortgagees on needy tenants and proprietors and by the urgent necessity of prompt release for the multitude of such small debtors. Thus the “ mortgage pillars ” were swept away and the land was once more free. Such a setting aside of the rights of property, expedient as it may have been under circumstances of acute public distress, must have inflicted a heavy loss on the wealthier class, and the landlord and the mortgagee would also have a fair claim for relief. This, it appears, Solon accomplished by a device which has been variously explained, a deprecia­tion of the currency which relieved to a considerable extent—27 per cent., according to Grote’s@@1 calculation— the wealthier debtors of the landlord and mortgagee class. Grote here remarks that, had Solon cancelled all debts and contracts, there would have been no need to interfere with the currency and lower the standard of money. His relief law could not have been so sweeping and revolu­tionary as it has sometimes been represented. There was no redistribution or confiscation of the land, no universal remission of debts. For the great majority of the people indeed there was substantial relief. The land was free from incumbrance, and the small cultivator had a fresh start in life ; there was no imprisonment or slavery for the debtor; and it would seem that debtors who had sought refuge abroad were purchased back and restored to their homes. Such on the whole appears to have been the character of Solon’s first great reform, though some of the details remain obscure. The reconstruction of the political system on the principle that every citizen was to have a share in the government was Solon’s next work. A few noble families, Eupatrids, as they were called, had hitherto had all the power in their own hands. Solon made property the measure of political power, and con­fined the higher offices of state to the wealthiest citizens ; but election to these offices was to be made by the whole body of the people, the tenure of office was limited as to time, and an account had to be rendered publicly as to its exercise. The citizens were distributed into four classes

@@@1 History of Greece, ch. xi.

according to a graduated scale of property, the first class being alone eligible to the archonship or highest office and to military and naval commands. The actual administra­tion of public affairs was thus restricted to the wealthy few. The second class were the knights or horsemen—the men who could keep a war-horse for the service of the state ; these were assessed at three-fifths of the amount of the first class. The third class answered to our yeomen, and had to serve as heavy-armed infantry. These three classes were subject to direct taxation in the form of a graduated income tax, which was, however, simply an extraordinary tax, levied only in special emergencies at varying amounts per cent. on a citizen’s rateable property, as set down in a public schedule. The fourth and lowest and most numerous class, which supplied light troops and sailors for the fleet, was exempt from all direct taxation, but paid indirect taxes; it would be made up of small farmers, tradesmen, and artisans, and consist in fact of quite the poorest and humblest class of citizens. Its members could not hold any office ; but they had a large amount of political power through their votes in the popular assembly which elected the magistrates and called them to account, and through the very great judicial powers with which they were intrusted, and in virtue of which the Athenian juror practically decided questions both of fact and of law. Solon’s constitution thus gave the people ample means of protecting themselves from mis­government and oppression, every magistrate being directly responsible to them. Not that Solon himself contemplated anything like pure democracy; there is every reason to believe he shrank from it ; but pure democracy was pretty- sure to follow as soon as the people distinctly realized their power. Solon’s council of 400, taken exclusively from the first three classes, must have been meant to furnish the popular assembly with political guidance, and this it did by preparing and introducing measures for discussion and superintending its meetings and exercising some direction over its proceedings. It is impossible for us to define its peculiar functions precisely. It was, how­ever, ultimately under the control of the popular assembly, by which probably it was annually elected, and to which it had annually to render an account. We are not to suppose that either the council or the popular assembly- originated with Solon. What he really did was to put them on a new footing, and to the latter, which previously in all probability had hardly any weight or influence, he gave greatly enlarged powers. The archons and magistrates and the council itself were elected by the popular assembly, and were responsible to it for good behaviour during their term of office. In this assembly met the citizens of all four classes, and consequently the great majority of its members would be poor men and almost peasants. The voting was by show of hands ; every voter was allowed to speak ; and in the voting there was no distinction of classes, all being on a perfectly equal footing. Although theoretically they could not originate any measure, but had to accept for discussion what had been prepared for them by the council, they had an absolute power of veto; and, as the election of the council was in their hands, it must have been easy for them to get that body to bring forward any proposal which they might wish to discuss. Thus it may be truly said that Solon laid the foundation of the future democracy. And through the Heliæa, as it was called,—a body of 6000 citizens annually elected by lot to act as jurors for the trial specially of political offences,—the people acquired a complete control over public affairs. There was but one proviso : the Athenian juror must be upwards of thirty years of age. In the Athenian courts which were formed out of these 6000 citizens the functions of judge and jury