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The Athenian Democratic Revolution and Its Causes

After the tyranny in Athens was overthrown, a new political struggle emerged over who would hold power, pitting Isagoras, the son of Teisandrus and a supporter of the old tyrannical regime, against Cleisthenes of the Alcmaeonid family. While both men vied for power for some time, it was ultimately Cleisthenes, who took the approach of winning the support of the general public, that took control in Athens. With this, he reformed Athenian society, involving more people in the distribution of land and political power. While ordinary citizens played a vital role in defending and solidifying these changes, it was Cleisthenes' actions that laid the groundwork for this new political order and thus was the primary force behind the Athenian democratic revolution.

Early on, as Cleisthenes was losing the political battle with Isagoras, he recognized that he could make up ground by adding the common people to his faction and reforming the current government structure. Herodotus notes, "He established ten tribal leaders to replace the previous four, and then distributed the demes in ten parts throughout the tribes. By adding the people to his side, he gained the upper hand by far over his political opponents" (Herodotus 5.69). This restructuring ensured that political power was not concentrated among a few aristocratic families, but rather spread across ten tribes, enabling broader participation from the demos.

Additionally, Cleisthenes divided the demes across various regions to ensure that each tribe would have a balanced representation from different parts of the city-state. According to the *Constitution of the Athenians*, "He distributed them over the countryside by demes in thirty sections: ten of demes in the city region, ten of the coast and ten inland... he assigned by lot three to each tribe, so that each tribe should have a share in all of the regions" (*Constitution of the Athenians* 21.4). This distribution of land types ensured that no tribe could dominate another and that each region — city, coast, and inland — had a stake in the political system. Such equal distribution diluted old regional loyalties and encouraged Athenians to identify more with their tribe than their family lineage, fostering a sense of unity and collective governance. Evidently, Cleisthenes' actions set the groundwork for Athenian democracy and helped strip away the state's old political tendencies—no democratic revolution would have occurred without these reforms.

However, these reforms did not go unchallenged. Isagoras, seeking to reassert control over Athens, enlisted the help of his guest-friend Kleomenes of Sparta, to remove Cleisthenes and his supporters from power. They attempted to weaken the democratic reforms by exiling hundreds of Athenian families along with Cleisthenes and dissolving the newly expanded council. As Herodotus recounts, "by banishing the 700 Athenian households that had been specified by Isagoras...he next attempted to dissolve the Council and to place power in the hands of 300 partisans of Isagoras" (Herodotus 5.72). This move was a direct attempt to revert to an oligarchic structure that favored the few over the many. Despite this power grab, the Athenian people united against Isagoras and Kleomenes, even in the absence of Cleisthenes. They rose in revolt, laying siege to the tyrants, preventing their takeover. This resistance demonstrated that the reforms Cleisthenes put in place had given the state the desire to defend it as a unit, along with the structure to easily come together as one. The subsequent return of Kleomenes with another

Spartan army, combined with attacks on Attica by Boeotians and Chalcidians, put Athens under considerable pressure yet again. However, the Athenians' resolve, bolstered by the new sense of political agency, led to a victorious defense against these threats. As Herodotus notes, "Thus it is clear that they were deliberately slack while repressed, since they were working for a master, but that after they were freed, they became ardently devoted to working hard so as to win achievements for themselves as individuals" (Herodotus 5.78). The people, having tasted a democratic structured society, were inspired to actively protect and fight for their city, showcasing the revolutionary power of Cleisthenes' democratic reforms.

Ultimately, while it was the people of Athens who came together to create the democratic revolution, Cleisthenes' actions laid the foundation for this new democratic society. By redistributing power through the creation of ten balanced tribes, increasing the council's size, and ensuring equal representation from different regions, he effectively reformed the political landscape. This restructuring inherently broke up the old political structure in the state and allowed Athenians to act more as a unit in their balanced tribes. Without this, the people would never have been able to defend their state, and Isagoras and Kleomenes would have had greater opportunity to seize power. The democratic revolution was, therefore, primarily the result of Cleisthenes' leadership as an elite individual, providing the vision and framework that empowered the demos to rise up and transform Athenian society.

Works Cited

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