

# Tyranny

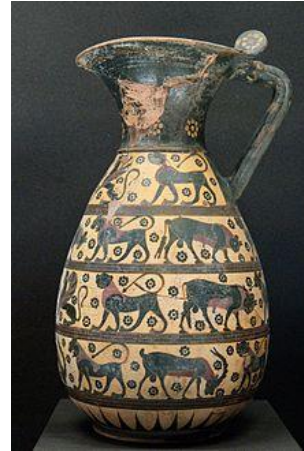
# Fights between the elite



- Phaleron mass graves late 7<sup>th</sup> c. BC
- healthy young men bound and executed

# Why is the elite fighting?

- Rapidly changing and increasingly complex economy
- Access to new sources of wealth, and sources of prestige
- Access to new social networks
- Broad class of free peasants increasingly dissatisfied and equipped to come to class with the elite





# 7<sup>th</sup>-6<sup>th</sup> c.: The Age of Tyranny



**Corinth:** Cypselus, Periander

**Sicyon:** Orthagoras, Kleisthenes

**Megara:** Theagenes

**Athens:** Peisistratos

**Samos:** Polykrates

**Mytilene:** Pittacus

# The original meaning of the word tyrant

- Word not Greek in origin
- Perhaps Lydian meaning lord?
- First used in Greek in 7<sup>th</sup> century poetry
- Not clear negative connotations
- Described desirable but unattainable luxury and power

I have **no interest in the possessions of Gyges**,  
the one with so much gold,  
nor has jealousy of him yet overcome me.  
Nor do I envy the works of the gods,  
**and I have no desire for a grand tyrannis;  
that is beyond my sights.**

Archilochus, Fragment 19

And let us relax from heart-eating faction  
and civil conflict,  
which some Olympian god has stirred up,  
leading the people to ruin,  
while bestowing delightful glory on Pittacus.

Alcaeus, Fragment 70,

# Main Questions

- Were the tyrants really tyrannical?
- Were they a step backwards, from law and order to unconstitutional rule?
- Or did they, or some of them, made a positive contribution too?
- In particular, did they ease the road to democracy by going against the elite and promoting popular causes?

# Herodotus (5.92)

## on Cypselus, tyrant of Corinth 660 BC

The Corinthian state was ordered in such manner as I will show. There was **an oligarchy, and this group of men, called the Bacchiadae**, held sway in the city, marrying and giving in marriage among themselves. Now Amphion, **one of these men, had a crippled daughter, whose name was Labda. Since none of the Bacchiadae would marry her, she was wedded to Eetion** son of Echecrates, of the township of Petra, a Lapith by lineage and of the posterity of Caeneus. When no sons were born to him by this wife or any other, he set out to Delphi to enquire concerning the matter of acquiring offspring. As soon as he entered, the **Pythian priestess spoke these verses to him:**

**“Eetion, worthy of honor, no man honors you.**

**Labda is with child, and her child will be a millstone**

**Which will fall upon the rulers and will bring justice to Corinth.**

” This oracle which was given to Eetion was in some way made known to the Bacchiadae. The earlier oracle sent to Corinth had not been understood by them, despite the fact that its meaning was the same as the meaning of the oracle of Eetion, and it read as follows: “An eagle in the rocks has conceived, and will bring forth a lion,

Strong and fierce. The knees of many will it loose.

This consider well, Corinthians,

You who dwell by lovely Pirene and the overhanging heights of Corinth.

This earlier prophecy had been unintelligible to **the Bacchiadae**, but as soon as they heard the one which was given to Eetion, they understood it at once, recognizing its similarity with the oracle of Eetion. Now understanding both oracles, they kept quiet but **resolved to do away with the offspring of Eetion**. Then, as soon as his wife had given birth, they sent ten men of their clan to the township where Eetion dwelt to kill the child. These men came to Petra and passing into Eetion's courtyard, asked for the child. Labda, knowing nothing of the purpose of their coming and thinking that they wished to see the baby out of affection for its father, brought it and placed it into the hands of one of them. Now they had planned on their way that the first of them who received the child should dash it to the ground. When, however, Labda brought and handed over the child, **by divine chance it smiled at the man who took it. This he saw, and compassion prevented him from killing it.** Filled with pity, he handed it to a second, and this man again to a third. In fact it passed from hand to hand to each of the ten, for none would make an end of it. They then gave the child back to its mother, and after going out, they stood before the door reproaching and upbraiding one another, but chiefly him who had first received it since he had not acted in accordance with their agreement. Finally they resolved to go in again and all have a hand in the killing.



Fate, however, had decreed that Eetion's offspring should be the source of ills for Corinth, for **Labda, standing close to this door, heard all this. Fearing that they would change their minds and that they would take and actually kill the child, she took it away and hid it where she thought it would be hardest to find, in a chest,** for she knew that if they returned and set about searching they would seek in every place—which in fact they did. They came and searched, but when they did not find it, they resolved to go off and say to those who had sent them that they had carried out their orders. They then went away and said this.

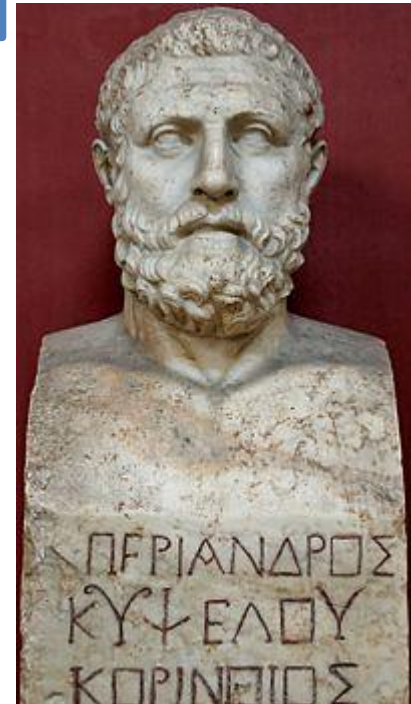
Eetion's son, however, grew up, and **because of his escape from that danger, he was called Cypselus, after the chest.** When he had reached manhood and was seeking a divination, an oracle of double meaning was given him at Delphi. Putting faith in this, he made an attempt on Corinth **and won it. The oracle was as follows:**

**“That man is fortunate who steps into my house,  
Cypselus, son of Eetion, the king of noble Corinth,  
He himself and his children, but not the sons of his sons.**

”Such was the oracle. Cypselus, however, when he had gained the tyranny, conducted himself in this way: **many of the Corinthians he drove into exile, many he deprived of their wealth, and by far the most he had killed.**

# Periander of Corinth (627 BC)

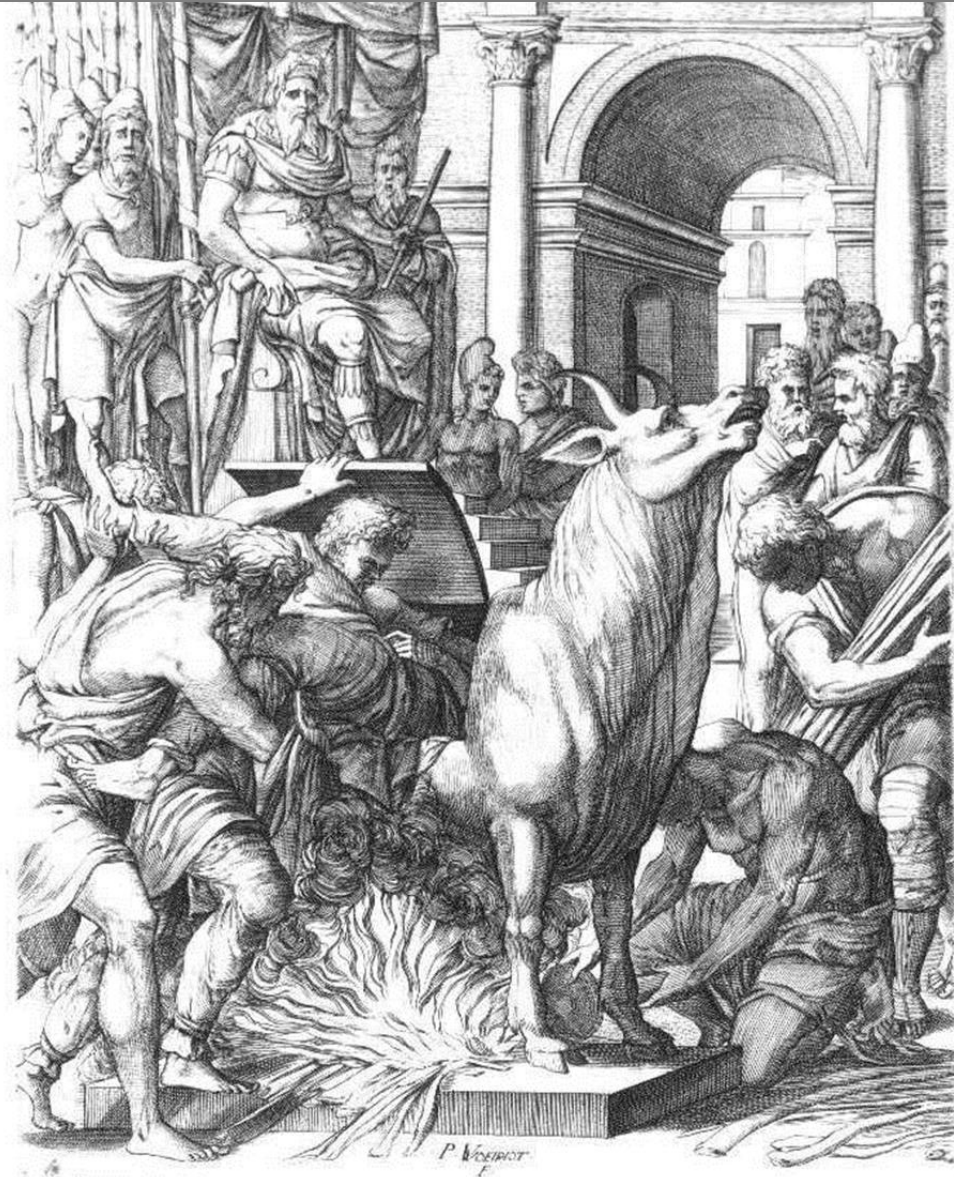
- **Whatever act of slaughter or banishment Cypselus had left undone, that Periander brought to accomplishment... Herodotus 5.94**
- **The inventor of corruptions, bribery and terror, according to Aristotle (Politics 1313)**



# Phalaris of Acragas (Diod. 9.19.1)

Perilaus, an bronze worker, gives him as a gift a bronze bull, telling him that

‘If you ever wish to punish some man,  
Phalaris, shut him up within the bull  
and lay a fire beneath it;  
by his groanings the bull will be thought  
to bellow and his cries of pain will give  
you pleasure as they come through the  
pipes in the nostrils’



# Some Mythical Motifs in tyrant stories

- Sterility overcome
- Lameness
- Hiding baby in chest
- Failed attempt to kill baby

# The Stereotype of the Bad Tyrant

## The tyrant

a sole ruler who has **usurped** power, rules with **no respect to the law**, and **with cruelty especially against the elite**, is not required to give an account of himself, and mostly cares for **his own interest** and leads a life of **luxury and perversion**, **his power will not last**

## The lawgiver:

Appointed in power

Establishes laws  
puts an end to violence

Has no status allegiance, cares  
for the community

Paradigm of wisdom and moderation  
His laws survive him and are long-lasting



# Hero or villain?

## The Seven Sages

Thales of Miletus

Solon of Athens

**Periander of Corinth**

**Pittacus of Mytilene**

Bias of Priene

Chilon of Sparta

Cleobulos of Lindos

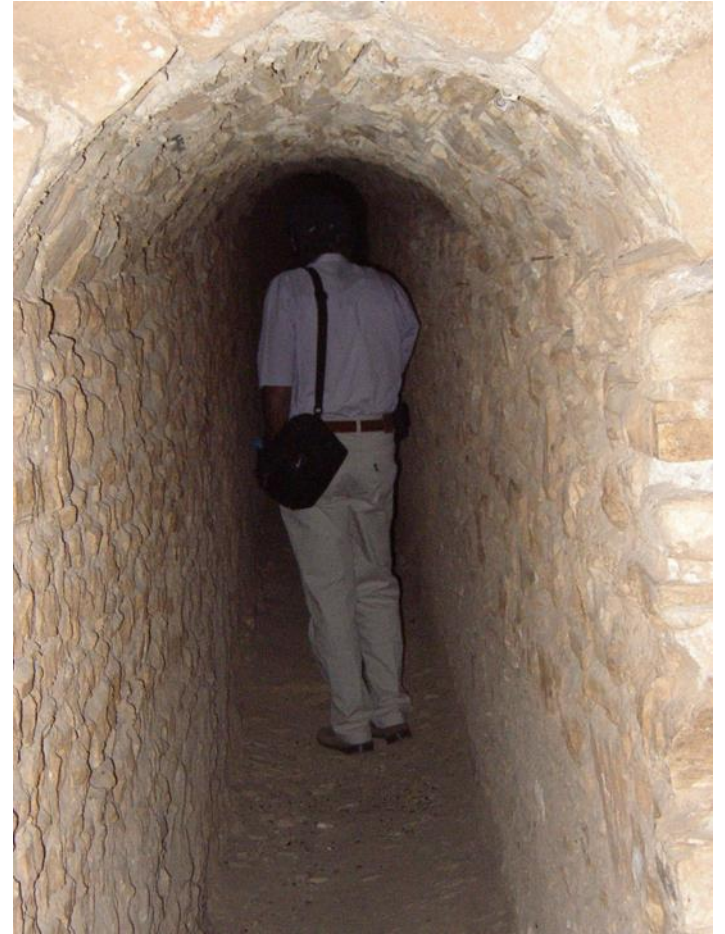


# Polykrates of Samos (538 BC)

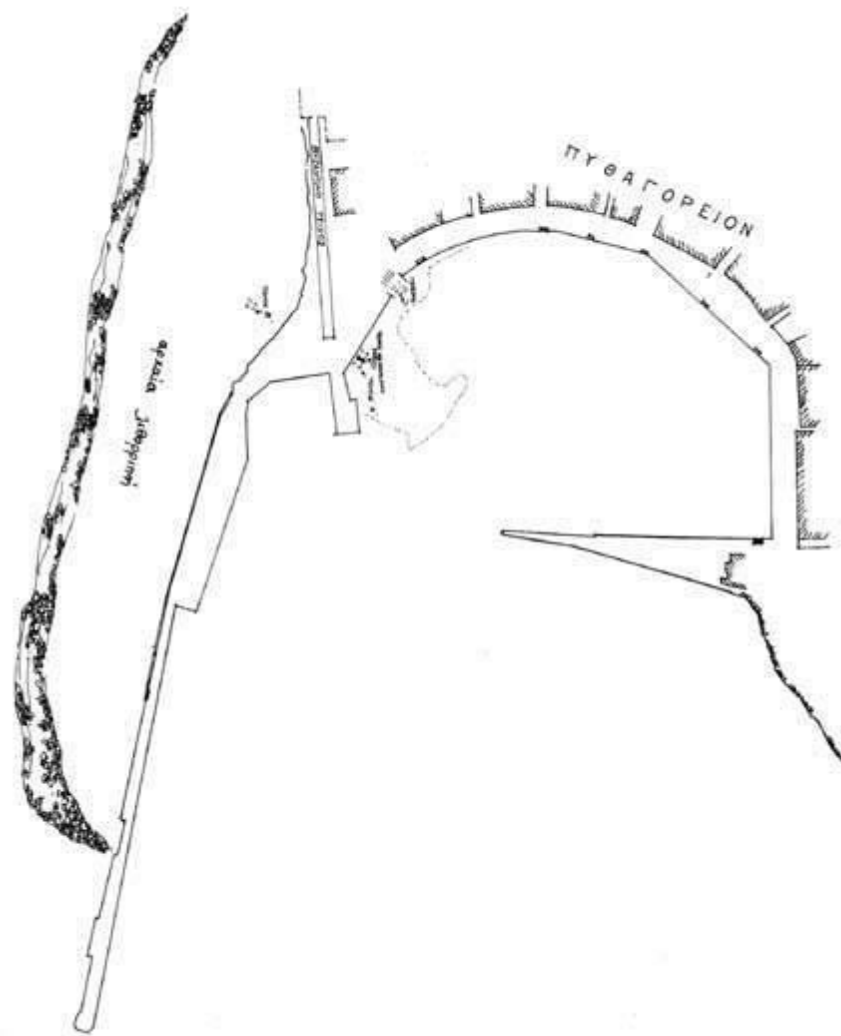
So Polycrates came to Magnesia, and there **he died in a way that dishonoured himself** and his high ambitions; for except, for the tyrants of Sicily alone, there is not one of the rest of the Greek despots **who is worthy to be compared with Polycrates for magnificence**

Herodotus 3.125

# The projects of Polykrates of Samos



Eupalinus Tunnel

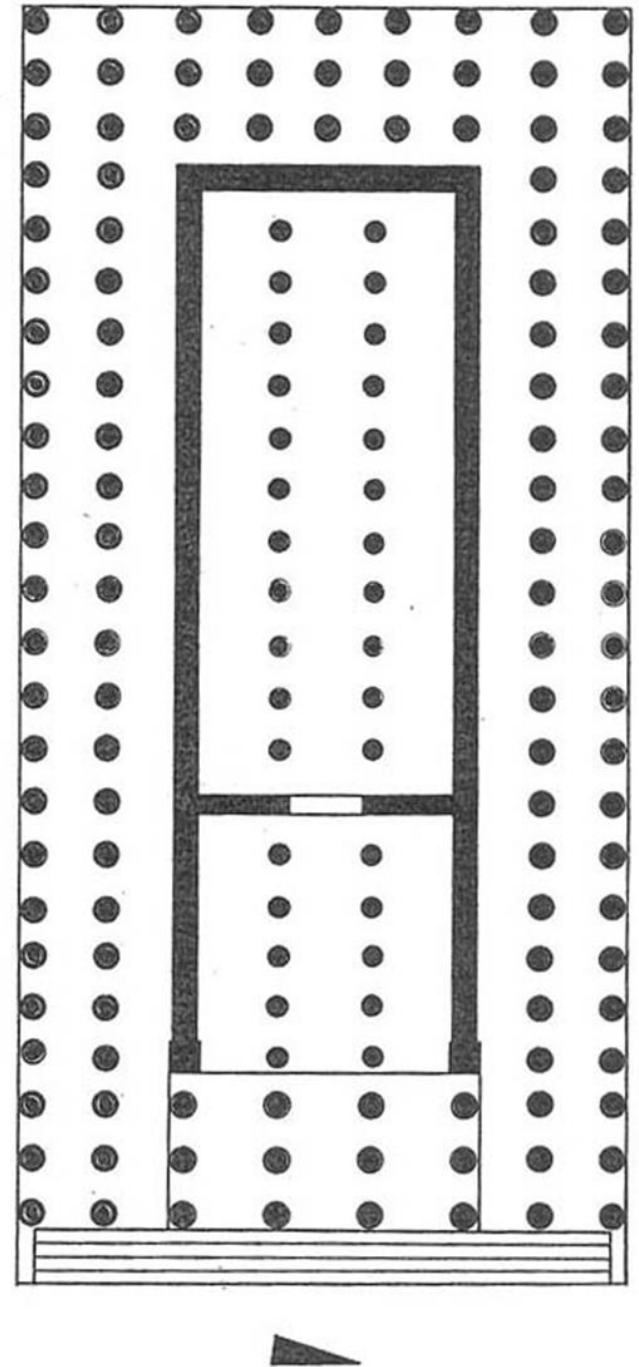


The Harbour mole





The temple of Hera





# Building projects associated with tyrants of Corinth

## The Diolkos:

paved road across the Isthmus  
used for transport of boats by land

Dated to the 6<sup>th</sup> c. and associated with  
Periander on the basis of pottery



**Peisistratos and his sons  
561-510 BC (on and off)**

# Typical tyrant motifs in Peisistatos' story (Herodotus 1.59-)

This Hippocrates was still a private man when a great marvel happened to him when he was at Olympia to see the games: when he had offered the sacrifice, the vessels, standing there full of meat and water, boiled without fire until they boiled over. Chilon the Lacedaemonian, who happened to be there and who saw this marvel, advised Hippocrates not to take to his house a wife who could bear children, but if he had one already, then to send her away, and if he had a son, to disown him. Hippocrates refused to follow the advice of Chilon; and afterward there was born to him this Pisistratus...

Having got back his sovereignty in the manner which I have described, Pisistratus married Megacles' daughter according to his agreement with Megacles. But as he already had young sons, and as the Alcmeonid family were said to be under a curse, he had no wish that his newly-wedded wife bear him children, and therefore had unusual intercourse with her.

# Peisistratos as a popular ruler

...and Pisistratus ruled the Athenians, disturbing in no way the order of offices nor changing the laws, but governing the city according to its established constitution and arranging all things fairly and well.

Herodotus 1.59

The factions were three: one was the party of the Men of the Coast, whose head was Megacles the son of Alcmaeon, and they were thought chiefly to aim at the middle form of constitution; another was the party of the Men of the Plain, who desired the oligarchy, and their leader was Lycurgus; third was the party of the Hillmen, which had appointed Peisistratus over it, as he was thought to be an extreme advocate of the people.

[Aristotle] *Constitution of the Athenians* 13

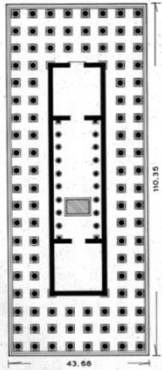
and moreover he advanced **loans of money to the poor** for their industries, so that they might support themselves by farming... And for this reason **he organized the Local Justices**, and often went to the country on circuit in person, inspecting and settling disputes

And in all other matters too he gave the multitude no trouble during his rule, but always worked for peace and safeguarded tranquillity; **so that men were often to be heard saying that the tyranny of Peisistratus was the Golden Age of Cronos**; for it came about later when his sons had succeeded him that the government became much harsher

Aristotle *Constitution of the Athenians* 16



# Fountains and Temples



**Temple of Olympian Zeus**

# Pomp and Spectacles

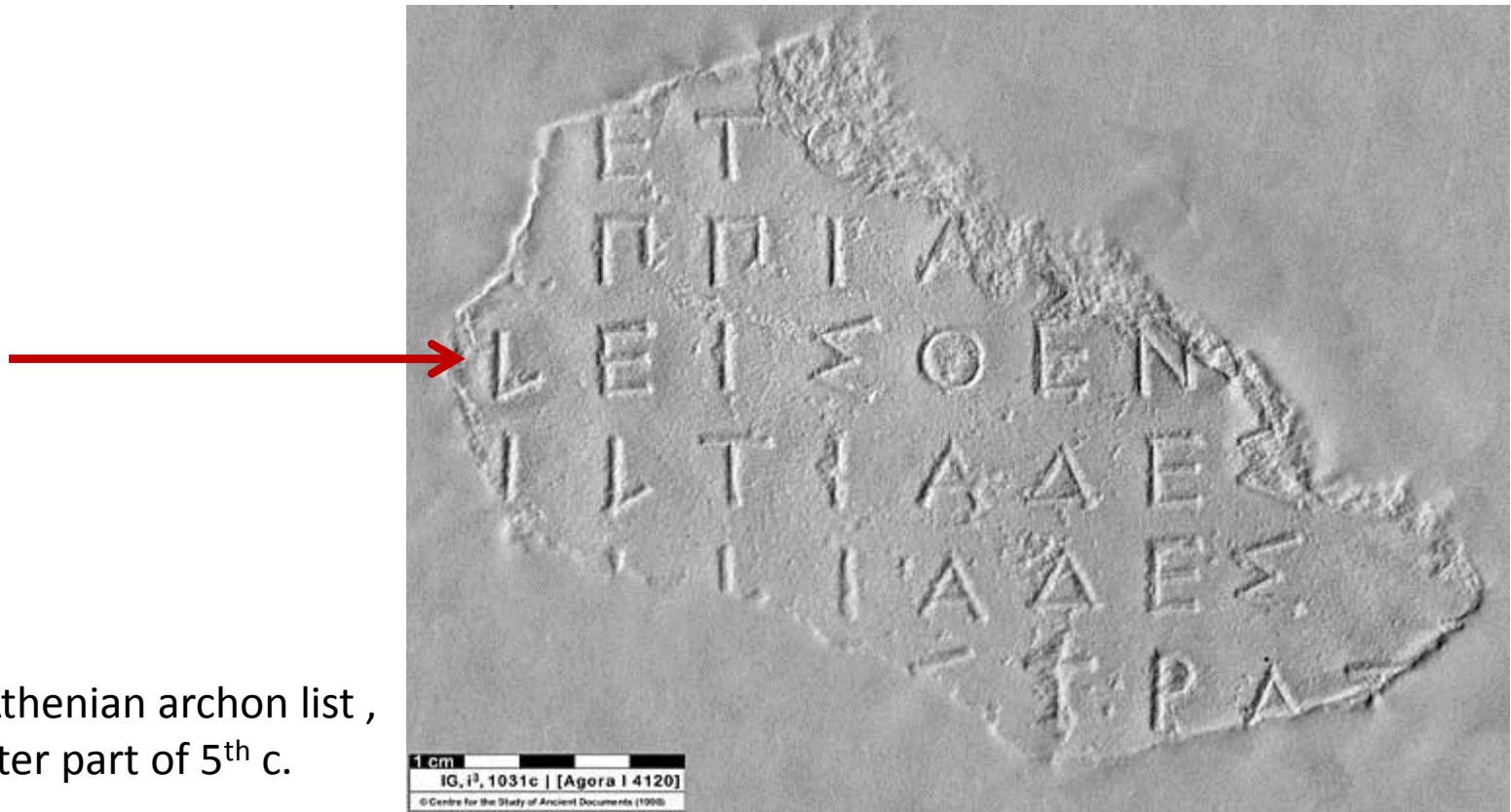
- Reorganized the City-Dionysia ?
- Reorganized the Panathenaia festival ?
- Monumentalize the acropolis?



# Tyrants and the people

- Put an end to violent elite strife
  - They might have improved the economy and living conditions of lower classes
  - Enhanced civic pride through conspicuous monuments and spectacles
- But were they really anti-elite: did they really champion the interest of the masses?

# Not that anti-elite afterall!



The archons listed belong to the period  
527/6-522/1 under the tyranny of Hippias, and include  
Kleisthenes, who was purportedly in exile, during the  
tyranny!