

# Solon

**Solon**, (born c. 630 BCE—died c. 560 BCE), Athenian statesman, known as one of the Seven Wise Men of Greece (the others were Chilon of Sparta, Thales of Miletus, Bias of Priene, Cleobulus of Lindos, Pittacus of Mytilene, and Periander of Corinth). Solon ended exclusive aristocratic control of the government, substituted a system of control by the wealthy, and introduced a new and more humane law code. He was also a noted poet.



**Solon**

Solon, statue in the Library of Congress's Thomas Jefferson Building, Washington, D.C.  
*Carol M. Highsmith/Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. (Digital File Number: LC-DIG-highsm-02101)*

## Solon's era

In Solon's lifetime, the Greeks had not yet begun to write history or biography. It was not until the 5th century that accounts of his life and works began to be put together, on the evidence of his poems (of which the 300 or so lines preserved by quotation probably represent only a small proportion), his law code, oral tradition, and inference from existing institutions. Although certain details have a legendary ring, the main features of the story seem to be reliable.

Solon was of noble descent but moderate means. As the tradition states and his travels and economic measures suggest, he may have been a merchant. He first became prominent about 600 BCE, when the

Athenians were disheartened by ill success in a war with their neighbours of Megara for possession of the island of Salamis. By publicly reciting a poem that made the issue a matter of national honour and that called on the Athenians to "arise and come to Salamis, to win that fair island and undo our shame," Solon induced them to resume the war, which they eventually won.

The early 6th century was a troubled time for the Athenians in other ways as well. Society was dominated by an aristocracy of birth, the eupatridae, who owned the best land, monopolized the government, and were themselves split into rival factions. The poorer farmers were easily driven into debt by them and when unable to pay were reduced to the condition of serfs on their own land and, in extreme cases, sold into slavery. The intermediate classes of middling farmers, craftsmen, and merchants resented their

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exclusion from the government. These social, economic, and political evils might well have culminated in a revolution and subsequent tyranny (dictatorship), as they had in other Greek states, had it not been for Solon, to whom Athenians of all classes turned in the hope of a generally satisfactory solution of their problems. Because he believed in moderation and in an ordered society in which each class had its proper place and function, his solution was not revolution but reform.

## Economic reforms

Solon had already held office as archon (annual chief ruler) about 594 BCE. It was probably about 20 years later that he was given full powers as reformer and legislator. His first concern was to relieve the immediate distress caused by debt. He redeemed all the forfeited land and freed all the enslaved citizens, probably by fiat. This measure, known popularly as the "shaking off of burdens," was described by Solon in one of his poems:

These things the black earth...could best witness for the judgment of posterity;  
from whose surface I plucked up the marking-stones [probably signs of the  
farmers' indebtedness] planted all about, so that she who was enslaved is now  
free. And I brought back to Athens...many who had been sold, justly or unjustly,  
or who had fled under the constraint of debt, wandering far afield and no  
longer speaking the Attic tongue; and I freed those who suffered shameful  
slavery here and trembled at their masters' whims.

He also prohibited for the future all loans secured on the borrower's person. But he refused to go to the length demanded by the poor, which was to redistribute the land. Instead, he passed measures designed to increase the general prosperity and to provide alternative occupations for those unable to live by farming: e.g., trades and professions were encouraged; the export of produce other than olive oil was forbidden (so much grain had been exported that not enough remained to feed the population of Attica); the circulation of coined money (invented in Solon's lifetime) was stimulated by the minting of a native Athenian coinage on a more-suitable standard than that of the coins of neighbours, which had been used hitherto; and new weights and measures were introduced. The rapid spread of the new coinage and of Athenian products, particularly olive oil and pottery, throughout the commercial world of the times, attested by archaeology, shows that these measures were effective. Poverty, though not eliminated, was never again in Attica the crying evil that it had been before Solon's reforms.

## Political reforms

Solon's new political constitution abolished the monopoly of the eupatridae and substituted for it government by the wealthy citizens. He instituted a census of annual income, reckoned primarily in measures of grain, oil, and wine, the principal products of the soil, and divided the citizens into four income groups, accordingly. (Those whose

income was in other forms, including money, must have been rated on a system of equivalents.) Henceforth, political privilege was allotted on the basis of these divisions, without regard to birth. All citizens were entitled to attend the general Assembly (Ecclesia), which became, at least potentially, the sovereign body, entitled to pass laws and decrees, elect officials, and hear appeals from the most important decisions of the courts. All but those in the poorest group might serve, a year at a time, on a new Council of Four Hundred, which was to prepare business for the Assembly. The higher governmental posts were reserved for citizens of the top two income groups. Thus, the foundations of the future democracy were laid. But a strong conservative element remained in the ancient Council of the Hill of Ares (Areopagus), and the people themselves for a long time preferred to entrust the most important positions to members of the old aristocratic families.

## Code of laws

Solon's third great contribution to the future good of Athens was his new code of laws. The first written code at Athens, that of Draco (c. 621 BCE), was still in force. Draco's laws were shockingly severe (hence the term *draconian*)—so severe that they were said to have been written not in ink but in blood. On the civil side they permitted enslavement for debt, and death seems to have been the penalty for almost all criminal offenses. Solon revised every statute except that on homicide and made Athenian law altogether more humane. His code, though supplemented and modified, remained the foundation of Athenian statute law until the end of the 5th century, and parts of it were embodied in the new codification made at that time.

## Response to Solon's reforms

When Solon had completed his task, complaints came in from all sides. In attempting to satisfy all, he had satisfied none. The nobles had hoped that he would make only marginal changes; the poor, that he would distribute all the land in equal shares and, if necessary, make himself tyrant in order to enforce the redistribution. But Solon, although concerned for freedom, justice, and humanity, was no egalitarian, nor had he any ambition for autocratic power. Though discontented, the Athenians stood by their promise to accept Solon's dispositions; they were given validity for 100 years and posted for all to see on revolving wooden tablets. To avoid having to defend and explain them further, Solon set off on a series of travels, undertaking not to return for 10 years.

## Later years

Among the places Solon visited were Egypt and Cyprus. Those visits are attested by his poems. Less credible (because of chronological difficulties) is the famous encounter with the fabulously rich Croesus, king of Lydia, who, so the story goes, learned from Solon that

wealth and power are not guarantors of happiness and that, while they lived, fate could reverse the fortunes of all.

When Solon returned to Athens, he found the citizens divided into regional factions headed by prominent nobles. Of these, his friend Peisistratus, general in the final war for Salamis and leader of northeastern Attica, seemed to Solon to be planning to become tyrant. The old statesman's urgent warnings were disregarded, even dismissed as the ravings of a madman. His reply was that "A little time will show the citizens my madness, / Yes, will show, when truth comes in our midst." It was not long before he was proved right: Peisistratus did become tyrant (560 BCE). Although on this occasion he was soon ejected, it seems that Solon did not live to see it.

## Reputation

Solon embodied the cardinal Greek virtue of moderation. He put an end to the worst evils of poverty in Attica and provided his fellow countrymen with a balanced constitution and a humane code of laws. Solon was also Athens's first poet—and a poet who truly belonged to Athens. As the medium through which he warned, challenged, counseled the people, and urged them to action, his poetry was the instrument of his statesmanship.

It was probably before the end of the 5th century that the Greeks first drew up a list of the Seven Wise Men who had been prominent intellectually and politically in the 6th century. The earliest list, accepted by the Greek philosopher Plato, did not satisfy later writers, who expanded it to 10 and even 17 to accommodate rival claimants. Every version, however, contained four names that were not challenged. One of them was that of Solon of Athens, a testimony to the abiding respect in which his memory was held.

Theodore John Cadoux The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica

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