

TRANSLATION

On the Athenian Constitution

(c.580 B.C.)

Solon of Athens

THE FOUNDING OF THE WESTERN TRADITION of constitutional government can be identified with Solon's role in the birth of the Classical culture of Greece. Solon lived in Athens from approximately 640 to 560 B.C., and was called upon to rule the city in 594 B.C. during a deep financial and social crisis.

Under the Draconian laws that preceded Solon, a creditor was allowed to claim the debtor's person in payment of money owed. This debt-slavery, which reduced human beings to mere extensions of their financial agreements, progressively brought Athens to ruin. Usurious rates of interest exceeded the profit margins of otherwise healthy enterprises, and enslaved otherwise free laborers. In a bold step, Solon ended debt-slavery with his *SEISACHTHEIA*, or cancellation, which "shook off the burden" of the debt—an event which the Athenians continued to commemorate annually. In a new constitution for the city, Solon attempted to reformulate relations between the powerful and the powerless from a more universal standpoint, as his poem relates.

Solon's poem progresses in stages to its climax. Present evils are due to men's actions, not abstract fate. Human frailties of greed, pride, and immoderation must lose out sooner or later to justice. Evil enslaves humans, and destroys society. It invades each individual's most intimate private life. Mankind can and must order its affairs according to *EUNOMIA*, which has the power to destroy evil.

The word *EUNOMIA*, meaning "a healthy ordering of law," or as translated here, "a good constitution," is quite unique in the poem: one hears in this relatively short word, the whole spectrum of vowel sounds. Considering the invariant ordering of vowels—"u, o, a, e, i,"—*EUNOMIA* can be said to sweep like a pendulum from side to side ("e-u", "o-i"), coming to rest near the middle ("a"). The very sound of the word conveys a sense both of encompassing the universe of vowels, and of bringing order out of wild gyrations.

EUNOMIA stands at the climax of the Greek poem,

followed by a cascade of rippling effects, starting with the phrase *TRACHEA LEIAINEI*, or "rough things [a good constitution] makes smooth." Again, the words perform the action described, the verb *LEIAINEI* "smoothing" out the "rough" *TRACHEA*.

This particular phrase—*MAKING THE ROUGH SMOOTH*—along with the parallel phrase—*MAKING CROOKED JUDGMENTS STRAIGHT*—would have struck a chord for early Christians reading the Greek of the New Testament text, for the familiar passage from the prophet Isaiah describing the coming of the Lord, which is variously quoted in St. Luke and the other Gospels, uses the same two pairs of Greek words as are here used by Solon. Although a relationship between the earlier texts of Solon and of Isaiah can only be hinted at, the power of the passage as found in the Greek of St. Luke has continued to echo throughout Western civilization down to the present day.

Early Americans heard this passage from Isaiah in their King James Bible: "and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways shall be made smooth." Many today have heard it in the masterwork by Handel, the *MESSIAH* oratorio: "the crooked [shall be] straight, and the rough places plain."

In his own time, Solon's fellow citizens would have recognized poetic allusions to both Homer and Hesiod, as familiar starting points for the mental transformation Solon was demanding of them. Two hundred years later, Plato would hold up Solon's tradition as a model. Plato goes further, to cite Solon as the source for his breath-taking story of Atlantis, the ancient pre-history of Greece conveyed to Solon by the wise men of Egypt. The cultural connection of both Solon and Plato to the remnants of the scientific faction in Egypt need only be cited here. Regardless, it is clear that the power of informed, deliberative human action to change history for the better, is a quality of Classical culture that owes no small debt to the Athenian law-giver Solon.

The Constitutional Order¹

Never will our city be destroyed by Zeus' decree,
Nor by the will of the bless'd immortal gods,
For, born of a potent father, great-hearted guardian
Pallas Athena spreads her hands o'er our city—
But, by money seduced, the Athenians themselves
Seek mindlessly to corrupt the great city,
Joined by the iniquitous schemes of their leaders,
Who from arrogance great woes shall suffer:
For they understand not how to restrain gluttony,
Nor best to order their feasting in quiet.

[The Greek manuscript breaks off here; a fragment refers to
"corrupt ones becoming rich."]

Sparing neither sacred ground nor public goods,
Greedy they steal from the one place or the other.
They fail to protect the rev'rend temples of Justice,
She who notes silently the "what is and what has been,"²
Who in time shall come exacting retribution.
Behold, an inex'orable harm visits all Athens:
To vile slavery is she swiftly progressed,
Which rouses up from slumber civil strife and war—
War that wipes out for many their cherished youth;
Now our much-loved city is soon worn down by faction,
While the wicked stir them to confrontations.
These evils ensnare the whole people; but the poor,
Many of them, depart to a foreign land,
Plundered, and bound up in shameful fetters.
[For the slave's yoke bears all other wickedness.]³
Thus does the public evil come home to each of us:
Straining, the courtyard gates no longer hold fast,
The evil leaps o'er the high walls; it finds everyone,
Even him fleeing to the inmost chamber.

This my soul commands me teach the Athenians:
A bad constitution brings civic turmoil,
But a good one shows well-ordering and coherence,
As it puts shackles 'round about wrong-doing—
It smoothes out the rough; it checks greed, tempers hubris,
And withers the fruits of reckless impulse.
It takes crooked judgments and makes them straight,
Softens arrogant deeds, halts seditious acts,
And ends the bile of grievous strife. And so, under it,
Everything for mankind becomes whole and wise.

—translated by David Shavin

1. The title and punctuation have been supplied by the translator.

2. An Homeric expression for the power of divination; e.g., *Iliad* I, 70.

3. This line is missing in the manuscript; an editor has supplied the bracketed material in the Greek text.

Final stages in the preparation of this translation were assisted by Kenneth Kronberg.