

ANCIENT HISTORY

Cleisthenes of Athens: Assess the contributions Cleisthenes made to the development of democracy in Athens

Cleisthenes was a tyrant of Athens who sought *isonomia*, that is, equality among all classes. He attempted to create a government where people from all parts of society could participate in and this is why he is often thought of as quite democratic. However, it must be noted that Cleisthenes did adapt the policies and reforms that his predecessors, Solon and Pisistratus, had carried out.

Cleisthenes wanted to establish a link between local and central government so that citizens would be able to participate in and work their way up the political ladder. Therefore, he used the demes, the epicentre of local tradition, as the basis of his new system of government. Herodotus states that “he added the demes to his faction, a demes previously ignored”. Here, all citizens, regardless of their socio-economic status were able to sit in the ‘demarchos’. This promoted egalitarianism as it gave people of all classes the opportunity to have their voices heard and enacted upon. It was also from the demes that citizens could experience politics and take part in local administration. Cleisthenes was what Aristotle described as “leader and champion of the people”. From the demes, he created the trittyes, which, although had no political function, acted as a bridge between the demes and his new tribal system, the phylae.

Cleisthenes established ten new tribes or phylae to replace that of the old Ionian four. In these tribes included people from various socio-economic backgrounds such as peasants, farmers, traders, musicians, aristocrats and soldiers. Aristotle stated that he “distributed all the citizens through the tribes instead of the old Ionian four, mixing them up, so that they could all have a share in the running of the state”. Here, citizens were able to discuss the affairs of the state and raise any questions. It was also from the phylae that Cleisthenes’ constitution was based upon. Plutarch recorded that he had “established laws and a constitution that promoted harmony between the people”. This is true as his democratic reforms were well-accepted by his people and helped to promote Athens as an egalitarianistic polis.

Cleisthenes also replaced Solon’s former Council of the Four Hundred with the Council of the Five Hundred. This was democratic as citizens could gather and vote on matters concerning the state. All members were also able to be voted magistrate twice in their lifetime. This allowed ordinary people the opportunity to have immense political power. It promoted the idea of equality among all the ranks of society. Other positions in the council were selected by lot as the Athenians thought that the choosing should be left to the divine will of the gods. It also allowed everybody the same chance to be elected. It promoted fairness amongst all citizens. However, there was a concern that the person chosen would be incompetent. Cleisthenes, however, allowed them the opportunity to prove themselves.

Another democratic reform of Cleisthenes was ostracism. This expelled people or peoples who were seen as a threat to or were feared by the Athenian citizens. Ostracism was based around the majority of votes for or against during the sixth prytory. This reform allowed each and every citizen to voice their opinions and have them heard, acknowledged and enacted upon. It was probably Cleisthenes’ most democratic reform as such significant issues were left in the hands of the people. Ehrenberg stated that Cleisthenes had created a “constitutional framework on a society on the verge of becoming democratic”.

However, there were some downsides to Cleisthenes’ democratic reforms. Farmers and those who were poorer, who left their jobs for the various councils, did not receive any extra money as the positions are not a paid one. Cleisthenes had attempted to remove factional strife among the nobility but he had not taken into consideration that the farmers were still poor.

It has also been debated whether Cleisthenes' contribution to the development of Athenian democracy at all or whether he was merely adapting and taking credit for the reforms of Solon and Pisistratus. Solon was a mediator reformer whom he enacted many guidelines because he disapproved of the aristocrats' abuse of power (Plutarch). He was an "honest and fair man" (Plutarch) who attempted to help the oppressed lives of the poor. Pisistratus was a tyrant who preceded Cleisthenes during the time that was referred to as the "Golden age of Pisistratus" (Aristotle). This was so as he was "more like a citizen than a tyrant" (Aristotle) and "maintained his position as tyrant with outstanding ability" (Hammond). This is the reason why historians have questioned whether Cleisthenes contributed anything at all. For it can be seen that he just further progressed the reforms of his predecessors.

However, it can be argued that Cleisthenes created a sense of identity amongst the Athenian citizens. He wanted to make them seen first and foremost as belonging to the Athenian state than to a particular local group. He also introduced the idea of voting on important issues and this has proved to be democratic as the final choice was based upon the vote of the people.

It has also been debated whether Cleisthenes' developments toward Athenian democracy were benevolent or were just fashioned out of his detest for Isagoras. Aristotle believes in Cleisthenes' genuity as he believes that there would be no other reason why Cleisthenes would have been expelled during the time of Hippias if he did not strongly believe in democracy. However, Herodotus fervently argues that Cleisthenes intentions were to "bring abuse upon Athens and revenge upon Isagoras". He believed that Cleisthenes' contributions are only so as he wanted to prove Isagoras wrong and show that he indeed was the stronger and more powerful tyrant.

The idea of Athenian democracy itself has been challenged by historians through time. Plutarch states that democracy usually only revolved around the ideas of the tyrant who was in charge. Herodotus quotes that there is nothing "more wicked" than a democracy. Modern historians and people have looked back at Athens and do not recognise the immense things it has achieved. Kagan, on the other hand, applauded Athenian democracy. He states that historians are being blinded by the expectations of modern time and its ideas of democracy. He believes that Athens was fairly advanced in terms of democracy and that people such as Cleisthenes have helped established it.

Although not all of Cleisthenes' contributions were original, he did contribute a lot of things to the development of Athenian democracy. He attempted to remove factional strife amongst the nobility, give people of all classes an opportunity to elect and be elected, as well as introduce the idea of voting in setting major decisions. He established a link between local and central government so that people were able to learn and work their way up the political ladder. He helped the people identify themselves with the state, rather than to a particular group. In conclusion, although Cleisthenes may not exactly be 'the father of democracy', he did contribute a lot to the development of Athenian democracy.