



SOLOON

THE THINKER

POLITICAL THOUGHT IN
ARCHAIC ATHENS

JOHN LEWIS

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Political Thought in Archaic Athens

John David Lewis

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'The Horoi and the Bridge between the 4th and 6th Centuries', *Place and Genre in Greek Epigraphy Conference*, University of Cambridge, January 1999.

Preface

The research grew out of my PhD dissertation at the University of Cambridge. A dissertation, however, is one's final college paper, and few – certainly not mine – should become books. This book draws from the research, but is completely re-written. In the research I received patient help from Paul Cartledge, Paul Millett, Dorothy Thompson, Pat Easterling and many others, none of whom has seen the book. Thank you to Mary Beard for the chance to sit in the Museum of Classical Art and Archaeology in Cambridge, under the statue of the Sunium Kouros. Regular tea with A.J. Graham and Harold Mattingly, Jr, was like sitting between Zeus, who sees all, and Prometheus, who never hesitates to share the fire of his intellect.

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Most of all, to my wife Casey, I owe more than I can write or say. I am so glad she had a chance to run off to Nice for a month, while I contemplated the sculptures in the Cambridge Classics Library.

Author's Note

Latinized forms of Greek names are used throughout the text, for ease of reading.

Attic forms of Greek terms are given, except where quoting from Solon or referring directly to his verses. For instance, I use *Dusnomiè* because that is Solon's form (and capitalized as such), but in discussing it I may compare it to *anomia*. Thus in some cases the Attic and Ionian forms may be mixed in a single sentence.

In the bibliography and citations, the cited date refers to the date of the edition used, not necessarily the original date of publication.

Abbreviations

Poems and fragments of Solon and other archaic poets are numbered as by M.L. West, *Studies in Greek Elegy and Iambus*. Ancient authors are generally abbreviated as in LSJ.

CAH = *Cambridge Ancient History*

DK = H. Diels and W. Kranz, *Die Fragmente der Vorsokratiker*

FGrH = F. Jacoby, *Die Fragmente der Griechischen Historiker*

HCT = A.W. Gomme, *A Historical Commentary on Thucydides*

IESS = D.L. Sills, *The International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*

IG = *Inscriptiones Graecae* (Berlin, 1873-)

KA = R. Kassel and C. Austin, *Poetae Comici Graeci*

LSJ = H.G. Liddell, R. Scott and S. Jones, *A Greek-English Lexicon*

KRS = G.S. Kirk, J.E. Raven and M. Schofield, *The Presocratic Philosophers*

MW = R. Merkelbach and M.L. West, *Fragmenta Hesiodica*

OED = *Oxford English Dictionary* (2nd edn, 1991)

PMG = D.L. Page, *Poetae Melici Graeci*

Smyth = H.W. Smyth, *Greek Grammar*

Introduction

Approaching Solon's fragments

A short time will show the townsmen whether I am crazy,
with the truth coming out into the middle

Solon 10

The purpose of this book is to examine the poetic fragments of Solon as early Greek political thought. The focus is on Solon's preserved poetry, not on laws or institutional reforms attributed to him by later writers, and not on his place in a literary or historical tradition. What rises out of Solon's verses is an all-embracing way of looking at his world – a way of understanding Athens and the men in it, of grasping the certainty of justice and the arbitrariness of fate, and of judging rulers both bad and good – that is rooted in a new world-view that was sweeping the Aegean world. His preserved verses, even though fragmentary, often cast in epic form, and motivated by an opaque rhetorical purpose, nevertheless present an enlightened frame of reference, an energetic moral programme and a well-organized set of ideas. His words mark the birth of thought about the *polis* as a lawful, just community.

Solon, selected as chief official of Athens around 594 BC, is one of the most revered figures in Greek history.¹ The classical Greeks, the Romans and the American Founders crafted pedestals for him: Plato made him one of the Seven Wise Men; Aristotle thought him among the most serious lawgivers; Demosthenes used him to attack his opponents; Cicero saw him as a fount for Roman Law; Plutarch sensed a moral icon; James Madison admired the immortal legislator; and Woodrow Wilson said he gave to Athens 'a fixed and definite constitution'.² Yet Solon's reputation as a constitution-maker bears little resemblance to what is left of his poems. Numerous studies have focused on social reforms, political institutions, economic policies and laws, often in terms familiar to students of political science but anachronistic to early Greece. In reaction, many studies of his verses have reinforced his position in a Homeric–Hesiodic tradition, either basing his ideas on epic poetic forms, or showing him to be a less-than-great poet. But these vital examinations may obscure his own thoughts and distort his real importance. This book proposes an approach that looks to his verses neither to reconstruct Athenian history, nor to relate him to a poetic tradition, but rather to discern the remains of early sixth-century Athenian political ideas. To do so, we must take a deceptively simple

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approach, but one that is surprisingly controversial: we must look at everything Solon says about these ideas, in all of his fragments. Solon is not an extension of a genre – he is a person in his own right, with a distinct point of view, who should be read as such.

There has been an exciting revival of interest in Solon over the past five years, and a plethora of full-length studies dedicated to his poems.³ Yet there remains an under-valuation of Solon's importance in the history of thought, and, given his early dates, an unwillingness to break from the idea that a progression of time corresponds necessarily to intellectual progress. Some scholars have recognized extraordinary innovations in Solon; Richmond Lattimore laments that 'the influence of Solon on tragedy seems to have been generally underestimated', since later poets 'tend to retire from the advanced position of Solon' with respect to the punishment of *hubris*. Victor Parker sees in Solon an understanding that is more definitive than classical-period writers. But the possibility that Solon's verses might take positions more advanced than those of the fifth century runs counter to expectations.⁴

All of our evidence supports one assumption about Solon in his own time: he was immersed into a swirling cauldron of political competition and clashing ethical values. Struggle and contest – whether expressed in private symposia, public shouting matches, tragic competitions or before magistrates and juries – is a feature of ancient Greek history at every point, and there is no reason to exempt early Athens from this agonistic way of doing business. Solon may have made his name by publicly challenging a law against advocating war with Megara, in his poem *Salamis* (only fragments 1, 2 and 3 remain); and a fragment that suggests a context for the delivery has the truth coming out 'in the middle', i.e. in public (fragment 10). Solon repeatedly refers to antagonists (fragments 4c; 5.5-6; 15; 33; 36.22-5). This was an energetic debate conducted on the normative level, over ideas such as *dikê* and the fundamental values of the *polis*. The recension of Homer, the creation of tragedy, the late sixth-century Athenian buildings, and indeed Solon's own references to his enemies, all suggest a cultural atmosphere that was much more lively than Solon alone.⁵

To reconstruct the intellectual foundations of this discourse, a historian would ideally examine the positions of the various speakers, finding agreement and conflict, and defining the ideas at work and how they affected the community. However, apart from scraps of poetry preserved in later historians and biographers, this material is lost to us. This presents a serious problem of evidence and interpretation. From archaic Athens only Solon's words survive, in a recension of personal and political observations, exhortations and aspirations, in a self-consciously identified Attic tongue designed to move his audience into support for his views.⁶ The point demands emphasis: Solon's verses are all that is left of early sixth-century Athens from which we can determine any specific point of view

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without importing more material from other centuries than we have from Solon's own time.

How then can we approach these verses? It is obvious that the poems are too vague and fragmentary to allow a chronological reconstruction without relying heavily on later works. But the question remains as to where to start in understanding the ideas that are fundamental to understanding cultural and political history.

One approach – common to general histories – uses later historical narratives to set the intellectual and institutional contexts within which the verses are interpreted. Writers such as Herodotus, Aristotle or Plutarch are used to reconstruct a sequence of social crises ('debt slavery') and political upheavals ('a change in the *politeia*'), to lay out economic conditions ('interest rates'), to establish the institutional makeup of archaic Athens (a 'second council of four hundred'), or to establish the abstract ideas implicit in archaic thought (*politeia* or *démokratia*). This becomes the framework of interpretation for the poems. However, this runs the risk of turning the poems into malleable tools of support for secondary interpretations. Aristotle wrote some three hundred years after Solon's birth, and the gulf between the two men constitutes the intellectual revolution of the fifth century and the Platonic Academy. Likewise the legendary confrontation between Solon and Croesus – if used to understand Solon as a historical figure – should be evaluated in relation to the ideas found in Solon's verses, as a means to understanding how those ideas were understood, reformulated and transmitted by Herodotus. How wrong it would be to see Herodotus as presenting the 'real' Solon, and to make the poems fit that portrait.⁷

An objection may follow, that the extant verses were selected by later writers, who shaped the material when they decided to preserve certain verses and not others. A few readers might even conclude that there is no evidence for a 'Solon', beyond the character created by a literary tradition.⁸ But it is more accurate to see Solon's poems as 'expressions of a specific purpose at a specific time, place and circumstance'.⁹ In either case, our understanding of him does depend upon the choices of later writers, which may say as much about the principles of selection as they do about the original author. Yet such selection does not involve the level of creative intervention found in the wholesale manufacture of laws, institutions and economic reforms in Solon's name. Calhoun, for instance, found a principle of 'criminal law' in Solon, derived from later commentators.¹⁰ Nor is Solon evidence for archaic 'economic' conditions – his concern is rather for the effects of material wealth on a man's disposition, his *polis* and his fate.¹¹ Economic conditions are better revealed through research into pre-monetary societies, pre-technological agricultural methods and classical archaeology.¹² It is a sobering thought to realize that what we have of Solon makes no reference to reforms of the Attic tribes, a second council, coinage, juries, or specific legal cases and laws, and that debts and wealth

requirements for offices are each mentioned solely by one ambiguous phrase. The poems are mercilessly silent on the status of women, foreign slaves and children – although young boys do get at least one lustful mention – and they say virtually nothing about the audiences, despite strong implications of *public* delivery of his poems. But to escape from the no-man's land between the vagueness of the poems and the unverifiability of later sources by mixing primary and secondary literary materials requires loyalty to primary materials.

With a very different aim in view, and often in reaction to such studies, scholars have worked to place Solon into a tradition of oral poetry. Such studies may rely upon a generic poetic form, a typology by which material from otherwise differentiated poets is selected, classified and compared. Elizabeth Irwin has produced an important study on precisely these grounds, establishing a 'genre' of 'martial exhortation elegy', exemplified by Callinus and Tyrtæus, and then finding rich parallels between such works (as well as Homer and Hesiod) in Solon's poem 4, which is considered explicitly apart from any other works by Solon. Similarly, Eric Havelock has shown that Solon 4.5-8 exhibits important similarities to Hesiod *Works and Days* 202-85, particularly the actions of stupid and unjust men and the certainty of retribution by divine personifications.¹³ These linguistic parallels are certainly real, and Solon clearly participates in a pan-Hellenic discourse using common poetic devices. But these devices must not be allowed to obscure the challenges he made to what came earlier – challenges that would grow, in the next century, into an intellectual revolution. Irwin stresses that 'The introduction to Solon 4 is indeed programmatic: martial themes throughout the poem play a continuous subordinate role analogous to their initial function as foil'. Further: 'Solon composes a poem in which the defining virtue in martial poetry – both epic and elegiac – is subordinated to his message, namely, the warning of the disasters awaiting those who disregard justice, and the suffering such behaviour lays on the entire community'. These martial themes, Irwin maintains, were 'performed' almost exclusively in aristocratic symposia, dominated by 'heroic role-playing' with 'political implications'.¹⁴

It is vital to maintain the proper subordination. Poems with generic similarities, e.g. those of Tyrtæus and Solon, were from different *poleis*, were not intended for the same audience, do not always display the same understanding of 'excellence', and were written decades or centuries apart by men who probably never met. A common 'genre' or terminology does not imply that either they or their audiences understood their political concepts and values the same way, or that the latter drew on the former for more than the impact that an emotive poetic turn-of-phrase may offer.¹⁵ Our literary evidence is punctuated in time and space. Solon punctuates the history of Attica in the early sixth century, and Hesiod, for example, punctuates Boeotia in the late eighth or so. To juxtapose Solon and Hesiod is to compare points of punctuation in an otherwise austere historical

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record. Such a comparison does not tell us to what extent (or even *whether*) the earlier man influenced the latter, and it need take no position on the historical development between the two men. The determination of ‘influence’ is a tricky business, and is dependent upon establishing some meaning for any given passage before its origins or effects can be determined. For instance, Irwin observes that Solon’s fragment 11 is ‘the explicit recognition of the deceptive use of political language’.¹⁶ But this basic meaning – which is surely incontestable – leaves open the source of its poetic form, and the context of its delivery. Did Solon publicly chide the deceivers, condemn them in a symposium, or even praise them in private? We may disagree about whom he is referring to and his rhetorical purpose, but the basic meaning of his words is clear – and not dependent upon the audience.

But the elevation of genre and ‘performance context’ into primary considerations has led scholars to claim that each poem must stand alone from the poet’s other works – and that using a poet’s other works to understand that poem is simply wrong. By this approach, Solon’s poem 4, the *Hymn to the City*, for instance, can be compared to Hesiod, but not to Solon 36.¹⁷ But to use Hesiod to understand Solon’s poem without the benefit of Solon’s other verses would be akin to using phrases within Thomas Hobbes’ *Leviathan* to understand Thomas Jefferson’s *Declaration of Independence*, all the while eschewing Jefferson’s *Notes on the State of Virginia* because of a difference in rhetorical purpose or audience. Hobbes will be useful here only if we have some understanding of the basic positions of the two men – which requires first reading each on his own terms.

By examining everything Solon and Hesiod say about, for instance, *dikê*, including their claims about the divine, human life and natural events, it becomes clear that the conceptual differences between Solon and Hesiod are profound, and transcend similarities in language. These include Solon’s denial of divine power over the *polis*, the lack of any statement in his verses that a human deed results in a natural event, his focus on failings in *noos* as the reason men destroy the *polis*, and his joining of *dikê* to written laws enforced alike. It is in such differences that the mark of innovation may be discerned, and that the poetic tradition becomes a vehicle for profound transformation as well as evidence for homogeneity. But to understand the nature of the subordination, Solon must be taken on his own terms, by considering everything he says about *dikê*, in every verse. His words must be taken as a singular point of view at a particular time – not merely as an appendage to a poetic tradition.

Coming to grips with Solon’s use of tyrannical language is a case in point. Terms such as *kratos* (power) may suggest that Solon was not far removed from tyrants, who used similar language to gain and legitimate their power. Perhaps Solon attained tyrannical power for himself, and only then created his famous laws, as a cover for single rule. But whether he

acted tyrannically or not, and whatever his rhetorical purposes at any moment, his verses offer a powerful indictment of the tyrant's entire approach to life. This is their meaning, regardless of how he used them. Victor Parker has shown that, prior to Solon, little semantic distinction had been made between *tyrant* and *basileus* (chief) or *anax* (king). Further, Parker finds no negative evaluations of tyranny (as distinguished from kingship) before Solon, and that even fifth-century playwrights may not challenge the positive connotations.¹⁸ Perhaps Solon used such language because no distinctions had yet been made between tyranny and other forms of single rule. But this does not mean that he accepts their equivalence without challenge. He condemns tyranny on multiple levels; we can infer a rhetorical purpose – or deny a difference between tyranny and kingship – only by first recognizing the meaning of tyranny as Solon gives it to us.

Solon's importance in the history of political ideas is precisely in such challenges. Embedded in his exhortations are the first extant descriptions of a tyrant in terms of psychic corruption, the first equations of slavery and tyranny in political terms, and the first descriptions of how and why a crowd grants power to tyrants. He also offers an alternative – the protection of all Attic-speaking men from slavery under written laws – that constitutes the first statement of political freedom in western thought. Firm differentiations between just rule and hubristic aggrandizement – and of existing as a slave from being free politically – are thematic in Solon's verses. To test such claims about the verses, while bearing in mind his archaic forms of thought, requires us to consider everything extant from Solon's words about what it means to fall into the slavery of tyranny – to discover how he uses important terms in different passages, to find his place in the shifting values of his age, and to ask whether he is consistent across the verses. To begin an investigation by lifting a 'tyrannical' passage out of a poem and building a series of linguistic parallels to earlier poets, without establishing what *Solon* claims is essential about the idea, is to elevate linguistic similarities over the content of the ideas. This may empower the ideas of the past to obscure the new message of the present.

But should we expect consistency from a poet like Solon? Mark Griffith, citing multiple inconsistencies from poets other than Solon, draws the conclusion that a 'proto-philosopher' and a 'religious sage' such as Xenophanes or Parmenides may need coherence across his thought, but this is not so for a 'wisdom poet' such as Solon. As a matter of policy such poets rely upon deceit to win a contest; their vision is necessarily limited to the contest that is immediately before them.¹⁹ But Griffith's conclusion depends upon the premise that Solon is a member of this category (a 'wisdom poet') who thereby possesses the quality of deceit. Griffith offers this without citing any examples from Solon's own works. A reader who considers Solon to be one of the 'proto-philosophers' may draw precisely the opposite conclusion. The conclusion is only as good as the categories,

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and it is difficult to place Solon, or even a poet-philosopher like Xenophanes, into one category or the other. In his day, a wisdom poet *was* a philosopher, and a lawgiver *was* a poet. A wise man can, after all, be consistent in his overall world-view (if not in every particular detail), all the while engaging in a contest of words, and pursuing a political purpose.

An *a priori* assumption of inconsistency, if used as an interpretative strategy, can condition its own result. Solon's direct disavowal of tyranny can be used to turn him into Shakespeare's Julius Caesar, ostensibly refusing the crown in order to gain power. Anything in the poems can support this conclusion; a call for freedom or a demand to obey the laws can be read as ironic or rhetorical ploys to establish tyranny, and ambiguity becomes a Procrustean bed of selective redefinition. But it is improper to conflate, at the outset, archaic political verse with fiction, or a speaker's exhortations with lying, in order to create a self-fulfilling prophecy. Since *any speaker and any position* can be so deconstructed, including those who adopt this method of analysis, the approach is not reliable.

There is an even more important point here. The premise behind using a range of the poetic fragments to understand any particular verse is not that the poet is always consistent. The point is that we always understand any particular item – whether in reading, conversing or writing – in context with other knowledge. I am an American of the late twentieth and early twenty-first century, who learned Greek late in life, and who understands politics in post-Lockean terms of limited government, liberty and individual rights. Solon comes from a very different time. The best evidence I have for his intellectual context is what remains from him – his views of divine figures, his statements about the men of Athens and their motivations, his grasp of *noos*, *dikê*, *moira*, *doulosunê* and *eleutheros*. Hermann Fränkel observed a certain archaic method, 'to circle around its subject', a point that I interpret as understanding an idea in a widening context of related ideas.²⁰ Solon suggests precisely this method, as he returns to similar topics from different directions before unknown audiences. What we discover in one place may support or challenge what we find elsewhere, and we may find ourselves uncertain of a particular point – as I am not at all certain what Solon means by the *horoi* ('boundary stones') that he tore up in poem 36 – but we should not ignore what he has said elsewhere.

In contrast to literary and historical approaches, philosophical studies have often been directed towards particular concepts, focusing on Solon's place in an unfolding tradition of heroic, martial, aristocratic and democratic values, or on the development of duty, responsibility and moral consciousness.²¹ Such a narrow focus on Solon's ideas is understandable; he leaves not even an outline of a 'natural philosophy', a 'cosmology', or an 'ethics' or 'politics'. Nor does he rise to political philosophy or theory by speaking of the *polis* and its constitutions as types. Consequently, philosophical studies have seldom connected Solon with the Ionian philosophic

revolution on any fundamental level, at best seeing him as part of a wide cultural phenomenon and de-emphasizing his position between Homer and the Presocratic philosophers.²² There are many exceptions, of course: the studies of Gregory Vlastos, for instance, are powerful and important.²³ But beyond localized comparisons, philosophers have generally not paid attention to Solon, and most histories of philosophy do not deal with his poems.²⁴ Solon has had his own poetry little examined as a source for the political ideas that illuminated the intellectual life and history of archaic Athens. To cite one example of neglect, von Fritz, in his study of *noos* and *noein*, jumps from Hesiod to Xenophanes, noting that Xenophanes is the 'first Greek thinker ... who uses the word in fragments of indubitable authenticity'. Yet *noos* and derivatives appear eleven times in Solon's extant verses, and Solon directly connects failures in *noos* to civil strife.²⁵

Solon deserves such an examination. A.A. Long, attempting to define a 'scope' for early Greek philosophy, proposes an 'account of all things' that is (1) explanatory and systematic, (2) coherent and argumentative, (3) transformative, (4) educationally provocative and (5) critical and unconventional.²⁶ Solon's lack of concern for 'all things' in the extant verses is indisputable, as is his lack of explicit theories. But can we say with assurance that Thales was 'systematic' and that Solon was not? Can we be certain that Thales was more 'educationally provocative' than Solon? Is it not possible that Anaximander's cosmology is a wider application of ideas developed by thinkers about the *polis*? If Anaximenes has a 'system' of cyclical rain / sea / mist / clouds / rain, has he not closed a circle that began with verses such as those of Solon, that 'snow and hail comes from clouds, and thunder comes from lightning'? Does Solon not show concern for an 'ethics' – if not formally systematized, at least pregnant with implications for a system of some kind? The lack of systematic thought in Solon about the *polis* as a type, for instance, does not mean that he is not thinking about his *polis*, and that what he has left us is not 'political thought' in the form that he understood it.²⁷ Thus I can accept Adkins' admonishment that in Solon's poem 4 'there is no political theory', and yet consider the nature of 'political thought' at the time. The key is to distinguish thought about the *polis* of Athens – which is surprisingly well developed in Solon – from thought about the *polis* as a type. Only after the former could the latter develop.

This book will not attempt a historical reconstruction of Solon's actions in Athens, including his laws, institutional 'reforms', or even the specific audiences before whom he spoke. Nor will it attempt an exhaustive review of scholarship on Solon, a systematic commentary, or a chronological ordering of the poems. No systematic epistemology or epistemic position will be developed for Solon. The question here is how Solon understands the *polis*, his world and the men in it, in exhortations that do not present theories but nevertheless do reveal a rational point of view. The primary

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importance of Solon's verses is as sources for intellectual history: the ideas that shaped his world and that of his descendants.

The first four chapters are structured around ideas that are unveiled in poem 4, *The Hymn to the City*, but are also found in Solon's other verses. In broad outline, the first three chapters read the poem in order. Chapter 1 reads lines 4.1-4 alongside the first two lines of fragment 11, in which divine will is disavowed as responsible for the *polis*. This leads to a hypothesis, that Solon sees Athens as a self-supporting *kosmos* – a human realm set apart from the gods – that functions without threat of external destruction. Chapter 2, centred on lines 4.5-10 but also considering fragment 6, delves into the internal energy of the *polis*, unpacks the psychic qualities that Solon sees at the heart of the *polis*, and connects them to *koros* as both satiety and excess. Chapter 3 then turns from this internal perspective to a wider view of Solon's *polis*, his ideas of necessity, *Dikê*, *Eunomiê* and the 'Good Order' that are distributed throughout a just *polis*. Chapter 4 addresses Solon's claim to have created a '*kosmos* of words', by examining the internal organization of poem 4 and the archaic logic at its heart. Chapters 5 and 6 deal with a fundamental problem in Solon, his fatalism – the deep divide in his thought between the certainty of *Dikê* in the *polis* and the uncertainty of *Moirai* in each person's pursuit of wealth – that sets poem 13 at odds with his more political verses. Chapter 7 turns to the intellectual and physical aspects of tyranny, slavery and freedom, using poem 36 but also shorter fragments such as 9 and 11 to unveil Solon's lawful solution to the disorder of his day.

The limited size of Solon's extant corpus imposes serious difficulties on the organization of this book, which emphasizes different ideas in the same verses at different points. Solon's two perspectives on the *polis* is a case in point; he may see it both in terms of its abstract form of arrangement, and in terms of the psychic conditions of the men in it. Myriad applications of this dual perspective follow; for instance, Solon's concepts of *hêsuchia* (broadly, 'calmness'), *Dikê* and *Eunomiê* must be considered in relation to the disposition of each man, as well as to the condition of the *polis* as a whole. It is not the case that Solon understood a concept such as 'perspective', or that he was aware of the implications of his own approach. But this idea does allow us to draw inferences about his thoughts about the hectic world of Athens, either standing on the acropolis and looking down at the city, or walking among its inhabitants.

Solon's claims to understand the implications of events beyond what is immediately before his eyes led him to a strong prediction of his own place in the Court of Time. His foresight was essentially correct; whether accidentally or by merit, he has gone down as the most important of the earliest Athenians. To read him is akin to looking at a plaster copy of a sculpture, housed in a museum, effaced and broken, ripped from its context, remoulded with the tools of a later age, but nevertheless projecting an underlying order that refuses to be suppressed. To understand

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Solon we must not take him anachronistically, either by attributing later philosophical concepts to him, or by undervaluing his position as 'not quite philosophical' and therefore trapped in epic prehistory. To do either would be to drop the context of his achievements, which stand in relation to the *Politics* of Aristotle as the Sunium Kouros stands in relation to the sculptures of Praxiteles: as proud in their own right, state of the art for their own time, and precursors of later glories.

‘I brought the people together’
Solon’s *polis* as *kosmos*

I brought the people together for these reasons,
How did I stop before I accomplished them?

Solon 36.1-2

We will never know the exact nature of the crisis that swept over Attica in the last decades of the seventh century BC, but that it was a crisis is beyond doubt. Solon’s verses, the suggestions of archaeology, and the evaluations of every commentator to follow, all agree that deeply rooted social problems threatened to engulf Athens in civil strife. Whether fuelled by claims to aristocratic honours, the desperation of subsistence farmers or the pressures of regional factions, tensions between the Athenians rose to threaten their way of life. If our information is at all accurate, they tried a series of remedies: Draco was appointed to write laws, probably to translate customs of revenge into stone; this could not solve the problems that had been fuelled by those same customs. A strong-man such as Cylon, possibly a supporter of a rival city, tried to attain power; he was killed by another gang, who brought a grievous pollution onto the *polis*. To cleanse Athens of the crime and bring the city back to good order, a Cretan religious figure, Epimenides, may have been summoned to purify the city. We cannot verify the accuracy of all this – Draco in particular may be mythical – but it is evident that the crisis was not alleviated.¹

The Athenians then did something truly remarkable: they took control of the situation, and, to the extent of their ability, ceased to settle for rule by an unchallenged aristocracy, chance, divine will or tyrants. Still mindful that their gods were powerful, and that a past crime was a pollution that would lead to further conflict, they chose one of their own – Solon, a man of the middle in some sense – to bring a solution to their problems. If his own words are any guide, neither tyranny nor shamanism was his claim to fame; the *polis* was understandable and actionable, a self-supporting cosmic unity that worked in an understandable way, and it was the responsibility of human beings to preserve or to destroy it.

Such ideas were part and parcel of new forms of thought that were sweeping the Aegean world. In Solon’s day, Greek thinkers had begun to search for a singular principle underlying life on earth. This does not mean that they had a cosmology, a systematic view of the earth and the heavens. But their ‘world-view’ had a meaning more fundamental than cosmology: