

## Ostracism in Athens

### Overview:

- Ostracism was a legal practice in Athens in use during the 5th c. BCE
- Male citizens were subject to ostracism; most were ostracized in order to prevent tyranny
  - Despite this, it was not necessarily considered a punishment (at least according to Plutarch)
- An ostracized person must leave the city within ten days and not return for ten years

### Aristotle:

- Aristotle discusses the origins of ostracism as a practice in his *Athenian Constitution*
  - This was written in the 320s BCE, a little less than two hundred years after ostracism fell out of practice
  - Aristotle's Constitutions were a series of nearly 160 works concerning the political systems of various Greek *poleis*, with many of these likely being written by or with the help of his students
- He states that the laws surrounding ostracism were introduced by Cleisthenes alongside his other forms at the end of the 6th c. BCE as "a precaution against men in high office"
- However, the law was not employed until seventeen years later against Hipparchus, a relative of the tyrant Pisistratus, who had been the reason the law was created in the first place
- Ostracism was enacted purely against tyrants and their friends/relatives for a few years, until the ostracism of Xanthippus broke this pattern
- During Hypsichides' archonship in 481-480 BCE, every ostracized person was recalled to Athens due to Persian invasion
- Aristotle mentions the names of a few more ostracized individuals, and the last thing he says about ostracism is that it is voted on in the assembly each year during the sixth Prytany whether or not to ostracize someone

### Philochorus:

- Philochorus (340 - 261 BCE) was a historian who wrote a full history of Athens, although only fragments of his work survive
- A fragment concerning the procedure of ostracism reads:
  - "Ostracism takes place as follows. Before the eighth prytany, the people vote on whether it is necessary to hold an ostracism. If it is necessary, the agora is fenced in with boards, leaving ten entrances, through which the people enter in their tribes, and deposit their shards [*ostraca*] with the writing facing downwards. The nine archons and the council oversee the process. When the shards have been

counted to determine who has the most votes (which must be not less than 6,000), then this person must, after settling his personal commitments, leave the city within ten days, for a period of ten years (this was later reduced to five years). He is allowed to receive income from his possessions, but he must not come nearer [to Athens] than Geraestum, the headland on [the coast of] Euboea."

Plutarch:

- Plutarch (~50 - 120 CE) was a Greek historian and biographer
- He wrote a series of biographies called *Parallel Lives* in which he compared Greek and Roman figures, and some of these biographies provide information about ostracism in Athens, specifically the social views and implications surrounding it
- *Life of Aristides*:
  - "banishment in ostracism every one was liable who was superior to the common run of men in reputation, or lineage, or eloquence. And so it was that Damon, the teacher of Pericles, was ostracized because he was thought to be rather extraordinary in his wisdom."
  - "the sentence of ostracism was not a chastisement of base practices, nay, it was speciously called a humbling and docking of oppressive prestige and power; but it was really a merciful exorcism of the spirit of jealous hate, which thus vented its malignant desire to injure, not in some irreparable evil, but in a mere change of residence for ten years."
  - "The method of procedure — to give a general outline — was as follows. Each voter took an ostrakon, or potsherd, wrote on it the name of that citizen whom he wished to remove from the city, and brought it to a place in the agora which was all fenced about with railings. The archons first counted the total number of ostraka cast. For if the voters were less than six thousand, the ostracism was void. Then they separated the names, and the man who had received the most votes they proclaimed banished for ten years, with the right to enjoy the income from his property."
- *Life of Pericles*:
  - "Besides, since he was rich, of brilliant lineage, and had friends of the greatest influence, he feared that he might be ostracized, and so at first had naught to do with politics, but devoted himself rather to a military career, where he was brave and enterprising."
  - "Now ostracism involved legally a period of ten years' banishment."
- *Life of Cimon*:
  - "Laying hold of a trifling pretext, they ostracised him for ten years. That was the period decreed in all cases of ostracism."
  - "the Athenians did not long abide by their displeasure against Cimon, partly because, as was natural, they remembered his benefits, and partly because the turn of events favoured his cause. For they were defeated at Tanagra in a great battle,

and expected that in the following spring-time an armed force of Peloponnesians would come against them, and so they recalled Cimon from his exile. The decree which provided for his return was formally proposed by Pericles.”

Archaeological Evidence:



- *Ostraka* were pottery shards that voters would scratch the names of those who they wished to be ostracized on to.
- Thousands of these have been found during archaeological digs in Athens.

## Works Cited

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