

Aristotle's Collection of Constitutions or Politeiai

Aristotle was not only one of antiquity's greatest philosophers but also the head of the Lyceum in Athens, an institution that functioned closer to what we in the modern day would call a research center rather than merely a school of speculative thought. Unlike Plato, whose political philosophy often begins from an ideal theoretical model, Aristotle consistently grounded his arguments in observation classification and comparison therein. His intellectual method aimed to collect data first and theorize second. The collection of 158 constitutions (politeiai) of Greek city-states must be understood within this empirical framework. It represents a large-scale research project of the ancient world designed to document how real political systems functioned in practice across the Greek world. Today almost all of these constitutional examinations are now lost. What survives is indirect and layered: ancient testimony about their existence, one nearly complete surviving example Constitution of Athens, internal evidence within Aristotle's Politics, and scattered fragments preserved by later authors.

Ancient Accounts

The clearest external evidence for the collection comes from Diogenes Laertius, writing in the third century CE in his work *Lives of Eminent Philosophers* (5.27). In a catalogue of Aristotle's writings, Diogenes explicitly states that Aristotle composed 158 constitutions. Although Diogenes lived several centuries after Aristotle's death in 322 BCE, his catalogue likely drew on earlier Hellenistic library records and scholarly inventories. His testimony is crucial because it gives us the specific number 158 and confirms that these constitutional treatises circulated independently in antiquity. Without Diogenes Laertius, we would lack firm evidence for the scale of Aristotle's comparative political research. His statement anchors all modern scholarship on the subject. While we must always approach late testimony critically, the precision of the number and its inclusion within a broader bibliographical tradition strongly support its reliability.

The Survival of The Athenian Constitution The only largely complete example of the constitutional collection is *The Athenian Constitution* (*Athenaion Politeia*). This work was rediscovered in 1890 on a papyrus found in Egypt and later identified as British Library Papyrus 131. The manuscript itself dates to the first century BCE, although the text was originally composed in the late fourth century BCE, likely during Aristotle's lifetime or shortly thereafter within the Lyceum. The structure of the work is highly revealing. The first half provides a historical account of the development of Athenian political institutions, tracing reforms and constitutional changes over time. The second half offers a systematic description of the institutions as they functioned in Aristotle's own day, detailing magistracies, councils, courts, and procedures with remarkable precision. This dual structure historical narrative combined with institutional analysis was likely the model for the other 157 constitutional studies.

Surviving work The Athenian Constitution

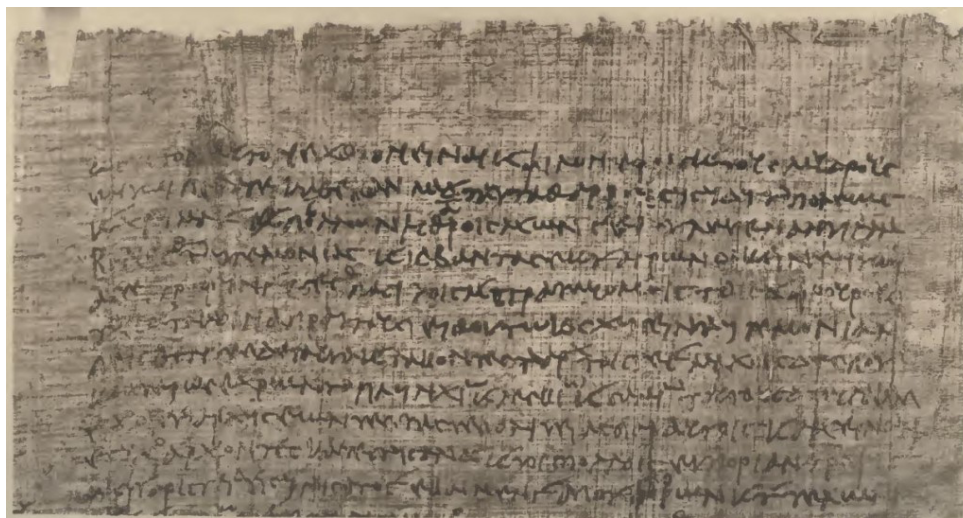
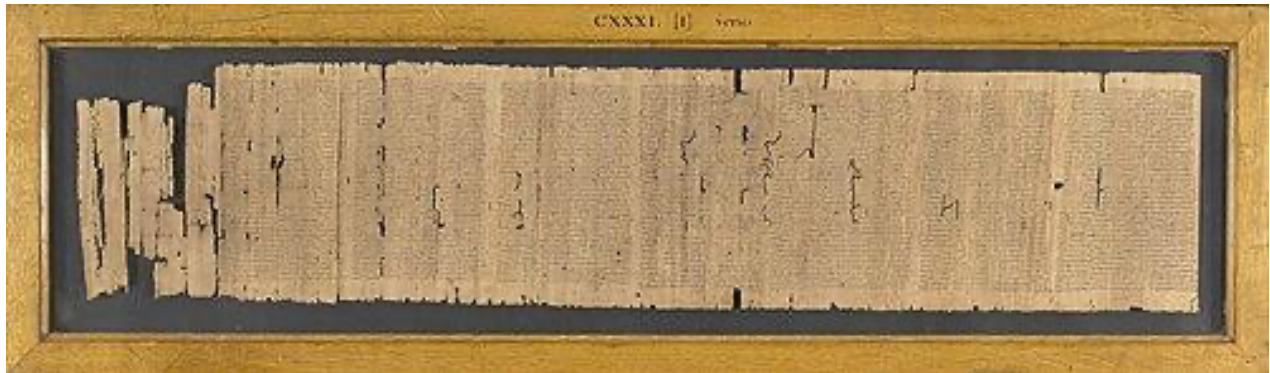
Aristotle's *The Athenian Constitution* explains how Athens developed from an oligarchy into a full democracy. The work has two main parts. The first traces the historical evolution of the Athenian government. The second describes how the democratic system functioned in Aristotle's own time.

In its earliest phase, Athens was ruled by an oligarchy. Power was concentrated in the Areopagus, a council of elite families. Important offices such as the Basileus, Polemarch, and Archon were controlled by aristocrats. Ordinary citizens had little political influence. Political conflict among elites led to reform. In the early 6th century BCE, Solon was appointed Archon with special authority to resolve unrest. Solon introduced major changes. He created a citizen Assembly open to all adult male citizens. This Assembly became the center of political decision-making. He also reorganized citizens into four property classes and created a new Council of 400 (the Boule) to prepare legislation. Although the wealthy still held advantages, Solon expanded participation in government. Athens had moved from oligarchy to what we might call a limited democracy. Factional conflict continued, however. Rival groups representing landowners, poorer citizens, and coastal traders struggled for power. This instability allowed tyrants to briefly seize control of Athens. After tyranny was overthrown, further reforms transformed Athens into a fuller democracy. The old wealth-based classes were abolished and replaced by ten new tribes. These tribes were geographically mixed to prevent factional domination. Athens was also divided into local districts called demes. Citizens increasingly identified themselves by their deme rather than by family background. This strengthened civic identity and weakened aristocratic influence. The Council was expanded from 400 to 500 members. Each tribe sent fifty representatives, chosen by lot. Service was limited, giving many citizens the opportunity to participate in government. An executive committee called the Prytaneis managed daily affairs. Each tribe took turns serving in this role. A chairman was selected by lot each day, symbolizing democratic equality. Military leadership was handled differently. Each tribe elected a Strategos (general). Unlike most offices, this position required skill and could be renewed. The Assembly often relied on the Strategoi for military advice. To prevent the rise of another tyrant, Athens introduced ostracism. Once per year, citizens could vote to exile a political figure for ten years. No crime had to be proven. It served as a safeguard against dangerous concentration of power. In its mature form, Athenian democracy was highly participatory. Citizens debated and voted directly in the Assembly. Offices were widely distributed, often by lottery, to prevent corruption and elite dominance. However, democracy was limited to adult male citizens. Women, slaves, children, and foreign residents were excluded from political rights. Overall, Aristotle shows that Athenian democracy developed gradually through reform and crisis. It was not accidental. It was the result of deliberate institutional changes to ensure and maintain stability for the Athenian state.

Further confirmation of the constitutional project comes from Aristotle's *Politics* itself. Throughout Books II–VI, Aristotle compares numerous political systems across the Greek world, analyzing variations of democracy, oligarchy, kingship, and mixed regimes. His discussions are specific. He does not speak in general abstractions; instead, he refers to concrete institutional arrangements, legal mechanisms, and structural differences between city-states. Such detailed comparative analysis presupposes systematic prior research. The existence of the 158 constitutions explains the empirical foundation behind these discussions. The *Politics* therefore functions as internal evidence that the constitutional collection was substantial, and methodologically central to Aristotle's political theory. It demonstrates that his normative

arguments were grounded in the study of actual political systems rather than purely ideological speculation.

Surviving copies of the Constitution of the Athenians



Several ancient sources preserve direct quotations and references that confirm both the existence and the scale of Aristotle's constitutional research project. These passages are especially valuable because almost all of the individual constitutional treatises themselves have been lost. What survives instead are quotations and references preserved by later authors who relied on Aristotle as an authority on Greek political institutions.

Ancient citations and quotes referencing The Constitutions

The clearest statement appears in Diogenes Laertius, who records the scale of Aristotle's work in his catalogue of writings. In *Lives of Eminent Philosophers* he mentions: "He also wrote the Constitutions of one hundred and fifty-eight states." — Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers* 5.27. This statement is extremely important because it provides the exact number of constitutional studies produced by Aristotle and the Lyceum. The precision of the number suggests an organized research program rather than scattered historical essays. Diogenes' testimony therefore anchors modern knowledge of Aristotle's comparative political project.

Direct evidence of Aristotle's method also survives in the text of *The Athenian Constitution*, the only largely complete example of the constitutional collection. When describing the reforms of Solon, Aristotle explains the shift in political authority and writes: "And so the people came to control the constitution." — Aristotle, *Athenian Constitution* 9.1. Elsewhere in the work Aristotle describes the development of democratic participation in Athens and notes that the Assembly became central to political life. These passages show that Aristotle's constitutional studies combined historical narrative with detailed institutional analysis. Rather than presenting abstract theory, he carefully documented how real political structures evolved.

Further confirmation of Aristotle's historical work appears in Plutarch's *Life of Solon*, written centuries later but drawing on earlier historical sources. When describing Solon's reforms, Plutarch explicitly refers to Aristotle's account and states that "Aristotle says that Solon established the Council of the Areopagus as guardian of the laws." — Plutarch, *Life of Solon* 25. This citation demonstrates that Aristotle's constitutional writings were still being consulted by historians long after his lifetime. Plutarch's reliance on Aristotle shows that these works were considered reliable sources for understanding the institutional development of Athens.

Later authors also preserve fragments of Aristotle's constitutional research when discussing civic customs and political practices. In *Athenaeus' Deipnosophists*, Aristotle is cited as a source on the laws and institutions of various Greek communities. Athenaeus remarks that "Aristotle records the laws and customs of many cities." — Athenaeus, *Deipnosophists* 6.272 (6.272c). Even though the quotation is brief, it confirms that Aristotle's constitutional writings circulated widely enough to become reference works for later scholars.

Other surviving passages within Aristotle's own political writings also reflect the influence of this research project. In *The Politics*, Aristotle emphasizes the importance of studying multiple constitutions in order to understand political systems properly. He observes that "The student of politics must study not only the best constitution but also those that actually exist and those that are possible." — Aristotle, *Politics* 1288b–1289a. This statement reveals the methodological foundation of Aristotle's work. Political theory, for Aristotle, must be based on the careful study and comparison of actual governments. Together, these quotations provide strong evidence for the existence and importance of Aristotle's constitutional collection.

Historical Significance

Aristotle's collection of constitutions represents one of the earliest known large-scale projects of comparative political research in world history. It demonstrates a deliberate attempt to gather, classify, and analyze empirical data about real political systems. This approach distinguishes Aristotle sharply from purely ideal theorists and situates him as a foundational figure in the development of political science as a discipline.

Although nearly the entire collection has been lost due to the fragility of ancient manuscript transmission, the surviving evidence confirms its existence and importance. Even in absence, the project reshapes our understanding of Aristotle's methodology. His political thought was not constructed in isolation from reality but built upon systematic investigation of the structures and

practices of actual Greek city-states. The loss of the texts is significant, but the survival of their influence is even more so.

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