

# Cleisthenes' Reforms

## Background

- Who is Cleisthenes? He was a Greek statesman credited with founding Athenian democracy.
- He may be written as Clisthenes, Cleisthenes, or Kleisthénēs
- He belonged to the Alcmaeonid family, a prominent family in Athens.
  - The Alcmaeonid curse, where Cleisthenes' great-grandfather Megacles, who was also his father's name, had brought a curse upon his family, which exiled the Alcmaeonids
- Athens, in the region of Attica, was very unsettled following Solon's reforms, which failed to address long-term stability
- At around 546, the Alcmaeonid again was again exiled for 10 more years
- After the fall of the tyranny, Cleisthenes is elected Chief archon, but is not able to uphold his leadership, which ends in Isagoras becoming chief archon instead
- What did his reforms entail?
  - Ten New Tribes
  - Reorganization of Attica
  - The Deme System: Herodotus *Histories*: 5.69
  - Council of 500, which replaced the Council of 400
  - Ostracism: citizens could vote to exile any individual deemed a threat to the democracy for ten years.
- Citizens were renamed using their deme instead of their father's name to promote civic identity.
- Elected ten generals (strategoi), one from each of the ten new tribes.
- The evidence comes from later historians writing decades or centuries after 508/507 BCE.

## Herodotus – *Histories*: Book 5

- Oldest surviving narrative (~440s BCE)
- Gives details of the debate of Cleisthenes (Clisthenes) vs. Isagoras; Spartan involvement; creation of new tribes and the Council of 500.
- This source comes off as one of the most important sources; he is writing at the time of Athens' democratic high point after the Persian Wars.
- Herodotus writes about Cleisthenes's past and his status as an aristocrat, but these reforms aimed to weaken the aristocratic clans
- The regional factions that were in place before the 10 tribes corresponded with the coast, hills and the plains, and within those, 4 tribes Geleontes (priests/nobles), Hopletes (warriors), Argadeis (artisans), and Aigikoreis (goatherds).

- See 5:66
  - This section describes Cleisthenes' background as an Alcmaeonid
  - The reforms, such as the ten tribes, helped give power to the people, which is what we know as democracy

[66] The power of Athens had been great before; but, now that the tyrants were gone, it became greater than ever. The chief authority was lodged with two persons, Clisthenes, of the family of the Alcmaeonids, who is said to have been the persuader of the Pythoness, and Isagoras, the son of Tisander, who belonged to a noble house, but whose pedigree I am not able to trace further.

Howbeit his kinsmen offer sacrifice to the Carian Jupiter. These two men strove together for the mastery; and Clisthenes, finding himself the weaker, called to his aid the common people. Hereupon, instead of the four tribes among which the Athenians had been divided hitherto, Clisthenes made ten tribes, and parcelled out the Athenians among them. He likewise changed the names of the tribes; for whereas they had till now been called after Geleon, Aegicores, Argades, and Hoples, the four sons of Ion, Clisthenes set these names aside, and called his tribes after certain other heroes, all of whom were native, except Ajax. Ajax was associated because, although a foreigner, he was a neighbour and an ally of Athens.

### **Aristotle's *The Athenian Constitution* Section 1: Parts 21-22 and Section 2: Part 43**

Written around 330 BCE, 180 years later

- This was written under the Lycurgan revival, when Athens was preserving its institutions
- Section 1: Part 21

“Next he made the Council to consist of five hundred members instead of four hundred, each tribe now contributing fifty, whereas formerly each had sent a hundred. The reason why he did not organize the people into twelve tribes was that he might not have to use the existing division into trittyes; for the four tribes had twelve trittyes, so that he would not have achieved his object of redistributing the population in fresh combinations. Further, he divided the country into thirty groups of demes, ten from the districts about the city, ten from the coast, and ten from the interior. These he called trittyes; and he assigned three of them by lot to each tribe, in such a way that each should have one portion in each of these three localities. All who lived in any given deme he declared fellow-demesmen, to the end that the new citizens might not be exposed by the habitual use of family names, but that men might be officially described by the names of their demes; and accordingly it is by the names of their demes that the Athenians speak of one another. He also instituted Demarchs, who had the same duties as the previously existing Naucrari,-the demes being made to take the place of the naucrari. He gave names to the demes, some from the localities to which they belonged, some from the persons who founded them, since some of the areas no longer corresponded to localities possessing names. On the other hand he allowed every one to retain his family and clan and religious rites according to ancestral custom. The names given to the tribes were the ten which the Pythia appointed out of the hundred selected national heroes.”

- Clesithenes reorganized Attica:
  - **30 trittyes**: political and administrative divisions
  - **10 tribes (phylai)**: with each tribe containing a person from the coast, hills or the plains
  - Around **140 demes**: districts which were subdivisions of Athens
- He created the Council of 500 or the Boule
  - There were 50 members from each tribe
  - They were chosen by lot
  - Each group of 50 created a prytany, also known as an executive committee
    - Aristotle, *Athenian Constitution Section 1: Part 22*
  - Each of the prytany serves for one-tenth of the year
  - Then the Boule prepares the legislation for the Assembly
  - Each of the boule members serves for one year

“In the sixth prytany, in addition to the business already stated, the question is put to the vote whether it is desirable to hold a vote of ostracism or not; and complaints against professional accusers, whether Athenian or aliens domiciled in Athens, are received, to the number of not more than three of either class, together with cases in which an individual has made some promise to the people and has not performed it. Another Assembly in each prytany is assigned to the hearing of petitions, and at this meeting any one is free, on depositing the petitioner's olive-branch, to speak to the people concerning any matter, public or private. The two remaining meetings are devoted to all other subjects, and the laws require them to deal with three questions connected with religion, three connected with heralds and embassies, and three on secular subjects. Sometimes questions are brought forward without a preliminary vote of the Assembly to take them into consideration.”

- Part 43, section 2

## Archaeological Evidence



Above is a list of the Athenian archons with Cleisthenes' name in the middle, excavated at the Athenian Agora



A shard of pottery which was used to ostracize an individual