

Solon on Athletics

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The athletic spirit of the ancient Greeks is well-known and their contributions in this area were no less spectacular than they were in other fields of human endeavor. Their devotion to athletics has prompted scholarly investigations into many aspects of the historical development of their athletic festivals. Little effort, however, has been devoted to investigating the relationship of such festivals to concurrent social and economic reforms. The purpose of this paper is to show how the athletic festivals at Olympia and Isthmia were connected with the social and economic reforms of Athens designed by Solon in the sixth century B.C. Moreover, we shall examine the contradictory evidence concerning Solon's attitude towards athletics in general.

Solon's reforms were an attempt to deal with social and political unrest in Athens. While his legislation failed to resolve the internal problems plaguing Athens with any degree of permanency, his laws were in part responsible for paving the way towards democracy which followed later in the same century.¹ The discontent of the underprivileged classes in Athens had risen to dangerous levels, and Solon, who apparently had the confidence of all parties, was appointed to resolve the crisis and legislate for the future.² He first cancelled all debts for which land or liberty was the security, and hereby released the peasants from serfdom, restored their farms and redeemed those who had been sold into slavery.³ Furthermore, he prohibited all future borrowing on the security of any individual. These measures were known as the *seisachtheia*, or "shaking off burdens."⁴ Solon also reformed the constitution. Previous to his enactments the governing of Athens was shared exclusively by the *aristoi* or "the best men."⁵ The aristocratic monopoly of government control caused discontent among those people who were improving their financial status through new-found maritime endeavors while still being denied an opportunity to share in the affairs of the state.⁶

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As a step towards placating the Athenian citizenry who had previously been denied the opportunity of government involvement, Solon took a census of every citizen's property. He divided the citizens into four census-classes called *pentakosiomedimnoi*, *hippeis*, *zeugitai*, and *thetes*, as they had been divided before; however, the distinguishing feature under Solon's scheme was that they now were classified according to wealth rather than their birthright.⁷ Those who received an annual income of 500 measures or more of wet and dry produce were placed in the first class or the *pentakosiomedimnoi*.⁸ The second class included those citizens whose income was 300 measures of wet and dry produce; these men were called *hippeis*. A third classification, known as the *zeugitai*, was composed of individuals whose yearly income amounted to 200 measures of wet and dry produce. The last group, the *thetes*, was made up of men whose yearly income amounted to less than that of the *zeugitai* class or less than 200 measures of wet and dry produce.⁹ It is generally agreed that an equivalent rating in money-income, in this case drachmas, was acceptable for these individuals who made their living in other ways.¹⁰ According to the above census, it was now possible for men in the first three classifications to hold office in proportion to their census qualifications, while the *thete* class could participate in the Assembly of the people and in the law courts.¹¹

Solon had transformed an aristocratic state into a timocratic state that is, one in which wealth was now just as important as an individual's birthright-in effect, he has broken up the aristocratic monopoly. What role did the Olympic and Isthmian Games play in Solon's overall reforms? According to Plutarch, one of Solon's laws informs us that any Athenian victor in the Isthmian games was to be paid one hundred drachmas, and an Olympic victor five hundred.¹² Keeping in mind Solon's newly formed timocratic plan, it is possible to speculate what was his aim in paying victorious Athenian athletes. Perhaps it provided the Athenian citizenry an additional means of economic mobility. Whether one's income was measured in wine, grain or drachmas won at the Olympic or Isthmian Festivals mattered not.¹³ Considering that the average wage of a skilled worker was one drachma per day in the late fifth century B.C.,¹⁴ it could conceivably have been less than that nearly 200 years earlier. An Olympic victory would have been equal to one year's income of a *pentakosiomedimnos*. It is not known whether or not the victory purse of five hundred or one hundred drachmas had to be counted towards one's income in the year it was won, or could have been distributed over the four-year or two-year period.¹⁵

Although it may be argued that the number of citizens who actually benefited from Solon's law was small and could not have had any real effect on the economic situation in Athens, it should be remembered that

the possibility of winning the state prize must have appealed to a large number of citizens. Many citizen-athletes may have occupied much of their time and energies in preparation for either one or both of the festivals in question. Moreover, when one considers that the Athenian state paid for the training expenses incurred by those individuals preparing for the Games, it seems reasonable to believe that many prospective champions would have taken advantage of the offer.¹⁶

It appears that Solon's law may have resulted in the Olympic and Isthmian Games becoming more democratic; that is, Athenian citizens from all classes of society could now participate in these festivals rather than have competitions limited to the wealthy class. The Games became affordable to all interested citizen-athletes, since under the state subsidization plan they could now manage to leave their occupations long enough for the journey to Olympia, or near-by Isthmia in order to take part in the one month training period required of each athlete.¹⁷ So while the Olympic and Isthmian victors from Athens probably numbered very few,¹⁸ the preoccupation of large numbers of Athenian citizens training for a possible opportunity to compete for the state prize was responsible for directing their energies towards athletic training and away from their social and economic problems.

The second portion of this paper will deal with an apparent paradox in Solon's attitude concerning athletics. In addition to Plutarch, whose evidence does not clearly say that Solon was either for or against athletics, we can turn to the second-century A.D. writer Lucian for additional information. Lucian's *Anacharsis*, an imaginary dialogue between Solon and the barbarian Anacharsis, is intended to depict early sixth century life in Athens. It portrays Solon explaining and defending athletics as one of the most striking features of Greek culture as well as one of the best institutions in Greece. The following passage underscores the value Solon placed on athletics:

It seems, Anacharsis, that you have never yet done any thinking about the proper way to direct a state; otherwise you would not disparage the best of institutions. If ever you make it your object to find out how a state is to be organized in the best way possible, and how its citizens are to reach the highest degree of excellence, you will then praise these exercises and the rivalry which we display in regard to them. and you will know that they have much that is useful intermingled with the hardships, even if you think our energy is spent on them for nothing.¹⁹

When Plutarch's and Lucian's statements are considered, it seems that we are on safe ground by stating that Solon was well-disposed towards athletics. The picture becomes clouded, however, when Diodorus Siculus' evidence is taken into account:

Solon believed that the boxers and stade-runners and all other athletes contributed

nothing worth mentioning to the safety of cities, but that only men who excel in prudence and virtue are able to protect their native lands in time of danger.²⁰

Diodorus's statement certainly raises questions about the credibility of Solon's conversation with Anacharsis defending athletics and emphasizing their importance in the proper development of the state. Perhaps the evidence furnished by Diogenes Laertius will help clarify the situation. It seems that the tradition of honoring Athenian athletes existed prior to Solon's laws. Furthermore Solon's legislation appears to have been instituted to reduce the amount of money paid to victorious Athenian athletes: "He curtailed the honours of athletes who took part in the games, fixing the allowance for an Olympic victor at 500 drachmas, for an Isthmian victor at 100 drachmas, and proportionately in all other cases."²¹ So, in fact, Solon had taken measures to decrease the amount paid to winning athletes claiming that it was more appropriate to spend money on the maintenance and education of the sons of soldiers killed in battle.²² He also pointed out that if victorious they were crowned for a victory over their country rather than their rivals.²³

The obvious contradiction in the evidence can best be dealt with by analyzing the validity of the sources. Therein, however, lies a problem. Some of these ancient historians lack distinguished commentary in English, while others lack notable discussion in any modern language. Such is not the case, however, with Plutarch. There are several commentaries readily available;²⁴ however, his evidence needs the least explanation, since he merely recorded that Solon passed the law paying athletic champions at Olympia and Isthmia. The difficulty lies in determining the usefulness of Diodorus Siculus, Diogenes Laertius and Lucian. This writer is not qualified to deal with source criticism and analysis to any great degree. The intent of the following few lines is to point out the conflicting evidence that exists regarding the ancient historian in question, and, in turn, magnify the problem at hand. Modern authorities are, at best, divided on the trustworthiness of these ancient sources. For example, while Diodorus cannot be considered among the ablest historians of antiquity, he was noted for using good sources and according to some authorities cited them faithfully.²⁵ Yet, if we are to believe W. W. Tarn we would find his analysis of Diodorus falling far short of being complimentary. In fact, Tarn has labeled Diodorus as an incompetent historian.²⁶ The same problem is apparent with the two remaining ancient worthies—Diogenes Laertius and Lucian. Diogenes Laertius, a younger contemporary of Lucian has some support as a valuable source;²⁷ however, according to Wright, Diogenes has little literary or critical merit.²⁸ Opinion is similarly divided where Lucian is concerned.²⁹

It is apparent that disagreement exists concerning the reliability of the

historians in question. Rather than dismiss any of the three historians for being unreliable, or praise one above the other, it seems that the wisest course to follow is to explain Solon's inclusion of the law concerning athletics regardless of his attitude towards athletics. Solon's charge was to bring peace and order to a strife-torn state. As outlined earlier, part of his plan was to divide Athens' citizens according to wealth. By retaining the custom of paying victorious athletes—even though he curtailed the amount that was previously paid to them—Solon provided an opportunity for economic mobility. While the number of athletic champions was admittedly very small,³⁰ the opportunity to improve one's economic status nevertheless existed. The chance to become an Olympic champion and to have one's training expenses paid for by the state, regardless if one was victorious or not, must have had great appeal to many prospective athletes. Moreover, Solon risked an escalation of further unrest and irritation on the citizenry by eliminating the law. He undoubtedly realized the popularity and the importance of the athletic tradition in Greek culture. Some have stated that the most striking and outstanding feature of ancient Greek culture was their athletic system.³¹ Furthermore, Solon certainly did not want to diminish the role of the hero; the Athenians could rally around an Olympic champion—a visible hero.³² But the real reason for his retention of the law was to use athletics as a diversion through which a large number of male citizens could channel their frustrations and energies into preparing for the Olympic and Isthmian Games and away from their social and economic problems.

So it seems that Solon, who may or may not have had a dislike for athletics and may or may not have treated the athlete with scant respect, recognized the importance of the athletic tradition in Athens. He used this institution to help carry out the mandate given to him by the Athenian people.

Notes

1. Arnold W. Gomme and Theodore J. Cadoux, "Solon," *The Oxford Classical Dictionary* (Oxford, 1970), p. 1000; hereinafter cited as *OCD*.
2. Victor Ehrenberg, *From Solon to Socrates* (London, 1968), p. 60.
3. Aristotle, *Constitution of Athens*, 6.1.
4. *Ibid.*, 6.2.
5. Ehrenberg, p. 54.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 60.
7. Aristotle, *Constitution of Athens*, 7.3.
8. *Ibid.*, 7.4. Also see A. French, *The Growth of The Athenian Economy* (London, 1964), p. 19, who suggests that wet produce consisted of wine or oil and dry produce of grain. Ehrenberg, p. 64, goes further and suggests that cattle, sheep, goats, and income from other means might have been counted.
9. Aristotle, *Constitution of Athens*, 7.4.

10. A. Gomme and T. Cadoux, "Solon," *OCD*, p. 999.
11. Aristotle, *Constitution of Athens*, 7.3.
12. Plutarch, *Solon*, 23.3.
13. It is widely known that the olive wreath and crown of pine were the initial awards presented to athletic champions at the Olympic and Isthmian Games. This evidence is furnished by Pausanias 8.2. There is ample evidence, in addition to Solon's law, that athletes in general were rewarded very richly by their city-states. See Xenophanes Fr. 2, *Elegy and Iambus* I; Aristophanes *Plutus* 1161 and Plato *Republic* 5.465, for further information on payments made to victorious athletes.
14. J. K. Davies, *Athenian Propertied Families* (Oxford, 1971), p. xxii. H. A. Harris, *Greek Athletes and Athletics* (London, 1966), p. 37, states that even the smaller Isthmian payment of 100 drachmas was almost as much as a year's earnings of a working man.
15. Perhaps it was plausible to divide a victory purse into equal portions and supplement one's income accordingly. For example, 125 drachmas would be applied to an Olympic victor's annual income until the next Olympiad and 25 drachmas for an Isthmian victor.
16. Diogenes Laertius, *Life of Solon* 1.55-56.
17. Rachel Sargent Robinson, *Sources For the History of Greek Athletics* (Cincinnati, Ohio, 1955), p. 60.
18. See footnotes 30 and 32 below.
19. Lucian, *Anacharsis* 14 (Loeb Classical Library, Cambridge, Mass., and London, 1969), Trans. by A. M. Harmon.
20. Diodorus, *Siculus* 9.23 (Loeb Classical Library, Cambridge, Mass., and London, 1960), Trans. by C. H. Oldfather.
21. Diogenes Laertius, *Solon* 1.55-56 (Loeb Classical Library, Cambridge, Mass., and London, 1959), Trans. by R. D. Hicks. Diogenes proposes an interesting point by suggesting that rewards be curtailed proportionately at other athletic festivals. This infers that in addition to worthless garlands—oteoavital monetary rewards—gematikol were given to Athenian victors as well as the Nemean and Pythian Games. That being the case, additional opportunities would have been available for Athenians to supplement their income. Unfortunately, victor lists for the Isthmian, Nemean, and Pythian Games are not available for the sixth century. E. N. Gardiner, *Greek Athletic Sports and Festivals* (London, 1910), p. 226, claims, however, that many competitors in the Nemean Games represented Athens.
22. *Ibid.*, Yet Robinson, p. 247, suggests that Diogenes Laertius' comments are a condemnation of athletic practices in his own time rather than during the time of Solon and should not be taken seriously. See pages 7 and 8 below for a brief discussion concerning the trustworthiness of Diogenes Laertius, Diodorus Siculus and Lucian.
23. *Ibid.*
24. See, R. H. Barrow, *Plutarch and His Times* (Bloomington, 1967). P. A. Stadter, *Plutarch's Historical Methods, An Analysis of the Mulierum Virtues* (Cambridge, 1965) and C. P. Jones, *Plutarch and Rome* (Oxford, 1971).
25. See C. H. Oldfather, *Diodorus Siculus*, pp. xxi-xxii (Loeb Classical Library, Cambridge, Mass., and London, 1960).
26. W. W. Tarn, *Alexander The Great* Vol. 2 (Cambridge, 1950), p. 63. A. W. Gomme, *Commentary on Thucydides* (Oxford, 1945), p. 45, also claims that Diodorus was a careless compiler and inaccurate in his chronology.
27. Herbert S. Long, "Diogenes Laertius," *OCD*, pp. 348-9.
28. Wilma C. Wright, *A Short History of Greek Literature* (New York, 1907), p. 84. Also see Moses Hadas, *A History of Greek Literature* (New York, 1950), p. 288, who thought Diogenes Laertius to be not a very clever man and Leonard Whibley, *A Companion to Greek Studies* (New York, 1968), p. 183, who believed Diogenes to be uncritical and careless.
29. Walter M. Edwards and Robert Browning, "Lucian," *OCD*, p. 621, considers Lucian as an author of the second rank; however, Paul Turner, *Lucian: Satirical Sketches* (Baltimore, 1961), p. 14, says that Lucian was very consistent in putting across what he regarded as a realistic view of human life.
30. Luigi Moretti, *Olympionikai, I Vincitori Negli Antichi Agoni Olimpici* (Roma, 1957). 68-No. 81, lists Alceon as a champion in 592 B.C. The next Olympic victory from Athens was not recorded until 564.
31. Ulrich Wilcken, *Alexander The Great*, Trans. by G. C. Richards (New York, 1967), p. 299; Edith Hamilton, *The Greek Way* (New York, 1930), p. 31.
32. There were several Athenian champions between 592 and 527, the period of time that Solon's laws were in effect. For further information on the duration of Solon's reforms see Neville Ure and N.

G. L. Hammond, "Pisistratus," *OCD*, p. 836. For a list of Athenian Victors at Olympia until 527, see Moretti, p. 71-No. 106, p. 72-No. 120, p. 74-No., 124 and No. 127.