Reforms of Cleisthenes

**Category** Government and politics  
**Date** 508-507 B.C.E.  
**Locale** Athens

The reforms of Cleisthenes decreased the authority of the noble factions in Athens and established the foundations of Athenian direct democracy.

**SUMMARY OF EVENT**

After the passage of Solon’s legislation early in the sixth century B.C.E., Athens continued to experience political turmoil. Pisistratus established a tyranny which, after his death in 527, passed to his two sons, one of whom was assassinated in 514 and the other expelled with the assistance of King Cleomenes I of Sparta in 510. The tyranny was followed by government by the nobility, apparently a narrow oligarchy whose leader was the aristocrat Isagoras. Cleisthenes of Athens, of the noble family of the Alcmaeonidae, incited the common people against the oligarchs. In 508-507 B.C.E., he besieged the conservatives and their Spartan supporters on the Acropolis. The Spartans acknowledged defeat and were permitted to withdraw, whereupon the aristocratic faction surrendered. Cleisthenes, with the support of most Athenians, then drew up a fresh series of laws which superseded the constitution established by Solon. The reform was essentially political in nature, although it inevitably had repercussions on Attic society as a whole.

Social change was made mainly through abolishing the four traditional tribes of citizens and creating new ones which were not territorial, although they were made up of members of the old *demes*, the villages of Attica. There were then about 170 *demes* of varying sizes. Groups of ten *demes* called *trittyes* were formed by assigning *demes* by lot from the three geographical regions of Attica: the city itself and the countryside immediately around it; the coastal district; and the interior. The *demes* were not necessarily contiguous, especially as Cleisthenes intended to break up regional interest groups of the nobility that had hitherto caused civil unrest, but they were approximately equal in population. New cults were created for the tribes with the approval of the Delphic Apollo in order to bind new loyalties.

The organization of Solon’s assembly was also changed, and there is reason to suppose that Cleisthenes assigned to it a more active and important role. It continued to supervise the annual election of magistrates and to be consulted on the issue of war or peace, but it now passed new laws from time to time. With thirty thousand male citizens including the *thetes* (lower-class citizens) eligible to attend, though not to vote, the assembly was unwieldy. An important constitutional innovation of Cleisthenes was creation of the *Boule* or council, an executive committee of the assembly made up of five hundred councilors, fifty from each tribe. Each *deme* elected councilors in proportion to its population. It is a matter of controversy whether the *Boule* was a new institution or merely replaced the Council of Four Hundred said to have been constituted by Solon.

Though the precise functions of the *Boule* in the time of Cleisthenes are not clear, it began somewhat later to draw up formal bills for consideration by the assembly, receive foreign embassies, discharge certain judicial functions, and look after the construction of warships, fortifications, and other public works.

Each tribal group of fifty men, a *prytany*, lived continuously at public expense in the city of Athens for a tenth of the year, an arrangement that was the closest Cleisthenes came to giving payment for holding public office. These groups were ready in emergency to call either the full *Boule* or the assembly into session. One man of the *prytany* was chosen each day to be the *prytanis* or “president” of Athens for twenty-four hours. He was responsible for the safekeeping of keys to the temples and treasuries, and he presided over any sessions of the council or assembly that might take place on his day in office. The *Boule* familiarized the people of Athens with
the organization, finances, and resources of the state. It also prepared the generation that followed Cleisthenes for the more democratic 460’s and 450’s under Pericles.

The nine archons (rulers) continued to function as heretofore, but Cleisthenes has also been credited by some authorities with creating the new office of “general” or strategos, which was a more democratic office than archon because generals were elected without regard to census rating. As the office actually dates from 501/500 B.C.E., it was probably the creation of some other man, because Cleisthenes drops out of Athenian history abruptly after 507 B.C.E. Some ancient writers also ascribed to him the honorable form of legalized exile known as “ostracism,” but since it was not used until 487 B.C.E., it, too, was in all probability the creation of someone else.

**SIGNIFICANCE**

Cleisthenes’ governmental reforms marked a significant advance in the concept of democracy. His version of elected representation, as embodied in the prytany and the Boule, provided a workable compromise between oligarchy or monarchy and the unwieldy assembly created by Solon. His creation of trittyes also served to break up regionalism and opened citizens’ eyes to wider interests, as did the practice of sharing oversight of the government through the office of prytanis. The Boule also inaugurated the creation of laws by a representative assembly. In many ways, Cleisthenes’ reforms sowed the seeds of modern democratic government.

**FURTHER READING**


**RELATED ARTICLES IN GREAT LIVES FROM HISTORY: ANCIENT WORLD**

Cleisthenes of Athens; Cleomenes; Pericles; Pisistratus; Solon.

*Samuel K. Eddy updated by Jeffrey L. Buller*

**Article Citation**