If the unification of Attica was ultimately a more complex and problematic process than is usually recognized, the Athenians themselves preferred to gloss over any untidy or inconvenient details. The tradition of the Thesean synoecism reduced the process to a straightforward bureaucratic act in the distant past, and no one, it seems, ever saw the need to challenge this version of events. By contrast, there was not always such easy unanimity about that other momentous chapter in Athenian political history, the evolution of democracy.

While it was generally accepted that *dēmokratía* was the “traditional mode of government” (*patrios politeia*) in Athens, the precise nature of the original *dēmokratía* became a matter of heated dispute at certain points in the classical period. If defined in its most basic sense as “the collective control of the state by the demos, or people,” the idea was of course open to some breadth of interpretation according to how the notions of control and demos were defined. And as rival groups competed to establish their own particular political visions as the true descendant of “ancestral” democracy, more than one account of the origins of *dēmokratía* in the state inevitably emerged.

Needless to say, memory of constitutional developments, like any other form of collective memory in classical Athens, was all too easily manipulated to fit the needs of the present. It is therefore essential to allow for this instability of constitutional memory when we confront ancient opinions about the role played by Cleisthenes’ reforms in the story of Athenian democracy. After
all, even the earliest of these opinions (that of Herodotus) was recorded at least seventy or eighty years after the event. And we should remember that the reforms themselves were passed at a time when Greek historiography was still some way short of its infancy, and at a time when it was still not yet standard practice to keep permanent records of the business transacted by the Athenian state.¹ So most if not all of our literary testimony for the political changes of 508/7 derives ultimately from an oral tradition that was less than reliable. Regarding the specific details of the tribal reform, discussed in the previous chapter, our sources’ dependence on oral material probably had little effect on the quality of their testimony, since it would have been easy for authors to flesh out their accounts with inferences from contemporary practice. But on larger questions, such as the overall historical significance of Cleisthenes’ measures and their impact on the development of democracy, ancient authors are likely to be less helpful. An informed judgment on such issues will have required not only a clear understanding of what transpired in 508/7 but also a sound working knowledge of political arrangements in even earlier eras, a level of knowledge that was perhaps already unattainable by the time that the likes of Herodotus and Thucydides began work on their texts.

Turning, then, to our own inquiry into the contribution of Cleisthenes’ reforms to the history of popular government in Athens, it seems appropriate to begin by looking in a little more detail at the problems presented by our primary sources. Here, we should try in particular to get a sense of the different oral accounts of Athenian constitutional history that were circulating in the later fifth and fourth centuries, accounts that may well have influenced how contemporary writers chose to characterize Cleisthenes’ achievement.

DEMOCRACY AND MEMORY

Among the relatively small number of ancient authors who refer to Cleisthenes, there appears to be a general consensus on both the content and the larger historical significance of his reforms: they were associated in some way with development of democracy in Athens; and their most important provision was for the creation of the intricate system of demes, trittyes, and tribes that was to become such a familiar feature of Athenian public life. As a rule, scholars have been inclined to accept both of these claims at face value and have then attempted to identify some kind of causal relationship between the two. Many believe that we can find anticipations of popular rule in earlier times. But the general consensus, found in most textbooks, is that Cleisthenes’ measures in fact marked the effective birth of democracy in Athens, and that the main ev-
idence for this conclusion is to be found somewhere in the details of the new tribal system. The conclusion itself may well be correct, but this use of the sources is problematic, for at least two reasons.

To begin with, even our most informative sources—Herodotus and AP—are disappointingly vague on the question of how exactly Cleisthenes’ tribal system made Athens more democratic. And it must be admitted that the nature of any such causal relationship remains less than self-evident.\(^2\)

Granted, as two of our sources (AP 21.2–3; Arist. Pol. 1319b19–27) maintain, the system involved some “mixing up” of rich and poor in the demes and tribes. In the demes in particular, political life does seem to have been somewhat egalitarian from the very beginning, with even the very poorest citizens entitled to the same rights and privileges as any of their more distinguished brethren.\(^3\) But the primary purpose of this mixing seems to have been to generate a stronger sense of common interest and purpose within the citizen community as a whole. And here, as we saw in chapter 1, the simple need to overcome physical distances between citizens was at least as urgent as the need to soften distinctions of wealth and status. In any case, it is hard to see how the presence of different socioeconomic groups within each tribe will have made the political process in Athens itself more democratic. Mixing may have left some mark on the composition of the Council of 500, but it will have had no direct, tangible impact on any other organ of the central government.

Alternatively, some modern authorities believe it is possible to detect a broadly democratic sensibility in the geography of Cleisthenes’ tribal system. By distributing the members of powerful families or local cult organizations among the trittyes of different tribes, the new order, it is held, will have diminished the ability of the elite to exploit these traditional sources of support in the national political arena, or at least in the new Council of 500.\(^4\) There may be a measure of truth to this claim, though we know of too few certain instances of such manipulation to conclude that the tribal system as a whole was inherently “democratic,” even in this very limited sense. Besides, we might reasonably expect any democratic reforms worthy of the name to be more concerned with raising the level of political rights and opportunities for poorer citizens than with simply trimming back those previously held only by the rich. Certainly citizens of the hoplite class were an integral part of the new order. Yet, as noted in the previous chapter, it is highly unlikely that those of the thete class would have had any part to play in either the Council of 500 or the citizen army, the very institutions whose organizational basis the new tribes were expressly designed to provide.
In short, the tribal reform would seem to be a strangely oblique way of realizing democracy in the Athenian state. This cannot have been its larger purpose. We may be able to identify some degree of leveling in the new system, even a trace of egalitarianism. But this would not have made the reform democratic as such, unless we maintain a rather loose definition of the term *dēmokratia*. We shall return to this question of definition shortly.

In the meantime, our sources present another serious problem for those who contend that Cleisthenes instituted democracy through the tribal reform. For a mountain of impressive inferences and suppositions cannot hide the fact that only one ancient author, in a single statement, comes close to claiming that Cleisthenes actually was the founder of Athenian democracy. This author is Herodotus, and the statement (6.131.1), surprisingly, does not come at the point in his text where the tribal reform is explicitly discussed. Instead, we find it tucked away near the end of the following book after the colorful account of the events that led to the marriage of Cleisthenes’ parents, Megacles II and Agariste of Sikyon. In the standard translation, it reads as follows.

Of this union was born Cleisthenes, the man who established the tribes and the democracy for the Athenians [*ho tas phulas kai τὴν δημοκρατίαν Ἀθηναίων καταστήσας*], and who was named after his maternal grandfather, [Cleisthenes] the Sikyonian [tyrant].

At first sight, the statement seems straightforward enough. The only problem is that even this testimony may not be saying quite what we would like it to say. The difficulty comes with the all-important verb form [*katastēsas*], which could mean “established (from scratch),” but could also mean simply “set in order,” or even “reestablished,” implying that democracy had already existed in some form in Athens at some earlier time. And regarding the other object governed by this verb (“the tribes”), these alternative translations would certainly be more appropriate, since Herodotus makes it clear elsewhere (5.66.2) that he saw Cleisthenes’ ten phylai as a reorganization of the existing 4-tribe system, not as something entirely new. Sadly, what we do not find elsewhere is a definitive statement about the kind of political arrangements, which the author believed had prevailed in Athens before the Peisistratid tyranny. In the absence of such confirmation, Herodotus’ intent in 6.131.1 must for now remain unclear. We will be in a better position to clarify his meaning at the end of chapter 9, when evidence adduced during the course of this study should help us to settle the issue with some finality.
So if Cleisthenes was not widely seen by the ancients as the founder of Athenian democracy, who did they think was responsible? Two different claims about the origins of popular government in Athens seem to have been current in the classical period.

The more tendentious of the two probably entered circulation in the late fifth century, emerging during the period of domestic turmoil that followed the disastrous demise of the Athenian campaign in Sicily in 413. It seems to have been a product of an ongoing debate over the nature of the “traditional mode of government” (patrios politeia) in Athens. This was a debate waged initially between supporters of the current, radical democratic (“demotic”) regime and the followers of Theramenes, who sought to replace it with what amounted to a moderate form of oligarchy. The latter group briefly prevailed, and in Cleitophon’s rider to the decree of Pythodorus that established the short-lived regime of the Four Hundred in 411 B.C. (AP 29.3), we find an injunction to seek out as guidance “the traditional laws” [tous patrious nomous] drafted by Cleisthenes when, again in the standard translation, “he established the democracy” [kathiste tén demokratian]. According to AP, the rationale here was that this democratic constitution associated with Cleisthenes was “not radical” [ou démotike-n] but “similar to that of Solon” [paraple-san ... tei Solonos]. If this statement reflects arguments that were actually made at the time of the decree, it would constitute our earliest—albeit oblique—evidence, for the claim that the poet-lawgiver Solon was actually the author of some form of democracy, since he is not explicitly characterized as a constitutional reformer in any source written before this time.\(^5\) As for Cleisthenes’ role in this scheme, it is clear enough from the context that he was seen not as the original founder of democracy but merely as the man who restored it after the Peisistratid tyranny. Hence, we should probably emend the standard translation of the text of Cleitophon’s rider in AP 29.3. In this instance, the verb kathiste, a form of the very same verb (kathistemti) used earlier by Herodotus to describe Cleisthenes’ contribution to Athenian democracy, must mean “reestablished” not “established (from scratch).”

The claim that Solon was in some sense the founder of Athenian democracy would prove to be extremely durable. In an effort to counter the force of this new historical charter for the constitution preferred by the Therameneans, supporters of radical democracy ultimately devised a very similar precedent for their very own version of demokratia. Following the restoration of this “demotic” democracy after the fall of the Thirty Tyrants in 403, it was resolved in a decree proposed by Teisamenos (see Andoc. 1.83–84) that inter alia the polis be governed “according to traditional precedent” [kata ta patria], and be sub-
ject to the “laws” [nomoi] of Solon, with some role even foreseen for the “ordinances” [thesmoi] of Draco. Thus, whatever the actual historical achievement of Cleisthenes, it was Solon who came to be celebrated as the preeminent democratic reformer and Athenian history’s first true “champion of the people.”6

But assuming that Solon was not cast in this role until the later fifth century, how were the origins of democracy in Athens understood before this time? According to the earliest unambiguous testimony for a founder figure, the Athenians apparently believed that the first steps toward popular government had been taken long before the times of Solon and Cleisthenes, back during the reign of the legendary king Theseus. Perhaps nurtured in the less partisan, more “imaginary” realm of state funeral orations, the beginnings of this tradition are very hard to pin down. But it was certainly current by the 420s, when it is first visible to us in the Suppliants of Euripides (esp. 350–462). Thereafter, it is attested more frequently, appearing implicitly or explicitly in a number of fourth-century sources, and it seems even to have influenced Thucydides’ conception of the early Athenian state.7

How then did the Athenians of the fourth-century reconcile memories of three different moments of political rupture—those associated with Theseus, Solon, and Cleisthenes—and organize them into a single coherent narrative? The best-attested reconstructions of early Athenian constitutional history from this time are found in AP and in the works of the reactionary pamphleteer Isocrates.

In the first part of AP (1.1–41.3) we find a highly nuanced, if not always accurate or consistent overview of Athenian political developments down to 403 B.C., concluding (41.2) with a summary of eleven successive changes of government [metabolai] identified by the author. The second of these is characterized as “shifting slightly away from absolute monarchy” [mikron parenklinousa tēs basilikēs] under Theseus, though the eventual abolition of the monarchy is not included in the scheme. What then follows represents something of a compromise between the “demotic” and oligarchic versions of constitutional history.

Thus, after a probable interpolation concerning the supposed constitution of Draco, the third change comes when Solon lays down the “foundation of democracy” [arkhe demokratias]. However, we learn from elsewhere in the text (9.1) that this development involved only limited gains for ordinary citizens, the “most demotic” [demotikōtata] reforms being a ban on taking loans on the security of the body, the right for anyone who so wished to seek legal redress, and the right to appeal a legal decision in a dikaste–rion. Meanwhile, in the fifth change it is left to Cleisthenes to revive the democracy after the fall of the Pei-
sistratid tyranny and give it a much more radical character (cf. 22.1). Although further steps in this direction would be taken by Aristides and Ephialtes in the seventh change in the sequence, the author of *AP* clearly felt (20.1) that the decisive shift towards radical democracy had already occurred decades earlier, when Cleisthenes “won over the demos by handing over control of the state to the people” [prosegageto ton de–mon, apodidous toi plethei ten politeian].

An altogether less nuanced and more partisan synthesis of constitutional history is found among the copious writings of Isocrates. More concerned to influence contemporary affairs than the author of *AP*, Isocrates was inspired by a nostalgic longing for what he thought was the traditional constitution of the past, arguing throughout his career for its revival and the abandonment of the degenerate constitution of his own day. Though his preferred regime is repeatedly described as “democracy,” it in fact resembles nothing more than the kind of moderate oligarchy once favored by the Therameneans.

As for the history of this avowedly “aristocratic” version of democracy, he imagined it had been first introduced to Athens “not less than a thousand years” earlier at the time of Theseus (cf. 12.129, 148). But the real hero of the story for Isocrates seems to have been Solon, described as a “champion of the people,” whom he credits with finally writing this constitution into law. Cleisthenes, too, is presented in a very positive light. However, unlike in *AP*, he is not seen as any kind of innovator, his achievement being rather to restore the Solonian regime after liberating Athens from the Peisistratid tyrants. For Isocrates, therefore, it was not until well after the reforms of 508/7 that the constitution first began to be tainted by “demotic” elements, the ultimate result being the debased form of popular government all too familiar to his fourth-century contemporaries.

Whatever the differences of detail between these two reconstructions, the overall scheme in each is similar. In both, it is Theseus who makes the first significant move toward popular government, but Solon who makes this commitment essentially irrevocable by writing democracy into law. Both charter traditions were thus accommodated into a single satisfying narrative. As for Cleisthenes, his role was simply to restore Solon’s political arrangements after their abandonment by the Peisistratids. Dispute remained only on the question of whether he gave democracy a more radical flavor in the process.

We should of course like to know better what others in the fourth century came to believe about Athenian constitutional history, especially Atthidographers like Cleidemus and Androtion. But in so far as we can recover an “official” version of events, it does not seem to have diverged significantly from the overall pattern found in Isocrates and *AP*. While, for obvious reasons, the
state may have placed more emphasis on the achievements of Theseus than on
those of Solon, the contributions of both were deemed worthy of public cele-
bration. Thus, extant fourth-century funeral orations routinely appeal to the
“ancestral” democracy of the heroic past, and there was probably an allusion to
the foundational moment of this democracy in a mural executed in ca. 340 by
Euphranor in the Stoa of Zeus Eleutherios. Here, in the first known monumen-
tal commemoration of an event in the earliest, formative phase of Athenian con-
sicutional history, the artist conspicuously juxtaposed a Theseus figure with per-
sonified images of Demos and Demokratia. But equally conspicuously, when, at
some point before the early 320s, a decision was made to memorialize the achieve-
ments of a more recent constitutional reformer, it was Solon who was honored
with a free-standing bronze statue in front of the Stoa Poikile in the Agora.11

There was then, it seems, a broad consensus about the outlines of Athen-
ian constitutional history by the fourth century, with individual writers gen-
erally echoing the official line, namely that democracy was no recent, progres-
sive innovation but an almost timeless feature of the Athenian cultural
landscape. The achievements of Cleisthenes, meanwhile, were now seen as no
more than a footnote in the larger story of the Athenian state. His decisive role
in the political unification of Attica was eclipsed by the synoecism tradition,
and his contribution to the cause of popular government was judged to be a
more or less straightforward revival of practices initiated by others. And since
Cleisthenes was never accorded the kind of permanent public recognition that
was lavished so freely upon Theseus and Solon in the classical era, interest in
the Alcmeonid declined appreciably thereafter.12 Apparently the only monu-
ment to him still visible when Pausanias came to record the sights of Athens
in the second century A.D. was a grave memorial in the state cemetery in the
Kerameikos. The travel writer (1.29.5) passes over it in about half a sentence,
noting merely that Cleisthenes was the man responsible for “the present
arrangement of the tribes.” And it comes as no surprise when Pausanias im-
plies elsewhere in his text that even this limited achievement would no longer
have been common knowledge among his readers.13

We shall have more to say in due course about the formation of a shared
constitutional memory in Athens (see especially chapter 9). For now it is
enough to observe that the vagaries of this memory in the classical period, al-
luded to above, make it extremely difficult to assess the historical contribu-
tion of Cleisthenes’ reforms to democracy in Athens. Even the earliest and most re-
liable of our ancient guides were forced to depend to a great extent on an oral
tradition that was all too vulnerable to the influence of political expediency and
patriotic fancy. Most if not all of them may therefore have made assumptions
and inferences that are fundamentally flawed, requiring us to exercise unusual levels of caution and skepticism when handling their accounts. Perhaps the ancients were correct in their view that Cleisthenes did little more than reassemble an older order dismantled by the Peisistratids, though we cannot assume that they were. Whatever the case, our sources understandably show greater interest in the more illustrious achievements of Theseus and Solon. And their relative lack of interest in the Alcmeonid raises a further problem that is both more straightforward and far harder to overcome, namely, the paltry quantity of information that has come down to us about the career of Cleisthenes, the content of his reforms, and their historical context.

Still, these problems need not be insurmountable. As I hope to show in the remainder of this chapter, there are other kinds of evidence on which we can draw to compensate for the shortcomings of our main literary sources and complete our picture of Cleisthenes’ reforms. But first, we should clarify an important semantic issue raised earlier.

What exactly did ἰσαρχή mean in the Athenian context? To speak of the term as if it referred to a single, monolithic idea seems unhelpful, not to mention unrealistic. Ancient and modern authors use the word with such latitude that it is probably preferable to think of a continuum of meaning along which at some point we must locate the contribution of Cleisthenes’ reforms. At one extreme, we have the regime described in AP and elsewhere as “de­motic” democracy, with its sovereign citizen Assembly (ekklesia), powerful mass-jury courts (dikasteria), routine public scrutiny and review of all state officials, payment for jurors and magistrates, and use of the lottery in the selection of most officeholders. Under this radically egalitarian system, almost all distinctions in privilege between rich and poor would, in theory at least, be eliminated. But what were the bare minimum requirements for democracy? In other words, where does the continuum begin?

This question continues to be the object of an ongoing and vigorous debate, since the way we choose to answer it determines, in large part, where we locate the decisive break in the evolutionary progression from an older, more aristocratic form of government toward a genuinely popular regime in Athens. While some are content to equate the emergence of democracy with the first signs that nonelite citizens are playing a meaningful role in the political process, others insist that a regime cannot truly be described as democratic until it features at least some of the more obviously egalitarian practices mentioned above, such as the selection of officeholders by lottery.14

Of these two points of discontinuity, the former is clearly the more historically significant, marking the moment of irreversible shift from a state in which
the deliberative process is conducted largely by elites in camera to one in which nonelite citizens first begin to contribute to major political decisions on a regular basis. Defining this moment in the Athenian context requires the fulfillment of two conditions: the Assembly must have acquired ultimate authority over key matters of policy and legislation from the institutions that hitherto dominated the state, the archons and the Areopagus; and all citizens must be allowed to attend, speak, and vote in meetings of the Assembly, so that its resolutions can be deemed to represent the will of the entire demos, regardless of the numbers and class identity of those actually in attendance on any given occasion. Whether or not these conditions match all of our own criteria for “democracy,” they would seem to fulfill the minimum requirements for démokratia, that is, the claim that the demos collectively ruled in Athens. However, to avoid confusion and contention, I will refer to this scenario by the less loaded term “popular government.”

DEMONS AND ASSEMBLY UNDER THE NEW ORDER

Is there then any evidence to associate Cleisthenes’ reforms with the elevation of the Assembly to supremacy in the state? Though the accounts of Herodotus and AP contain no explicit notice of any overall change in the powers and competence of the ekklesia with respect to those of other institutions, there are several hints in these sources that the Assembly did assume a far more prominent position in Athenian political life after the reforms and that this was part of a greater emphasis on collective (over individual) authority in the new order.15

First, there are the circumstances of the introduction of the reforms themselves. It seems beyond doubt that Cleisthenes, in his capacity as a private citizen, proposed the measures in the form of a pséphisma (resolution to be voted on) presented for ratification in the Assembly. Both sources emphasize the critical role played by the support of the demos in the passage of the reforms, and it is hard to imagine how this support could have had any meaningful political impact unless it was expressed institutionally, in the ekklesia. Since Herodotus elsewhere uses the word démos in effect as a synonym for the Athenian ekklesia (e.g., 1.59.4–6, 5.97.2), he may be alluding to this specific procedure when he tells us, in the crucial phrase, that Cleisthenes “won the démos over to his side” [ton démon prosetairizetai] (5.66.2). In any case, it seems likely that ratification in the Assembly was thereafter required to make binding any new item of legislation.16

But was this the first time that the ekklesia had provided the ultimate sanction for a resolution of such far-reaching significance? We cannot know the an-
swer to this question for sure and shortly will look at evidence for its role under earlier regimes in Athens.

Second, our sources mention another Cleisthenic innovation that seems to hint at a greater role in the new order for ordinary citizens and for the Assembly in particular: the introduction of the practice of ostracism (see AP 22.1, 4), whereby one political leader a year could be expelled from Attica without loss of citizen’s rights for a period of ten years. Whatever the original stated purpose of the procedure, it clearly would have helped to ensure the accountability of leaders to the citizen body as a whole, since the right to call a vote on whether to hold an ostracism was reserved exclusively for the Assembly and since a quorum of six thousand citizens was required for the procedure to be initiated in any given year. Even if ostracism was not actually used for the first time until some twenty years later, the very existence of such a mechanism strongly suggests that the collective will of the demos was now held to take precedence, at least nominally, over the will of any particular individual, however influential.

Third, possible evidence that citizens of all social backgrounds were now actively encouraged to participate in the deliberations of the Assembly comes in another passage of Herodotus (5.78). Having just described the sudden upturn in Athenian fortunes on the battlefield that followed soon after Cleisthenes’ reform of the state, the historian directly associates this newfound military prowess with the political transformation, in particular with iségoria—literally, the equal right of all citizens to address the Assembly. While, in the context of this passage, the meaning of the term is clearly generalized to suggest a broader idea of “equality” or “freedom” (i.e., from the rule of a tyrant), some have concluded that Herodotus is also using iségoria in its narrower sense here, as one of the signature innovations of the new order. If so, this concern to make the ekklesia more representative of the entire citizen body can be taken as a further sign of a new emphasis on collective (over individual) responsibility for decision making in the Athenian state as a whole.

Finally, we have the creation of the boule, or Council of 500 (see AP 21.3)—at first sight, perhaps the best available evidence for the Assembly’s enhanced role under the new order. Though, in its earliest phase, the council was probably limited in function to probouleusis (the drafting of motions for deliberation in the ekklesia), that there was even a need for such a body, let alone one of this size, is obviously indicative of the large volume and significance of the business that was now to be transacted in the Assembly.

But here we run into another problem confronted by those who would trace the rise of popular government in Athens to the transformation of 508/7.
For there is some evidence that a very similar kind of probouleutic council had been operating in Athens since the time of Solon, which suggests that the *ekklesia* had already acquired a prominent, if not dominant, position in the state more than eighty years before Cleisthenes first proposed his reforms. Again, this evidence will be examined more closely in due course, when we come to look at earlier political arrangements in the city.

In the meantime, if we turn our attention away from the accounts of Herodotus and *AP* and look further afield, we find a range of other testimony from the time of the reforms and the years immediately following that seems to corroborate our findings so far. In the first place, it can hardly be a coincidence that spacious new quarters for both the Assembly and Council were constructed in ca. 500 B.C. As we shall see in chapter 3, these structures were to form the centerpieces of a new civic center created at this time in the area of the Agora. While the Council was to be housed in a handsome columnar building in the Agora itself, the *ekklesia* would henceforth meet in a specially modeled theatrical area located on the nearby Pnyx hill. This site, containing space sufficient to seat around five thousand citizens even in its earliest phase, clearly presupposes a deliberative process in which mass participation would be a key ingredient. It is unfortunate, but perhaps also revealing, that not a single memory or physical trace survives of any predecessor to either structure.

The practice of recording the decrees of the Assembly in permanent form, a sure index of this body’s growing stature within the state, may also have been introduced in the immediate aftermath of Cleisthenes’ reforms. Not a single document of this kind survives among the large number of Athenian inscriptions we have from earlier times, nor is there any reference in our written sources to decrees that will have been published before 508/7. Probably the earliest known instance is a fragmentary decree recovered from the Acropolis (IG I3 i) that appears to include instructions to the “governor” [arkhon] of Salamis on the administration of Athenian settlers, or cleruchs, on the island. The letter forms on the document allow a date anywhere between 520 and 480, and some would place it toward the lower end of this time frame. But if, as Meiggs and Lewis (1988, 26–27) have suggested, it in fact belongs to the brief period between Cleisthenes’ reforms and the Athenian defeat of the Chalcidians in ca. 506, we would have good reason to see the publication of Assembly decrees as an innovation of the new order.

The content of the Salamis decree is also revealing. Like all future documents of this kind, it describes itself as a resolution not of the *ekklesia* but of the *demos* itself. Thus, whatever the reality of the numbers and backgrounds of those present on the Pnyx on this or any future occasion, each deliberative
outcome is now officially claimed to embody the will of the citizen body as a whole, again suggesting a new concern to present the political process in Athens as a collective undertaking and to assert the Assembly’s role as its primary conduit. Some indication of the extent of the powers enjoyed by the ekklésia can also be seen in the subject matter of this and another early decree (IG I3 4), a set of regulations from 485/4 that concerns the management of the Hekatompedon precinct on the Acropolis. Evidently, if an Assembly vote was now routinely required to ratify legislation on matters as diverse as the settlement of cleruchs and the conduct of officials and citizens at a major cult site, its competence was extremely wide-ranging. But perhaps most important of all, as Ostwald (1986, 24) notes, the two decrees reveal that “[t]he people as a whole, nobles and commoners, now gave directions to magistrates.”

Meanwhile, evidence for a more fundamental revaluation of the authority of the Assembly within the state may be visible in a fragmentary inscription from the late fifth century (IG I3 105) that is widely believed to be a republication of measures enacted sometime during the period between the reforms of Cleisthenes and those of Ephialtes in 462/1. What survives appears to be a document defining the powers of the Council of 500 relative to those of the ekklésia, including a list of matters of state where no final action can be taken “without [ratification by] a full meeting of the demos of the Athenians.” The document appears to describe how the Assembly holds ultimate jurisdiction over such critical areas as the declaration of war and the conclusion of peace (34–35), as well as (perhaps sitting as the Heliaia) the imposition of the death penalty in certain circumstances (36) and of ἠθοῖαι, fines for offenses whose nature remains unclear (40–41). If we combine this evidence with the testimony of literary sources, a case can be made that at least two of these powers were exercised by the demos as early as the 490s.

First, it emerges that the right of the demos (whether as ekklésia or Heliaia) to inflict the death penalty may have been exercised in conjunction with a broader authority over serious crimes against the state. The case has been argued in some detail by Ostwald (1986, 28–40), who examines the evidence for six political trials concerning five prominent individuals, from that of the tragedian Phrynichus in 493/2 to that of Cimon in 462. In each instance, it appears that the final verdict was delivered by a popular body, described variously as “the demos,” “the Athenians,” or “a law court” (dikasterion). Presumably, this body deliberated after an initial hearing before the Areopagus, since the latter had apparently been given exclusive jurisdiction over trials of this kind by Solon (see AP 7.5). Ostwald (1986, 39–40) concludes that a new stipulation, whereby any crime against the state that would incur a serious penalty had to
be referred for final consideration before a mass tribunal believed to embody the collective will of the demos, was introduced “either by Cleisthenes himself or soon after his reforms.”

Second, we have good evidence that as early as 499 B.C., the Assembly was already playing a decisive role in declarations of war and the determination of what we would consider “foreign policy.” When, at that time, Artaphernes, the Persian satrap at Sardis, demanded that the Athenians take back Hippia or face the consequences, “it was resolved” [ededokto] by “the Athenians,” says Herodotus (5.96.2), “to become open enemies of the Persians.” And when, shortly afterward, Aristagoras of Miletus came to persuade the Athenians to join the Ionian revolt against Persia, Herodotus (5.97) explicitly states that he made his appeal “to the demos” [epi ton demon]. Dispelling any doubt that the mention of the “demos” in this instance refers to the Assembly, Herodotus then tells how the Milesian, upon securing the support he sought, playfully remarked how much more successful his entreaty had been with thirty thousand Athenians than it had with one single Spartan, King Cleomenes, on an earlier occasion. Herodotus concludes the episode by noting that it was “the Athenians” [hoi Athenaioi] who “voted” [epsephisanto] to send the fateful twenty ships to Ionia, thus confirming that the ekklesia was now ultimately responsible not only for receiving the appeals of foreign emissaries and making declarations of war but also for determining the details of the military response to any given situation.

As a final indication of a general shift toward collective popular rule under the new order, we might briefly note a contemporary change in nomenclature. Ostwald (1969, 158–60) has traced to the late sixth century the displacement of the term thesmos by nomos as the word for “statute” in official parlance, and he suggests that this change reflects a fundamental reconceptualization of the legislative process in Athens, whereby laws were seen no longer as “imposed” from above but as “accepted” by common consent. As Ostwald puts it elsewhere (1986, 27),

Just as the law on ostracism was contrived to let the people as a whole decide which of two major policies was to be adopted by temporarily banishing from the political scene the most prominent spokesman of one of them, so the disappearance of thesmos from the official vocabulary of the new constitution indicates that imposition of laws by a ruling class was to give way to laws ratified by popular acceptance.

In sum, there are many indications in the historical record for the late sixth century that the significance of the citizen Assembly within the Athenian state
was substantially increased in 508/7 and the years immediately following. The authors of our main literary sources do not talk about this transformation in as many words. Indeed, it seems that they were largely unaware of any such change. But hints in their texts, along with a variety of circumstantial evidence from elsewhere, do suggest that a fundamental shift of political gravity away from the archons and Areopagus and toward the Assembly took place at this time. As part of a broader emphasis on collective (over individual) responsibility in the management of the state, resolutions on most if not all major items of policy and legislation now required ratification in the ekklēsia. And while this far-reaching competence would be extended still further in the years to come, especially after the reforms of Ephialtes in 462/1, it looks very much like the Assembly had already become the primary arena of political engagement in Athens by the end of the sixth century. Henceforth, all aspiring politicians would have to defend their programs and agendas before an audience of thousands on the Pnyx, and henceforth their success would be measured in popular votes. With politicians thus accountable to their fellow citizens on an almost continual basis, and with all resolutions of the Assembly deemed to represent the will of the entire demos, it seems that popular government now held sway in Athens.23

But just how sudden or dramatic was this elevation of the Assembly to supremacy in the state? Much of the evidence I have discussed suggests that this was indeed a wholly new departure and that nonelite citizens before 508/7 played little part in the political process. But many modern authorities believe that some form of popular government predated the reforms of Cleisthenes, and some, notably Wallace (1998), have argued that démokratia itself was already in place more than eighty years earlier, seeing it as a direct outcome of measures introduced by Solon. To reach a more informed judgment on the historical significance of the developments of the late sixth century, we clearly need to examine these claims and look in more detail at earlier political arrangements in Athens.

THE SOLONIAN STATE

The problems in our sources for Solonian interventions in the political domain are again formidable. Aside from what he tells us in his own poems, almost everything we know about Solon as a political and legal reformer comes from the fourth century or later. By this time, any items of legislation passed before the republications of the late fifth century were referred to generically as “laws of Solon,” making it hard for our sources to distinguish the authentic from the
inauthentic Solonian measures.\textsuperscript{24} Moreover, if, as we noted earlier, he was not widely viewed as a significant agent of political change until ca. 411 B.C., we might have further cause to suspect the authenticity of the various constitutional reforms with which he is later credited.\textsuperscript{25} That said, for the purposes of discussion, we should grant our sources some benefit of the doubt and assume that at least some of the “laws” they describe were genuinely Solonian, whether deriving ultimately from the wooden \textit{axones} in the Prytaneion (see Paus. 1.18.2; Plut. \textit{Sol.} 25.1–2), the stone \textit{kurbeis} in the Stoa Basileios (see \textit{AP} 7.1), Nicomachus’s republications in the late fifth century, or from some other public document.

We might start by noting two developments of very broad significance for the evolution of Athenian political life that Solon almost certainly did encourage. First, if even a very small portion of the individual laws credited to him are correctly assigned, it seems fair to associate Solon with an increasing willingness on the part of the state to intervene in areas previously considered private. For example, his laws regulating marriage and the begetting of children (see Manville 1990, 149 n. 65), his economic prescriptions concerning exports (see Plut. \textit{Sol.} 24.1) and weights and measures (see \textit{AP} 10), and his formal instructions for the conduct of religious ceremonies suggest an overall concern with defining what we would consider a public domain. Nevertheless, as a salutary reminder that this process of definition was still very much in its infancy, it is worth pointing out that not a single extant documentary inscription from before 508 B.C. records an item of business enacted in the name of the “the Athenians,” let alone “the demos of the Athenians.”\textsuperscript{26} Even the Acropolis dedications from ca. 560 that are generally associated with the administration of the Great Panathenaia (see Raubitschek 1949, nos. 326–27), the most important single occasion in Athenian public life, appear to have been offered by private individuals in their own names.

Second, as Manville (1990, esp. 146–56) has shown persuasively, a range of Solonian measures imply the establishment of some kind of criteria for determining who was and who was not an Athenian citizen.\textsuperscript{27} Here too, however, we should not suppose that the procedures involved were necessarily as comprehensive and systematic as they would become after 508/7. Very little is known about the administration of citizenship before the reforms of Cleisthenes, and for reasons outlined in chapter 1, it seems unlikely that individuals who lived beyond the plain of Athens were yet routinely enrolled into the Athenian citizen community.\textsuperscript{28} But our chief interest here is in the political content of citizenship at this time. What role, if any, did nonelite citizens play in the political process?
Our primary accounts of Solonian constitutional arrangements are found in *AP* (5–12), Aristotle’s *Politics* (1273b35–1274a22), and Plutarch’s *Life of Solon* (17–25), the first and last of which credit Solon with a range of political innovations, introduced presumably around the time of his archonship, 594/3.29 Unfortunately for our purposes, neither *AP* nor Plutarch says anything about the competence of the citizen Assembly at this time, while Aristotle tells us that its functions were merely “to choose magistrates and call them to account” [tas arkhas haiereisthai kai euthunein].30 We do, however, learn that Solon introduced a “Council of 400, [made up of] a hundred from each [Ionian] tribe” (*AP* 8.4; cf. 21.3, 31.1), whose function was to prepare the business of the Assembly (Plut. *Sol.* 19.1–2). Since the very need for such a body implies that the Assembly met regularly and played a meaningful role in the conduct of state business, these reports, if accurate, would constitute very strong evidence that a form of popular government was in operation in Athens long before the reforms of Cleisthenes.

In the absence of any other straightforward evidence, the veracity of these reports comes to assume considerable importance. Most observers, it seems, are content to accept them at face value and suppose that a predecessor of the Cleisthenic *ekklesia/boule* complex influenced the deliberative process in Athens as far back as the early sixth century, perhaps serving as a kind of counterweight to the archons and Areopagus, which were still exclusive preserves of the elite. Others remain more skeptical, and though their arguments are often dismissed as “extreme,” the overall case actually has considerable merit.31

To begin with, it must be admitted that there is a strange reticence about this institution in our sources. Aristotle discusses Solonian constitutional arrangements in some detail, giving particular attention to the claim that Solon founded the “traditional democracy” [dēmokratian . . . tēn patrion] in Athens (*Pol.* 1273b38–39); yet the probouleutic council, an institution central to so many modern interpretations of Solon’s reforms, does not appear once in the discussion. Meanwhile, in *AP* and Plutarch, the only details we hear about this council, spare statements of its function (*probouleusis*) and composition (by tribal contingent), could simply be inferences drawn from knowledge of the later Council of 500. Even if the powers of the Assembly at this time did include the rights “to choose magistrates and hold them to account,” one is entitled to wonder why an effective standing committee of four hundred councillors was required to facilitate the execution of such modest functions. However we choose to resolve this problem, it is truly astonishing that the author of *AP* fails to include the creation of a new probouleutic council in his list (9.1) of “the three most radical features” of the “Solonian constitution” [tēs
Solōnos politeias tria . . . ta dēmotikōtata]. Why was the significance of this development, self-evident to modern observers, so lost on a highly informed ancient student of Athenian political history?

It is tempting to conclude that the author’s sources for Solonian constitutional arrangements were considerably less informative about the Council of 400 than they were about, say, the Areopagus or the selection and duties of magistrates. The incidental, almost evasive manner in which he refers to the institution, along with his complete failure to integrate this council into his broader picture of the state apparatus in the Solonian era, suggests a distinct lack of self-assurance on the subject. This vagueness, along with the absence of any explicit evidence for the activities of a popular council in Athens between 594/3 and 508/7, has understandably raised suspicions in some quarters about the institution’s historicity, especially since it is quite easy to pinpoint a particular moment in later Athenian history when a tradition of the Solonian Council of 400 might conveniently have been invented.32

As Hignett (1952, 93) pointed out many years ago, such a moment came with the introduction of what AP (31.1) describes as the “interim constitution” [politeian en toī paronti] formulated by oligarchic forces in 411 B.C. According to the new arrangement, a Council of 400, established “in accordance with traditional practice” [kata ta patria], was to be installed with broad competence over the constitution, the laws, and the appointment of magistrates. To legitimate this new institution by representing it as the reestablishment of a “traditional” body, its designers, Hignett contends, invented the precedent of the Solonian Council of 400.33

To this reconstruction, it may be objected that such a fiction would hardly have been in the oligarchs’ best interests; while the number four hundred, as an easy multiple of four, suggested authentic origins in the pre-Cleisthenic tribal system, why would they make the number so “democratically” large if they were free to use any multiple of four they chose?34 To answer this question, I think we have to envisage the physical space in which this supposedly Solonian council was imagined to have convened. This surely was the structure occupied at that time by the Council of 500, the so-called Old Bouleuterion in the Agora, a building we now know to have been erected in ca. 500 B.C. But from evidence elsewhere, it seems safe to suppose that this and other earlier structures in the Agora area were thought by later Athenians to be somewhat older than they actually were. If, then, the Old Bouleuterion could plausibly be claimed to have housed a Solonian council by 411, the oligarchs clearly had to come up with a multiple of four large enough to make this “original”
council a credible occupant of a building that was actually designed to accommodate five hundred men.\textsuperscript{35}

Defenders of the Solonian Council of \textit{400} typically resort to three items of independent evidence to bolster the slim testimony in Plutarch and \textit{AP} though none of these is decisive. First, in response to the claim that a popular council could not have coexisted alongside a more aristocratic body like the Areopagus in the early sixth century, defenders point to an inscription from ca. 575–550 found on Chios that appears to attest to precisely such an arrangement. But, to quote Sealey (\textit{a}, 161), “Athens was not Chios,” and the feasibility of the arrangement elsewhere hardly proves that it was actually implemented in Athens by Solon.\textsuperscript{36} Second, there is the somewhat more compelling suggestion that the coexistence of the two councils in Athens may in any case have been alluded to in one of Solon’s poems. Certainly Plutarch’s statement (19.2) that Solon intended the pair to function as the “twin anchors” of the state could reflect a metaphor used by the poet himself, but it need not do so. Again, this is hardly formidable evidence.\textsuperscript{37}

The final claim in the case for the Council of \textit{400} derives from our two accounts of the troubled events in Athens following Cleisthenes’ ratification of his reforms in the Assembly. Herodotus (5.72.1) and \textit{AP} (20.3) both tell us that Cleomenes tried unsuccessfully to dissolve “the council” before leading his forces to storm the Acropolis. Neither author specifies whether this was the Council of \textit{400}, the Council of \textit{500}, or, for that matter, the Areopagus. Clearly, it makes most sense in this context that the body concerned was the Council of \textit{500}, the embodiment of the new order that had prompted Isagoras’s appeal to Cleomenes in the first place. While we may wonder if there was sufficient time to install the new council before the king’s intervention, it is not hard to imagine that a pro tempore version of the \textit{boule} might already have been convened by this point. Since the argument for seeing this episode as evidence for the existence of the Council of \textit{400} consists solely of eliminating the other two possibilities, we must again conclude that the case is less than compelling.\textsuperscript{38}

A neutral observer of this debate about the Solonian council would probably pronounce it inconclusive. The evidence in favor of the council’s existence is not negligible but is too riddled with problems to be even moderately persuasive in itself. Unfortunately, the issue cannot simply be ignored, since our understanding of the evolution of the archaic Athenian state depends to a considerable extent on how we choose to resolve it. The choice is a stark one. The introduction of such a council by Solon presupposes an abrupt, even radical
shift toward popular government, with an energetic citizen Assembly playing a significant role in the political process; without such a council, our picture of the state apparatus in the early sixth century looks dramatically different, still dominated most likely by the archons and Areopagus, with little room for any meaningful participation by nonelite citizens. With evidence for the council being so problematic and evidence for the activities of the Assembly at this time being almost non-existent, our next step must be to look at what our sources tell us of Solon’s other political reforms for clues about his overall aims.

By any objective reckoning, Solon’s innovations in the political domain, the council aside, suggest that he was in general concerned more with standardizing received institutional practice, curbing abuses of power, and quelling tensions within the elite than with radically transforming the state. Hence, the system of the four tele, or wealth classes, which he either introduced or refined, provided legally enforceable criteria for office holding. Leading magistrates, such as the archons and the treasurers, were henceforth to be chosen only from the top two classes, while members of the lowest class, the thetes, were still excluded from all forms of political participation except attendance in the Assembly.39

Indeed, Solon seems to have been less interested in empowering ordinary Athenians than in simply protecting them from elite malfeasance. Aside from his well-known cancellation of debts and ban on taking loans on the security of the body, he is also credited with an important procedural innovation that provided some form of legal recourse in the event of abuses of power from above. This was the mechanism known as ephesis, whereby it was possible to appeal against a magistrate’s decision by having the case referred to a popular court—at this point, presumably the Heliaia. However, the larger claim—expressly stated in Aristotle’s Politics (1273b42–1274a4)—that Solon established a system of “jury courts composed of all citizens” and thus “founded democracy” [eiko . . . ton . . . demon katastēnai ta dikasteria poiesas ek pantōn] is probably anachronistic, reflecting the distinctive concerns of fourth-century speculation about Athenian constitutional history.40

As for the distribution of prerogatives between the various organs of the state apparatus, Solon seems to have effected little, if any, change to the existing system, perhaps merely standardizing established practice. As before, the eponymous archon served as the official head of state (see AP 3.3). But more significantly, the Areopagus, according to AP (8.4), was responsible not only for general oversight of the laws and constitution (nomophulakia) but also for “most of the greatest matters of state” [ta pleista kai megista ton politikon], just as it had been in earlier times (see AP 3.6).41 Since the actual production of policy and legislation in the Solonian state is nowhere explicitly discussed in
perhaps the author simply assumed that these all-important functions fell ultimately within the wide-ranging compass of the archons and Areopagus.

If so, it would seem there is little room left here for any role to be played by the citizen Assembly beyond holding the elections and possibly the performance reviews (euthunai) specified in the Politics (1274a16–17). Solon’s overall concern with standardization, stability, and continuity would not lead us to expect otherwise. If the Assembly was not yet routinely involved in the production and ratification of policy and legislation, it is extremely hard to visualize a meaningful role for any kind of probouleusis in the political process at this time, let alone for a standing committee of four hundred councillors. Perhaps it was also hard for the author of AP to visualize the role played by the Council of 400 in Solonian Athens, thus explaining his apparent reluctance to draw attention to its significance and tell us more about it.

That said, the evidence for the “Solonian constitution” is problematic, often ambiguous at best, and interpretation is all too easily influenced by presupposition. Both those who defend and those who oppose the idea of Solon as a major political reformer adduce passages from his own poems in support of their claims. And even if the poems provide no concrete information about any constitutional change, their authenticity, at least, is rarely questioned.

Of most immediate interest are the verses referring to the acute social unrest of this period, which was prompted, it seems, by the increasingly unrestrained abuse and exploitation of poor smallholders and agricultural laborers by members of the landed elite. Solon’s own attempts to resolve this situation in his capacity as diallaktés, or specially appointed mediator (AP 5.2; Plut. Sol. 14.3), are described only in rather general and allusive terms. For our purposes, the value of the poems therefore lies less in their factual content than in what they reveal of their author’s broader cultural assumptions—especially concerning the “common people” (de–mos)—and thus of his likely attitude toward the idea of radical political reform.42

As Wallace (1998, 18) has emphasized, Solon is at times sharply critical of the conduct of the elite in his poems, chastising them for their arrogance, their greed and their disregard for justice (e.g., 4.7–14, 4c.5–8). But Wallace’s conclusion that Solon was part of a “popular revolutionary movement” is not easy to sustain. Elsewhere, the poet makes it clear that he remained staunchly unaligned in the conflict and sought only to restore equilibrium in Athens. This position is expressed unambiguously in poem 5 (lines 1–6):

δήμωι μὲν γὰρ ἔδωκα τὸσον γέρας ὅσον ἐπαρκεῖν,
τιμῆς οὐτ’ ὀφελῶν οὐτ’ ἐπορεξάμενος.
οἱ δὲ εἰχον δύναμιν καὶ χρήματιν ἑσαν ἀγητοί, καὶ τοῖς ἑφροσύμην μηδὲν ἀεικῆς ἐχειν·
ἐστιν δὲ ἁμφιβαλὸν κρατερὸν σάκος ἁμφοτέροις, νικάν δὲ οὐκ εἴασ' οὐδετέρους ἁδίκως.

[For I gave to the common people as much privilege as is sufficient for their purposes, neither adding to nor detracting from their dignity. And as for those who held power and were distinguished for their wealth, I decided they too should have nothing disgraceful. I stood with my strong shield cast around both groups, and suffered neither side to gain an unjust victory.]

What exactly did the two sides “deserve”? What was “just” here? As far as we can tell, in Solon’s poems, as elsewhere in archaic Greek thought, “justice” (dike) means little more than the “established order,” the divinely ordained dispensation of hallowed tradition. Thus, in poem 13 (lines 7–13; cf. 64, 74), Solon asserts his belief that wealth is an inalienable gift from the gods that only passes from one man to another when “persuaded by unjust deeds” [adikois ergmasi peithomenos], and even then does not go “willingly” [ouk ethelo–n]. So, too, in political life, the demos should be followers, not leaders (6.1–4); given the innately inadequate intelligence of the demos, the alternative would result only in chaos:

dήμος δὲ δοῦ ἀριστα σὺν ἡγεμόνεσιν ἐποιτο, μήτε λίαν ἀνεθεῖς μήτε βιαζόμενος·
tίκτει γὰρ κόρος ύβριν, ὅταν πολὺς ὀλβος ἐπηται ἁνθρώποις ὀπόσοις μή νόος ἀρτιος ἡ.

[The common people will best follow their leaders thus, if neither too much unleashed nor too restrained. For excess breeds insubordination whenever great prosperity comes upon men whose minds are unsound.]

Far from identifying with any popular cause, Solon takes credit in poem 37 (lines 6–8) precisely for not being the kind of leader who would have encouraged defiance in the “common people” and thus deprived society’s “milk” of its “cream.” And far from empathizing with the aggrieved masses, Solon seems to think of them collectively as being a kind of unruly transport animal that needed “restraint” (see 6.1–2, 37.6–7). This metaphor is articulated more explicitly in poem 36, where he makes the much quoted claim that he wrote “or-


A man who speaks of having to “goad” the “common people” into abeyance and preserve the “cream” of society, and who clearly saw his task as the defense of the established economic and political order against pressures from both above and below is not likely to have abruptly entrusted the destiny of the state to popular institutions.46

To judge from the evidence of his poems, Solon was less interested in radical change than in simply restoring equilibrium and stability to a polis in turmoil. His slogan, if he had one, was not “revolution” but the altogether less radical idea of eunomia, or “good order,” famously celebrated at 4.30–39:

ταύτα διδάξαι θυμός Ἄθηναιοις με κελεύει,
 ώς κακὰ πλεῖστα πόλει Δυσνομίη παρέχει:
Εὐνομίη δ’ εὐκόσμα καὶ ἀρτια πάντ’ ἀποφαίνει,
καὶ θαμὰ τοῖς ἀδίκοις ἁμφιτίθησε πέδας:
τραχέα λειαίνει, παύει κόρον, ἤβριν ἁμαυροῖ,
ἀναίνει δ’ ἀτης ἄνθεα φυόμενα,
εὐθύνει δὲ δίκας σκολιάς, ὑπερήφανα τ’ ἐργα
πραύνει παύει δ’ ἐργα διχοστασίης,
παύει δ’ ἄργαλεν ἐρίδος χόλον, ἐστι δ’ ὑπ’ αὐτῆς
πάντα κατ’ ἀνθρώπους ἀρτια καὶ πινυτᾶ.

[My heart bids me teach the Athenians how Disorder brings most ills upon a polis, while Good Order renders all things decorous and agreeable, and frequently binds the unjust in fetters. It makes what is harsh smooth, checks excess, blunts arrogance, and parches the budding flowers of destructive madness; it makes crooked judgments straight, tames overweening deeds, halts the works of faction and puts to rest the anger of grievous strife. As a result of Good Order are all things among men made perfect and wise.]
The consistently conservative tone of the sentiments expressed in poem 4 and elsewhere in Solon’s verse broadly bears out the conclusions reached earlier. We can easily believe that the author of these words might have introduced basic legal protections and minimal political rights for ordinary citizens. But he was primarily interested in preserving, not overtaking, the established order, and thus is not likely to have sanctioned any kind of significant shift toward popular government in Athens.

Is there any further way to corroborate this conclusion? Discussions of the Solonian state tend to focus almost exclusively on his poems and on ancient accounts of the reforms themselves, though most scholars would acknowledge the limitations of both forms of evidence. To date, modern observers have been surprisingly reluctant to pursue what would seem to be a plausible route out of this impasse, namely, to gauge the nature and significance of Solon’s reforms by looking for signs of their impact on the actual conduct of politics in subsequent years. If the reforms were even moderately progressive, we might expect to find evidence for a discernible shift toward a more inclusive political culture. If no such shift is apparent, we have further reason to believe that the significance of the reforms has been overstated, either because they were somehow ineffective or because they were less progressive than was later claimed.

In the following section, I pursue this line of inquiry by looking in some detail at the broader political culture in Athens during the decades after the 590s. Since no lasting constitutional changes seem to have been made between the 590s and 508/7, Solonian political arrangements presumably prevailed in Athens for more than eighty years, a period long enough, one would think, to be a valuable source of evidence for how these arrangements might have worked out in practice.

This approach does, of course, have its problems. The latter part of the time frame in question, from ca. 546/5 to 511/0, was dominated by the Peisistratid family, and though they apparently refrained from any constitutional change, it seems safer, for the purposes of analysis, to exclude this period from the inquiry. As for the earlier part of the time frame, from the mid-590s to the later 560s, apart from a few anecdotes referring to domestic political turmoil and Athenian relations with Megara, we know too little to be of much service. But excluding these periods still leaves a window of some fifteen years, from ca. 561/0 to ca. 546/5, the one extended stretch of time for which we do have something resembling a sequential narrative in our sources.47
We can begin by dismissing as fiction the impression conveyed by both of our main sources (AP 13.3–15.2; Hdt. 1.59.3–1.64) that these fifteen years saw Attica engulfed by a trilateral regionwide stasis. As we saw in chapter 1, power in Athens was keenly contested during these years by three leading families, the Boutads, the Alcmeonids, and the Peisistratids, but they almost certainly did not represent “parties” from the “plain,” the “coast,” and the “hills.” Nor is there any reason to believe that the machinery of government was suspended at any point during this period. Archons continued to be elected, and aside from Peisistratus’s recourse to force in 546/5 and to the threat of force in 561/0, there seem to have been no major constitutional irregularities.48

At the beginning of this period, in 561/0, Lycurgus and Peisistratus were in Athens, while Megacles and his family, as I argued in chapter 1, were living far to the south, in the Anaphlystos area, where they had spent some four decades in exile. If, as I also argued, the polis proper did not yet extend much beyond the plain of Athens itself, the tradition that placed Lycurgus at the head of the “party” from this “plain” presumably contains some recollection of his historical role as de facto leader of the Athenian state at this time. We have no way of knowing when or how Lycurgus and the Boutadai first acquired this level of authority. But a surprising wealth of independent testimony allows us to confirm his family’s preeminence and trace it back at least to the earlier 560s. I refer here to the substantial body of evidence that broadly corroborates the ancient tradition that the Great Panathenaia, the most important single public occasion in the Athenian calendar, was founded in ca. 566 B.C. Since the Boutadai controlled the cult of Athena Polias, the goddess honored at the festival, it takes no great leap of faith to suppose that they played a decisive role in bringing the new quadrennial celebration into existence, and so were probably a dominant force in Athenian politics for at least half a decade before Peisistratus’s “first tyranny” in 561/0.49

The extent of Lycurgus’s influence at this time is further suggested by the manner in which Peisistratus first took power. As we also saw in chapter 1, Peisistratus was certainly not an outsider in city politics and does not appear to have drawn once on the support of any “party” from the “hills.” But despite being from a well-established Athenian family, he evidently lacked the political capital necessary to gain wide support among his peers and supplant Lycurgus by conventional means, and so was forced to resort to an armed occupation of the Acropolis.
Our main sources tell us only two things about Peisistratus’s “first tyranny”: it was unsuccessful, being short-lived and without deep foundation; and it was conducted wholly within the constitutional constraints of the day. In the words of AP (14.3), Peisistratus governed the state “in a civil fashion” [politikos], rather than “in the manner of a tyrant” [tyrannikos]. The truth of the matter therefore seems to be that this distinctly ephemeral event was no tyranny worthy of the name but merely a brief coup. It certainly began with a display of force, but the style of leadership employed by Peisistratus thereafter was probably no different from the highly personalized, but essentially legitimate, form of de facto authority hitherto exercised by Lycurgus. Only in retrospect did it seem like an ominous anticipation of later tyranny.50

At all events, this short-lived coup ended when Lycurgus appealed to the banished Megacles and offered to restore the Alcmeonids to Athens in exchange for whatever kind of support was necessary to oust Peisistratus. Unfortunately, we have no idea what form this support took; both sources tell us only that the Boutads, the Alcmeonids, and their allies expelled him (exelaunousi min, Hdt. 1.60.1; exebalon auton, AP 14.3). Evidently, this was not a particularly dramatic or violent event. If, as seems likely, Peisistratus actually withdrew voluntarily from Athens when he saw his political position was no longer tenable, the ease of his capitulation would further confirm the tenuousness of his authority in the city at this time. Whatever the case, he seems to have departed for a safe haven in the Attic periphery (see Hdt. 1.61.2), perhaps in the Brauron area, where a period of residence-in-exile would help to explain his later associations with that locale.

Back in Athens, the Boutads could now resume their hegemonic position, with the Alcmeonids serving presumably as junior partners. Thus, when a power struggle broke out between the two some four or five years later (see AP 14.4; Hdt. 1.60.2), it must have taken the form of a challenge to Lycurgus’s leadership by Megacles. It is against this background that we should view the extraordinary incident that soon followed.

Peisistratus’s return to Athens in 556/5 is one of the relatively few events in archaic Athenian history for which we have some detailed information. Apparently, an exceptionally tall and beautiful young woman named Phye was first dressed up in the warrior garb of Athena and then driven in a chariot by Peisistratus through the streets of Athens and up to the Acropolis. The Athenian onlookers were, by all accounts, genuinely awestruck, believing themselves to be in the presence of true divinity. What was the purpose of such a charade?

Those who accept the historicity of this intriguing event have exercised considerable critical ingenuity in teasing out its meanings and nuances. Some have
suggested analogies with ancient kingship rituals or “sacred marriage” ceremonies, while others have supposed that Peisistratus sought merely to suggest that he enjoyed some kind of special favor with Athena, much as Heracles and Odysseus had done before him. But common to almost all interpretations are two assumptions: that Peisistratus orchestrated the whole stunt and that he himself was the ultimate focus of the ceremony, with the presence of “Athena” serving, in the end, only to provide a kind of public sanction for what is usually seen as his “second tyranny.” Both assumptions are shared by our two main ancient sources. But the details they describe seem to tell a rather different story.51

First, it is abundantly clear, from the information provided by both Herodotus and AP, that Megacles, not Peisistratus, orchestrated the spectacle. The former was maneuvering to supplant Lycurgus as the dominant figure in Athenian politics, while the latter, still in exile from the city, was hardly in a position of strength. It appears that Megacles offered Peisistratus the task of driving “Athena” in the chariot as a condition of his safe return to Athens. Since it is very hard to believe that the ambitious Alcmeonid wanted to restore his erstwhile rival to power at his own expense, we can only conclude that Peisistratus was here serving Megacles’ purposes rather than his own.52

The suggestion that Megacles was in control of the whole situation seems to be confirmed by the other condition of Peisistratus’s return, namely, a marriage alliance with the Alcmeonids. Given that this alliance would have required Peisistratus to divest himself of his recent, second marriage to Timonassa of Argos and would have damaged his potentially significant relations with that state in the process, the arrangement was not necessarily to the future tyrant’s political advantage. Further confirming Megacles’ control is the dissolution of his third marriage immediately after the Phye ceremony, on the grounds of nonconsummation, along with Peisistratus’s apparent powerlessness to prevent his own subsequent return into exile. It makes little sense to believe that he might have entered into the marriage without actually intending to produce children by his new wife (as our sources imply) and thus willingly gave himself no choice but to depart again into exile. Clearly, we must infer that he was no more responsible for sundering the alliance than he was for initiating it in the first place. In the circumstances, the claim of nonconsummation, supported by a more lurid charge of “unnatural” intercourse (see Hdt. 1.61.1–2), looks a lot like an Alcmeonid pretext for getting rid of Peisistratus once he had somehow outlived his usefulness.53

But what are we to make of the Athena ceremony itself, with its apparent attempt to convey divine favor enjoyed by Peisistratus? Here we come to the
second false premise behind the standard accounts. For according to the cultural logic of the ceremony described, it was Athena, not Peisistratus, who was in fact being restored to Athens. After all, it is the goddess, not the mortal, who belongs on the Acropolis, and as more than one source reveals (AP 14.4; Cleidemus, FGrH 323 F15), Peisistratus was merely the humble driver of the chariot. The armed “Athena,” meanwhile, like an Iliadic hero borne off to battle, played the starring role of warrior-passenger, or paraibatēs (cf., e.g., Il. 23.132). As Connor (1987, 46) notes in his now classic discussion of the episode, “Peisistratus is not seizing the kingship but serving as . . . Athena’s attendant, a brave but subordinate charioteer.” Nor should we ignore the other participant in the ceremony, whose presence is usually overlooked in discussions of the episode: though Megacles is later airbrushed out of the final tableau, both major sources indicate that he actually led the procession in person, either riding ahead or as a fellow passenger in the chariot.

Why did Athena need to be restored to the Acropolis? How did this apparent hoax serve the interests of Megacles? The answers to these questions must lie in the contemporary political situation and in Megacles’ bid to challenge Lycurgus for de facto leadership of the state. It seems safe to assume that Lycurgus’s authority drew much of its force and legitimacy from his family’s control of the cult of Athena Polias and that his special association with the goddess would only have been reinforced in the years since the founding of the Great Panathenaia in ca. 566. Clearly, for Megacles to supplant his rival, he had to find some means of countering this powerful alliance of goddess and mortal. I therefore propose that we see in the Phye ceremony a highly elaborate attempt by the Alcmeonids to undermine this alliance by suggesting that Athena had deserted the Acropolis some time ago and therefore needed to be restored in appropriate style. Megacles, it seems, was only too happy to oblige.

But where exactly on the Acropolis was the goddess restored to? Obviously not to the cult site of Athena Polias on the north side of the citadel, which was controlled by the Boutadai, and which at this point was probably occupied by a very modest seventh-century temple. But archaeologists have long suspected that a second Athena temple, considerably grander than the first, may have been erected somewhere on the Acropolis in ca. 560 B.C. Sometimes known as the “Bluebeard temple” from a figure found among surviving pedimental sculptures, it is thought by some to have replaced the small seventh-century structure on the north side, only to be itself replaced by the so-called Old Athena Temple later in the sixth century. If this were indeed the case, we would be able to associate the “Bluebeard temple” fairly closely
with the establishment of the Great Panathenaia and to see it probably as an initiative of the Boutadai.56

But as others, notably Dinsmoor (1947), have pointed out, the fit between what is known of temple and the surviving northside foundations is not exact, raising the possibility that the temple may in fact have been located elsewhere on the Acropolis, presumably on the south side, on the site later occupied by the Parthenon. Debate continues, though Dinsmoor’s argument seems to be finally winning the day.57 Still missing from the picture, however, is any satisfactory explanation for the sudden appearance here of this second, far larger Athena temple in ca. 560. I tentatively propose that we see it as an Alcmeonid initiative, built to accommodate Athena in suitably grand style after her supposed restoration to the city by Megacles. After all, if the logic of the Phye ceremony suggested that the patron deity had previously deserted the more humble precinct administered by the Boutadai, it also required alternative accommodations on the Acropolis to which she might be willing to return. The “Bluebeard temple” will have filled this need admirably.

Seen in this new perspective, the ceremony as a whole was not, in the end, the elaborate hoax described in our sources; it did have a serious ritual purpose. But the ritual pattern to which it conforms closest has nothing to do with sacred marriages or kingship. Rather, the ceremony recalls nothing more than those processions at festivals where a mortal would don the garb of the celebrated divinity with no intent to dupe onlookers into believing that the god or goddess was now literally present among them. Megacles, I suggest, simply adapted this style of procession to create his own ritual of restoration. Only in retrospect, once Peisistratus’s posthumous reputation as a proverbial tyrant-trickster had been secured, did this event come to assume very different implications.58

Overall, this reading of the ceremony as an attempt by Megacles to counter Lycurgus’s politically profitable association with Athena allows us to abandon completely the idea that the event was in any sense a preamble to a “second tyranny” of Peisistratus. Far from being a powerful insurgent making an ostentatious bid to take control of the city, Peisistratus was here little more than a pawn in a larger contest for hegemony between the Boutads and the Alcmeonids. His roles in the Athena ceremony and the marriage alliance suggest that his support was of some value in this contest. But having served his purpose, he was powerless to resist a humiliating exit back into exile. If the tradition of Peisistratus’s “first tyranny” has little in the way of historical substance to commend it, the tradition of his “second tyranny” has no substance
whatsoever. Again, hindsight lent events a significance that they did not at the time possess.

It would be ten more years before Peisistratus would attempt to come back to Athens. Apparently, he spent much of this time cultivating important connections elsewhere, repairing his relations with Argos, and building up military resources, recognizing that a return on his own terms would now require force. Sadly, our sources tell us almost nothing of the Alcmeonids and Boutads during these years, though both Herodotus (1.61.2) and AP (15.1) imply that they reconciled soon after the Phye ceremony. Whatever the case, the presence of the Alcmeonids at the battle of Pallene and their subsequent return to their residence-in-exile in the paralia after their defeat by Peisistratus suggest that they retained a dominant position in the state throughout this ten-year period.59

Thus, the overall impression conveyed by our sources that the years ca. 561/0–546/5 were a time of turbulent stasis punctuated by “tyrannies” does not stand up well to close scrutiny. Once we remove from these accounts the thick interpretive overlay imposed by later interests and presuppositions, we are left with a rather different picture, one of a vigorous, but for the most part conventional, competition between two families for de facto leadership of the Athenian state. The Boutadai appear to have been dominant from at least the earlier 560s, only to be challenged and perhaps displaced in the mid-550s by the Alcmeonids, who clearly remained a powerful force in the city for the next ten years or so, down to the battle of Pallene.

Peisistratus, meanwhile, was probably in Athens for little more than a year of the fifteen-year period in question, spending the rest of the time in exile in rural Attica and elsewhere. He surely was not an insignificant figure, as his Argive marriage and other foreign connections attest. But his coup in 561/0, his short-lived later alliance with Megacles, and his ultimate recourse to violence suggest that he as yet lacked sufficient support among his peers at home to challenge the hegemony of the Boutads and Alcmeonids by conventional means. The ominous shadow that he appears to cast over events in the fifteen years before Pallene is more imagined than real.

The idea that this fifteen-year period was a time of robust political competition rather than one of lawless stasis is also borne out by the contemporary material record. The Acropolis, in particular, experiences a dramatic increase in building and votive activity during these years. In the words of Hurwit (1999, 104–5):

Between 575 and 550, the Acropolis, which had been for so long the modest sanctuary of a provincial polis, became a grandiose spectacle of...
the first order, the visible expression of a city that was now entering the first rank in Greece . . . The picture we can draw of the Acropolis in the 560s and 550s . . . is of a suddenly busy and increasingly rich place, acquiring the accoutrements of a major sanctuary, with Athenians . . . beginning to compete with one another for the gods’ (and their fellow Athenians’) attention through the wealth of their dedications.

One might guess that this wholly unprecedented flurry of activity was stimulated above all by the establishment of the Great Panathenaia. It seems reasonable to suppose that the major developments associated with the festival, such as the erection of a massive ramp some eighty meters in length up to the entrance of the citadel and the possible remodeling of the entranceway, were overseen by the Boutadai. Meanwhile, for reasons I have discussed in this section, it makes good sense to see the new “Bluebeard temple,” the first monumental stone temple to be installed on the Acropolis, as an Alcmeonid response to their rivals’ bold attempts to advertise their links with Athena.

But the site was not the exclusive preserve of these two families. No doubt inspired by the sudden transformation of the citadel into one of Greece’s more impressive urban sanctuaries, a relatively large number of their peers also chose now to lavish wealth on expensive dedications. Votives from this period are numerous and assume a wide variety of forms, from life-size marble statues, such as the well-known Moschophoros and the earliest korai, to several marble relief panels, a bronze Palladion, and high-quality vases painted by the likes of Sophilos and Cleitias. Of course, few of these items can be assigned with confidence to known families or individuals. But it is clear enough that a significant proportion of the Athenian elite were willing and able to embrace the opportunities for public self-advertisement now presented by the Acropolis, with some presumably motivated by the political capital that might accrue from such display. The scale of their investment, along with the open, self-regulating, and essentially peaceful nature of this form of competition, surely presupposes a stable and well-ordered political environment. Despite all its obvious material inequalities, this was not a society that was being torn apart by endemic civil strife.60

Putting all this together, it therefore seems safe to infer that, the coup of 561/0 aside, there was nothing particularly anomalous or “extraconstitutional” about political behavior in Athens during the fifteen or twenty years before the battle of Pallene. To later writers, who clearly misunderstood the style of archaic Athenian politics, it may have seemed like there were no rules. But this was in fact politics as usual, played, we must assume, according to the arrangements laid down by Solon a generation earlier. What, then, does the record of

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*In Search of Popular Government*

**The Athenian Experiment: Building an Imagined Political Community in Ancient Attica, 508-490 B.C.**

Greg Anderson

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the mid-sixth century reveal of these arrangements and, in particular, of the role played by ordinary citizens in everyday government?

While our ancient accounts for the years 561/0–546/5 are hardly exhaustive, the general impression they convey is that there were distinctly few enforceable constraints on the political behavior of leaders at this time. The archons may have been the most important individual officials in the state (see AP 13.2), but the power wielded by these annually elected magistrates was of significantly less consequence than the ongoing de facto authority exercised by the likes of Megacles and Lycurgus. We can certainly imagine that this particular form of authority would have depended to some extent on a leader’s performance within the confines of state institutions—for example, on his ability to secure magistracies for his own associates or to persuade archons and Areopagites to follow particular courses of action. But the political culture was hardly limited to the institutional arena, and much of the business of politics was evidently conducted elsewhere.

As far as we can tell, leadership was contested and legitimized primarily through a combination of private negotiation and public display. Major sources of political capital included alliances with influential families at home and abroad, equestrian victories, and the sponsorship of lavish buildings, monuments, festivals, and other spectacles—activities that clearly lay outside what we would consider to be the constitutional domain. And while de facto leadership must have required the consent and support of other leading families, it appears that there were as yet no regular institutional channels through which such authority could be safely challenged or even held to account. The stakes in the political game were thus formidably high. For those—such as Peisistratus in 561/0—who tried and failed to supplant an established leader, the only remaining options were to resort to arms or to withdraw from the state entirely.

As for nonelite citizens, they can hardly have been much more than spectators in the theater of archaic Athenian politics. Whatever their political sympathies, they had no visible role to play in major developments, such as the recall of the Alcmeonids from exile in the late 560s or the banishment of Peisistratus in 561/0 and 556/5. The sum total of evidence we have for measures actually passed in the Assembly before the reforms of Cleisthenes are the accounts of how Peisistratus duped the ekklesia into decreeing him an armed bodyguard, which he promptly put to service as a private army when mounting his first coup in 561/0 (see AP 14.1; Hdt. 1.59.4–5; Plut. Sol. 30.3).

Despite the extraordinary nature of this decree, some would see in the anecdote a suggestion of wider powers enjoyed by the Assembly at this time. But surely the more interesting implication of the story (if it is true) is precisely the
minimal significance of popular support in the politics of the era. Like Cleisthenes later in the century, Peisistratus confronted a situation where he lacked sufficient backing among his social peers to challenge the position of his rival by conventional means. But unlike Cleisthenes, Peisistratus evidently saw little point in trying to outmaneuver his opponent by appealing to nonelite constituencies for support. Thus, instead of courting its favor, he merely deceived the Assembly into supplying him with the means necessary to pursue an altogether more dangerous course of action. It would be left to Cleisthenes to break the mold of Athenian politics more than fifty years later.

Otherwise, the only major public interaction between elite and nonelite we hear about from this time comes during the Phye ceremony, and it is equally revealing. Far from suggesting the “closeness” or “rapport” between leader and people seen here by Connor (1987, 46), this very public attempt by Megacles to assert his family’s special association with Athena precisely illustrates the yawning ideological gulf that still separated the two. And as long as the elite were perceived to enjoy a privileged, almost mystical relationship with the state’s presiding deities, a similar distance would continue to separate the political culture of this era from its classical successor.

Nonelite Athenians in the mid–sixth century were thus still a long way from a time when they might confront a Megacles or a Lycurgus on the floor of the Assembly or law courts as even nominal political equals. The ekklesia may have elected the archons and other magistrates each year, but it is hard to believe that it would have strongly opposed candidates favored by the de facto leaders of the moment. And these leaders will have remained essentially unaccountable to the demos as long as the Assembly had no role in the production of policy and legislation. If a probouleutic Council of 400 did exist at this time, it would have been little more than an irrelevance. The real business of politics took place elsewhere, much of it conducted far from the gaze of ordinary citizens, in the private realm of the wealthy. Whatever their actual content, Solon’s reforms, it seems, had little radical or lasting impact on the realities of Athenian political life.61

As noted earlier, ancient accounts are unanimous that institutional arrangements in Athens remained essentially unchanged through the Peisistratid period (ca. 546/5–511/0). In fact, aside from the upheavals of the battle of Pallene and its aftermath and the reported autocracy of Hippias at the very end of the period, we hear very little to suggest that the family’s leadership was qualitatively very different from the kind of authority exercised earlier by Lycurgus and Megacles:62 it was simply more enduring and successful. In the early years, their hegemonic position was no doubt helped when major rivals
withdrew from Athens, voluntarily or otherwise, after Pallene. But the archon list for the years immediately following Peisistratus’s death in 528/7, which includes the names of the Alcmeonid Cleisthenes and the Philaid Miltiades, shows conclusively that the Peisistratids had by now established a broad-based coalition of supporters that included their former rivals. Clearly, the family did make some effort to abide by existing institutional arrangements. Equally clearly, these arrangements were not, in the end, capable of preventing an unusually effective group or individual from dominating the Athenian state for a period of several decades or more, accountable only to their peers.

To regard the regime of the Peisistratids as a wholly anomalous tyranny is therefore to overestimate the capacity of the prevailing Solonian constitutional provisions to constrain their influence. The rules of the political game, it seems, were still relatively loose.

**THE MAKING OF MASS POLITICS**

Even after the reforms of Cleisthenes, a peculiarly successful elite politician, like a Pericles or a Cimon, could exercise a decisive de facto influence over the direction of the state for a decade or longer. To be sure, this influence would still have depended to some extent on the support of privately assembled coalitions of peers and on lavish public displays of various kinds, albeit displays that now emphasized a politician’s public-spirited munificence rather than simply his elite credentials. But the critical difference between politics before and after 508/7 is in the contribution made by nonelite citizens. After this point, as I showed earlier in the chapter, there arose an entirely new emphasis on collective (over individual) decision making in the conduct of government, allowing ordinary citizens not only to expel a political leader of their choosing each year through the procedure of ostracism but also to vote on the highest affairs of state, as the Assembly and new Council of 500 increasingly assumed control over the production of policy and legislation.63

As a result, with the overall direction of the polis now a matter for open, public deliberation, ambitious elites were forced to compete with one another for the minds and votes of their more lowly fellows if they wished to exercise influence over political outcomes. And as individual success in politics came increasingly to be measured in terms of popular appeal, so elite politicians became more directly accountable to nonelite citizens than ever before.64 Meaningful participation by ordinary Athenians in the day-to-day running of the
state was thus for the first time an institutional reality, and the elite stranglehold on the political process had finally been broken. In its place, a new era of mass politics and popular government had just begun.

But it would be a mistake to believe that the benefits of the new style of politics were all one-way; the position of the aspiring political leader was now considerably more secure than it had been in the past. As I noted earlier in this chapter, under the high-stakes, almost zero-sum conditions of the old system, those who tried and failed to supplant a dominant figure like Lycurgus or Megacles, were faced with the stark alternatives of either resorting to force or departing from the state altogether until a leader emerged who might sanction their return. After the reforms of Cleisthenes, by contrast, as the ongoing contest for de facto leadership came increasingly to be determined by voting patterns in the citizen Assembly, it became possible for opponents to challenge established leaders within the relatively safe and regulated confines of an institutional arena without fear of serious repercussion. For the unsuccessful challenger who stayed within the law, the most serious consequence he could expect was now ostracism, a temporary expulsion from the state without loss of property or rights.

Indeed, this new procedure is probably best understood as part of a larger design to replace the high-stakes politics of the past with a lower-risk and altogether less wasteful alternative. In the short term at least, the practical political outcome was the same: the strengthening of established leaders by the elimination of rivals. But the expulsion process was now subject to the kind of institutional constraints that were sorely lacking in the past, with only one such expulsion allowed per year and with the loser’s fate determined not by the whim of a small group of his social peers but by the collective will of thousands of fellow citizens. Even if victories in the game of politics were now less absolute than they once might have been, and though winners were now accountable to a larger segment of the population than ever before, a political career was a far less risky undertaking than it had been earlier in the sixth century.65

Exactly how and when was the new mass politics inaugurated in Athens? Pinning down the precise moment of the shift is not easy. As noted earlier in this chapter, our main sources for Cleisthenes’ reforms do not include in their accounts any explicit mention of a formal change in the competence of the Assembly. At the same time, such innovations as ostracism and the new council clearly presuppose a strong *ekkleśia*. And as we also saw earlier, within a few years, the Assembly was playing a decisive role in such key areas as the regulation of cleruch settlements, military deployment, and foreign policy. This raises...
two possibilities. Perhaps the elevation of the Assembly was indeed an item in Cleisthenes’ original “reform bill” proposed in 508/7, but the detail has simply been omitted from our sources. Alternatively, there may for some reason have been no formal enactment defining the new role; conceivably, Cleisthenes himself irreversibly reordered the political process in Athens when he chose to ratify his transformation of the state in the Assembly, in effect setting the procedural precedent for the passage of all future legislation. Either way, a change of such magnitude will certainly have required some form of justification, and an explanation for how this critical innovation might have been presented in 508/7 will emerge during the course of the coming chapters.

Did the new emphasis on collective responsibility in government amount to demokratia? We can be fairly sure that it was not advertised as such, since the term itself had probably not yet been invented. If there was a single concept, principle, or banner associated with the new regime, it was more probably isonomy (equality before the law, equality of political participation), though even this cannot be proved. That said, with the Assembly now assuming direct control over state policy and legislation, the cornerstone of later demokratia was effectively laid, whether de jure or de facto, by Cleisthenes’ reforms, raising the possibility that the new regime was indeed essentially democratic, even if it could not yet be described as such by contemporaries.66

Some, most notably Ober, would go further than this. In a pair of papers (1996, 1998), Ober has argued not only that a genuinely “demotic” form of demokratia was inaugurated in Athens in 508/7 but that it was also in effect installed by the people en masse when they successfully resisted the interventions of Isagoras and Cleomenes. This act of resistance he reads as a spontaneous, “leaderless riot,” even a “revolution,” which was driven and shaped not by elite leaders but by ordinary Athenians armed with a distinctively “demotic vision of a new society” (1996, 51–52).

Ober thus emphasizes the role played here by citizens below the hoplite class, while at the same time “decentering” the figure of Cleisthenes in our narrative of change, seeing him less as a primary agent of reform than as a mere “interpreter” of the will of the masses (1996, 52). In this view, the institutional innovations of 508/7 did not so much effect a change as reflect a more profound transformation that had essentially already occurred. This transformation he describes (1998, 69) as an “epistemic shift,” meaning a fundamental change “in the ways that people think, speak, and behave towards one another.” Though long in the making, this shift, he believes, was “crystallized” in
the “leaderless riot” of the masses. Ober (1996, 35) therefore concludes that democracy in Athens “was not a gift from a benevolent elite to a passive demos, but was the product of collective decision, action, and self-definition on the part of the demos itself.”

These papers offer a forthright reminder of the crucial part played in the events of 508/7 by nonelite citizens, and as such their arguments are important and well taken. But Ober’s attempt to go further and see the political transformation as the direct outcome of a popular “revolution” is more problematic, for at least three reasons.67

To begin with, Ober shows surprisingly little interest in the actual content of the political reforms introduced at this time, taking it largely as fact that they brought about immediate “democracy” and must therefore have been animated above all by the kind of egalitarian impulse one would expect to find behind a revolutionary popular agenda. But this chain of assumption is hardly secure. To be sure, members of the lowest, thete class were entitled to enroll as citizens in the new demes and were presumably not actively prevented from attending proceedings at the Assembly’s new site on the Pnyx hill. However, as noted above, they probably would have had no role to play in the new council or citizen army and would still have been excluded from the archonships and Areopagus, however diminished the stature of these institutions had now become. It is thus hard to see how sub-hoplite Athenians were yet considered full members of the political community. In short, there are still too many sources of inequality in the new system for egalitarianism to have been the dominant impulse behind it, or for any fully “demotic” form of democracy to have been the practical result.68

Second, it is one thing to claim that there was a general will for political change among nonelite citizens at this time, but it is quite another to suggest that this will effectively shaped and drove the transformation itself. The evidence Ober produces for his “demotic vision of a new society,” into which Cleisthenes was supposedly “absorbed,” is tenuous at best.69 How, in any case, might such a vision have arisen in the first place? To judge from the evidence discussed so far in this study, the little we do know of Athenian political culture in earlier times hardly encourages us to believe that, as Ober suggests (1996, 51), ordinary citizens could have organized themselves enough to develop their own independent political agenda distinct from that of any leader “during the course of the sixth century.”70

Nor when we look closely at the reforms themselves do we see the obvious imprint of any revolutionary, “bottom-up” movement for change. Inequalities would persist, while the deme/trittys/tribe reform, the very fundament of the
new order, was not in itself an egalitarian measure but an initiative designed, as we saw in the last chapter, to furnish the kind of institutional apparatus necessary to bring about the political unification of Attica. Whether we assign responsibility for this particular initiative to a single leader or to several, we do not have to subscribe to some outmoded “Great Man” view of history to see here all the hallmarks of centralized and essentially “top-down” planning.71

Third, if the Acropolis siege was in fact, as Ober (1996, 33) claims, the “signal moment in the history of democracy,” why do the Athenians themselves appear not to have remembered it as such? In all of extant Athenian oratory, including funeral orations, there is not a single reference to the incident, let alone to any armed democratic “revolution.” And the only classical source other than Herodotus and AP that does mention the siege, written less than a century after the event, treats it as a straightforward military action devoid of any “revolutionary” political significance.72 If, moreover, the demos in 508/7 was fully capable of “collective decision, action and self-definition” independent of their political leaders (Ober 1996, 35), it is surely extraordinary that they overlooked the chance to commemorate publicly in some way their own contribution to the shift from “tyranny” to “democracy,” preferring instead to monumentalize an act of limited historical significance by a pair of otherwise unremarkable aristocrats (see chap. 9). Perhaps the masses had little control over the public memory banks at this time, but this only begs the question.73

We should probably then agree with Raafhaub (1996, 1998a, 1998b), who, as Ober’s primary opponent in recent debate on the issue, argues with equal vigor that democracy “in the fullest sense of the word” was not realized in Athens until after the reforms of Ephialtes in 462/1. Only from this point on can we detect traces of the more radical egalitarianism we associate with “mature” Athenian democracy, implicit in such practices as the widespread use of lottery in the selection of magistrates and the payment of jurors and officeholders. By comparison, the Cleisthenic polity is perhaps better seen, to borrow Raafhaub’s phrase (1996, 147), as a kind of “republic of hoplites and farmers.”74

That said, to consider Cleisthenes’ reforms purely in terms of their contribution to the cause of political equality would be to miss their larger historical significance and to misapprehend their overall intent. While Ephialtes’ goal in 462/1 was merely to eradicate inequalities still lingering in the national political community, the reforms of 508/7 were responsible for defining that community in the first place and for establishing the institutional foundations for its operation as a cohesive political unit. The shift toward democracy at the
end of the sixth century was an essential part of this larger project but was not an end in itself. For this reason, of the two sets of reforms, those of Cleisthenes were by far the more momentous. Before the playing field could be leveled, the game itself had to be invented.

The new order was not shaped by some utopian vision of an egalitarian society, only to fall some way short of realizing this imagining. The reforms were no more the product of an enlightened idealism than they were a vehicle for shameless gerrymandering. The guiding vision here was of the state as a collective enterprise, and the goal was to create channels through which citizens from all over the region could contribute to the common cause, regardless of whether some contributions were more significant than others.

We might see the result as a reaction not so much against the shameless inequities of the past as against the rampant, sometimes destructive individualism of archaic Athenian political culture. The state would no longer be simply the arena for an exclusive contest among competing private interests, its direction resting in the largely unfettered hands of a Megacles or a Peisistratus. Henceforth, it would be a forum for the negotiation of a single collective interest, and its destiny would now be the responsibility of the community as a whole. We do indeed see here the seeds—the ideological predicates—of démokratia in Athens. But before “mature” democracy could be realized, the very idea of the “demos,” the collectivity of all citizens in Attica from the lowliest thete to Cleisthenes himself, had to assume concrete, institutional form. This was the work of Cleisthenes’ reforms.

In sum, the measures introduced in 508/7 were not just a set of narrow, constitutional prescriptions or merely the latest in a series of steps along a path that led gradually, but inexorably, toward democracy in Athens. They mark instead, as Ober (1998, esp. 67–69) has urged, the decisive “point of rupture” in Athenian political history, the critical moment of discontinuity between the archaic and the classical state. But the new order was not the spontaneous creation of a popular revolutionary fervor, however much the support of nonelite citizens might have been crucial to its success. Rather, it should be seen as a massive, ingenious, and artfully self-conscious exercise in social engineering—the product, in short, of a vision from above, not from below.

But exactly whose vision was it? Unfortunately, we know the name only of Cleisthenes himself, though he was surely helped in the design and implementation of his program by a group of associates, which presumably included his kinsman Alcmeon, archon in 507/6. Of course, these were not free-floating individuals acting outside history. All were products of the very specific envi-
environment they sought to change, and their actions were no doubt at once encouraged and constrained by longer-term structural conditions and processes of which they may or may not have been aware. Clearly, there was at this time a growing demand for change among nonelite sections of Athenian society, and there are signs elsewhere in the Greek world, especially in Ionia, of an increasing willingness among elites to involve their lesser fellows in government, a development that may itself have been encouraged by an emerging egalitarian strain in elite values.75

Yet it would be wrong to see the radical changes of 508/7 as the inevitable—even predictable—outcome of some impersonal structural logic. In the final reckoning, environmental forces, however significant, cannot account for the precise timing and specific content of the transformation in Athens. We must acknowledge the role played by the conscious designs and decisions of interested, influential individuals, creatively responding to the circumstances in which they found themselves. What immediately prompted the decision to push for change was the political self-interest of Cleisthenes himself and the need to garner the support of the Assembly in his struggle with Isagoras. However, once presented with a popular mandate to reform the state, it seems that Cleisthenes and his associates saw a historic opportunity to author a series of initiatives that would not merely reward their nonelite supporters but help to resolve perhaps the two most fundamental and intractable problems that faced the Athenians at this time: chronic military vulnerability and recurring political turmoil.

Their solution to these two related problems radically changed the shape and fortunes of the polis almost overnight. A city-state that had for generations been a somewhat timid and marginal player on the wider Panhellenic stage was abruptly transformed into a very different kind of polity, one that could harness the human potential of an entire region in its efforts to become a more secure and assertive force in the interstate politics of the day. The social and geographical distances that had for so long separated the elite from the nonelite and the urban from the rural were now bridged by a series of highly artificial, but binding, institutional ties, laying the foundations for a formidable citizen army and an integrated political community that was quite unlike any other in Hellenic experience. Henceforth, individuals of widely divergent backgrounds would enroll in the same demes, serve in the same tribal regiments, convene in the same national council, and vote in the same national assembly, as partners in an improbable, regionwide experiment in collective self-rule. The influence of this experiment on the
course of Athenian and Greek history in the decades to come would be most profound.

The preceding reading of the content and significance of Cleisthenes’ reforms does of course beg a number of further questions. Of these, three would seem to be especially important. First, if this reconstruction is broadly accurate, why did so little memory of this massive discontinuity survive into later times? Why are so many key details omitted from our sources, and why, in particular, is no mention made of any change to the Assembly? Second, for all the wide consent apparently enjoyed by the new order, how were its designers able to legitimize so dramatic a departure from past practice and allay deep-seated cultural suspicions of “revolution” (neôtera pragmata, neôterismos)?

Finally, and perhaps most fundamental of all, how could a national community so abruptly and artificially contrived ever acquire authenticity in the eyes of its own constituents? Citizenship could be legislated, but loyalty, fellowship, and a sense of belonging could not. In practice, the new institutions might help to break down social and spatial distances between citizens and perhaps even to bridge the almost mystical ideological distance that had for so long separated elite from nonelite. But it is hard to see how this bold experiment in political community would succeed without a more fundamental change “in the ways that people think, speak, and behave towards one another.” Collective self-rule could only thrive if rooted in values, assumptions, and expectations that were shared by all members of the citizen body in all parts of Attica. As we have seen, evidence that this particular “epistemic shift” had already occurred in the region before 508/7 is at least questionable. How, then, could a shared identity, a shared sense of mission and of commonality, be constructed around the bare bones of the new institutional apparatus? How, in short, could this become a community that was “imagined” as well as lived? Our answer to this question should also help us to resolve the previous issue, since the legitimacy of a given political community depends precisely on the capacity of its members to feel a common bond of identity.

All of these questions require us to consider a larger issue that has all too rarely been raised in this context, namely, the contemporary response to political change. If we are even to begin to answer them, we must shift our attention away from objective realities to the more elusive realm of mentalité and try to understand how the new order might have appeared to Athenian men and women at the time of its inception. In the absence of eyewitness accounts, we can of course only speculate about popular perceptions of change. How-
ever, we are in a good position to assess how the new order was first represented to its constituents. It is now increasingly clear that the reverberations of institutional change were felt in many other areas of public life. A surge of cultural energy, unprecedented in the city’s history, produced a host of new buildings, ceremonies, commemorative practices, and mythical traditions over the course of the next two decades. Close study of the design of these many artifacts of change affords invaluable insights not only into the contents of the new order but also into its overall style. This issue of style and representation will be a recurring concern in the chapters to come, as we broaden our focus beyond the strict confines of state institutions and explore innovations introduced elsewhere in Athenian public life during the years 508–490.