

*Fame, Money, and Power*



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THE RISE OF PEISISTRATOS AND  
“DEMOCRATIC” TYRANNY  
AT ATHENS

B. M. Lavelle

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This book is dedicated to my mother and my father  
who gave of themselves, all that they had,  
and who taught their children that  
a life not led for others is no life at all.



*Te amo, te amo.*

## Preface



This book is the result of several years' study of Peisistratid tyranny at Athens. It was prompted not by an interest in tyranny as much as by a desire to know more about the genesis of Athenian democracy. In a short time, it became clear that fifth-century controversies about the tyranny had warped the history of the period, distorting its record by revision, apology, or silence. Thucydides defines the problem to some extent in his account of the murder of Hipparchos, the son of the tyrant Peisistratos (6.54–59). Popular memory and accounts of the murder and what it brought about were at variance with what Thucydides believed and purported to be the facts about it. Differences and distortions are generally detectable in relation to the “history” of the tyranny, and it is clear that the Athenians who remembered or told themselves or others what they did about it were not above altering facts to obtain apparently desired results. The record was further affected by the passage of time under these conditions. Source criticism must be the bedrock for establishing what might be reliable in the record and so the history of the period. A preliminary work, *The Sorrow and the Pity: A Prolegomenon to a History of Athens under the Peisistratids* (1993) took up the problem of sources for the tyranny.

The tyrant Peisistratos did not operate or become tyrant in a political vacuum. Athens was functioning at least semidemocratically as early as Solon's time, and Peisistratos inherited conditions that he could neither end nor alter fundamentally. The Athenian *dēmos* (“the people”) was a partner in his tyranny, as what little there is of a reliable historical record attests. Peisistratos and his successors adapted to these circumstances, as

they and their contemporary competitors had to do. They must court the *dēmos* to keep it. This was a lesson that Kleisthenes, the author of Athenian democracy but also a high official under the tyrants, had learned well by the end of the sixth century B.C.E. His formulation of Athens' democracy was surely influenced by these conditions.

In fact, the patterns of political behavior of outstanding early democratic politicians of Athens are not dissimilar to Peisistratos'. Military leadership and success led first to credibility and then to popularity; wealth gained thereby or to be gotten was passed on in some form to the *dēmos*; enrichment, in turn, sustained popularity and so political power. This symbiotic "system" seems to have been in place by Solon's time; it appears to have become entrenched by the early fifth century. "Democracy," in a form recognizable in the early fifth century B.C.E., was present and working in Athens before and during the time of the regimes of Peisistratos and his sons. There was in fact no "day/night" break between tyranny and democracy at the time of Kleisthenes' "reforms."

This book is the result of a study of the rise of Peisistratos amid these conditions. It is a compilation of material about Peisistratos to Pallēnē arranged in chronological fashion, as well as an analysis of the political conditions at Athens at the time (and later) and how Peisistratos fit into them. It seeks to set the facts as much as possible with a view toward the limitations of the sources for doing so. I have therefore supplemented what little remains about the tyranny and the period by introducing context, both immediate and extended, and the possibilities that context enables. In view of the dearth of evidence about this crucial period in Athens' development, such supplementation is really the only creditable means by which to extend information about it and so to better understand not only the rise of the tyrant but also "democratic" tyranny, the *dēmos*' relation to it, and so the democracy of Athens.

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