

Assess the achievements of the peisistratid tyranny essay



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Only 34 years after Solon had formulated his code of law in Athens Peisistratus, in 561BC, set himself outside of the constitution and became tyrant. During the period of the Peisistratid tyranny the city of Athens flourished. Economically the city was prosperous, it also gained prestige from the newly built civic and religious buildings. Abroad their policies were successful which in turn helped commercially advance Athens by allowing new trade routes to be opened up. Most importantly further steps were taken by Peisistratus that helped politically curb the Aristocracy's power.

This essay will assess these achievements of the Peisistratid tyranny with the aim of showing the effects they had on Athens. It took Peisistratus three attempts to establish himself firmly as a tyrant leader of Athens. The core of his support came from the agricultural poor, however it has also been claimed that he drew his best support from successful but discontented rich Athenians for, as Forrest states; "" the successful are stronger than the failures and it is to them that we look for effective discontent"" (Forrest, 1966. p178).

Whether Peisistratus' main supporters were the poor or the new rich, Peisistratus had policies that assisted the lives of both. Indeed it can be argued that by accepting the unconstitutional rule of Peisistratus and that of Hippias, Peisistratus' son in 528BC, the Athenians as a whole did not do anything to hold up Athens' development. Peisistratus made few if any substantial changes to the political system as it stood. Thucydides reports that Peisistratus observed the existing laws only saw to it that the highest offices were always held by his own friends (Thucydides bk6. 54).

In other words those parts of the machinery of state that the ordinary Athenian had used or operated like the assembly, the courts and the council remained the same. It was probably only the nobility who would have felt any loss. Even though Peisistratus strove to avoid openly flouting the law, and although he played at being an ordinary citizen, he did not fully disguise his true position. He lived on the Acropolis and his own army, that he continued to maintain once he had gained power, were always there to remind people that they were under a ruler not bound to obey the law.

However this is not to say that there was constant political tension, especially between Peisistratus and the nobility. Peisistratus' managed to reconcile the opposition without offending his own supporters. This skill, in conciliating all classes of the Athenian population, impressed Aristotle; "" The bulk of the nobles and commoners favoured him"" (Aristotle, ch14). Furthermore, under Hippias rule men were actually elected from the families formally opposed to his rule.

A fragment of an archon list that dates from 525/4BC includes Kleisthenes, a member of the Alkmeonid family who had previously opposed the establishment of the tyranny. The economic success that Athens experienced under Peisistratus' rule came in the form of increased trade and industry. There were no border wars during the period that Peisistratus ruled Athens. Megara was quiet and Salamis' possession secure. This allowed Peisistratus to concentrate on the Aegean side where he acquired closer relationships with the islands of the Aegean and with Argos.

Peisistratus was also able to revive Athens' ambition of reestablishing control at the Hellespont. As a result the tyranny indirectly helped prosperity by providing external peace for Athens. It was at this time that the pottery industry of Athens grew to maturity and overwhelmed the foreign market by outshining all its rivals, especially when the potters began experimenting with the new red figure style after the middle of the century. However, how much Peisistratus helped the Athenian economy can be disputed.

As has been shown Athens was indeed a prosperous city during his period of rule, but whether this was his doing is another question. There is no evidence to suggest that there was a major economic crisis in Athens after Solon. Black figure pottery was reaching its height when Peisistratus seized power and was already being exported all over the Greek world as far as Eretria and Southern Russia. It can therefore be suggested that the success of the new red figure work, while Peisistratus was in power, was nothing to do with Peisistratus himself.

It is far more plausible to perceive it as a natural continuation in the development of Athenian pottery that just happened to occur during Peisistratus reign as tyrant. For, apart from individual patronage, it is difficult to know what help Peisistratus could have directly given the pottery and other industries as industry was not centralised or organised by the state. This evidence, therefore, suggests that the prosperity within Athenian industry during the Peisistratid tyranny was not started by the tyranny.

The Peisistratid's achievement in this sphere of the economy, therefore, was simply their enhancement of it. Peisistratus' encouragement of the smaller

farmer is singled out by Aristotle as one of the major achievements of his rule. He levied a 5% tax on the produce of the land. Some of this revenue was returned to the land in the form of loans for struggling farmers. This policy, implemented by Peisistratus, helped cure the countryside from the evil of poverty. An evil which Solon reforms had been unable to deal with.

The help he gave to Attica's farmers turned them into an economic rather than subsistent model of farming, where life became something other than a desperate struggle to survive. Justice also became more uniform for the Athenian citizens who resided in the countryside. This was achieved through his institution of travelling judges whose job it was to settle smaller disputes in the country which saved the citizens involved the expense of travelling to the law courts. The famous public works of the tyranny also helped the poorer citizens of Athens by providing them with employment.

These policies and programmes that helped the prosperity of the ordinary Athenians were not, however, implemented solely to assist them. They were primarily introduced to help curb the power of the aristocrats. For example his board of itinerant judges would have been formed with the intention of taking away some of the legal authority that remained in the phratry hands. The judges prevented the local aristocrats from implementing their own form of justice by making the state stronger in legal affairs.

By interfering with the rule of the local clans, normal Athenians were shown that life could go on without the local aristocrat. Previously a poor man could only appeal to an upper class patron. In the tyrant he had a master, a master whose position was secure and whose decisions were enforceable and what

is more a master who favoured the small farmer by adopting measures that benefited him. By assisting the ordinary Athenians in this way Peisistratus hoped that they would look towards him for continued leadership.

The new buildings served a similar purpose. The Peisistratid tyranny hoped that the glorification of Athens would stimulate pride in the city and thus turn the population's attention away from the local. The substantial building policies that they implemented did just that. For example Peisistratus was responsible for two buildings built for the council. The motive behind the provision of these two public offices was the same reason behind the rest of the extensive building programme - the glorification of Athens.

But at the same time, as Forrest states; "" it cannot failed to have enhanced the prestige of these bodies"" (Forrest, 1966. p183). It can therefore be concluded that Peisistratus' policies were successful in two ways. Firstly they importantly but indirectly helped the welfare of the average Athenian. Secondly, they directly helped make the government more centralised by increasing the self importance of the central institutions. This was their major achievement as it helped curb the power of the localised aristocrats.

Another measure that was clearly imposed to overcome local particularism, and was therefore just as fundamental, was Peisistratus' encouragement of the national cults and religious festivals. As Andrews states; "" The religious beliefs of the tyrants are a mixture, characteristic of an age of transition: naturally they are not all, or even mainly, policy, but so far as we can detect a definite tendency of it is anti-aristocratic and national"" (Andrews, 1956. p114).

For example the goddess Athena received special attention, receiving a new temple on the Acropolis, since she was the patron of the city as a whole not of a particular section. The annual festival for Dionysus which provided several days of musical and dramatic contests was significant too.

Peisistratus gave it his attention because Dionysus was a universal god that was not the special preserve of any of the aristocratic families. The more spiritual cult of Demeter was also favoured, it gained a new hall of initiation at Eleusis and a sanctuary at the south east corner of the Agora.

Although the priest hood of this cult was still in the hands of two aristocratic families; the Eumolpidai and Keroukes; they now had to act for Athens as a whole instead as purely for their own followers (Forrest, 1966. p189). The new emphasis on national religions was an important measure in emphasising the national over the local and must have, as Forrest states; "" drawn man's attention and devotion away from the local shrine of the family or the phratry"" (Forrest, 1966. p186). Indeed the Peisistratid tyranny did everything in its power to encourage the subordination of the local to the national.

This increased centralisation must have brought many Athenians into the city and encouraged them to have increased interest in the life and thoughts of the city when previously the majority of the Athenian people would have only have been interested in, for example, the affairs of Marathon, Sounion and Acharnai because the Athenian population was so scattered. These affairs would still have been in the hands of aristocratic families. Therefore, by bringing as many Athenians into the city as regularly as possible the

Peisistratid tyranny would have been able to check aristocratic power.
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The suppression of the free play of the Aristocratic faction in Athens was a major achievement of the Peisistratid tyranny. They took the first effective measures to overcome local particularism with their cultivation of national pride as shown in their treatment of religion and their extensive building programmes. The tyrannies essential achievement is, however, their effect on the ordinary man. The tyranny replaced aristocratic faction with a stable, continuous and paternal government.

Furthermore, by consolidating Attica as a national unit the tyranny must have fostered within these citizens the awareness that they belonged to a larger body than that of the local clan. Athenians began to recognise themselves as part of the Athenian demos. As Forrest states; "" The idea of citizenship, not fully but to some extent only theoretically defined by Solon, acquired another element of real meaning"". (Forrest, 1966. p189). It is in this context that the tyranny helped the development of Athenian political consciousness, which to some extent must have helped pave the way for a future democracy.