

Graham WHEELER **Tyrants?**

My paper seeks to challenge the validity of the categories of "tyrant" and "tyranny" as they are employed in both ancient and modern historiographical and political-scientific discourse relating to archaic Greece.

The first section notes that an unusually solid consensus exists among ancient and modern scholars on the issues of who archaic Greek tyrants were, what they did and how and why they came to power, and that this consensus cuts across all the obvious political and historiographical lines of division. Points of general agreement include the following: tyrants were qualitatively different from traditional kings; their régimes were constitutionally irregular and could be cruel and oppressive; yet they frequently assisted the common people in their struggle against oligarchy; and they contributed constructively to their cities' political and material development.

The second section argues that the traditional view of archaic tyranny as a distinctive and qualitatively discrete political phenomenon is implausible *a priori*, since as such it would have had no particular cause or function in the archaic Greek world. Theories linking tyranny with the development of hoplite warfare or anti-oligarchic strife involving commercial *nouveaux riches*, the middle classes or the poor are reviewed and rejected. It is also argued that some of the most characteristic motifs in the surviving stories of tyrants seem to be psychologically rather than historically determined and hence should arouse our suspicions *ab initio*.

The fourth section reviews the surviving references to tyrants and tyranny in pre-classical texts. It is suggested that no archaic author can be shown to have conceived of tyranny as a particular and distinctive form of government possessing the characteristics attributed to it by the later tradition. The (partial) exception is Solon, whose views on the subject may have been coloured by the unusual socio-economic conditions prevailing in sixth-century Athens and by the political climate which had developed in the wake of Cylon's attempted *coup*.

The fifth section looks at the tyrannical dynasties concerning which we are best informed and suggests that in no case does the surviving evidence tend to support the traditional conception of tyranny: none of the actual real-life rulers examined can be shown to fit the morphology of the tyrant familiar from later discourse, even when our data are themselves drawn from relatively late sources.

My paper concludes with the suggestion that the canonized view of tyranny developed in fifth-century Athens as an indirect consequence of the Persian Wars and the introduction of the Cleisthenic constitution: anti-Persian and anti-tyrannical feeling became entangled, and tyranny provided a useful ideological bogeyman for the new democracy.

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