



# Solon of Athens

The Fragments

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Ancient Classics Series

*The Fragments of*

**SOLON**

(c. 630 - c. 560 BC)



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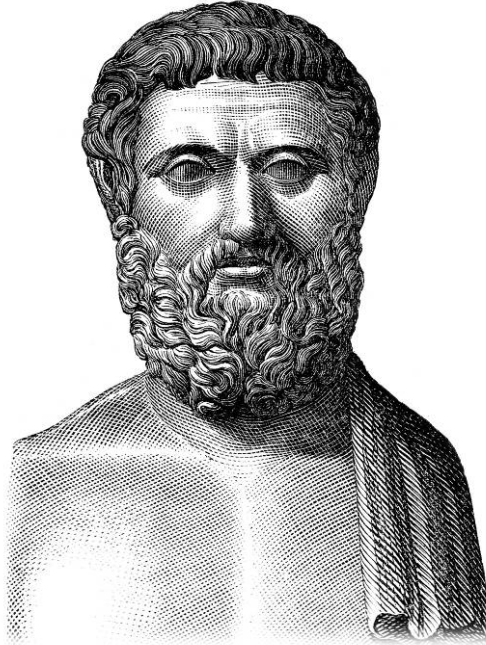
Solon (1911) by John Malcolm Mitchell

*The Delphi Classics Catalogue*



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Version 1

*The Fragments of*  
**SOLON OF ATHENS**



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## *The Fragments of Solon of Athens*



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## The Translations



*The Island of Salamis, near Athens — Solon's birthplace*



*Ancient ruins at Salamis*

## The Fragments of Solon of Athens



*Translated by P. Laskaris, 2026*

Regarded as one of the Seven Sages of Greece, Solon (c. 630-c. 560 BC) was a statesman, lawmaker, political philosopher and poet. He is credited with laying the foundations for Athenian democracy, with efforts to legislate against political, economic and moral decline. His reforms included an unprecedented form of debt relief, later celebrated among Athenians as the *seisachtheia* (shaking off of burdens). He is described by Aristotle in the *Athenian Constitution* as “the first people’s champion,” while Demosthenes credited his reforms as establishing Greece’s golden age.

Our knowledge of Solon is limited and his works only survive in fragments preserved by later authors, with interpolations by other sources. Our understanding of him is further limited by the general scarcity of documentary and archaeological evidence covering Athens in the early sixth century BC. The principal sources are ancient authors such as Plutarch, Philo of Alexandria and Herodotus, but still they wrote about Solon long after his death.

Solon was born in Athens in c. 630 BC. His family was distinguished in Attica, belonging to a noble clan. Some believe his father was Execestides, tracing a lineage back to Codrus, the last King of Athens. According to Diogenes Laërtius, Solon had a brother named Dropides, who was an ancestor of Plato. According to Plutarch, Solon was related to the tyrant Pisistratus — their mothers being cousins. Solon is said to have transacted business in maritime trade, which later authors in antiquity judged as being unaristocratic.

Draco was the first legislator of Athens and was active between 625 and 600 BC. The Draconian constitution was a law code written in response to the unjust interpretation and modification of oral law by Athenian aristocrats. As most societies in Ancient Greece codified basic law during the mid-seventh century BC, Athenian oral law was manipulated by the aristocracy until the emergence of Draco’s code. Around 621 BC the people of Athens commissioned Draco to devise a law code that the literate citizens could read at a central location accessible to all. This enactment of a rule of law was an early manifestation of Athenian democracy.

However, aristocratic corruption still continued. According to Diogenes Laertius, in 594 BC Solon was chosen archon, or chief magistrate. He repealed all of Draco’s laws, save for those relating to homicide. Many Greek city-states of the time had seen the emergence of tyrants, opportunistic noblemen who had taken power on behalf of sectional interests. Solon was described by Plutarch as having been temporarily awarded autocratic powers by Athenian citizens on the grounds that he had the wisdom to sort out their differences in a peaceful and equitable manner. As archon, Solon discussed his intended reforms with his friends. Knowing that he was about to cancel all debts, these friends took out loans and promptly bought land. Suspected of complicity, Solon complied with his own law and released his own debtors, amounting to five talents (15 according to some sources). His friends never repaid their debts. After completing his work of reform, Solon surrendered his authority and travelled abroad for ten years, so that the Athenians could not induce him to repeal any of his laws.

Solon's laws were inscribed on *axones*, large wooden slabs attached to a series of axles that stood upright in the Prytaneion (the seat of government) at Athens. Originally, the *axones* recorded Draco's laws. During his visit to Athens, Pausanias, the second century geographer reported that Solon's inscribed laws were still displayed at the Prytaneion. Fragments of the *axones* were still visible in Plutarch's time but today the only records we have of Solon's laws are fragmentary quotes and comments in sources such as those written by Plutarch himself. Moreover, the language of Solon's laws was archaic, even by the standards of the fifth century, causing interpretation problems for ancient commentators. Modern scholars doubt the reliability of these sources and our knowledge of Solon's legislation is therefore limited in detail.

Generally speaking, his reforms appear to have been constitutional, economic, moral and sexual in their scope. Prior to Solon's reforms, the Athenian state was administered by nine archons appointed or elected annually by the Areopagus on the basis of noble birth and wealth. There was an assembly of Athenian citizens, but the lowest class was not admitted and its deliberative procedures were controlled by the nobles. There appeared to be no means by which an archon could be called to account for breach of oath unless the Areopagus favoured his prosecution. According to the Athenian Constitution, Solon legislated for all citizens to be admitted into the assembly and for a court to be formed from all the citizens. By giving common people the power not only to elect officials, but also to call them to account, Solon appears to have established the foundations of a true republic.

Within four years of Solon's departure, the old social rifts reappeared, but with new complications. There were irregularities in the new governmental procedures, elected officials sometimes refused to stand down from their posts and occasionally important posts were left vacant. Some citizens blamed Solon for their troubles. Eventually, one of his relatives, Pisistratus, ended the factionalism by force, instituting an unconstitutionally gained tyranny. In Plutarch's account, Solon accused Athenians of foolishness and cowardice for allowing this to happen.

After his return to Athens, Solon became a staunch opponent of Pisistratus. In protest and as an example to others, he stood outside his home in full armour, urging all that passed to resist the machinations of the tyrant. His efforts were in vain. Solon died shortly after Pisistratus usurped by force the autocratic power that Athens had once freely bestowed upon him. He died in Cyprus around the age of 70 and, in accordance with his will, his ashes were scattered around Salamis, the island where he was born.

Solon was also Athens' first poet, composing verses that challenged and counselled the people, urging them to action. It is recorded that he wrote poetry for pleasure, as patriotic propaganda and in defence of his constitutional reform. His verses have come down to us in fragmentary quotations by authors like Plutarch and Demosthenes, who employ them to illustrate their own arguments. Solon was also the first citizen of Athens to reference the goddess Athena. The literary merit of his verse is generally considered unexceptional, appearing 'self-righteous', even 'pompous' at times. Once he went so far as to compose an elegy with moral advice for a more gifted elegiac poet, Mimnermus. Most of the extant verses reveal him as writing in the role of a political activist, determined to assert personal authority and leadership. They have been described by the German classicist Ulrich von Wilamowitz-Moellendorf (1848-1931) as a "versified harangue" (Eine Volksrede in Versen). According to Plutarch, however, Solon originally wrote poetry for amusement, discussing pleasure in a popular rather than philosophical way. His elegiac style is

said to have been influenced by the work of the Spartan poet Tyrtaeus, who flourished in the mid-seventh century BC. Solon also wrote iambic and trochaic verses, which are livelier and more direct than his elegies, even possibly paving the way for the iambs of Athenian drama.

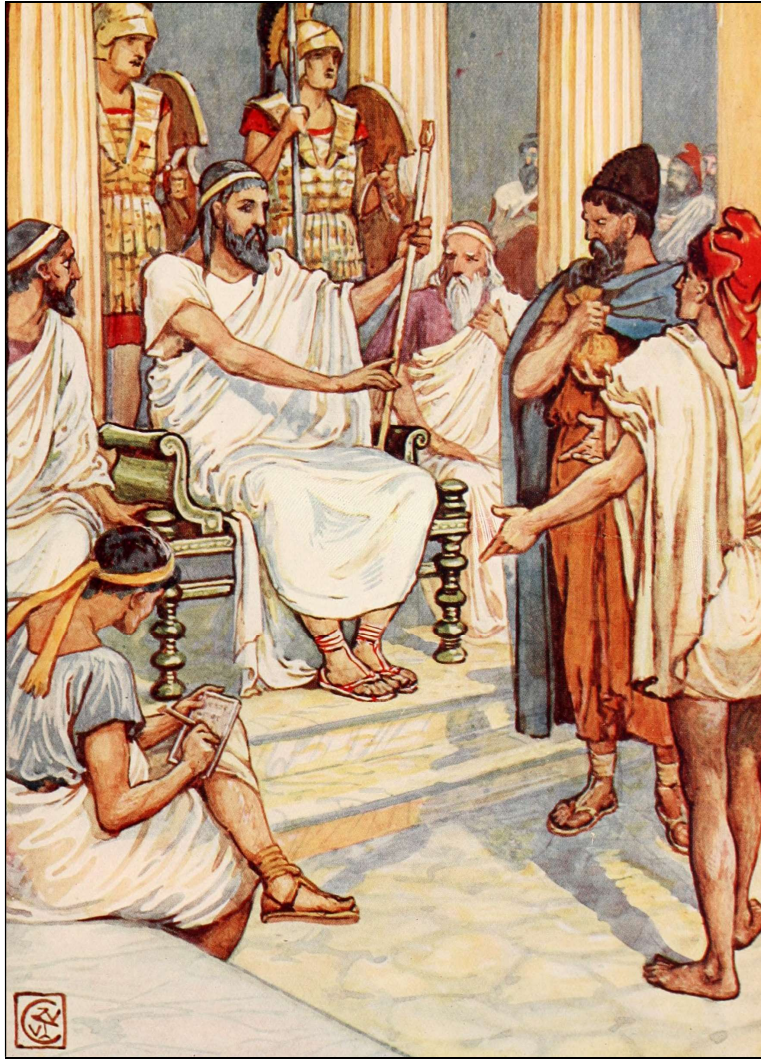
His poetry is mainly significant for historical rather than aesthetic reasons, providing something of a personal record of his reforms and attitudes. Still, poetry is far from an ideal genre for communicating facts and very little detailed information can be gleaned from the surviving fragments. According to Solon the poet, Solon the reformer was a voice for political moderation in Athens at a time when his fellow citizens were increasingly polarised by social and economic differences. For many, Solon embodied the cardinal Greek virtue of moderation. He put an end to the worst evils of poverty in Attica and provided his fellow countrymen with a balanced constitution and a humane code of laws.



*Bust of Solon, copy from a Greek original from the Farnese Collection, now at the National Archaeological Museum, Naples, c. 110 BC*



*Republiation of Draco's law on homicide (408–409 BC)*



*"Solon, the wise lawgiver of Athens" by Walter Crane, from 'The Story of Greece', 1910*

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*M. A. Barth's depiction of Solon demanding respect for his laws, 1832*



*Solon, depicted with pupils in an Islamic miniature, Topkapı Palace, 1250*

## FRAGMENT 1. Plutarch, Life of Solon



WHEN THE ATHENIANS grew weary of the extended and difficult war with Megara over the island Salamis, they passed a law that in future no one on pain of death was to propose in writing or speech that the city should lay claim to Salamis. Solon found the disgrace hard to bear and when he saw that many of the young men wanted to renew the war, but lacked the courage to do so themselves due to the law, he pretended to be insane and word was passed from his household to the city that he showed signs of madness. Secretly, Solon composed elegiac verses and after practising, reciting them from memory, he rushed into the marketplace, wearing a small felt cap. After a large crowd assembled, he climbed the herald's stone and recited the elegy that begins:

I have come in person as a herald from lovely Salamis, composing song, an adornment of words, instead of speech.

This poem was entitled Salamis and contains a hundred lines, a very fine composition.

## FRAGMENT 2. Diogenes Laertius, Lives of the Philosophers



THE ELEGIAC VERSES which especially appealed to the Athenians were the following by Solon:

In that case may I change my country and be a Pholegandrian or Sikinite [two tiny islands in the southern Cyclades] instead of an Athenian. For this report would quickly be spread among men: “This man is an Athenian, one of the Salamisceders.”

And then:

Let us go to Salamis to fight for a lovely island and dispose of bitter disgrace.

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*End of Sample*