

The Seven Sages of Ancient Greece as Reconcilers

The Seven Sages of ancient Greece are familiar figures from literature and legend, famous for their pithy proverbs (such as "know thyself" and "nothing in excess"), their selfless deeds, and their witty repartee. But all of the Seven Sages were also historical figures who were prominent personalities in the 6th century BCE. It is unclear precisely when these men were transformed into culture heroes, but the process seems to have begun soon after their deaths and was probably completed by the mid-5th century BCE (Noussia-Fantuzzi 2010: 3; Hornblower 2013: 260). Although there were several competing lists of Seven Sages in the ancient world, the most frequently cited (and probably the earliest) list includes Solon of Athens, Chilon of Sparta, Periander of Corinth, Thales of Miletus, Bias of Priene, Cleobulus of Lindus, and Pittacus of Mytilene (Diogenes Laertius 1.13, 1.30, and 1.41-42).

Although all of these men were historical figures, there has been surprisingly little research into their lives and activities, and what achievements may have caused them to be placed on the list of the seven wisest men in Greece. (Prominent exceptions include Martin 1993, Tell 2015, and Carty 2017. There has, of course, been much work on Solon, e.g. Blok and Lardinois 2006, Noussia-Fantuzzi 2010, Montanari and Rengakos 2015, and Allan 2018). A preliminary survey indicates that all of the Sages provided tangible benefits to ordinary Greeks, including military victories, economic development, lawgiving, and technological advances. The Sages were also extremely popular during their lifetimes, and several of them (including Solon, Chilon, Bias, Pittacus, and Thales) were worshipped as heroes after their deaths (see, for example, Kearns 1989: 198 and Clay 2004: 131-132).

In this paper I will show that at least four of the Seven Sages — and possibly five — were also chosen to resolve a difficult conflict. Three of the sages (Solon, Pittacus, and possibly Chilon) were asked to resolve a civil war or stasis, and two (Bias and Periander) were chosen to settle a dispute between two warring poleis. I will first explain how these five sages functioned as reconcilers and show that their activities follow a common pattern. I will argue that the reconciliations that these men achieved (even when they did not last) enhanced their reputations and contributed to their being included on the list of the Seven Sages. Finally, I will show how these sages' efforts at reconciliation can give us greater insight into the political conditions of the late archaic period.

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