

Solon, Athenian Identity, and Global Inequalities

This paper reconsiders Solon's abolishment of debt-slavery in Athens using recent work on inequality in the study of globalization. Recent work has explored Solon's abolition of debt-slavery against a Near Eastern background. In particular, Solon's poetry has been argued to generically fit into Near Eastern proclamations of debt amnesty (Blok/Krul 2017) and Solon's constitutional innovations have been compared to similar legal innovations in ancient Israel regarding debt-slavery (Lewis 2017, 2018). However, these studies are relatively narrow in focus and do not try to understand Solon's changes within a wider historical context, even though Solon's and the Israelites' innovations nearly contemporaneous with one another (late-7th to early-6th cent.). This paper will look at wider changes in the eastern Mediterranean that may have been driving inequality and therefore the increase of debt-slavery across the area and will use recent studies of how poorly managed globalization drives wealth inequality and how people react to this change.

Recent archaeological work has increasingly recognized that the Greek Archaic Age was a period of regional globalization with dramatically heightened levels of contact between cultures of the Near East and eastern Mediterranean especially (Hodos 2020). If poorly managed by governments, globalization provides opportunities for elites to increase wealth disparity through their better connections to lucrative global flows of trade and capital (Stiglitz 2018). Growing inequality results in political backlashes calling for extreme changes that protect the in-group (Brown 2010, Stiglitz 2018). Similar dynamics are at play in the globalizing eastern Mediterranean of the Iron Age: the Neo-Assyrian and Neo-Babylonian Empires monopolized resources for imperial ventures (Vanderhooff 1999; Liverani 2017) and used resource

distribution to win local elites' loyalty (Gunter 2009; Feldman 2014). Consequently, local elites' connections to imperial (or globalizing) networks allowed them to enrich themselves as resources in general were flowing towards imperial centers. Furthermore, archaeological evidence seems to confirm growing inequality in Attica and Israelite urban centers in the 7th-6th centuries (Foxhall 1997; van Wees 2006; Faust 2012). Growing economic inequality resulted in lower-classes selling themselves into debt-slavery in Attica and Israel (and presumably elsewhere, cf. the First Secession of the Plebs in Rome).

Solon's and the Israelite's reactions therefore are both local responses to larger global pressures that helped to protect the in-group (protections against debt-slavery only applied to Athenians and Israelites, respectively). Moreover, Solon's poetry justifying his changes help to assert a local Athenian identity using means of international or globalizing prestige. His poetry is modeled on the Panhellenic poetry *par excellence*, namely Homer and Hesiod (Irwin 2005) but it also includes influences from Near Eastern genres as well (Blok/Josine 2017). At the same time that Solon proclaims a new Athenian constitution and a new local Athenian identity (based around protecting the Athenian in-group), he does so by using terms that the wider Greek world and the wider world in general would understand. In short, this paper explores how local Athenian concerns were negotiated in relationship to wider global processes.

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