

What Were Solon's Economic and Political Reforms?

Solon quickly introduced a sweeping set of reforms in an effort to prevent class conflict and make the government more responsive to the will of all citizens. Solon first tried to reduce the gap between rich and poor and give merchants more power. He did not redistribute land, which the poor classes desperately wanted, but he did cancel all public and private debts and overnight wiped out debt-slavery, freeing those who had become slaves because they could not pay back their loans. Solon then established a graduated income tax, taxing the rich more than he taxed the poor. (The United States did not introduce an income tax until 1913.) He also devalued the currency so it would cost less to borrow money.

Solon wrote a constitution in which he reduced the power of the hereditary aristocracy by permitting more men to hold public office. He divided the people into four classes based on wealth, not on birth or one's clan. He kept the ruling council, but allowed anyone in the richest class to become a member. He also created a Council of Four Hundred made up of merchants and other citizens, even some in the poorest class. This council decided which issues should come before the Assembly, composed of all the male citizens. All citizens, even the lowest class, could participate as jurors, 6,000 of whom were selected by lot annually. The citizens' names were placed in a jar and the men whose names were pulled out served as jurors. (We follow a similar way of selecting jurors today.)

These political reforms mainly affected men, because only males had political power and could be Athenian citizens. Solon did not establish a democracy, rule by the people, but men in all classes were represented in major political decisions, and there was some social mobility, that is, people could move from one class to another.

How Did Solon's Reforms Affect Women?

Women were not considered citizens and had no direct say in the government, so politically all women were inferior to men, even men in the lowest class. However, some of Solon's reforms were directed at women. For example, he put a limit on what people could spend for ceremonies and funerals. Because women were responsible for taking care of the dead and were hired as mourners who grieved publicly, this reform reduced those jobs.



Women weaving

Solon made laws about dowries that brides brought when they married. Her dowry helped pay the wife's expenses and neither her husband nor members of his family could touch it. Solon reduced the size of dowries, including limiting the number of outfits a woman could have to three. Perhaps he hoped that this would help ensure that poorer girls could find husbands, but restricting dowries also reduced what a girl inherited from her family.

Solon wanted to lessen tensions among the various social classes and institute reforms aimed at both men and women. Once he had put his reforms in place, he relinquished power, retired, and devoted himself to writing poetry. Not many leaders voluntarily give up power as Solon did. Perhaps he was attentive to his own counsel: "Mark a man by his end."