

Kylon: The Man Who Changed Athens

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Who was this Kylon and why did he bring about change in Athens in the mid-seventh century BC? The aim of this discussion will endeavour to focus briefly on Kylon himself and why he caused such a stir at Athens at the time. This event, now known as the *Kylonian Conspiracy* is the earliest attested historical event in Athenian history which will be briefly outlined. The main focus though will be on the close of events and how the Conspiracy ended, and what became of Kylon, his supporters and his opponents.

The Kylonian Conspiracy brought about a lot of political turmoil that embroiled one of Athens' leading families, the Alkmeonidai. Their role in the whole affair will be discussed as they were accused of dealing with Kylon's supporters heavy handedly.

As this event is strictly based on literary traditions, the evidence that will be used primarily to illustrate certain points is in literary works of well known status, namely Herodotos, Thukydidēs (Thucydides) and Ploutarkhos (Plutarch). The source traditions as presented by the literary accounts preserve differing aspects of the Conspiracy which will be examined to explain the differences.

Introduction

Apart from the mysterious figure of Drakon who codified the Athenian Law Code, Kylon was also a figure of much interest in the seventh century BC in what was then Archaic Athens. It is a period of which only a sprinkling of information is known and where modern scholarship has brought out the tools of extrapolation, interpolation and re-construction to fill in the gaps left in our knowledge. From the evidence available, we have a small number of separate episodes, one of which where Kylon was the main character.

Who was Kylon?

Although Kylon was somewhat of an important figure in Archaic Athens, it seems that the ancient writers from Herodotos onwards knew a fair amount about Kylon and were able to draw up some basic traditions about him. Firstly, Kylon was described in the surviving traditions about him as a nobleman by birth, belonging

The Acropolis at Athens (Leo von Klenze, 1846).

to one of the old aristocratic families of Athens, whom Thoukydides described as being “noble and powerful in days of old”.¹ Secondly, the traditions about Kylon state that he was an Olympic victor as he had won the footrace (*diaulos* in Greek) at the 35th Olympiad (640–39 BC) and he was quite renowned in Athens after his victory for his Olympian status.² Thirdly, the traditions indicated that Kylon had married a woman of non-Athenian parentage, the woman being the daughter of the Megarian tyrant Theagenes who was another powerful figure in Archaic Greece of whom modern scholarship knows very little.³ Pausanias noted in his description of the Akropolis a bronze, uninscribed statue of poor craftsmanship which tradition claimed to be a depiction of Kylon that once stood within the temenos of Athena Polias on the Akropolis that was perhaps dedicated to him.⁴

The Kylonian Conspiracy

The term *Kylonian Conspiracy* is a modern term employed by modern scholars to describe this episode. The *Conspiracy* was actually an attempt at tyranny by Kylon in approximately 632–1 BC or thereabouts. What is also important about the Kylonian Conspiracy is that it was the first historically attested event of Athenian political history placing it before the time of Solon. As the sources are quite detailed the evidence has been tabulated below:

¹ Thoukydides 1.126.3.

² See Eusebios, *Khronika* 1.198 for the date of Kylon’s victory. For other evidence of Kylon’s Olympian status see Herodotos 5.71.1, Thoukydides 1.126.3 and Pausanias 1.28.1.

³ For evidence of the marriage alliance between Kylon and the family of Theagenes see Thoukydides 1.126.3, Pausanias 1.28.1 and sch. Aristophanes, *Knights* 445 ἀλιτηρίων.

⁴ Pausanias 1.28.1.

TABLE 1

SOURCE DETAILS	HERODOTOS 5.71.1–2	THOUKYDIDES 1.126	PLOUTARKHOS <i>SOLOON</i> 12
Mention of the preparations of Kylon prior to the coup.	Kylon grew his hair long with a view to tyranny and collected a band of friends together.	Kylon's father-in-law Theagenes provided him with troops and Kylon summoned his own friends to join him.	No mention of any prior preparations.
Consultation of the Delphic Oracle?	Not stated.	Yes, the reply being to seize the Akropolis at the <i>greatest festival of Zeus</i> .	Not stated.
Mention of Kylon's capture of the Akropolis.	Yes.	Yes.	No, but implied.
Mention of a siege	Yes.	Yes.	Yes.
Mention of an agreement between the two parties.	Yes, the prytaneis of the naukraroi induced the Kylonians to leave the Akropolis to face trial but sparing their lives.	Yes, the archons who kept guard over them induced them to leave the Akropolis.	Yes, Megakles the archon induced the Kylonians to leave the Akropolis to stand trial.
What became of the Kylonians?	They were executed. The Alkmeonidai were blamed. Kylon's fate unclear.	They were massacred on the spot. Others were massacred at the altars of the Eumenides. Kylon and his brother escaped.	Those outside the Akropolis were massacred. Others were massacred at the altars. Some survived by appealing to the wives of the archons. Kylon's fate unclear.
What became of the perpetrators?	Not mentioned.	Labelled as <i>Accursed</i> and expelled some time later but unclear when.	Labelled as <i>Accursed</i> and expelled some time later but unclear when.

TABLE 2

SOURCE DETAILS	SCH. AR. KNIGHTS 445 = ΕΚ ΤΩΝ ΑΑΙΘΡΠΙΩΝ (1st)	SCH. AR. KNIGHTS 445 = ΑΑΙΘΡΠΙΩΝ (2nd)	SCH. AR. KNIGHTS 445 = ΑΑΛΩΣ (3rd)
Mention of the preparations of Kylon prior to the coup.	No stated.	Yes, Kylon collected a force from Theagenes.	Not stated.
Consultation of the Delphic Oracle?	Not stated.	Yes, the reply being to take the city at the <i>great festival of Zeus</i> .	Not stated.
Mention of Kylon's capture of the Akropolis.	No, but implied.	Yes.	Yes.
Mention of a siege.	Yes.	Yes.	Yes.
Mention of an agreement between the two parties.	Not stated.	Not stated.	Not stated.
What became of the Kylonians?	Executed by stoning. Kylon's fate unclear.	Some executed, others massacred at the altars. Kylon escaped.	They were executed at the altars of the gods. Kylon escaped.
What became of the perpetrators?	Labelled as <i>Accursed</i> . Not named.	They were expelled for breaking ancient laws pertaining to suppliants. Not named.	Labelled as <i>Accursed</i> . Not named.

How did the conspiracy occur?

It would appear that Kylon and his followers made some very important military preparations in secret and in order that they not arouse suspicion amongst the Athenians. These military preparations were possibly conducted in Megara under the guidance of Theagenes, Kylon's father-in-law.⁵ Apart from his military preparations, Kylon sought the divine approval of Apollo at Delphi to support his attempt at tyranny by consulting the Delphic Oracle which told him to capture Athens at the *greatest festival of Zeus*.⁶ Kylon and his force were almost successful in capturing the Akropolis but were spotted by an unknown individual or individuals who alerted the authorities to the crisis that was about to occur.⁷ All our sources indicate that the Kylonians were besieged upon the Akropolis and the siege lasted an unknown amount of time, but long enough for the Kylonians to feel the pain of hunger and subsequent death. As a result of this predicament, the Kylonians agreed to come to terms with the Athenian authorities and negotiations between the two parties were conducted resulting in a reprieve for the Kylonians on the condition that they come down from the Akropolis and face justice before the Athenian courts.⁸ One of the points where our main sources diverge is who the chief negotiators were for the Athenians at the time of the crisis. The earliest source Herodotos referred to an Athenian office known as the Prytaneis of the Naukraroi (which was rendered obsolete by the end of the sixth century BC when Kleisthenes reformed the Athenian constitution) as being not only the negotiators at the time but also the main political office in Athens in the seventh century BC. Thoukydides followed another tradition stating that the negotiators were the nine archons who were amongst the most powerful officials in the archaic period in Athens which is a direct contradiction to what Herodotos had claimed.⁹ The latter of the main sources concerning Kylon, the biography of Solon by Ploutarkhos went one step further and named the eponymous archon of that year Megakles the Alkmeonid as the negotiator. By naming Megakles, Ploutarkhos made a very important connection and noted the very purpose as to why the tradition about Kylon's attempt at tyranny was preserved, the origin of the Alkmeonid curse, the Alkmeonidai being one of the prominent aristocratic families in Athens to which Megakles belonged.

The end of the conspiracy

Unfortunately for Kylon most of his supporters were massacred where they stood or at the altar of the Eumenides possibly by means of stoning or daggers once they

⁵ Herodotos 5.71.1, Thoukydides 1.126.5, sch. Aristophanes *Knights* 445 ἀλιτηρίων.

⁶ Herodotos 5.71.1, Thoukydides 1.126.5, sch. Aristophanes *Knights* 445 ἀλιτηρίων.

⁷ Herodotos 5.71.1, Thoukydides 1.126.7, sch. Aristophanes *Knights* 445 ἀλιτηρίων + ἄλλως.

⁸ Herodotos 5.71.2, Thoukydides 1.126.11, Ploutarkhos, *Solon* 12.1.

⁹ Thoukydides 1.126.8.

had descended from the Akropolis under the initial terms of the treaty.¹⁰ Due to their hunger and severely weakened state many of them were unable to escape and were at the mercy of the Athenians. Some of the Kylonians survived the massacre by appealing to the wives of the archons, and these survivors formed a new following and remained at odds with the Alkmeonidai by never allowing them to forget what they did to their supporters on that fateful day.¹¹ Kylon escaped the atrocities together with his brother.¹² The perpetrators of the massacre were condemned by the Athenians as *Accursed* for breaking ancient laws pertaining to suppliants but the ones accused of ordering the massacre of the Kylonians and were expelled from Athens a generation later as a result of a public trial possibly on the indictment of sacrilege.¹³ The family who in fact were held responsible for this crime were the Alkmeonidai, but due to the prominence of the family in Athens it would take many years for the family to be indicted. It was the persistence of the family's opponents who lost members of their families during the Kylonian Conspiracy.

Why did Kylon change Athens?

Kylon's attempt at tyranny and the way it was dealt with by the Alkmeonidai tainted the reputation of the family. The influence of the Alkmeonidai began to wane in the years after Kylon's failed coup which led to civil strife breaking out in Athens between the Kylonians and the Alkmeonidai.¹⁴ The Alkmeonidai who had once dominated the political scene in Athens were fighting for survival, humiliated by the curse that tainted the family name (even Perikles some two hundred years later at the beginning of the Peloponnesian War in 431–0 BC was attacked by the Spartans for carrying this old curse¹⁵). Solon attempted to defuse the feud as Athens was suffering also militaristically when they lost the island of Salamis to the Megarians which might well have stirred up memories on both sides.¹⁶ Solon persuaded the Alkmeonidai to submit to a public trial to clear the family name only to be condemned and expelled from the city and the bones of their dead ancestors were exhumed and cast out of Attika.¹⁷ Even though Kylon lost his chance at becoming tyrant he left Athens forever tainted with the blood of his supporters and the repercussions of his defeat would be felt by the Alkmeonidai for many years to

¹⁰ The evidence available although late indicates that stoning was how the Athenians massacred the Kylonians. See sch. Aristophanes *Knights* 445 ἐκ τῶν ἀλιτηρίων.

¹¹ Ploutarkhos *Solon* 12.2, Aristotle *Athenaion Politeia* 2.

¹² Thoukydides 1.126.10, sch. Aristophanes *Knights* 445 ἀλιτηρίων.

¹³ Thoukydides 1.126.12, Ploutarkhos *Solon* 12.2–3.

¹⁴ Aristotle *Athenaion Politeia* 2, Ploutarkhos *Solon* 12.2–3.

¹⁵ Thoukydides 1.127.1.

¹⁶ For traditions concerning the war over Salamis see Ploutarkhos *Solon* 9.

¹⁷ For the exhumation of the Alkmeonid dead see Thoukydides 1.126.12, Ploutarkhos *Solon* 12.2–3.

come as it became known not only to the Athenians but also to other Greeks like the Spartans who saw this as an excuse to remove Perikles from office in the fifth century BC.

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* Please note that in this article the Greek spelling of personal names has been adopted but in the bibliography where works are cited if the Latin spelling has been used it has been written thus.