ON SOME LINGUISTIC FEATURES OF SOLON’S LAWS

by

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Abstract

Plutarch, in his *Life of Solon*, gives us an interesting testimony of the importance assigned by the Athenian statesman to the role of language in his political strategy. Most of the features observed by Plutarch are euphemisms, introduction of new technical terms, change of meaning of old words, and preference for the Attic vocabulary.

Starting from these Plutarchean comments, the author analyses the lexical particularities and innovations of the Solonian laws and concludes that, with a clever combination of tradition (including the use of Atticisms), creativity, specialisation and precision at the lexical level, Solon made a great effort of adaptation to the new historical, social, and political circumstances, and tried to facilitate the assimilation by the citizens of the new legal framework. Moreover, this trait of the laws coincides with some linguistic particularities formerly detected by the author in the poetic work of Solon. This study corroborates the validity of the remarks made by Plutarch and tries to put forward an explanation of these traits.

I

Plutarch, in his *Life of Solon*, comments on some particularities of the language used by the Athenian statesman in his legislative activity. He says in the first place that, to the νεώτεροι, the tendency of the Athenians to άστείως υποκορίσεσθαι—in other words, to use euphemisms (for instance, εταιραί for πόρναι, σύνταξις for φόρος and φυλακαί for φρουραί)—was inaugurated by Solon (Plutarch says that it was a σόφισμα of him), when he called the abolition of debts (χρεών αποκόπη) σεισάθεια. He adds that, according to other sources (he cites Androtion), the σεισάθεια was not the name for the condonation of debts, but for the φιλανθρώπευμα (the ‘humanitarian effects’) resulting from this decision (including the increasing of

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2 Solon, 15, 4 (all citations are according to the edition of Gentili and Prato [1979]). Cf. Plutarch, *De Alexandri Magni fortuna aut virtute* 2, 343d and *Praecepta gerendae rei publicae* 807d 10, where Plutarch qualifies again this use as a ύποκορισμός. He uses the word as a common noun in *Vita Luculli*. 20, 2, 5 and *Vita Caesaris* 37, 23.