Directions
You may write in this book during perusal time.

After the examination session
Take this book when you leave.
Planning space
Source A — Concept and background information

Tyrant means “sole ruler”. The word is neutral, has associations with wealth and power and can therefore be synonymous with expressions like *basileus*, “king”. For example, the oldest known use of the word *tyrannos* is a fragment by the poet Archilochos describing King Gyges of Lydia (ruled 680–644 BC). Yet, in Greek history the tyrant was usually more than just a monarch. Since the mid-nineteenth century, ancient historians discern two types of tyranny:

1. The “older” tyrants in mainland Greece of the seventh and sixth centuries. These people were often dissatisfied aristocrats who managed to seize control of the state by cooperating with the *nouveaux riches*: wealthy people from non-aristocratic families that had until then usually been excluded from government. Examples are Cypselus and Periander of Corinth, Pittacus of Mytilene, Pisistratus of Athens, and Polycrates of Samos. These tyrannies were a normal phase in Greek history, marking the end of the old aristocracy and the beginning of oligarchic or even democratic rule.

2. The “younger” tyrants in the periphery of the Greek world of the late fifth and fourth centuries. These people tried to expand the power of their city-states and were in fact creating larger political units. Examples are Jason of Pherae and Agathocles of Syracuse.

Modern scholars tend to add two other types:

3. The eastern tyrants. In the sixth to fourth centuries, many city-states in Asia Minor were part of the Achaemenid or Persian empire and were ruled by one man (e.g. Aristagoras of Miletus), who served as an intermediary between the city and the great king.

4. The western tyrants of the late sixth, early fifth centuries, to be found in Sicily and southern Italy. Using mercenary armies, people like Phalaris of Acragas, Hippocrates of Gela, and Gelon of Syracuse created political units that were larger than the old city-states. In fact, this type is a predecessor of type #2.

What these people have in common is that their sole rule was unconstitutional, and that, therefore, they had to justify their power. Usually, they claimed to provide more efficient government than the traditional rulers. And indeed, trade and commerce often benefited from the measures taken by tyrants, so that it was possible to embark on large-scale building policies, which also served as some sort of legitimization of the tyrant’s power.

The negative connotation of the word originated in fifth-century Athens, where the democrats more or less created the tyrant as their anti-type. Writers like Herodotus of Halicarnassus and Thucydides make it clear that democrats thought that the power of tyrants was uncontrolled, so that they easily became violent and mean despots, surrounded by sycophants. Democracy, in this philosophy, was the exact opposite: people were free to speak and power was controlled and balanced.

Source B — Concept of tyrant

A tyrant, in these Greek terms, is not necessarily a wicked ruler, but he is an autocrat (and generally a usurper) who provides a strong executive. The traditionally wicked kings of English history, like John, are not the best examples of tyranny: a closer analogy would be given by Henry VII, whose powerful centralised government was acceptable because of the chaos of the Wars of the Roses. Cromwell and Napoleon and Mussolini were all clearly tyrants, not because their rule was good or bad, but because of the manner in which they assumed power and of the kind of break they made with the régimes under which they came to the front. … From early times, as early as the second generation of Greek tyranny, the word was capable of carrying the odium that it carries today, and in the classical period.
violent emotion could be generated against a man who was suspected of designing to set himself up as tyrant. Yet in other contexts it bears no odium, indeed a monarch might be addressed as “tyrant” in compliment. Again, fourth-century philosophers take it for granted that “king” is the word for a good sort of ruler and “tyrant” for a bad one, yet other (mostly earlier) writers treat the words as synonyms. This is confusing at first sight, but the confusion is not very deep-seated, and a discussion of the Greek use of the word will help to explain how popular rulers like Cypselus or Peisistratus could be classified as tyrants.

A Andrewes, *The Greek Tyrants*, p. 7 and p. 20

### Source C

When historians speak of “the age of the tyrants” in Greece, it is this period that they mean, a period when so many Greek cities underwent a tyranny that we naturally look for some general cause in the circumstances of the time. The causes are largely internal, to be found in the oppressiveness or inadequacy of the aristocracies which held power in the early seventh century. The tyrants mark a turning-point in the political development of Greece, the moment when an old order was breaking down and a new order was not yet established. It is this which makes them interesting as a group, coupled with the interest of the period itself and the quality of individual tyrants.

A Andrewes, *The Greek Tyrants*, p. 8

### Source D — Aristotle in Politics, 1315b.11–29

Now the most short-lived governments are oligarchy and tyranny. The most enduring tyranny was that of Orthagorus and his sons in Sicyon, which lasted for one hundred years. The reason for this is that they treated their subjects with moderation and frequently put themselves below the law. Then, too, Clisthenes was too warlike to be despised with impunity, and they all devoted a great deal of attention to the interest of the common people. Clisthenes is even said to have presented the judge who decided a case against him with a crown. Reputedly there is a seated statue of this judge in the market place. (Pisistratus [of Athens] is also credited with allowing himself to be haled [hauled] before the Areopagus for judgment.)

The next longest tyranny was that of the Cypselids in Corinth, which lasted for seventy-three years and six months: for Cypselus was tyrant for thirty years, Periander for forty and one half years, and Psammetichus the son of Gorgus three years. And the reasons are the same: Cypselus was a popular leader who ruled without a bodyguard, while Periander, though despotic, was also warlike. Third in length was that of the Pisistratids in Athens. But it was not continuous, for Pisistratus was driven out of his tyranny twice. Thus in a period of thirty-three years he was tyrant for only seventeen, while his sons held the tyranny for eighteen years, the whole period of rule amounting to thirty-five years. Of the others the longest was that of Hieron and Gelon in Syracuse, though it was not very enduring, amounting altogether to only eighteen years: Gelon died after being tyrant for seven years, Hieron ruled for ten years and Thrasybulus was driven out after eleven months. But the majority of tyrannies have only lasted a short time.

TS Brown (ed), *Ancient Greece: Sources in Western Civilization*, pp.76–77

### Source E — Herodotus on Pisistratus of Athens (1st tyranny)

When the Athenian factions of the Coast and the Plain fell into dispute with one another, the former led by Megacles son of Alcmæon, and the Plain under the leadership of Lycurgus son of Aristolaides, Pisistratus formed a third party with his eye on the tyranny. He collected a following by championing the interests of the men of the upland districts, and then resorted to the flowing stratagem. Wounding himself he drove his span of mules into the market place pretending to be fleeing from his enemies who, according to him, tried to kill him as he was driving through a field. He begged the people to grant him some sort of a guard. He had won popularity earlier as a general against Megara, by capturing Nisaea and other great achievements. The Athenians were deceived by him, so they voted
Pisistratus the right to pick out some of the citizens to act as club-bearers, but not as spearbearers; for they followed along behind him carrying wooden staffs. But these men joined Pisistratus in a revolt and seized the acropolis. Then Pisistratus ruled over Athens without disturbing the existing magistracies or changing the constitution. He administered the city in accordance with the established laws, governing it extremely well.

TS Brown (ed), *Ancient Greece: Sources in Western Civilization*, pp. 82–83

**Source F — Herodotus on Pisistratus of Athens (2nd tyranny)**

Not long afterwards the partisans of Megacles and Lycurgus came to an understanding and drove him out. So the first time Pisistratus held the tyranny in Athens he was driven out before it was firmly established, but it was not long before the men who drove him out quarrelled again. Being pretty roughly handled in the struggle that followed, Megacles sent a messenger to Pisistratus, asking him whether he would marry his daughter to recover the tyranny. When Pisistratus received his offer and agreed to the terms, then in order to expedite his return they employed by far the most preposterous trick I have ever encountered, especially since Greeks have long been regarded as much sharper than barbarian peoples and much freer from downright stupidity, and also considering that the men who perpetrated this fraud were Athenians, felt to be the most intelligent people in Greece. There was a woman of Paeania named Phye, who was six feet tall and very good looking. Equipping her with armor they placed her on a chariot and decked her out in such a way as to make her look most attractive, then drove on towards the city, sending heralds on ahead to make a special announcement when they came into town. And this is what they said: “Oh Athenians, receive Pisistratus with a good will. Athena honors him above all men, and she is personally bringing him back to her acropolis.” While they were making the rounds with this announcement the rumor spread throughout the countryside that Athena was bringing Pisistratus back. Thereupon the townspeople adored that woman as a goddess and welcomed Pisistratus.

TS Brown (ed), *Ancient Greece: Sources in Western Civilization*, p. 83

**Source G — Herodotus on Pisistratus of Athens (3rd tyranny)**

Then, under divine inspiration, the Acarnanian soothsayer, Amphilytus, came up to Pisistratus and addressed the following hexameter to him:

> Hurled is the mesh of the net, its encompassing folds are wide stretched. Under the rays of the moon will the tunnies rush in in the night.

That was what he was inspired to say, and when he heard the oracle Pisistratus accepted it and attacked with his army. But the Athenians from the city had had their dinner at the time, and some of them were playing dice while the rest were asleep. Falling on the Athenians Pisistratus routed them. While they were fleeing Pisistratus devised a very clever plan to prevent the Athenians who were now scattered from coming together again. Putting his sons on horseback he sent them on ahead. Whenever they caught up with any of the fugitives they said what Pisistratus had ordered them to say, urging them not to be afraid but to return each to his own home.

The Athenians obeyed, and so Pisistratus became tyrant for the third time. He strengthened the tyranny with large numbers of mercenaries, and he increased his revenues at home, also collecting money from the Strymon valley. He took their children as hostages from those Athenians who did not immediately go into exile but remained at home, and he settled the affairs of Naxos (for Pisistratus took the city by force and put it into the hands of Lygdamis). Also he purified the island of Delos in accordance with an oracle. He exhumed the bodies of the dead from the whole area within view of the temple, and moved them to another part of Delos. So it was that Pisistratus became tyrant of Athens, and some Athenians fell in battle while others fled from their native land with the Alcmaeonids.

TS Brown (ed), *Ancient Greece: Sources in Western Civilization*, pp. 84–85
Source H — Peisistratus

… many of his external connexion were of a personal kind — for instance, the friendship with Lygdamis, who with his help became tyrant of the flourishing island of Naxos, and through whom he became a political friend of Polycrates of Samos. Although he had friendly relations with a hereditary kingdom such as Macedon or with aristocracies such as Eretria and Thebes, common interest brought the tyrants even closer together; their families often intermarried, and Peisistratus could use Lygdamis for holding as hostages some of his own opponents.

Ehrenburg, V, From Solon to Socrates: Greek History and Civilization during the sixth and fifth centuries BC, p. 82

Source I — Peisistratus

Perhaps Peisistratus’ greatest asset, apart from the real power he held, was his religious policy. In full accord with the trends of the time, he was deeply religious, even with a tendency towards mysticism. It does not reduce the strength of these convictions that they fitted in with his determined statesmanship and were supported by the amount of money at his disposal. … Building activities and religious policy in general went together with the extension of the Great Panathenaea and the inauguration of the Great Dionysia. … Equally important for his popularity were Peisistratus’ practical plans for Athens, for instance, a better water supply from the famous well of the Enneakrounos.

Ehrenburg, V, From Solon to Socrates: Greek History and Civilization during the sixth and fifth centuries BC, pp. 84–86

Source J — Cypselus

One day, after he had grown to maturity, Cypselus happened to consult the oracle, and on the strength of the answer he received — an answer which cut, as it were, both ways — set to work and made himself master of Corinth. The prophecy went like this:

Fortunate is he who steps down into my house,
Cypselus, son of Eetion, lord of famous Corinth:
Fortunate he and his sons, but not the sons of his sons.

Such was the prophecy which induced Cypselus to seize power, and I will now tell you what use he made of it when he got it: many of the Corinthians he drove into exile, many he deprived of their property, and still more, by a long way, of their lives. He ruled in Corinth for thirty years, died in the height of prosperity, and was succeeded by his son Periander.

A de Selincourt (trans), Herodotus: The Histories, p. 376

Source K — Periander and Thrasybulus

To begin with, Periander was less violent than his father, but soon surpassed him in bloody-mindedness and savagery. This was a result of a correspondence which he entered into with Thrasybulus, the master of Miletus. He sent a representative to the court of this despot, to ask his opinion on how best and most safely to govern his city. Thrasybulus invited the man to walk with him from the city to a field where corn was growing. As he passed through this cornfield, continually asking questions about why the messenger had come to him from Corinth, he kept cutting off all the tallest ears of wheat which he could see, and throwing them away, until the finest and best-grown part of the crop was ruined. In this way he went right through the field, and then sent the messenger away without a word. On his return to Corinth, Periander was eager to hear what advice Thrasybulus had given, and the man replied that he had not given any at all, adding that he was surprised at being sent to visit such a person, who was evidently mad and a wanton destroyer of his own property — and then he described what he had seen Thrasybulus do. Periander seized the point at once; it was perfectly plain to him that Thrasybulus recommended the murder of all the people in the city who were outstanding in influence or ability. Moreover, he took the advice, and from that time forward there was
no crime against the Corinthians that he did not commit; indeed, anything that Cypselus had left undone in the way of killing or banishing, Periander completed for him.

A de Selincourt (trans), *Herodotus: The Histories*, pp. 376–377

**Source L — Periander**

Periander, the son of Cypselus, had sent off to Alyattes at Sardis three hundred boys belonging to the leading families in Corcyra, to be made into eunuchs … in revenge for a brutal crime by which the Corcyraeans had started the quarrel. Periander had murdered his wife Melissa; and another misfortune was to follow.

A de Selincourt (trans), *Herodotus: The Histories*, pp. 223–224

**Source M — The Cypselids**

The aspect of Cypselus’ tyranny which emerges most distinctly from the ancient accounts is that the Bacchiadae whom he overthrew were a harsh, oppressive and unpopular aristocracy, whereas his own rule — though Herodotus says otherwise — was well liked in the city. The revolution at Corinth was both the first and, as it were, the purest of its kind, the aristocrats ripe for their downfall, the tyrant a straightforward liberator, so much identified with his supporters that he never needed a bodyguard. His son Periander made more noise in the world and built up his own and Corinth’s power to great heights, higher indeed than the basis would stand: within a few years of his death the tyranny collapsed, and Periander himself was execrated by posterity as the type of the wicked tyrant. For all that, posterity never rehabilitated the Bacchiadae, and the memory of Cypselus’ mildness remained.

A Andrewes, *The Greek Tyrants*, p. 43

**Source N — Polycrates of Samos**

Cambyses [the King of the Persians] … ask[ed] Polycrates to contribute a naval force for the coming campaign against Egypt. Polycrates thereupon manned forty triremes with carefully selected crews, every man of which he had particular reason to suspect of disloyalty to himself, and sent them off, with instructions to Cambyses never to allow them to return to Samos … [Later] to prevent the Samians who were still subject to him from playing traitor and joining the returned exiles, Polycrates had their wives and children shut up in the boat-sheds, and was prepared to burn them, sheds and all, in case of need.

A de Selincourt (trans), *Herodotus: The Histories*, p. 222

**Source O — Herodotus on Clisthenes of Sicyon**

… Clisthenes the tyrant of Sicyon raised the dignity of the house so that it became much more renowned among the Greeks than it had been before. Now Clisthenes, … had a daughter whose name was Agariste. He wanted to search out the best man in all Greece and to give him his daughter in marriage. At the Olympics in which he won the four-horse chariot race Clisthenes issued a proclamation inviting any Greek who thought himself worthy of being Clisthenes’ son-in-law to come to Sicyon … for Clisthenes would celebrate the wedding one year from the sixtieth day. Then all Greeks who were distinguished, … arrived as suitors. Clisthenes had made preparations for them to compete with one another in the footrace and in wrestling … Of all the suitors the Athenians pleased him best, and of these he rather preferred Hippocldes the son of Tisander, both on account of his bravery and because he was related by birth to the Cypselids [tyrants] of Corinth.

TS Brown (ed), *Ancient Greece: Sources in Western Civilization*, pp. 80–81
Source P — Herodotus on Polycrates of Samos

I have spent so much time on the Samians because they accomplished the three greatest engineering feats of all the Greeks [under the reign of Polycrates of Samos]: First there is a tunnel with two entrances dug down through a 900-foot mountain. The tunnel is over three quarters of a mile long, being eight feet high and eight feet wide. Through its entire length another tunnel has been cut twenty feet deep and three feet wide by which the water is conveyed in pipes from an abundant spring down into the city. The engineer of this tunnel was a Megarian, Eupalinus the son of Naustrophus. So this is one of the three structures, and the second is a mole in the sea around the harbor, one hundred and twenty feet deep and a quarter of a mile long. The third work they built is the largest temple we have ever seen, the original architect of which was Rhoecus the son of Philes, a Samian. And that is why I have spent so much time on the Samians.

TS Brown (ed), *Ancient Greece: Sources in Western Civilization*, pp. 87–88

Source Q — Herodotus on Phidon of Argos

And from the Peloponnese there was Leocedes the son of Phidon, the Argive tyrant who introduced his system of measures into the Peloponnese and was also the most insolent man in Greece.

TS Brown (ed), *Ancient Greece: Sources in Western Civilization*, p. 80
Unseen sources (Sources 1–7)

Source 1 — Evidence

Lastly, something must be said of the means at our disposal for examining the early tyrants. The Greeks of the seventh century speak to us in their own persons through their poets and artists, so that we begin already to know what sort of people we are dealing with and what sort of thing occupied their attention. But for a long time yet there were no contemporary historians, and we have no documents of the kind that illumine all but the darkest of our dark ages. The Greeks lost the art of writing early in their dark age, perhaps as early as the twelfth century, and though they learnt to write again in the eighth century, their everyday transactions are lost because the writing materials of that time were not durable in the Greek climate, like the papyri of Egypt and the clay tablets of Mesopotamia. Plutarch has preserved for us one important state document from seventh-century Sparta, but the earliest such document surviving on stone is from the middle of the sixth century, and inscriptions only become common in the middle of the fifth century at Athens.

Herodotus finished his enquiry into the Persian War and its antecedents soon after 430. Though he had some predecessors, he was the first to make a systematic study of such a subject and earned his title of Father of History. His easy manner of explaining matters by digression, as he came to them, has sometimes seemed slipshod to readers accustomed to a different historical technique, but his reputation for incoherence and credulity is undeserved: he lets us down occasionally by his lack of political interest and his tendency to assign trivial and personal motives to political (and even military) action, but his candour and the breadth and warmth of his interests make him an invaluable witness. For the tyrants he gives us oral tradition as it stood in the fifth century. The Peisistratidae were expelled from Athens some twenty-five years, and Polycrates of Samos was killed nearly forty years, before Herodotus was born, so that tradition about them was full and relatively undistorted. The great tyranny of Corinth lay further back — Periander died a full century before Herodotus’ birth — and here legend and folk-tale have made serious inroads into the story.

A Andrewes, *The Greek Tyrants*, pp. 16–17

Source 2 — Aristotle in *Politics*, 1313a.34–1313b.29

Now tyrannies are maintained by two diametrically opposed methods, the first of which is the traditional one by which most tyrants have carried on the government. Many devices of this sort were invented by Periander of Corinth and many more have been borrowed from the Persian rule. Some effective ways of preserving tyranny are reported from ancient times, such as: putting down the outstanding persons and eliminating men of independent spirit; forbidding common meals, education and things of that kind, thus taking precautions against whatever might have the double effect of engendering self-confidence and mutual trust; not permitting schools or meetings of scholars, but doing everything possible to prevent anyone from knowing anyone else (for knowledge tends to give men confidence in one another); and keeping those who are not abroad in plain view, dangling about the court (for in this way they are not apt to do anything without being detected, and their constant servitude will make them timid). Other such Persian and barbarous practices are tyrannical, for they are all the same. Also the trying not to miss anything said or done by their subjects, but making use of spies like the so-called “Talebearers” in Syracuse and the eavesdroppers Hiero sent out whenever there was a social gathering (for men are less apt to talk frankly for fear of such spies, and even if they do talk are more likely to be found out), is tyrannical; so is the practice of promoting mutual suspicion, stirring up friend against friend, the common people against their betters and the rich against one another. Then too it is customary for tyrants to impoverish their subjects, both to obtain pay for their guards and also to keep the people so busy that they will have no time to conspire against them. Examples of this are the pyramids of Egypt, the temple of Olympian Zeus built by the Pisistratids and the constructions of Polycrates in Samos (for all lead to the same result, keeping their subjects busy and impoverished). Then, too, there is the imposition of confiscatory taxes like the one in Syracuse (for under Dionysius they were required to give up all their
property over a five-year period). Tyrants also make war to keep their subjects occupied and to force them to feel the need for a ruler.

TS Brown (ed), *Ancient Greece: Sources in Western Civilization*, pp.75–76

**Source 3 — Herodotus on Pisistratus of Athens**

Thus Croesus learned that at this time the Athenian people were both held down and distracted by Pisistratus the son of Hippocrates, the tyrant of Athens.

TS Brown (ed), *Ancient Greece: Sources in Western Civilization*, p. 82

**Source 4 — Peisistratus**

Peisistratus’ reign could appear to later generations, especially to the peasants, as a golden age, “the life under Kronos”. This would never have happened, in view of democracy’s hatred of tyranny, unless Peisistratus’ policy in general was one of reconciliation as well as of economic and cultural progress. It is quite unlikely that he had to disarm the citizens, though Hippias afterwards did so. Even many of the noble families, apart from those in exile (later even they, as we shall see), were won over by his moderation and his success. He maintained Solon’s laws and constitution, though he saw to it that the higher offices were held by his relatives and close supporters.

Ehrenburg, V, *From Solon to Socrates: Greek History and Civilization during the sixth and fifth centuries BC*, p. 83

**Source 5 — Peisistratus**

The man whose reign witnessed a vigorous naval and trading policy was at the same time a man of wide intellectual interests and deep religious feelings. He truly laid the foundations of Athenian greatness. Politically, the mere fact of monarchical rule increased the impact of the idea of equality among the people, especially as, at least for some time, many noble houses were exiled. The former ruling class began to change its character, as were the *nouveaux riches* whose wealth was based on trade rather than land, a fact which lowered the barrier between the nobles and non-nobles. A new society had started on its career. The *tyrannis* was a necessary and creative antecedent of democracy.

Ehrenburg, V, *From Solon to Socrates: Greek History and Civilization during the sixth and fifth centuries BC*, pp. 86–87

**Source 6 — Periander**

Once, on a single day, he stripped every woman in the town naked, on account of his wife Melissa — but let me explain: Periander had mislaid something which a friend had left in his charge, so he sent to the oracle of the dead, amongst the Thesproti on the river Acheron, to ask where he had put it. The ghost of Melissa appeared and said that she would not tell, either by word or sign; for she was cold and naked, the clothes, which had been buried with her, having been of no use at all, since they had not been burnt. Then, as evidence for her husband that she spoke the truth, she added that Periander had put his loaves into a cold oven. The messengers reported what they had seen and heard, and Periander, convinced by the token of the cold oven and the loaves (because he had lain with her after she was dead), immediately issued a proclamation to the effect that every woman in Corinth should come to the temple of Hera. The women obeyed, crowding to the temple in their best clothes as if to a festival, and Periander, who had hidden some of his guards for the purpose, had them all stripped — every one of them, mistresses and maids alike — and their clothes collected in a pit and burnt, while he prayed to the spirit of his wife Melissa. After this he sent to the oracle again, and Melissa’s ghost told him where he had put whatever it was that his friend had left with him.

Well, gentlemen, now you can see what despotic government is, and the sort of things it can do.

A de Selincourt (trans), *Herodotus: The Histories*, p. 377
Source 7 — Quotes attributed to Periander and his family

“Which is better, my son — the wretched condition you are now in, or the prospect of inheriting the wealth and power which I enjoy, merely on the condition of obeying me, your father?” (Periander)

“It is much more agreeable to be the object of envy than of pity …” (Periander)

“Power is a slippery thing, and has never lacked lovers to woo it.” (Periander's daughter).

A de Selincourt (trans), Herodotus: The Histories, p. 225–226
Acknowledgments


Ehrenburg, V 1968, *From Solon to Socrates: Greek History and Civilization during the sixth and fifth centuries BC*, 2nd edn, Methuen, London, UK.


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