Paolo Desideri

Solon on the road

Abstract: In the Greek historical tradition from Herodotus on, Solon is presented as a man of travels and as one who established relationships with other peoples: his meeting with the Lydian king Croesus is emblematic of this. Plutarch’s Solon preserves this traditional element: the Life connects Solon’s travels with the very essence of his political activity. Furthermore, Plutarch treats travel as an invaluable source of knowledge. The comparison between Solon’s final political failure and Publicola’s much honoured death underlines how Solon, who shared, in a way, the same destiny as Croesus, also benefited from the lesson he had taught the Lydian king.

The historical tradition regarding Solon lays stress on the trips the great Athenian lawgiver had undertaken in the East, both before and after the period of his political activity in his native city. My aim in this contribution is to discuss the importance Plutarch assigns to this biographical detail, when he resolved to dedicate a Life to Solon, within the scope of his ‘biographical restructuring’—to use Christopher Pelling’s words—of Greek and Roman history at the turn of the first and second centuries CE. I will not address the general problem of the relationship between Near East and Greece in Greek archaic age, which constitutes the natural background of such trips,¹ nor take a position on their historicity.²

Since Plutarch’s general plan in the Lives was to proceed by pairs of heroes, I shall first of all seek to interpret the function Plutarch believed he could assign to the pair of Solon and Publicola; in fact, as we shall see, Plutarch explicitly declares that the relationship between the two heroes must be considered peculiar. Then, turning to Solon’s Life, I intend to show that, according to Plutarch, Solon’s early experiences as an overseas trader must be considered a necessary prerequisite for his political activity as reformer of the Athenian social and constitutional organization—not so much in terms of the concrete measures he passed, but, rather, with regard to the distinctive characteristics of his political personality. Finally, I shall discuss the overseas travels Solon made during the ten-year period when, after his reforms, he voluntarily abandoned Athens, visiting Egypt, Cyprus and Sardis. Taking into account the situation he encountered in Athens after his return, and the retirement from public life to which he was forced in the end, I shall show that, in a sense, Solon himself had to take advantage of the lesson he had taught Croesus. This can

¹ On this topic, which is the subject of intense debate among the historians of archaic Greece, I will limit myself to referring to Raaflaub (2009).
be seen as the last, but not least, positive effect of his experiences in a foreign world, the validity of which is confirmed by the parallel Life of Publicola, as well.

The pair of Solon and Publicola

It is not easy to find the right place for the Life of Solon within Plutarch’s Parallel Lives, as far as both the relative and absolute dating of its composition (and/or publication), and its role within the general project of the Lives are concerned. On the question of its absolute dating, we have only two indications: one, very general indeed, from Solon, and the second one from the Life of Publicola. In Sol. 32.2 Plutarch says that the Olympieium remained unfinished—which gives as terminus ante quem the dates of 131–132 CE, when the huge temple was finally completed under Hadrian’s reign.3 In Comp. Sol. et Publ. 1.2 he mentions Publicola’s death as an event of six hundred years ago, which fixes the date of this Life at 97 CE or so: this could be, therefore, a terminus post quem for the composition of the pair perfectly congruent with Publ. 15.3–5, in which Plutarch ‘refers to Domitian with a hostility which shows him to have died’ (as Christopher Jones put it).4 It is suggested that the pair Solon–Publicola could have been written towards the middle, more probably than in the final part,5 of Plutarch’s composition of the Lives.6

As regards the role of the pair in the Lives’ general context, we can rely on just one indication—though an important one—provided by Plutarch. This is the passage in the Comparison, in which Plutarch mentions that ‘there is something peculiar in this comparison, and something that has not been true of any other thus far, namely that the second (i.e. Publicola) imitated the first, and the first (Solon) bore witness to the second’.7 In order to explain what he means, Plutarch, referring to Solon’s conversation with Croesus, points out that Publicola’s life, evaluated according to Solon’s own criteria, was even happier than that of Tellus;8 secondly, he says that ‘Publicola, in his political activities, enhanced the fame of Solon, by making him the fairest of examples for one who was arranging a democracy’.9 Here we have perhaps the best example of what I have called elsewhere the ‘generazione congiunta’ (‘con-

3 Piccirilli (1977) 100; Manfredini and Piccirilli (1977) ad loc.
4 Jones (1966) 69.
5 As it is quoted in Coriolanus’ Life (33.2), the date of which is, in any case, likewise uncertain.
6 Jones (1966) 68.
7 Comp. Sol. et Publ. 1.1: Ἄρ’ οὖν ἵνα τι περὶ ταύτην τὴν σύγκρισιν ὑπάρχῃ καὶ μὴ πᾶν οἰκείος ἔτερῳ τῶν ἀναγεγραμμένων, τὸν ἐτέρον μιμητὴν γεγονέναι τοῦ ἐτέρου, τὸν ἐτέρον δὲ μάρτυριν (this, and all the other English translations to be found in my text are by B. Perrin, in the Loeb).
8 Ibid. Ὅσα γὰρ, ἢν Σόλων ἐξήγησεν περὶ εὐδαιμονίας ἀπόφασιν πρὸς Κροίσον, ὡς Ποπλικόλα μάλλον ἢ Τέλλωρ προσήκει.
9 Ibid. 2.1: Όὕτω μὲν ὁ Σόλων κεκόσμησε τὸν Ποπλικόλαν, τὸν Σόλωνα δ’ ἀυτὸ πάλιν ἐκεῖνος, ἐν τῇ πολιτείᾳ παραδειγμάτων κάλλιστον ἀνδρὶ κοιμοῦσι δημοκρατίαν θέμενος; the term δημοκρατία is also used in Publ. 1.2 and 10.7 (in Publ. 6.6 and 21.10, P. uses the more general term πολιτείᾳ).
current creation’) of a pair—a type of parallelism also represented by other pairs, such as *Dion and Brutus* and *Demosthenes and Cicero*. In the other cases, the Roman *Life* in the pair is functionally connected with the large, homogeneous group of the late-republican Roman *Lives*. In our case, however, even though one can accept the idea that Publicola may have been suggested to Plutarch by Sosius Senecio, or that Solon is the first in the sequence of the pair’s composition, both heroes appear to have sprung out of Plutarch’s mind at one and the same moment, as if they were naturally connected. It is therefore reasonable to think that such an intimate connection can best be explained by the fact that Plutarch decided to include the two *Lives* in his general plan in order to underline the importance he attributed to the founding of democracy in Athens and Rome respectively, the two ‘capitals’ of the Graeco–Roman world.

Though Plutarch’s idea that Publicola followed the example of Solon in founding a democracy is questionable—as is his definition of the Roman Republic as a ‘democracy’—it is clear that it was important for him to underline the birth in both cities of a political system in the true meaning of the term, as opposed to whatever authoritarian form of government there might have been before. The institution of such a system was not only a real point of departure for the historical success of both cities, but at the same time—more importantly from a biographical point of view—the beginning of real political personalities in Greek and Roman history. In fact, in these two heroes Plutarch sees a particularly close interdependence between ethical values and political impulses and objectives, perhaps aiming in this way at underlining that democracy necessarily requires noble moral qualities in its leaders. At any rate, the figure of Solon—which will be, from now on, at the centre of our attention—has been constructed by Plutarch in such a way as to represent the ideal moral qualities a political leader ought to be equipped with in order to be able to create and ensure a democracy. Special attention must be paid to the variety of human experiences Solon had when setting out to achieve his political reforms, as well as to the consequences of his decision to leave Athens for a long journey once he had accomplished this important task.

‘He travelled to get experience and learning rather than to make money’ (*Sol*. 2.1)

The first aspect of Solon to draw attention to in Plutarch’s *Life of Solon* is his intellectual pursuits, which had already been underlined by Herodotus and Plato, as well as by the old tradition which assigned Solon a place in the group of the

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11 Nikolaidis (2005) 304 (cf. n. 48).
12 See *Publ.* 1.1: Τοιούτῳ δὲ γενομένῳ τῷ Σόλωνι τὸν Ποπλικόλαν παραβάλλομεν.
13 See Desideri (2013) 19ff.
‘Seven Sages’.\textsuperscript{14} Besides, when composing Solon’s \textit{Life}, Plutarch himself had already written—or was in the process of writing—his \textit{Symposium of the Seven Sages}, where Solon appears not only as one of the Seven, but also as a prominent figure in the discussions which are staged therein.\textsuperscript{15} It comes as no surprise, therefore, that at the beginning of his \textit{Life}, immediately after giving the basic information about his family and origins, talking about Solon’s trading when still very young, Plutarch says that he travelled in order to ‘get experience and learning rather than to make money’ (πολυπειρίας ἑνεκα μᾶλλον καὶ ἱστορίας ἢ χρηματισμοῦ πλανηθῆναι τὸν Σόλωνα, 2.1). This is a departure from previous authors, who had attributed these travels to the financial difficulties Solon had after his father’s death.\textsuperscript{16} ‘For he was admittedly’, Plutarch concludes, ‘a lover of wisdom (σοφίας ἐραστής), since even when he was well on in years he would say that he “grew old ever learning many things”’ (Sol. 2.2).\textsuperscript{17} The inclusion of this famous verse by Solon—which is quoted again at the end of the \textit{Life} (Sol. 31.7)—confirms the idea that Solon’s interest in travel was essentially due to a true love of wisdom: curiously, Plutarch attributes the same motivation to Cleombrotus, one of the prominent speakers of \textit{On the Obsolescence of Oracles}, about whose travels we are told that they aimed not at amassing wealth by trade, but at ‘getting together information’ (ἱστορία) ‘to serve as a basis for a philosophy that had as its end and aim theology’ (410B). Plutarch specifies, moreover, that ‘in those earlier times, to use the words of Hesiod, ‘work was no disgrace’ (Works and Days, 311) nor did a trade bring with it social inferiority, and the calling of a merchant was actually held in honour, since it gave him familiarity with foreign parts (βαρβαρικά), friendships with kings, and a large experience in affairs’ (Sol. 2.3).\textsuperscript{18}

In writing about Solon’s trading, Plutarch had to work within a tradition on Solon’s trading activity in his youth, with which he was not at ease. Therefore he tried to ‘justify’ Solon in one way or another in what appeared to be an unacceptable breach of the unwritten Greek law against ‘banausic’ works. Even though elsewhere (Per. 1.4 – 1.6) Plutarch appears to agree with this law, he exhibits in this case a certain willingness to make an exception for overseas trade, as long as it is conceived as a tool for increasing not one’s riches, but, rather, one’s knowledge and intellectual skills. He goes so far as to list in the same category of ‘sage traders’, so to speak, founders of great cities, such as Protis, the founder of Marseille, as well as Thales,

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\textsuperscript{14} On the legend of the ‘Seven Sages’ see Snell (1971), and now Ramelli (2005).
\textsuperscript{15} See Desideri (1985).
\textsuperscript{16} Sol. 2.1: Καίτοι φασίν ἑνοὶ πολυπειρίας ἑνεκα μᾶλλον καὶ ἱστορίας ἢ χρηματισμοῦ πλανηθῆναι τὸν Σόλωνα. Plutarch is probably thinking of Hermippus, on which see Manfredini and Piccirilli (1977).
\textsuperscript{17} Sol. 2.2: Σοφίας μὲν γὰρ ἦν ὁμολογομένως ἐραστής, ὥστε καὶ πρεσβύτερος ἦν ἔλεγε ‘γηράσκειν αἰεὶ πολλὰ διδακόμενον’.\textsuperscript{18} Sol. 2.6: ἐν δὲ τοῖς τότε χρόνοις καθ’ Ἡσίοδον ἔργον οὐδὲν ἦν ὑνείδος’, οὐδὲ τέχνη διαβολήν ἐφερεν, ἐμπορία δὲ καὶ δόξαν εἶχεν, οὐκειομένη τὰ βαρβαρικά καὶ προξενοῦσα φιλίας βασιλέων καὶ πραγμάτων ἐμπείρους ποιοῦσα πολλάν.
Hippocrates the mathematician, and even Plato, who, Plutarch says ‘defrayed the expenses of his sojourn in Egypt by the sale of oil’ (Sol. 2.4).

The second problem Plutarch faced concerned the extent of Solon’s own wealth. Plutarch, following Aristotle’s lead, firmly believes that Solon was a μέσος, that is, a member of the so-called middle class, as his father, though of noble origins, ‘had impaired his estate in sundry benevolent charities’ (Sol. 1.2).¹ This financial position was, in his opinion, the best precondition for attempting and carrying out such important reforms as those planned by Solon, which aimed at restructuring the city socio-economically and politically. Here the difficulties arose from Solon’s own testimony: in fact, some of his poems reveal a certain contempt for wealth, whereas elsewhere he affirms, with Plutarch’s firm endorsement, that ‘wealth I desire to have, but wrongfully to get it, I do not wish, as justice, even if slow, is sure’ (Sol. 2.3). On the other hand, as Plutarch acknowledges in another poem, Solon even ’classes himself among the poor, rather than the rich’ (Sol. 3.2), which could legitimise the serious allegations of bias or even conflict of interests that his political enemies made against some of his measures, above all the σεισάχθεια, the cancellation of debts (Sol. 15).

The third problem, and the most important one from our point of view, was that of the relations with foreign people which Solon established through his travels abroad. As we have already seen, Plutarch positively evaluates at the beginning of the Life the broadening of intellectual horizons gained through such a wide-ranging set of experiences. He resumes this topic at the end of the Life, when recalling Solon’s decision to leave Athens for a period of ten years after having completed his political reforms. Though Solon claimed, as Plutarch says, that his choice was for reasons of business, what he really hoped was ‘that in this time the Athenians would be accustomed to his laws’ (Sol. 25.5).² However, we are not informed about any trading activities Solon carried out during his travels. Plutarch simply mentions three places where Solon stayed, Egypt, Cyprus, and Sardis, and summarises his activities there in the following way: in Egypt Solon attended a high-level philosophical seminar, as it were, with two very learned Egyptian priests, Psenophis of Heliopolis and Sonchis of Sais. Making explicit reference to Plato’s Timaeus, Plutarch says that the two priests told Solon the story of the lost Atlantis, which he planned to introduce to the Greeks in the form of a poem (Sol. 26.1). When in Cyprus, he persuaded Philocyprus, one of the kings of the island, to move his city to a better place, and helped to arrange it in the best possible manner both with regard to convenience of living and safety (Sol. 26.2–3). And finally in Sardis, which Solon visited at the invitation of Croesus, he had the famous interview with the king, whose reliability, as Plutarch observes, is questioned by some authors for chronological reasons. It is well

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¹ Sol. 2.1: τὴν οὕσιὰν τοῦ πατρὸς ἐλαστῶσαντος εἰς φιλανθρωπίας τινάς, ὡς φησιν Ἔρμιππος.
² Cf. Herodotus (1.29): κατὰ θεωρίης πρόφασιν ἐκπλάωσας, whereas Aristotle (Ath. 11.1) states the following about Solon: ἀποδημιὰν ἐποίησατο κατ’ ἐμπορίαν ὡμα καὶ θεωρίαν. See Camassa (1996) 572ff.
known that Plutarch strongly opposed what he deemed to be a hypercritical attitude towards tradition, refusing to reject an episode which ‘comports so well with the character of Solon, and is worthy of his magnanimity and wisdom’ (Sol. 27.1). What we conclude is that Solon’s journey, at least in Plutarch’s view, was undertaken out of exclusively intellectual interests—θεωρία, in his words, but that the hero took advantage of it for political objectives as well. Business, on the other hand, was completely out of the picture.

From Croesus to Peisistratus: Solon’s final political failure

The most important of Solon’s three travel experiences abroad was his conversation with Croesus, which from Herodotus on became a symbol of the superiority of Greek values over their barbarian counterparts. In this episode, Solon is represented ‘as giving to his host Croesus far more than he gains’, as Judith Mossman puts it.²¹ But I do not believe that the reason why Plutarch retold this story was just to underline this aspect, that is, to reaffirm pride in Greek identity. In fact, Plutarch simply says that the episode ‘comports well with the character of Solon, and is worthy of his magnanimity and wisdom’ (Sol. 27.1). I suggest that the entire story should be interpreted within the context of Solon’s final years, upon his return to Athens after his ten-year absence. In fact, the last chapters of Plutarch’s Life are devoted to the disappointing political situation Solon found in a city that, far from growing accustomed to his laws, as he expected, had not yet achieved peace, but, rather, was slowly sliding towards Peisistratus’ tyranny. Solon realised that he was unable to govern the city any longer, and at the end was forced to abandon it to its tyrannical destiny. The final act of Solon’s political activity is emblematic. Plutarch says that, after trying in vain to resist Peisistratus’ political pressure, ‘as no one had the courage to side with him, he retired to his own house, took his arms, and placed them in the street in front of his door, saying: ‘I have done all I can to help my country and its laws’ (Sol. 30.5). In a sense, this conclusion of Solon’s political activity can be considered as a sort of historical nemesis. The tears that Croesus shed on the pyre prepared for him by Cyrus were not the end of the story, as it were: Solon too was forced to recognise, through personal experience, that it was unwise ‘to be puffed up by the good things we have, or to admire a man’s felicity while there is still time for it to change’ (Sol. 27.6).

Plutarch cannot conceal that the final part of Solon’s life was not happy. And it seems only fitting that we find a sort of acknowledgement of this nemesis, on the part of Plutarch, when he tells the story of the final part of the life of Solon’s parallel, Publicola. I have already stated that in the Comparison of this pair Plutarch attributes to Publicola an even greater happiness than that of the good Athenian citizen Tellus,

who had just died defending his country; in fact: ‘... Publicola, while he lived, was foremost among the Romans in influence and repute for virtue, and since his death the most illustrious family lines of our own day ... have for six hundred years ascribed the glory of their noble birth to him’ (Comp. Sol. et Publ. 1.2). Moreover, Plutarch says that when he died, after defeating Rome’s enemies, ‘[H]is loss filled not only friends and kindred, but the entire city, numbering many tens of thousands, with weeping and yearning and sorrow’ (Comp. Sol. et Publ. 1.4). At this point the comparison is no longer between Tellus and Publicola, but between Solon himself and Publicola. Solon remains in fact the wisest of men, but Publicola ‘was the most happy, since what Solon prayed for as the greatest and fairest of blessings, these Publicola was privileged to win and continue to enjoy until the end’ (Comp. Sol. et Publ. 1.5). Truly ‘he had brought his life to perfection’, as Plutarch says at the end of his Life (Publ. 23.2). In the new Roman world, Solon’s overseas experiences—especially the most painful one, that of the precariousness of life, to which in the end he was himself witness—could be said to have not only continued to be a source of moral teaching, but also to have found their most rewarding affirmation.