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Cleisthenes

Once upon a time, Cylon, a former winner of the Olympic Games, wanted to become the tyrant of Athens. To realize that dream, he sought help from his father-in-law, the tyrant of Megara, and staged a coup around 632 B.C. But the uprising was an unsuccessful one. Knowing that defeat was imminent, Cylon and his supporters took refuge in the temple of Athena. After they got the assurance that their lives would be spared, they came out of their hideout and were ready to stand trial for their crime. But they were ultimately betrayed by an archon (chief magistrate), Megacles, who broke the promise and had them killed. The circumstance was so unspeakable that the Athenians decided to send him and his entire clan (the Alcmaeonids or the Alcmaeonidae) into exile. It was said that the descendants of this powerful family carried a curse or a *miasma* ("stain") for generations to come.

Now fast forward to circa 510 B.C. Athens was then in the hands of a bitter, cruel ruler named Hippias. Seeing how unpopular the tyrant was, Cleisthenes (also spelled as Clisthenes or Kleisthenes) -- a descendent of the Alcmaeonids -- took a chance and overthrew the man. But he soon locked horns with Isagoras. The latter brought up the curse and used it as an excuse to banish Cleisthenes from Athens. After getting rid of his opponent, Isagoras decided to clean house. He uprooted hundreds of people on the pretext that they, too, were cursed. He then sought to dissolve the *Boule* (Council of Four Hundred). Both decisions made the Athenians very angry. Hence, they banished Isagoras and recalled Cleisthenes.

Upon his triumphant return to Athens around 507 B.C., Cleisthenes launched a series of reforms. One of his earliest moves was to divide the country into three regions -- city, coastal, and inland. Each region was then further divided into ten groups called *trittyes* (singular: *trittys*). Every *trittys* consisted of several *demoi* (districts or villages; singular: *deme*) and was named after its chief *deme*. Now taking one *trittys* from each region, Cleisthenes forged them into a tribe. Once all was said and done, Athens had a total of ten new tribes, and the Athenians began to identify themselves not by their ancestry or family ties, but by their new tribes. This particular innovation was very critical in Greek history because it helped to dilute the influence of powerful clans, which had been the root cause of tyranny in the first place.

Following the restructuring of the Athenian society, Cleisthenes proceeded to expand the membership of the *Boule* from four hundred to five hundred (fifty per tribe). He declared that any male citizens above the age of thirty could serve on the *Boule* for a year. Under the law, they could not be on the *Boule* more than twice in their lifetime or for two consecutive years. Being a member of the *Boule* might sound glamorous, but the job was actually unpaid! Luckily, the lack of monetary compensation did not necessarily mean that the chosen ones had to quit their jobs and go starving for a year. That was because the representatives from each tribe became the executives (or *prytaneis*) of the *Boule* for only one-tenth of a year. During their time in office, they took turns acting as the day leader. Once picked to be the day leader, the man could not become one ever again.

Apart from setting up new tribes and re-organizing the *Boule*, Cleisthenes was also said to be the one who introduced the concept of ostracism which permitted the Athenians to vote and send a fellow citizen into exile for

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ten years. The idea was to cast off anybody deemed a threat to the democracy. Even if the practice had really been a work of Cleisthenes, it was never used during his time. The first victim, to the best of our knowledge, was Hipparchos. He was sent into exile in 487 B.C.

With all things considered, Cleisthenes' reforms were absolutely essential for the development of democracy in Athens. But, sadly, we know only of his accomplishments, not of the man himself. As a matter of fact, we do not even know when he died or how he died. For some odd reason, there was no more mention of this great statesman after he put his ideals to the test. Where did he go? Did he pass away in 507 B.C.? Well, for now, it seems that the answers to both questions will forever remain a mystery!

Cleisthenes

Questions

- _____ 1. Which of the following about Cleisthenes is correct?
- A. Cleisthenes was once a tyrant of Athens.
 - B. Cleisthenes' reforms helped to pave the way for democracy in Athens.
 - C. Cleisthenes was ostracized after he broke the promise and killed Cylon.
 - D. Cleisthenes used wealth to divide the society into ten tribes.
- _____ 2. What criteria did Cleisthenes use to set up different tribes?
- A. a person's familial lineage
 - B. a person's race
 - C. a person's place of residence
 - D. a person's wealth
- _____ 3. How many *trittyes* did Cleisthenes establish for his reforms?
- A. 10
 - B. 5
 - C. 50
 - D. 30
- _____ 4. Which of the following could become a member of the *Boule*?
- A. an 18-year-old male citizen
 - B. a 35-year-old male citizen
 - C. a 50-year-old female citizen
 - D. a 40-year-old citizen regardless of gender
- _____ 5. What was the *Boule* also called before Cleisthenes rose to power?
- A. The *Areopagus*
 - B. The Senate
 - C. The Council of Five Hundred
 - D. The Council of Four Hundred
- _____ 6. Who supposedly instituted the practice of ostracism?
- A. Megacles
 - B. Cleisthenes
 - C. Isagoras
 - D. Pericles

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- _____ 7. Up to how many times could a person serve on the *Boule*?
- A. four
 - B. two
 - C. one
 - D. three
- _____ 8. In Cleisthenes' restructuring of the Athenian society, what was the smallest unit?
- A. Region
 - B. *Trittys*
 - C. Tribe
 - D. *Deme*

