

# Thrasymachos of Chalcedon, Sophist

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Thrasymachos was born in CHALCEDON, a Bithynian city on the Bosphorus, in 460 BCE; the date of his death is uncertain. He was a sophist who charged for his teaching and traveled to foreign cities. He chiefly devoted himself to rhetoric, emphasizing the importance of the appeal to the emotions of an audience, and composed some treatises, contributing to the development of prose style. After arriving in Athens, possibly for the first time, in 427 BCE, he became involved in local politics, albeit indirectly given his status as a foreigner. In all likelihood, the long fragment from his speech *On the constitution* was drafted in the context of the heated polemics that led to the coup of 411 BCE (see FOUR HUNDRED, OLIGARCHS AT ATHENS). The reference to the Athenian Ancestral Constitution, the so-called *PATRIOS POLITEIA* (originating from Solon), was one of the themes exploited by oligarchic propaganda (in particular that of its more moderate wing) in order to curb the growing power of Athenian demagogues (according to a different interpretation, however, this is a fragment of a speech that the sophist delivered in 407 BCE in defense of his home city of Chalcedon, after a failed uprising against Athens; another hypothesis is that this is a purely fictional text). The fragment from the speech *For the people of*

*Larissa* instead refers to the troubled political situation in Thessaly and puts forward a pan-Hellenic ideal for anti-Macedonian purposes. However, Thrasymachos' fame is due not so much to the few surviving fragments of his writings as to PLATO, who chose him as the protagonist of a memorable debate with Socrates in the first book of the *Republic*. The thesis defended by Thrasymachos, according to whom justice is nothing but the advantage of the stronger, constitutes a first expression of what later came to be described as "political realism": laws are imposed to serve one's self-interest, identifying the just with what contributes to asserting one's own power. Justice, therefore, is no longer the principle capable of moderating force, but rather a means to mark the predominance of those who find themselves in the stronger position. It remains to be ascertained, however, to what extent Thrasymachos actually endorsed theses of this sort.

SEE ALSO: Oligarchy; Philosophy, Classical Greece; Rhetoric, Greek; Sophists, Greece.

## REFERENCES AND SUGGESTED READINGS

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