

SOLON AND CROESUS – A MYTH  
ABOUT FUTURE TIME AND  
FORESIGHT



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Solon the Athenian was renowned for his wisdom. Having set his city to rights with revolutionary new legislation, he set out on a ten year journey, that his constitution might take effect, and that he might find out about the world.

In his travels Solon came to the court of Croesus, the most wealthy king of ancient Lydia. Received as a guest, he was shown round the palace, with all its treasures and opulence.

Over dinner, Croesus posed a question: "Stranger of Athens, we have heard much of your wisdom, and of your travels through many lands, driven by your love of knowledge and a wish to see the world. I am curious therefore and want to ask you – Who, of all the people you have encountered, do you consider the most happy?"

Of course the king thought Solon would instantly answer that he, Croesus, was the happiest man he had ever met, on account of his power and wealth.

Instead Solon thought a little while and answered. "Tellus of Athens, my Lord"

"What!? Who on earth is Tellus of Athens? Why is he the happiest?"

"His community was flourishing in his days," said Solon. "Tellus had sons both beautiful and of good character. He lived to see children born to each of them, and these children all grew up. What's more, after a life spent in what our people look upon as comfort, his end was surpassingly glorious. In a battle between the Athenians and their neighbours near Eleusis, he came to the assistance of his friends, and died as he protected them. The Athenians gave him a public funeral on the spot where he fell, and paid him the highest honours."

"But he's dead", said Croesus.

"OK – so who's the second happiest person you've met?"

Again there was no quick answer. "Cleobis and Biton of Argos."

"What!? Who are they?"

“Two strong strapping sons of the Priestess of Hera. They won prizes in the games. And there’s a story about them that reveals their great fortune.

It goes like this.

“Their mother was due to preside over an important festival. She lived some distance from the temple, and the oxen, used to pull her carriage, hadn’t arrived back from the fields. So her sons, Cleobis and Biton, hitched themselves to her carriage and took her to the festival.

“The people at the temple thought this was wonderful. The Priestess, standing before the image of the goddess, asked her to bestow on Cleobis and Biton, the sons who had so mightily honoured her, the highest blessing which mortals can attain.

“They offered sacrifice and dined in the sanctuary, after which the two young men fell asleep in the temple.

And they never woke up. Sleeping dreams they passed from this world. The goddess took them.

Everyone thought this was perfect. They had statues made of Cleobis and Biton, which they gave to the shrine at Delphi.”

And you can still see those statues to this day.

Croesus: “They are dead too!” “What about my good fortune and happiness? Surely it vastly surpasses these ordinary mortals?”

“Lord Croesus, you asked me a question concerning a condition of humankind – happiness. I reckon 70 years to be a long life. Of those 26,250 days, no two will be the same. We are wholly accident. Good fortune is always mixed with misery. In the journey of our lives there is an infinity of twists and turns, and the weather can change from calm to whirlwind in an instant. We can never know what might come next. The gods are jealous and like to mess with mortals. Sometimes we get a glimpse of happiness, and then are plunged into ruin. Yes you are fortunate, wonderfully rich, lord of many peoples. But with respect to the question you asked, I have no answer, until I hear that you have closed your life happily.

"Consider no one happy until they are dead!"

Croesus was stunned.

Unimpressed with Solon, he finished the dinner quite sullen.

Solon left and soon after Cyrus of Persia arrived with a vast army to take Lydia into his empire. Croesus was captured and placed upon a pyre to be burned. As the stakes were lit, Cyrus heard Croesus speak Solon's name, saying how right he had been. Cyrus asked him to elaborate and Croesus explained: that it is only looking back with hindsight that we know where we are, what we are, who we are, where we have come from and where we are going to. It is the future that makes the present what it is.

Cyrus was so impressed with this that he had Croesus released and he reinstated him as King of Lydia.

So – how might we act in planning ahead? We will not be successful in predicting the future. Croesus asked all the oracles of antiquity what lay in store for him, and the answers were no help. Instead we might use our imaginations to jump ahead to where we might desire to be, and look back from that imagined vantage point to plot possible pathways that might lead from the present to that future. But we must always be ready for the twists and turns, agile and adaptive, mindful and aware of the moment as the pathways unfold. This is foresight.

(After Herodotus)

