

# **The Trial of Socrates**

## **399 BCE**

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**WHY?**

**The trial and execution of Socrates in Athens in 399 B.C.E. puzzles historians**

**What did Socrates say or do that prompted a jury to send a seventy-year-old philosopher to his death?**

**Finding an answer is complicated by the two surviving accounts of the defense**

**They were written by Socrates disciples, Plato and Xenophon**

**Their accounts probably were trying to show their master in a favorable light**

**They failed to present the most damning evidence against Socrates**

**3**

**The decisions to prosecute and ultimately convict Socrates had a lot to do with the turbulent history of Athens in the several years preceding his trial**

**An examination of that history may not provide final answers, but it does provide important clues**

**4**

**As a young man, Socrates saw the rise to power of Pericles  
He brought on the dawning of the "Golden Age of Greece."  
Pericles--perhaps history's first liberal politician-- acted on his belief  
that the masses deserved liberty**

**Pericles used the public treasury to promote the arts**

**He pushed a building program designed to demonstrate the glory that was Greece**

**It also ensured full employment and opportunities for the lower classes**

**Pericles rebuilt the Acropolis and constructed the Parthenon**

**5**

**Parthenon**

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**SOCRATES' BELIEFS**

**Meanwhile, Socrates developed a set of values and beliefs that would put him at odds with most Athenians**

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**Socrates was not a democrat**

**To him, the people should not be self-governing**

**They were like a herd of sheep that needed a wise shepherd**

**He denied that citizens had basic virtue necessary to nurture a good society**

**He criticized the right of every citizen to speak in the Athenian assembly**

**His unpopular views provoked his listeners to anger**

8

The playwright Aristophanes presents Socrates in his play, *Clouds*. Socrates is presented as an eccentric and comic headmaster of a "thinkery"

He is portrayed "rolling his eyes" at remarks he found unintelligent, and "gazing up" at the clouds

"Men set upon him with their fists or tore his hair out," but Socrates "bore all this ill-usage patiently."

At the time of *Clouds* Socrates was perceived as a harmless town character

Socrates himself, apparently, took no offense at his portrayal in *Clouds*. Socrates is quoted as saying, "When they break a jest upon me in the theatre, I feel as if I were at a big party of good friends."

**9**

***Birds*, another play of Aristophanes, labels pro-Sparta aristocratic youths as "Socratified"**

**Sparta and Athens were enemies and the remark suggests Socrates' teaching may have been subversive**

**10**

**Aristophanes is quoted as saying:**

**"I loathe that poverty-stricken windbag Socrates who contemplates everything in the world but does not know where his meal is coming from."**

**11**

**The standing of Socrates suffered during two periods in which Athenian democracy was temporarily overthrown**

For a four-month period in 411-410 BCE

A slightly longer period in 404-403 BCE

**The prime movers in both of the anti-democratic movements were former pupils of Socrates**

**12**

**Alcibiades, perhaps Socrates' favorite Athenian politician and his student, masterminded the first overthrow**

**Critias, another student of Socrates led the second bloody revolt against the restored Athenian democracy in 404**

**Critias led an oligarchy known as the "Thirty Tyrants"**

**The Thirty Tyrants revolt sent many of Athen's leading democratic citizens into exile**

**This group included Anytus, later the driving force behind the prosecution of Socrates**

**While in exile, they organized a resistance movement**

13

**One incident involving Socrates and the Thirty Tyrants would later become an issue at his trial**

**The Thirty Tyrants asked Socrates to arrest Leon of Salamis so that he might be executed and his assets appropriated**

**Socrates refused to do so**

**Socrates neither protested the decision nor took steps to warn Leon of Salamis**

**While citizens of Athens were being liquidated, Socrates did or said nothing to stop the violence**

**The final straw may well have been another short-lived anti-democratic uprising**

**14**

**After the last revolt was put down, a general amnesty was issued  
Socrates could not be prosecuted for his actions during the Thirty Tyrants' reign**

**By now, Athens had enough of Socratified" youth**

**15**

**Athenians undoubtedly considered the teachings of Socrates partially responsible for the resulting death and suffering**

**Socrates was no longer a lovable town eccentric**

**He came to be seen as a dangerous and corrupting influence, a breeder of tyrants and enemies of the common man**

# **PROCEEDINGS BEGIN AGAINST SOCRATES**

**17**

**In Athens, criminal proceedings could be initiated by any citizen  
The proceedings against Socrates was begun by Meletus, a poet  
He delivered an oral summons to Socrates in the presence of  
witnesses**

**18**

**The summons required Socrates to appear before the legal magistrate  
He was required to answer charges of impiety and corrupting the  
youth  
The magistrate determined that the lawsuit had merit and was  
permissible under Athenian law**

**19**

**A preliminary hearing was held, begun with the reading of the charges by Meletus**

**Socrates answered the charges**

**Then the magistrate questioned both Meletus and Socrates**

**Having found merit in the accusation against Socrates, the magistrate drew up formal charges**

**20**

## **THE CHARGES**

**Socrates is guilty of:**

Refusing to recognize the gods recognized by the state

Introducing new divinities

Corrupting the youth

**The penalty demanded is death**

**It was the political, not the philosophical or theological, views of Socrates which finally got him into trouble**

**21**

**The trial of Socrates took place over a ten-hour period in the civic center of Athens**

**The jury consisted of 500 male citizens, mostly farmers, over the age of thirty, chosen by lot**

**The spectators included a twenty-seven-year-old pupil of Socrates named Plato**

**22**

### **GUILT PHASE OF THE TRIAL**

**The trial began in the morning with the reading of the formal charges against Socrates by a herald**

**The prosecution presented its case first**

**No record of the prosecution's argument against Socrates survives**

**23**

**The accusers had three hours to present their arguments**

**Easily the best known and most influential of the accusers was Anytus  
Anytus had a personal gripe with Socrates which was believed to be  
the driving force behind the prosecution**

**Plato offers a possible clues as to the animosity between Anytus and  
Socrates**

**24**

**Socrates' argument that the great statesmen of Athenian history have nothing to offer in terms of an understanding of virtue enrages Anytus  
Plato quotes Anytus as warning Socrates:**

"Socrates, I think that you are too ready to speak evil of men: and, if you will take my advice, I would recommend you to be careful."

**Anytus had an additional personal gripe concerning the relationship Socrates had with his son**

**Plato quotes Socrates as saying, "I had a brief association with the son of Anytus, and I found him not lacking in spirit."**

**It is not known whether the relationship included sex, but Socrates was bisexual and slept with some of his younger students**

**Anytus almost certainly disapproved of his son's relationship with Socrates**

**Socrates urged Anytus's son not to "continue in the servile occupation that his father has provided for him."**

**Without a "worthy adviser," Socrates predicted, he would "surely go far in the career of vice."**

**This did not sit well with Anytus**

# **SOCRATES' DEFENSE**

26

Dozens of accounts of the three-hour speech (apologia) by Socrates in his defense existed at one time

Only Plato's and Xenophon's accounts survive

The two accounts agree on a key point - Socrates gave a defiant--  
decidedly *unapologetic*--speech

He seemed to invite condemnation and death

Socrates tells his jury that he is a hero

He reminds them of his exemplary service as a volunteer citizen soldier in three battles

More importantly, he contends, he battled for decades to save the souls of Athenians

**According to Plato, he tells the jury, he would rather be put to death than give up his soul-saving**

**27**

**Plato reports Socrates saying to his jurors:**

“Men of Athens, I honor and love you; but I shall obey God rather than you, and while I have life and strength I shall never cease from the practice and teaching of philosophy.”

**If Plato's account is accurate, the jury knew that the only way to stop Socrates from lecturing about the moral weaknesses of Athenians was to kill him**

**28**

**On the charge of impiety, Socrates point out – Athenians were accustomed to hearing the gods treated disrespectfully in both the comic and tragic theatre**

**Aristophanes, in his *Clouds*, had a character speculating that rain was Zeus urinating through a sieve, mistaking it for a chamberpot  
No one ever bothered to charge Aristophanes with impiety**

**29**

**Piety had, for Athenians, a broad meaning**

**It included respect for the gods, the dead and ancestors**

**The impious individual might bring upon the city the wrath of the gods  
in the form of plague or sterility**

**The ritualistic religion of Athens required observance of rites, prayers,  
and the offering of sacrifices**

**30**

**Any number of words and actions of Socrates may have contributed to  
his impiety charge**

He probably failed to attend important religious festivals

The impiety charge may have stemmed from the contention of Socrates that he received divine communications  
A vague charge such as impiety invited jurors to project their many and varied grievances against Socrates

**31**

**The most damaging accusation against Socrates concerned his association with Critias, the leader of the Thirty Tyrants  
And Socrates decision not to warn Leon of Salamis of the order for his arrest – he just went home**

**32**

**Socrates points to his refusal to comply with the Tyrants' order that he bring in Leon of Salamis for summary execution**

**He argues this act of disobedience--which might have led to his own execution, had not the Tyrants fallen from power--demonstrates his service as a good citizen of Athens**

**33**

**As for the charge that his moral instruction provided intellectual cover for the anti-democratic revolt of Critias and his cohorts, Socrates denies responsibility**

**He argues that he never presumed to be a teacher, just a figure who roamed Athens answering the questions that were put to him**

**He points to his pupils in the crowd and observes that none of them accused him**

**Moreover, Socrates suggests to the jury, if Critias really understood his words, he never would have gone on the bloody rampage that he did in 404-403**

**Socrates' message that piety cannot be defined, might have led Critias to believe that it was permissible to be impious**

**34**

**After of Socrates' three-hour defense, the jurors rendered their decision**

**280 jurors had voted to find Socrates guilty, 220 jurors for acquittal**

**After the conviction, the trial entered its penalty phase**

**35**

**PENALTY PHASE**

**Each side was given an opportunity to propose a punishment**

**After listening to arguments, the jurors would choose one of the two proposed punishments**

**The accusers of Socrates proposed the punishment of death**

**36**

**Socrates fail to offer a plea for mercy typically made to Athenian juries  
Neither his wife nor any of his three sons made a personal appearance  
Socrates held that pleading for clemency disgraces the justice system  
of Athens**

**37**

**It was expected that Socrates would counter with a proposal for exile,  
which would have satisfied the accusers and the jury**

**Instead, Socrates proposes to the jury that he be rewarded, not punished**

**Socrates asks the jury for free meals in the public dining hall in the center of Athens and a pension**

**38**

## **THE APOLOGY & SENTENCING OF SOCRATES**

**39**

**Why propose a punishment guaranteed to be rejected?**

**Socrates acts more like a picador trying to enrage a bull than a defendant trying to mollify a jury**

**The only answer is that Socrates was ready to die**

**40**

**The court demanded that Socrates propose a genuine punishment  
Socrates reluctantly suggested a fine of about one-fifth of his net  
worth**

**In the final vote, 360 jurors voted for death, 140 for the fine  
Under Athenian law, execution was accomplished by drinking a cup of  
poisoned hemlock**

**41**

**As he is being led off to jail, Socrates utters the memorable line:**

**"The hour of departure has arrived, and we go our ways--I to die, and  
you to live. Which to the better fate is known only to God."**

**42**

**THE DEATH OF SOCRATES**

**Socrates spent his final hours in a cell in the Athens jail**

**The hemlock that ended his life did not do so quickly or painlessly**

**43**

## **CONCLUSION**

**The conviction and execution of Socrates was a deliberate choice made by the famous philosopher himself**

**The trial of Socrates, the most interesting suicide the world has ever seen, produced the first martyr for free speech**

**44**

## **SOCRATIC QUOTES**

**The only true wisdom is in knowing you know nothing**

**I cannot teach anybody anything. I can only make them think**

**Death may be the greatest of all human blessings**

**Thou should eat to live; not live to eat**

**Once made equal to man, woman becomes his superior**

**45**

**AND FINALLY -----**

**46**

**My advice to you is get married: if you find a good wife you'll be happy; if not, you'll become a philosopher**

**THE END**

