

Ten years of exile from one's native Attica, not to see violet-crowned Athens for ten long years--this was the bane of the Athenian statesman, ostracism. True, one kept one's Athenian citizenship, nor was one's property confiscated by the state to be sold at public auction to the highest bidder as would be the case in banishment (phygê) for criminal activities. Still, to be deprived of the very fulcrum of civilized, meaningful life, to be driven from one's city and be apolis, without a polis (city state) for a full decade was, for a man in the prime of life, an intolerable burden. What great sin, then, had the citizen committed to be so harshly dealt with? The answer is regrettably, none: only that he was a politician (though many may think that

this is crime enough).

The originator of ostracism is sometimes given, significantly enough, as Cleisthenes, the father of Athenian democracy, who was chief archon in 508 B.C. The first victim was not claimed, however, till 488, the last in 417 B.C. There were in fact three phases in the use of ostracism. First, it was employed as a democratic weapon to check constitutionally the ambitions of a would-be tyrant. Indeed, the first person to succumb was Hipparchus, a cousin of the Athenian tyrant, Hippias, who had been driven from the city in 510 B.C. Secondly, ostracism was used as a final settlement between the claims of two rival factions. Since ancient Athens was a primary democracy, wherein every citizen was a member of parliament, the divisiveness of strong party politics could not be tolerated in the interest of a strong, unified city. Trudeau or Clark, one must be dispatched to Miami Beach for ten years so that the country could know internal peace. No matter that both men were innocent of any crime and only guilty of patriotism. The state came first; the rights of the individual must be subordinated. In 483 Themistocles, architect of Athenian victory in the Persian Wars, had exiled through ostracism his rival, Aristides, whose nickname was ironically "the Just".

In its final stages, ostracism became a mere political game. In 417 there was deep division between the policies of the solid, conservative Nicias, and the flashy radical, good-looking Alcibiades. An ostracism was decided upon to rid the state of one of them, but the two potential victims combined privately and each urged his followers to vote against a mutual enemy of theirs, Hyperbolus. Hyperbolus was consequently voted by the Athenian people "the man the people would most like to leave town for ten years". The institution had become a mockery and was soon abandoned.

The actual operation of an ostracism is quite revealing of the problems of operating an ancient primary democracy. Each year the Athenian

assembly (ekklesia) of adult males met and voted on whether to have an ostracism or not. If they decided affirmatively a date would be appointed for the event, and the market place (agora) would be barricaded with only ten entrances giving access. The citizens as they filed through the barriers into the agora would give the scrutineers a broken piece of pottery (an ostrakon) upon which they had scratched through the black glaze to the red clay beneath any unpopular citizen's name, eg. Pericles, the son of Xanthippus. The officials then had to count this heap of rubble to make sure there were at least 6,000 ballots. If there were, the names were then tabulated and he who was most often mentioned was summarily ordered to depart Attica. Potsherds were used because both paper, which had to be imported from Egypt (papyrus), and parchment were much too expensive for this pre-technological society, and because broken pottery was easily scratched on, needing no ink, and was as available as empty tin cans in our society. Moreover, the used ballots were of still further use to the state, for they were shovelled up and thrown into pot holes on the city-streets, as a quick repair job, where some were later discovered by archeologists. In all of Athenian history, however, only ten ostracisms took place, a mark of some moderation and good sense in using this potentially capricious weapon.