An attempt at finding new ideas or gaining fresh insight in the *Athênaion Politeia*, and in particular on the role of Solon in this work, may seem hazardous or even futile, especially after the magisterial commentary by P.J. Rhodes and Mortimer Chamber’s intelligent remarks.\(^1\) However, re-reading the *Athênaion Politeia* and other relevant parts of Aristotle’s works, notably the *Politics*, focusing on the relationship between them, I have come to the conclusion that some current views on the *Athênaion Politeia* and Aristotle’s interpretation of Solon’s achievements deserve reconsideration. This concerns not only the issue of authorship, but also, and even more, the methods and sources used by Aristotle in reconstructing historical topics and events. By shedding light on *Aristoteles historicus*, I hope to show at least one way toward a reconstruction of the historical figure of Solon.

**The Figure of Solon in Aristotle’s Politics**

I would like to start with an analysis of a section of the *Politics* that gives Aristotle’s main ideas on Solon and his achievements, chapter 12 of book two.\(^2\) Here, Aristotle is dealing with lawgivers who not only treated constitutional matters theoretically, but also acted as politicians and concrete legislators, some of whom, like Lycurgus and Solon, established both laws and constitutions. It is clear from the very beginning that, in presenting Solon’s work, Aristotle departs from and is oriented towards a debate (ἐνιούσιοι... οἴονται) or, more precisely, towards the question if Solon was a good lawgiver (νομοθέτην... σπουδαίον) or not. The criterion for deciding this was the quality of the constitution created, and the best constitution was a mixed one. Some answer the ques-

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\(^1\) Rhodes (1981); Chambers (1990). I am very grateful to Josine Blok and André Lardinois for the invitation to contribute to the most interesting conference and to its acts.

tion in the affirmative, saying that Solon abolished a rigid oligarchy, freed the people from serfdom and established the ancestral democracy by wisely installing a mixed constitution consisting of oligarchic, aristocratic, and democratic elements. These elements were the existence of the council of the Areopagus (oligarchic), the filling of magistracies by election (aristocratic), and the creation of popular courts (dikastēria) (democratic). This position adopted by some (ἐνιοΛΜκρι) is only slightly modified or defined more precisely by Aristotle, who points out that two of the institutions, the Areopagus and the election of magistrates, were already in existence before Solon, who simply refrained from dissolving them (ού καταλύσαι, 1274α1ff.). Solon’s real innovation was the introduction of popular law courts selected from ‘all the people’ (ἐκ πάντων, 1274α2ff.), by which he installed the popular element in the constitution.

The reference to the democratic feature leads Aristotle to present the opposing view in the debate about Solon, the view of Solon’s critics, who reproach him for being too democratic, i.e. for not having created a mixed constitution. One must be aware here that the criterion of judgement remains the same. The decisive point criticized by this party is that Solon destroyed the two non-democratic elements by giving the supreme power to the law courts, the members of which were appointed by lot. Because of the courts’ strength, people started to flatter them like a tyrant and thus democracy could gain its present, i.e. extreme form. In this way, Solon is seen less favourably, namely as the founder of radical democracy, as a forerunner of Ephialtes and Pericles.

In the third part of the section, Aristotle defends Solon against his critics by underlining that the abovementioned development to extreme democracy had not been due to Solon’s intentions (προαιρέσειν, 1274α12) but rather to certain coincidental circumstances (ἀπὸ συμπτώματος, ibid.). The establishment of the extreme kind of democracy was caused by concrete historical conditions: the role the people, in particular the common people, played in building up Athenian maritime power during the Persian Wars and its orientation towards bad demagogues in spite of the opposition of the upper and educated classes (ἐπιεικεῖς). By contrast, Solon conceded to the people only the degree of power necessary to prevent them from being enslaved and from the resulting feelings of hostility against the political system, i.e. the right to elect office-holders and to call them to account. In addition, Solon limited the holding of offices to the higher classes.