

THE ORIGINS AND EARLY HISTORY OF RHETORIC  
RHETORIC IN THE FIFTH AND FOURTH CENTURIES B.C.  
CORAX, TISIAS, AND THE BIRTH OF RHETORIC

According to legend, the formal study of rhetoric began in the city of Syracuse on the island of Sicily in the early fifth century B.C.

Several tyrants had been deposed, and land they had seized on the island was being returned to its original owners. Unfortunately, a good deal of time had elapsed since the tyrants first took power, and confusion arose over which families owned what land.

The upshot of this situation was a flurry of court cases to settle the land disputes. Under the judicial system in Sicily at the time, one was required to represent oneself in court. Hired advocates could not argue a case on another person's behalf. Thus, citizen was pitted against citizen, and natural gifts of oratory may have been sufficient to win the day.

Into this situation, the story goes, in approximately 467 B.C., stepped a teacher and entrepreneur named Corax. Corax had studied the ways of oratory and argument and even begun to systematize some of the principles of these arts.

He began to teach others, for a fee, to defend their claims in court. Thus, the first school of rhetoric was established, rhetoric had its first recognized teacher, and rhetoric became profitable.

Apparently Corax's students often were successful in court, so rhetoric also became important to public life.

Rhetoric's connection with education, profit, and civic life would contribute greatly to its controversial nature in subsequent history.

Another famous, though likely apocryphal, story indicates that Corax--whose name means "crow"--became so busy teaching rhetoric that he had to hire a teaching assistant. Corax took under his wing, so to speak, a talented young man named Tisias (whose name, interestingly enough, means "egg").

Corax agreed to tutor Tisias in the fine points of rhetoric in exchange for a reduced fee and for Tisias' services as a teaching assistant. For unknown reasons, the student, Tisias, decided to his teacher, Corax, claiming that he should not have to pay any money at all for studying with Corax.

Corax and Tisias decided to settle their dispute in court. The arguments advanced during this legendary trial were brief.

TISIAS developed an opening dilemma that went something like this:

Either Corax DID NOT teach me rhetoric or he DID teach me the art. If I prove that Corax DID NOT teach me rhetoric, clearly I owe him NO money. If I fail to prove that he taught me NO rhetoric, then the fact of my failure to successfully plead my case will prove that he DID NOT teach me rhetoric and I will owe Corax NO money.

Not to be outdone by his pupil, Corax developed a perhaps predictable dilemma in response, which ran something like this:

Either Tisias learned rhetoric from me or he did not. If I prove that I DID teach Tisias rhetoric, then he owes me my fee. If, however, Tisias pleads his case successfully, then it proves that I taught him rhetoric and he owes me my fee.

What's a judge to do in a situation like this? Being a clever individual himself, the judge threw the case out of court at this point, reputedly saying, "A bad egg from a bad crow."