

# Ostracize

"Ostracize" is Greek, but, came by way of the French (ostracisme). It first appeared in 1588 as a word but was used as a term in English "to banish by common vote" in the early 1600s.

Greek wise, it bares resemblance to "osteon" (bone) and "ostreion" (oyster). I believe the oyster term meant the shell, not the living, not-very-yummy creature. Today, the word ostracize shares a common root with the classification of crustaceans, like the sub-class Ostracoda. (Funny thing, ostrich does not share any common root. But, . . . why would it?)

The word "ostrakon" came around first. It was developed meaning tile or pavement so the idea of it being a dead piece of hard something-or-other was probably the concept. The term "ostrakos" refers to the broken shards of pottery. Again, not a huge leap of imagination or use. The Greeks used these pottery pieces/tile as jotters because paper was too scarce.

The jump between "shard" and "get the hell out of town" is the interesting jump.

Around 487 BC, the Greeks, the Athenians to be more exact, would, for lack of better term, "vote someone off the island" because the community felt they were growing too powerful or had too much influence in society.

Aristotle claims Cleisthenes was responsible for this idea. Cleisthenes was trying to develop what is now called an oligarchy: where the strongest/most powerful of the society would be sent away on "breaks". Ideally, rather than the strongest force always leading, the weaker forces played a larger role. But, I hate politics. (Incidentally, Cleisthenes was voted off first.)

Here's how the banishment went: the banishment was normally for 10 years with the property of the person staying intact. The practice was abolished around 417 BC with the poor lamp-maker Hyperbolus voted off in a media frenzy. Totally, only about 12 people were ever told to leave. Maybe about half were called back before their 10 years were up. But, I again, digress.

Anyhow, the name of the person would be written on these "ostrakoses" and were collected in an "ostraka". The pieces were then counted to see who had to leave. Thusly, a word meaning some pieces of pottery, now meant "to banish by common vote".

I'd be curious to see if wax tablets were used at all. I believe it was the Greeks who used tablets with a wax front as reusable jotters, paper only being used for the most important communications. Maybe broken pottery was the best way to keep an honest count. Maybe the wax tables were not around, or they could be forged/damaged too easily. Or, I suppose, the Greeks were clumsy and had a LOT of broken pottery.

The meaning of "ostrakos" bares striking resemblance to the German word "estrich" which means pavement. The modern day word of ostracize is probably a mixture of at least the German word.

Incidentally, in ancient Syracuse they had a similar governmental practice where people were banished for 5 years for the same political reasons. However, they took their votes on olive leaves so it was called "petalismos". So much sweeter, eh?