

# Wanax to Demokratia: The Oresteia as Political History (1200-458 BCE)

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Aeschylus' dramatic trilogy cycle, the *Oresteia*, was first performed in 458 BC at the annual City Dionysia festival in Athens.<sup>1</sup> The work functions as a mythological reconstruction of Greece's historical transition from kin-based retributive methods of justice to institutionalized law, which occurred during the Late Bronze Age Collapse (LBAC), as well as the Greek Dark Age (or early Iron Age), Archaic, and Classical periods.<sup>2</sup> The three-plays (we may call them Acts) structure of the narrative roughly conforms to this historical periodization. Act 1, *Agamemnon* reflects the LBAC and the early Greek Dark Age. Act 2, *Choephoroi*, or *The Libation Bearers*, represents the late Greek Dark Age and early Archaic period. Finally, Act 3, *Eumenides*, spans the late Archaic and early Classical periods. To substantiate this argument, each major plot point in the narrative is systematically addressed, along with explanations of the concomitant development in Greek history that it echoes. Given that Aeschylus' narrative begins with the Trojan War and concludes with what are likely references to events contemporary with its authoring, our chronology takes us from the end of the Mycenaean period of Greek history to when the play was first performed in the middle of the fifth century (ca. 1200 - 458 BC).

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1 *Aeschylus, Oresteia: Agamemnon. Libation-Bearers. Eumenides*, ed. and trans. Alan H. Sommerstein (Harvard University Press, 2009).

2 Ian Morris, *Archaeology as Cultural History: Words and Things in Iron Age Greece* (Routledge, 2000).

### **Terminological Note:**

Clarifying and contextualizing our titular terminology are the first priorities. One of the defining features of Mycenaean Greece was the *Wanax*, our first term. This roughly translates to the English word ‘King,’ and referred to the political and military head of a particular palatial settlement. Chief among these were Pylos, Tiryns, Midea, and, of course, Mycenae itself. On the other hand, *Demokratia* was a novel form of government invented in Athens during the middle of the first millennium BC: the reforms of Cleisthenes (508/7 BC) are often seen as the most pivotal and illustrative development in this process. Aeschylus’ dramatic trilogy tells an admittedly mythological, but ultimately historically rooted, narrative that serves to explain how Athens, and to a broader extent, Greece, went from being dominated by one to the other.<sup>3</sup>

### **Act 1, Agamemnon**

The first play in the trilogy, *Agamemnon*, begins with a lone watchman austere stationed at his post waiting for a signal fire that is to confirm a Mycenaean victory in the Trojan War: “Once more on guard I look for the signal brand, the flash of fire that shall bring news from Troy and bruit her fall” (Lines 8-10).<sup>4</sup> Many scholars contend that the Trojan War was not a single historical conflict but rather a purely mythological construct, or at most an amalgamation of memories of intermittent raids and sieges across the late Bronze Age.<sup>5</sup>

Conversely, I follow in the line of thinking that was initiated by Eratosthenes, and later interpreted by Nikos Kikkonos, who describes it as taking place in 1184/1183 BC: that it was indeed a

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3 As Avra Sidiropoulou has stated, “the tragedy is a shockingly bold validation of democratic process as an arbiter of homicide and conflict”; Avra Sidiropoulou, “Directing as Political Act: The ‘Dangers’ and ‘Fears’ of Mounting Aeschylus’s ‘Oresteia’ in Contemporary Periods of ‘Tyranny,’” *Comparative Drama* 52, no. 1/2 (2018): 159–80. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/45176238>.

4 For the English translations of passages, I will be utilizing the remarkably inspired renditions done by G.M. Cookson, as included in the fifth volume of the *Britannica Great Books of the Western World* publication series.

5 Jonathan S. Burgess, *The Tradition of the Trojan War in Homer and the Epic Cycle* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003).

real event which occurred during the LBAC.<sup>6</sup> The reasons for these are various, involving the corroboration of archaeology and philology.<sup>7</sup> For one, there were material remains covered at Troy (level VIIa, dated to ca. 1190 BC) that reveal numerous articles of evidence for mass armed conflict: arrowheads, burnt materials, structures collapsing not attributable to known seismicity, *et cetera*.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, this sort of conflict would be hardly unusual at the time, given that the whole of the Eastern Mediterranean and Near East Asia was undergoing the shocking LBAC, which involved the breakdown in social order, reduced access to resources, and mass migrations of peoples.<sup>9</sup>

Perhaps most telling, however, is the existence of Hittite records, which can serve as an unbiased form of corroboration. Their records describe the area as being heavily contested by warriors from the west during the century leading up to when the event likely occurred ca. 1190 BC.<sup>10</sup> Therefore, in light of the domestic and international literary, as well as archaeological evidence, it is fair to assume that the Trojan War was a real, discrete event whereby the Achaeans besieged, ransacked, and destroyed Troy during the early 12th, or perhaps very late 13th century BC. It is on the basis of this instantaneous connection in the text that we may reasonably entertain the remainder of my historico-literary arguments. Myths indeed distort, but such distortion presupposes an underlying historical signal that can, at least in principle, be reconstructed through archaeological and literary evidence and the comparative analysis of such material.

So why does Aeschylus choose to begin his narrative with the Trojan War? As mentioned above, it is perfectly plausible that oral tradition supplied his knowledge of the event, as various people groups have retained accurate information for much longer than 800 years without the use of written records. The reasons are multiple, both literary and historical. The most important frame of reference is the political: by opening the story at the twilight of the Mycenaean

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6 Nikos Kokkinos, "Ancient Chronology, Eratosthenes and the Dating of the Fall of Troy," *Ancient East & West* 8 (2009), 37-56.

7 Michael Wood, *In Search of the Trojan War* (University of California Press, 1998).

8 Eric H. Cline, *The Trojan War: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford University Press, 2013).

9 Robert Drews, *The End of the Bronze Age: Changes in Warfare and the Catastrophe ca. 1200 B.C.* (Princeton University Press, 1996).

10 Beckman, G. M., Bryce, T., & Cline, E. H. *The Ahhiyawa Texts*. (Society of Biblical Literature, 2011).

world, he contextualizes the societal fall back into a state of uninstitutionalized politics, “barbarism,” which the trilogy, particularly its second act, is so concerned with.

Aeschylus employs the breakdown of law and order as a narrative device to champion the values of democratically oriented legal reform. The *Oresteia* seeks to explain the novel establishment of judicial order, but such a phenomenon can only arise in an environment lacking it. This environment was brought about by the LBAC, for which the discrete event of the Trojan War deftly serves as a broader symbol of that period. By placing the narrative’s beginning here, Aeschylus summons a world in which the old Homeric values of retributive justice still stand, but have now proven maladaptive in a complex, populous urban society. This article therefore adopts a uniquely and historically-optimistic approach to the *Oresteia*. The existence of historically focused analyses, such as this study, is not generally incompatible with differing approaches, whether aesthetic, psychological, political, social, or otherwise. All are valid methodological frameworks, and differing procedures are necessary to unravel monumental works of literature, such as those of Aeschylus. Now, we ought to return to the narrative itself.

Thrilled at the sight of the victory signal, the aforementioned introductory watchman starts to anticipate the return of King Agamemnon, who has been away leading the war against Troy for the past ten years. After this initial scene ends, we next become acquainted with Queen Clytemnestra, following a rather cryptic chorus that lays out the trilogy’s themes of darkness, revenge, divine intervention, and submission to a higher order. Aeschylus narratively preempts Agamemnon’s harrowing recompense. The chorus and Clytemnestra then celebrate the Achaean exploits at Troy, but the victory is ultimately proven pyrrhic.

Agamemnon does return triumphantly, keeping Cassandra captive as a concubine, but this malfeasance, combined with the prior sacrifice of his eldest daughter, Iphigenia, has tarnished his elite reputation. Clytemnestra (symbolic of the nascent and pre-patriarchal ethnic body politic that exists and experiences a revitalization in Agamemnon’s absence), in honor of Iphigenia (the maternal line), murders both Cassandra and Agamemnon, showing how strict eth-

nocentrism, as illustrated literarily through the royal lineage, becomes incompatible with urban civilizations. As she poses: “Hath he [Agamemnon] not slain his own, even my branch, raised up from him, Iphigenia, wept with all my tears? Ah, to the traitor, treachery! He Hath discharged in blood his long arrears; the measure he dealt is meted him again” (*Agamemnon*, Lines 1520-1526). By taking place just after the Trojan War and as a consequence of blood-based retribution, Clytemnestra’s assassination of Agamemnon and his concubine Cassandra is the narrative device that most precisely connects the trilogy’s theme of violent retribution and the collapse of the elite class with the historical LBAC.

### **Act 2, Choephoroi, or The Libation Bearers**

The second play in Aeschylus’ trilogy, *Choephoroi*, or *The Libation Bearers*, chronologically takes place significantly later than the first. It tells the story of how Orestes, the son of Agamemnon, eventually returns to Argos to avenge his father’s death at Clytemnestra’s hands. It is clear beyond a doubt that Greece has plunged back into a Dark Age. As Electra, Orestes’ sister and one of Agamemnon’s daughters, states but shortly into the play: “We [now] live in a community of hate” (*Choephoroi*, Line 100).

The first major plot point of the *Choephoroi* is Orestes’ return to Argos after a lengthy hiatus. This appears to echo the instability and mobility of elite lineages during the Greek Dark Age (c. 1150 - 776 BC). Following the economic, social, and political collapse of the major urbanized Mycenaean settlements, aristocratic families often fled their homes in search of less turbulent environments. The exile of Orestes, therefore, reflects both the foreshadowed elite during the period and the (often desperate) movement of peoples.

The next major development in the story is when Electra and Orestes gather at their father’s grave to conduct a ritual, pour libations, and pray for his justice. As Orestes says:

O father, father of our woe! How can I serve thee now by word or deed? From this far would what homing wind shall blow where the Eternal Anchors hold thee fast? There thy long day is night: And at this gate of death where thou hast passed our grief that

are of Atreus' royal seed is all thou hast of glory and delight. (*Choephoroi*, Lines 317-324)

This scene reflects the growth of sepulchral rituals and ancestral cults observed during the Greek Dark Age. The societal shift from Mycenaean religious traditions integrated into the political system to a more decentralized society with familial cults is well-documented archaeologically through increasingly elaborate burial practices, assemblages of grave goods, and a renewed interest in special burial grounds called tumuli.<sup>11</sup>

The conclusion of *Choephoroi*, and the climactic peak of the whole trilogy, comes in the form of the matricide of Clytemnestra. But it is a precise thematic inversion of Clytemnestra's murder of Agamemnon, which concluded the first act: "I slew not, friends, my mother save with cause, my father's blood upon her, and Heaven's hate" (*Choephoroi*, Lines 1027-1028). In the previous instance, competition was sought in honor of the maternal line; in this instance, it was in honor of the paternal lineage. But while the former manifested as a system-dispelling, iconoclastic act, the more recent iteration has simply become a perpetuation of the *status quo*. That *Agamemnon* would allude historically to a (LBAC) societal collapse, and *Choephoroi* to a (Greek) Dark Age is therefore logical.

### Act 3, The Eumenides

In the first two acts, *Agamemnon* and *Choephoroi*, justice is administered through honor-based blood feuds, a pattern that becomes socially dysfunctional and perpetuates instability within larger communities. In the final act, *Eumenides*, the deity Athena establishes the Areopagus court:

Henceforth to Aegeus' congregated host this Court shall be an ordinance for ever; This Hill of Ares, once a place of arms where leaguering Amazons pitched their tents... is called the Rock Areian. There shall Awe, with civil Fear, her kinsman, night and day per-

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11 Joseph Maran and James C. Wright, "The Rise of the Mycenaean Culture, Palatial Administration and Its Collapse," in *A Companion to the Archaeology of Early Greece and the Mediterranean*, ed. Irene S. Lemos and Antonios Kotsonas (Wiley, 2019), 133-160.

petual sessions hold to punish wrong, if that my sons depart from my law... Nor anarchy nor arbitrary power would I have Athens worship or uphold, nor utterly banish fear from civic life. For who is virtuous except he fear? (Lines 682-698)

This harkens to a tangible and identifiable evolutionary advantage: societies can dissuade destructive revenge cycles by instituting a relatively unbiased form of third-party arbitration.<sup>12</sup> The shift is historically mirrored in the development of Greek, and especially Athenian, legal developments such as Draco's codifications, the Solonian reforms, and the rise of the polis system.<sup>13</sup> Moreover, the emphasis on retaining the motivating factor of fear subtly but powerfully points to the extent to which (evolutionary) psychological phenomena underlie such shifts, a theme briefly mentioned and covered more thoroughly in the Conclusion.

A pervasive phenomenon throughout the Mediterranean during the first millennium BC, the rise of the polis is a key piece of historical background necessary for approaching the works of Aeschylus and the bio-political themes he mastered. Principal figures in this era include Lycurgus, "The Lawgiver" in Sparta, and Numa Pompilius in Rome. Due to the ethnocentrism evident in their sociopolitical systems, Lycurgus is perhaps the most relevant. This is because he was recognized *both* ethnically and biologically as a descendant of their two "*divine*" royal lineages, and also socially and politically as a *non-divine* reformer. Lycurgus, therefore, serves as an apt figure to personify the transition from biological to political pressures on social relations that occurred in Greece during the Archaic and early Classical periods.

However, while it is fruitful to focus on such discrete events and persons, it is apparent that Aeschylus was providing a condensed mythological representation for a long historical process that took place more gradually during the late Archaic and early Classical pe-

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<sup>12</sup> Christopher Boehm, *Hierarchy in the Forest: The Evolution of Egalitarian Behavior* (Harvard University Press, 2001).

<sup>13</sup> Michael Gagarin, *Writing Greek Law* (Cambridge University Press, 2008).

riods.<sup>14</sup> Aeschylus would have been in his formative teenage years when Athens first created and adopted its famously democratic constitution in the late 6th century BC (Herodotus 5.66-69). Circa 508/7 the laws were reoriented in a way such that people's courts and public assemblies had far more judicial and legislative power.<sup>15</sup> To dismantle the extant aristocratic chokehold on the political system, Cleisthenes abolished the existing four tribes and created ten new tribes. Also crucial is the fact that these new sects were more heterogeneously constituted. Aristotle also describes contemporaneous public changes in religion: "...religious ceremonies held at private shrines [were now] concentrated on a few public ones (*Politics*, 1319b19-27).

It becomes easier to appreciate the historical allusions to democratic reforms in *The Oresteia* when one considers the general promotion of democracy across Aeschylus's various writings. Evident indeed is it made not just in *The Oresteia*, but in his *oeuvre* generally, that Aeschylus approved of and supported democratic reforms. For example, we can look at a conversation between Queen Atossa and the aged chorus of *Persians*. She asks of them, "Who is the shepherd, master and commander, over [the Athenian army?]," and receives the response, "They're not called slaves or subjects of any man (Aeschylus, *Persians*, Lines 241-242). Surely this was an apparently unique and exalted position in the ancient world, one which Aeschylus appears happy to draw attention to. For he also does so in *Suppliant Women*, as written in the 460s, when "the ruling hand of the demos" (Aeschylus, *Suppliant Women*, Line 604) is rhetorically extolled. However, whereas the play *Persians* would be a primarily *moral* appeal (opposed to a centralized hubris, *a la* Xerxes), and the play *Suppliant Women* a *religious* one, the *Oresteia* is a *historical* appeal to that political philosophy.

In *Eumenides*, the most significant historical developments to which Aeschylus was likely referring were the infamous trial of Cimon and the ensuing political reforms. The former of which occurred perhaps two years before the composition of the *Oresteia* be-

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14 This immense scope is one of the more important and impressive aspects of the text; this has been unfortunately underappreciated, scholars generally maintaining that Aeschylus' work is only useful historically insofar as it sheds light on the period during which it was written.

15 Robert W. Wallace, "Democracy's Age of Bronze: Aeschylus' Plays and Athenian-History, 508/7-454", in *A Companion to Aeschylus*, Jacques A Bromberg and Peter Burian (John Wiley & Sons Ltd. 2023).

gan, and the latter soon ensued. Such reforms therefore took place either just before or during Aeschylus' construction of this piece.<sup>16</sup> Cimon was an Athenian aristocrat and one of its foremost generals during the early exploits conducted by the Delian League.<sup>17</sup> The longest ancient source on Cimon is his biography written by Plutarch.<sup>18</sup> His legal trial likely occurred ca. 463 BC. It is highly relevant because of how it reflects a major shift in Athenian politics from the supremacy of aristocracy and the rise of radical democracy.<sup>19</sup>

Cimon was politically conservative, aligned with the old aristocratic guard, believing that Athens should cooperate with Sparta and that the preservation of the *status quo* was justified.<sup>20</sup> But after failing to aid Sparta during a major helot revolt (they categorically denied his offer), his political rivals would use the event as a rhetorical device to convince people of his ineptitude. While we are not precisely sure what the charges against him were (various sources suggest it could be either the acceptance of bribes or official incompetence), it is true that he was acquitted. Even so, his social – and therefore also political – reputation had been sufficiently tarnished from the ordeal.

Cimon was ostracized in the years that followed, a period during which leaders like Ephialtes and Pericles would push for major democratic reforms. Ephialtes, in particular, made defunct the existing powers of the Areopagus, instead shifting power to authoritative bodies like the *ekklesia* (the largest legislative assembly of Athenian citizens) as well as the popular courts. However, in Aeschylus' narrative, a gradual political progression was symbolized by the discrete event of the establishment of the Areopagus. This occults the historical element. However, we must remember, as did Robert Wallace, that "Aeschylus' stroke of genius lay in inverting the Areopagos' sig-

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16 Aeschylus, *Oresteia*.

17 Simon Hornblower, *The Greek World 479–323 BC* (Routledge, 1982).

18 "...when he [Cimon] afterwards was sent out to war, the multitude broke loose, as it were, and overthrew all the ancient laws and customs they had hitherto observed, and, chiefly at the instigation of Ephialtes, withdrew the cognisance of almost all causes from the Areopagus; so that all jurisdiction now being transferred to them, the government was reduced to a perfect democracy" (Plutarch, *Life of Cimon*, p. 397).

19 Athenian Democracy: Edinburgh Readings on the Ancient World, ed. P. J. Rhodes (Oxford University Press, 2004).

20 Russell Meiggs, *The Athenian Empire* (Oxford University Press, 1972).

nificance.”<sup>21</sup> Historically, the Areopagus was an ancient aristocratic body that, for the most part, was continually restricted over time. In *Enumenides*, the Areopagus was a new, more populist institution that was to serve as a foundation for the polis’ striving towards impartial adjudication. Therefore, Late Archaic and early Classical democratic reforms were mythologized in such a counterintuitive manner within the *Oresteia*’s third act. This is the story of how Greece collapsed during the late Bronze Age and was renewed during the early half of the first millennium BC.

## Conclusion

Aeschylus’ trilogy, *The Oresteia*, represents the transition from kin-based revenge to institutionalized legal systems and third-party adjudication mythically, reflecting genuine historical transformations in ancient Greece during the early first millennium BC. In order for blame to be reasonably ascribed to the indicted parties, the role of self-determination and agency must be emphasized: thus, the shift is dramatized as involving a political relinquishing of the old gods, from whom prior actions had been previously explained away. This transition, driven by perennial sociobiological selection pressures favoring social order in the context of increasing population growth and density, can be traced in the archaeological and literary evidence from the LBAC, Iron Age (or Dark Age), as well as the Archaic and Classical periods.<sup>22</sup> While the historical parallels have been hitherto highlighted, the underlying sociobiological logic that guided such processes should be further explicated.

Essentially, what we are witnessing is that cooperation rather than competition becomes an increasingly more evolutionary advantageous strategy in the context of highly populous and urbanized societies.<sup>23</sup> The quintessential piece of literature to remember for contextualizing this idea is the famous French sociologist Émile Durkheim’s 1893 doctoral dissertation, “The Division of Labor in Society.” We can also consider the work of English biologist Richard

21 Robert W. Wallace, “Democracy’s Age of Bronze: Aeschylus’ Plays and Athenian History, 508/7-454”, in *A Companion to Aeschylus*.

22 Joseph Henrich, *The Secret of Our Success: How Culture Is Driving Human Evolution, Domesticating Our Species, and Making Us Smarter* (Princeton University Press, 2017).

23 Petr Alekseevich Kropotkin, *Mutual Aid: A Factor of Evolution* (McClure, Phillips & Co., 1902).

Dawkins, who argued for a gene-centric model of *natural selection*. In this model, the individual, and even the species, are simply mechanisms that genes use to proliferate themselves.

During more precarious times, such as the Greek Dark Age, the “selfish gene,” the Dawkinsian entity, may tend toward violent behaviors, for example, in the form of retributive justice. Competition rather than cooperation can be a more evolutionarily advantageous strategy when available resources are limited. Moreover, in less populous and technologically developed societies, the primary form of social identity often still lies in ethnicity rather than the polis, as it were. However, as populations grow and urban centers develop, these sociobiological dynamics undergo drastic changes. People can become vastly more productive when integrated into a larger economic engine, and cooperation can produce many more resources than competition therein. We might also consider the insights of game theory, an intellectual discipline that examines the logic of behaviour, which suggests that increases in the iterations of interactions between parties, unavoidable consequences of urban intensification, and local demographic growth, tend to make cooperation increasingly viable and valuable over time.<sup>24</sup>

Social identity also tends to shift in urban societies, with economic and political factors playing a greater role than ethnic or cultural factors. An exemplary instance of such processes can be found in ancient Rome. It is thought that the Roman Empire was so politically successful for so long in the ancient Mediterranean on account of the fact that they were readily open to assimilating other ethnic identities (and their gods) into their sociopolitical systems.<sup>25</sup> A form of this aggregatory phenomenon occurs in most urbanized, especially metropolitan, societies. In addition to the varied and sometimes conflicting influences of nepotism and nationalism, we must also consider the greater access to commodities and human capital in major cities, which further shapes our understanding of evolutionary psychology.

Expanded populations, enabled by greater access to resources, naturally become more geographically dense, which further allows

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<sup>24</sup> Robert M. Axelrod, *The Evolution of Cooperation* (Basic Books, 1984).

<sup>25</sup> Arthur Eckstein, *Mediterranean Anarchy, Interstate War, and the Rise of Rome* (University of California Press, 2007).

for the specialization of labor. The ramifications of this are profound and compounding, as discussed by thinkers like Adam Smith and Ester Boserup.<sup>26</sup> The increased specialization of labor then enables people to become more productive and efficient, thereby producing even more resources, which in turn allows for greater specialization, and so forth. With so much more capital in a society, both in the form of labor and goods, physical cooperation becomes a more effective strategy than outright competition, which would now greatly disrupt the increasingly complex and productive socioeconomic network.

Aeschylus' dramatic trilogy represented this sociobio-historical process by adapting the oral traditions of Ancient Greece, dating back to the LBAC and the early Iron Age, and by making allusions and parallels to what, for him, was the prior eight centuries of Greek political history. While we unfortunately cannot recover the material which allowed such historical allusions to occur, on account of the role of ancient and prehistoric oral traditions in Greek tragedy, it yet served as a mythic oral political history of that great timespan for Athenians living in the fifth century BC.<sup>27</sup>

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26 W.T.S. Gould, *Population and Development* (Routledge, 2015).

27 Simon Goldhill, *Aeschylus: The Oresteia* (Cambridge University Press, 1992).