

The Cult of Heroes and Ajax

Cult and Poetry: A study of Ajax in Hero Cult, Pindar, and Sophocles

Within the Greek-speaking world during the 8th-7th centuries BC, several social and cultural developments emerged simultaneously. The gradual ossification of Homeric epic poetry brought an end to a long-standing era of composition and modification to the epic tales about the figures at Troy and their aftermaths.¹ At this same time Greek peoples began to group together into more structured social and political units. The rise of the polis marks a dynamic and fruitful period of cultural growth, and, by means of inter-polis communication, ideological proliferation and exchange, Greeks began to identify themselves as members of a polis community and on a larger scale as Hellenes, in addition to their ancestral tribes and extended family groups. Thus began what many scholars have termed an era of Panhellenism.²

During this time period, the hero emerges as a newly ubiquitous figure in Greek thought. Among the heroes were the subjects and main characters of Homeric poetry and many of these were also the recipients of hero cult. Many scholars, especially

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² Nagy (1979) 7. Nagy also includes the establishment of Delphi, the Olympic games and organized colonization as results of Panhellenism.

³ Not only in poetry but in the historical record as well. See Morris (1987) 750 ff. "Judging that the material needs of the people Greeks took relatively little interest in their past until about 750, and even then, only one aspect attracted their attention – the figure of the hero."

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The Cult of Heroes and Ajax

Within the Greek-speaking world during the eighth and seventh centuries BC, several social and cultural developments emerged simultaneously. The gradual codification of Homeric epic poetry brought an end to a long-standing era of composition of and modification to the epic tales about the ἦρωες at Troy and their journeys home.¹ At this same time Greek peoples began to group together into more structured social and political units. The rise of the polis marks a dynamic and fruitful period of cultural growth, and, by means of inter-polis communication, ideological proliferation and exchange. Greeks began to identify themselves as members of a polis community and on a larger scale as Hellenes, in addition to their ancient tribes and extended family groups. Thus began what many scholars have termed an era of Panhellenism.²

During this time period, the hero emerges as a nearly ubiquitous figure in Greek thought.³ Among the heroes were the subjects and main characters of Homeric poetry and many of these were also the recipients of various types of cult. Many scholars, especially Lewis Farnell in his 1921 book *Greek Hero Cults and Ideas of Immortality* have argued

¹ That is to say, the Homeric epics took on a standard, recited, form, probably between 750 and 650 BC, allowing of course for various performative interpolations. It is not my goal or intention to delve into the 'Homeric Question' in any way. For this cf. Nagy (1979) 1 ff. and his bibliography.

² Nagy (1979) 7; Nagy also includes the establishment of Delphi, the Olympic games and organized colonizations as results of Panhellenism

³ Not only in poetry but in the material record as well. See Morris (1988) 750 ff. "Judging from the material record alone, though, Greeks took relatively little interest in their past until about 750; and even then, only one aspect attracted them strongly — the figure of the hero."

that the spread of the Homeric epics in many cases actually brought about the practice of hero cult worship.⁴ Farnell's general position on the relationship between poetry and epic was that, "much hero-cult was directly engendered by the powerful influence of the Homeric and other epics."⁵ He acknowledges however, that this theory does not sufficiently explain the origins of every hero cult, and even fails to explain some of the cults of epic heroes.⁶

Robert Parker has argued that a great number of hero cults are products of the very same era that produced the Homeric poems and that because "Homer represents not the origin of a tradition but its culmination," so too are mature hero cult rituals the culmination of traditions, practices, and sagas about heroes of the past.⁷ A more adequate explanation, then, may lie in a qualified version of Farnell's thesis, that in the cases of epic heroes who receive cultic honors, some individual hero cults were influenced by the spread of epic poetry, some may have been actually inspired by it,⁸ and some developed independently from Homeric epic poetry.

⁴ Farnell was reacting against the monumental and influential work of Erwin Rohde's 1893 book *Psyche*. To fit with his interpretation of the psyche in Homer, Rohde argued that Homer could not have influenced hero cult at all. "The Homeric poems, so violently opposed to any idea of a conscious or active existence of the soul after death, could hardly have brought it about that those very champions whom it had represented as indeed dead and departed to the distant land of Hades should be regarded as still living and exercising an influence from their graves" (119). Instead Rohde insisted that, "The worship of heroes began as ancestor cult and an ancestor cult it remained in essence" (138).

⁵ Farnell (1921) 340; Much of the later scholarship on hero cult has sought to either prove or discount this theory, involving various kinds of evidence including pre-Homeric archaeological evidence of hero cult and tomb cult, and even textual evidence that Homeric poetry was aware of hero cult practices. For this see esp. Coldstream (1976), Price (1979), and Snodgrass (1982) and (1987)

⁶ Farnell (1921) 284: "Sometimes, indeed, as in the case of the Aikidai... we find the hero-cult strong on the ancestral soil, and here we may regard the personage as one of the local ancestors glorified by saga." and in the cases of Sarpedon and Glaukos, some heroes "were already enjoying ancestral-heroic cult in their own homes among their own kinsfolk before Homer took their names and wove them into the great fabric of his song" (284).

⁷ Parker (1996) 36-7; similarly Calligas (1986) 233: "Hero-worship is, I believe, parallel and not, as has been argued, a subsequent phenomenon to the spread of Epos."

⁸ As in cases of a post-Homeric rediscovery of a Mycenaean tomb in an area of Greece whence an epic hero was remembered to have come.

The very difficulty in attempting to examine or organize a theory for the origin of hero cult lies in the fact very few hero cults are exactly the same, and many archaeological or literary examples could be found to support various claims. Hero cult practices varied widely throughout the several hundred years of their development and just as widely throughout the different regions of Greece.⁹ There are, however, some basic trends that are uncontroversial, and this chapter will examine characteristics common to the majority of ancient Greek hero cults. After examining hero cult more generally, this chapter will turn to what is known about the cult of one hero in particular, namely, Telamonian Ajax, the famous hero of Homeric epic. Ajax was a hero celebrated in various forms of poetry, but also revered in several cultic forms at different locations throughout the Greek-speaking world. The relationship and interaction between his cult and his presentation in poetry comprises the focus of this study.

I. What is a hero?

Philologically, it is clear that the Greek word ἥρωες was used in various ways and had different connotations, depending on context, throughout archaic Greek poetry and society. Bruno Currie has noted that it is almost impossible to define the Greek concept of the hero without reference to Homer, but that the religious usage of the word seems to be completely absent from the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*.¹⁰ Martin West notes that ἥρωες is even used differently in the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, where it is used more widely and

⁹ Coldstream (1976) 13; Whitley (1988), (1991); Thessaly for example offers almost no evidence of hero cult, whereas Attica and the Argolid are rich with archaeological remains

¹⁰ Currie (2005) 29, 48; cf. Burkert (1985) 203ff. Currie (2005) 62ff. provides the most recent and succinct summary of various theories of the word's origins, including its use in Mycenaean society, its use in Homer as a title of respect akin to the English 'Sir' or 'Lord' as well as a possible link to the goddess Hera.

indiscriminately. West concurs that, “Nowhere in epic is there any hint of a religious significance, a connection with cult after death.”¹¹

As early as the time of Hesiod, Greeks were self-consciously aware of an ‘Age of Heroes’ and were also quite sure that they themselves were living in a later age, after the heroes had died.¹² For Hesiod then, the hero was someone categorically different from ordinary living men. Homer as well occasionally remarks that the heroes in his poems were superhuman in strength and stature, as in *Iliad* 12.447-449 where the poet describes how Hector lifted a rock that two men today could not hoist.¹³ In archaic poetry, therefore, it is clear that the world of heroes existed in an earlier age and that men of that time, possibly solely by virtue of the fact that they lived during that heroic age, were called ἥρωες. It is a moot point whether or not ἥρωες maintained separate religious and secular usages during the age of Homer, or whether Homeric poetry was consciously archaizing.¹⁴ However ἥρωες was used, the force of the word would have conjured up sentiments of awe, the grandeur of a bygone heroic era, and an awareness of the distinct qualities that link and separate heroes and men.

ἥρωες also had a very specific religious usage, however, and the category of heroes who received cultic honors extends beyond the heroes whose names have been immortalized in epic poetry. Emily Kearns has stated that in the widest sense, “the typical hero seems to represent the coincidence of an intermediate being who receives cult with a

¹¹ West (1978) 370

¹² Hesiod *Works and Days* 156-76. 158-60: Ζεὺς Κρονίδης ποιήσε, δικαιοτέρον καὶ ἄρειον, ἢ ἀνδρῶν ἡρώων θεῖον γένος, οἳ καλέονται ἢ ἡμίθεοι, προτέρη γενεῇ κατ’ ἀπίρονα γαίαν

¹³ τὸν δ’ οὐ κε δὴ ἀνέρε δῆμου ἀρίστω ἢ ῥηϊδίως ἐπ’ ἄμαξαν ἀπ’ οὐδεος ὀχλίσσειαν, ἢ οἶοι νῦν βροτοὶ εἰσ’· ὃ δέ μιν ῥέα πάλλε καὶ οἶος.

¹⁴ Hack (1929) 70 ff. discusses Homer’s intentional archaizing and its implications for hero cult origins

narrative, historical dimension.”¹⁵ Her definition emphasizes the ‘intermediate’ nature of heroes.¹⁶ Heroes had once been living men, in myth at least; they are not embodied spiritual forces,¹⁷ demoted gods or *daimones*.¹⁸ A hero of cult represents the force or power left behind by the soul of the departed. But because not every deceased man is a hero, something must set them apart from ordinary men. Something has to make the hero.

A hero is a figure with some mark of the superhuman. Someone who “was so powerful in his lifetime or through the peculiar circumstances of his death that his spirit after death is regarded as of supernormal power, claiming to be revered and propitiated...”¹⁹ Often a surfeit of some force or quality such as extraordinary strength, talent, ability, virtue, or even vice or madness makes a man a hero. It is possible for heroes to be the offspring of gods and men, but they are not immortal like the gods. They are thus more closely related to men than to gods, and more closely present after their deaths. A numinous force always surrounds and distinguishes the life, death, and tomb of a hero. Burkert writes, “It is some extraordinary quality that makes the hero; something unpredictable and uncanny is left behind and is always present.”²⁰

It is what the heroes leave behind that connects them with normal men and what establishes them as figures of cult. It was believed that heroes, because of their extraordinary nature in life, were able to use some power from beyond the grave for the benefit or for the harm of the living. In order to ensure that a benefit was accorded, or that

¹⁵ Kearns (1989) 135

¹⁶ For a literary example, see Pindar *Ol.* 2.2 τίνα θεόν, τίν' ἥρωα, τίνα δ' ἄνδρα κελαδήσομεν;

¹⁷ Of course a hero cult could develop around a personified force but typically the cult figure was also believed to have once been a living person.

¹⁸ Rohde (1950 ed.) 115-116, 139-140 Rohde claimed on philological grounds that because ἐναγίζειν (a specific verb meaning ‘to sacrifice’ that is used for the offering of ἐναγίσματα to heroes and never to gods) could never be derived from θύειν (a more general verb usually used for sacrificing to the gods), heroes must always have been spirits of men elevated, rather than demoted deities.

¹⁹ Farnell (1921) 343

²⁰ Burkert (1985) 208

harm was avoided, cults were initiated to appease and propitiate heroes. Through these cults, the living are able to access the spiritual power and force that the heroes leave behind. In the physical sense, the hero leaves behind his bones and relics, and the location of a hero's power is often centered on the location of these relics.²¹ The hero's power is usually limited to a particular location, connected to the ground and area surrounding their tombs or cult sites.

Typically, heroes were honored or worshipped at *heroa*. The *heroon* is a unique sacred space, often located at a tomb believed to be the tomb of the hero, but just as often at a dedicated shrine where no tomb was located but where the power of the hero occupied the space nonetheless. *Heroa* were community shrines, and the cultic sacrifices that took place at them bound local residents together ritually. The personality of the hero often provided communities with a sense of group identity, and *heroa* afforded the group a common sacred space.²² Because of the immanence and power of heroes, their shrines were treated with great reverence, and were always passed in silence.²³

An essential aspect of hero cult worship was its *chthonic* quality.²⁴ Heroes reside in and under the earth, and in some cases they are even described as "holding" (ἔχειν) the ground they are buried in.²⁵ The heroes were separate from the Olympian gods, who were more distant and less directly connected to the ground or space where they were

²¹ Ibid. 206; Antonaccio (1994) 404; Herodotus 1.68 records the discovery and Spartan acquisition of Orestes' bones

²² For these and other sociological traits of hero cults, particularly for explanations for the origins of hero cult, see Snodgrass (1982) 116-118, (2006) 216 ff.; Whitley (1991) 361 ff.; Calligas (1986); Kearns (1989) 83 ff. For hero cult as a politically unifying force, see de Polignac (1984) and Bérard (1983)

²³ Burkert 208; Epicharmos *Fr.* 165: ἀλλὰ καὶ σιγὴν ἀγαθόν, ὅκκα παρέωντι κάρρονες. With κάρρονες being a common euphemism for the hero.

²⁴ Farnell (1921) 281: "All hero-cults are chthonic, with a ritual only appropriate to a buried spirit."

²⁵ cf. Henrichs (1993) 174

honored.²⁶ Because of their connection to the earth, sacrificial ritual was typically performed for heroes in a different style. Often using low altars, black male animals were sacrificed and the blood was allowed to drain onto the ground to appease the hero whose spirit held that space or whose power was locally effective.²⁷ As Rohde puts it, "They are nearby in the earth itself, and there is no need in their case, as for the Olympians, to send up the savour of sacrifice in smoke to heaven."²⁸ Commonly a ritual meal was prepared and the hero was invited as the honored guest, sometimes a statue would be brought to the banquet or the hero would be present in some other guise such as a terra cotta votive.²⁹ Additionally, because of the need to ensure that the hero was appeased regularly, that is, to ensure the consistent and persistent favor of the hero, sacrifices and offerings were performed regularly, typically on a yearly basis.³⁰ An annual athletic contest or festival is another common aspect of hero worship, and in Rohde's view, reflects its close relationship to cults of the dead and funerary practices.³¹ For example, the Aianteia, an athletic festival on Salamis, was held there in honor of Ajax, and the Olympic games were established as a cultic celebration of Pelops, whose *heroon* was located nearby.³²

What was expected of a propitiated and honored hero? In many cases, a plague or famine was believed to be the result of the anger of a hero who had gone without the deserved propitiation. After the establishment of the cult, the plague ceases and the cult is kept up in order to prevent future maladies. This is a pattern especially common when the

²⁶ Harrison (1927) 375

²⁷ Homer, it seems, was aware of the tendency to use black rams for hero sacrifice cf. *Od.* 11.32-3; cf. Price (1973) 135

²⁸ Rohde (1950 ed.) 116

²⁹ *Ibid* 116; Burkert (1985) 205

³⁰ Burkert (1985) 205; Harrison (1927) 373-4

³¹ Rohde (1950 ed.) 116-117

³² Farnell (1921) 308; Burkert (1985) 208; On the importance of Pelops for the Olympic games, see Pindar *Ol.* 1

Delphic oracle recommends the establishment of a hero cult, as in the often-cited cases of Kleomedes of Astypalaea and Theogenes of Thasos.³³ In other cults the heroes protected their homelands in battle. In Herodotus 8.38-39.1 we hear that two local heroes of Delphi, Phylakos and Autoonos, took visible form and rushed down the mountain, chasing and even killing the fleeing Persian invaders. The Lokrians left an open slot in their phalanx where Ajax Oileus, the lesser Ajax of the Trojan War, could fight.³⁴ Heroes were also appeased for countless other reasons such as healing, healthy childbirth and safe maritime passage.³⁵

We have established a basic understanding of the nature of heroes as they are honored in cult.³⁶ As always, whenever investigating hero cult, its distinction from other types of cults of the dead, ancestor worship and grave tendance should be maintained.³⁷ All types of cults of the dead share a few common elements, but there is great diversity amongst them—so too amongst various types of hero cults. Some hero cults worship anonymous heroes, some the personified hero of an abstract force, some legendary city founders.³⁸ Some are for historical persons who died under unusual circumstances, and some cults offered ritual worship to the very same heroes celebrated in epic poetry. We cannot accept that Homeric epic poetry was the sole, or even primary, impetus for all heroic cults. However, heroes celebrated in epic poetry who also were honored with cult

³³ For Kleomedes, Paus. 6.9.6-9; For Theogenes, Paus. 6.11

³⁴ Paus. 3.19.12

³⁵ Burkert (1985) 207

³⁶ In cult as opposed to the portrayal of heroes in literature, which is more varied

³⁷ Farnell was the first to introduce close distinction between types of cults of the dead. Whitley (1994) 214: "Some (but not all) hero cults were tomb cults; some (but not all) tomb cults were cults of ancestors; and some (but not all) ancestors were also heroes." Additionally, Burkert (1985) 204 points out distinguishing beliefs and motives, "The hero cult, in fact, is not an ancestor cult at all; its concern is with effective presence, not with the chain of blood across generations, even though founding ancestors might naturally receive heroic honours."

³⁸ cf. Farnell (1921) 19 for his list of different hero 'categories'

often owe their popularity as cult figures to the spread of epic. Indeed, Farnell noticed that the cults of many epic heroes such as Achilles, Diomedes, Agamemnon and others appear in unlikely places around the Mediterranean and that, “one seems to perceive a number of great hero-names drifting about the sea-tracks of migration and later colonization. What set them adrift was the flood of epic poetry. In fact, we must attribute more influence to the epic than some scholars are willing to allow...”³⁹

There is, however, a distinction that needs to be drawn between epic poetry and hero cult honors. The glory and renown conferred by Homeric poetry is Panhellenic. The prestige of a cult hero is typically more circumscribed, however, and is usually limited to the locale of the hero’s cult and the seat of his power. Some heroes, however, may have cults in several different locations. It is to one of these very heroes that we now turn. Ajax’s cult crops up in various places around the Greek-speaking world. The cult gets its start in Salamis, his traditional homeland, but eventually is established in Athens. The diffusion of epic poetry was highly influential in the establishment of Ajax cult. His fame in Homeric epic, as well as his attachment to Salamis (and, possibly Athens) in epic poetry and local saga tradition comprise the primary reasons for the adoption of his cult in Attica. The prominence of Ajax’s cult diffused beyond the typical local limits of a cult hero’s power. Ajax’s fame in Panhellenic epic promoted the expansion of his cult sites and conferred Ajax the cult hero with uncommonly widespread honor and influence.

II. The Hero Cult of Ajax

τάδε γὰρ οὐκ ἡμεῖς κατεργασάμεθα, ἀλλὰ θεοὶ τε καὶ ἥρωες...⁴⁰

³⁹ Farnell (1921) 284

⁴⁰ Hdt. 8.109.3

“It was not we who achieved these things, but rather the gods and heroes.”

According to Herodotus, these are the words spoken by Themistocles in 480 BC after the surprising Greek victory over the Persians in the naval battle off the coast of Salamis.

Later in his account of the aftermath of the battle, Herodotus records that the Greeks dedicated a Phoenician trireme on Salamis as a victory offering to Ajax.⁴¹

In 480 BC the Greeks had scarcely forgotten the famous protective power of the Homeric Ajax, ‘bulwark of the Achaeans.’⁴² Although Ajax was never worshipped as a maritime or naval hero per se, before the Battle of Salamis the Greeks invoked his aid as a potent defensive warrior.⁴³ Herodotus records in 8.64 that the Greeks prayed to all the gods and ‘called forth’ Ajax and Telamon from Salamis itself (αὐτόθεν μὲν ἐκ Σαλαμίνοσ Αἴαντά τε καὶ Τελαμῶνα ἐπεκαλέοντο).⁴⁴ Herodotus’ language in these lines emphasizes the local residence of Ajax and Telamon on Salamis, indicating the deeply rooted belief that the island was their heroic ‘territory’.⁴⁵ Ajax and Telamon are not invoked because of any association they have with naval battles or favorable seafaring conditions, but they are called upon in the dire moment because of their local power as tutelary heroes who reside and receive cult honors on the very island where the Greeks were staging their desperate last stand. Ajax’s role in the *Iliad* made him a mythically and ideologically appropriate hero to pray to in such a situation. He was invoked as a local protective force off the coast of his native Salamis to prevent the

⁴¹ Hdt. 8.121

⁴² ἕρκος Ἀχαιῶν for this epithet of Ajax see *Il.* 3.229, 6.5, 7.211

⁴³ For seafaring heroes, particularly in Attica, cf. Kearns (1989) 36-43

⁴⁴ Hdt. 8.64 Ajax’s legendary ancestor Aiacus, traditionally connected with Aigina, was also called upon during the same conflict and was even brought to the battle on a ship. In what capacity he was brought is not clear. Herodotus does not specify if heroic relics or merely a statue was retrieved from the island. Regardless they were undoubtedly considered to have some sort of talismanic power in the battle. cf. Kearns (1989) 46.

⁴⁵ Even Aeschylus in the *Persians* line 307 calls Salamis “the island of Ajax” (νῆσος Αἴαντος)

destruction of the Greek fleet. In the same way, μέγας Τελαμώνιος Αἶας effectively defended the Greek fleet against Hector's fiery onslaught in Book 15 of the *Iliad*.⁴⁶ Ajax's famous actions in poetry, therefore, colored the conception of his cultic powers, further revealing the formative influence epic poetry held for Ajax's ritual honors. Additionally, the Greek victory at Salamis would have demonstrated the potency of Ajax's cult to all of the allied Greeks present. This may have given Ajax's cultic fame near-Panhellenic recognition, mirroring the renown he already enjoyed as a hero of Panhellenic epic poetry and increasing the prominence of his hero cult.

Ajax's fame in poetry also led to the establishment of his cult in other areas of Greek-speaking world. Strabo records a memorial and temple of Ajax (μνῆμα καὶ ἱερὸν Αἴαντος) in the Troad, the place of his suicide and burial.⁴⁷ Pausanias records that while he was visiting Salamis, a Mysian guide there described where Ajax's body was buried in the Troad. The guide was also able to indicate the size of Ajax's bones. He attests that the kneecaps of the corpse were the size of the discus used in the boy's pentathlon and that the size of the hero's body could be determined proportionally—that is to say, true to legend, Ajax was of superhuman stature.⁴⁸ In Megara as well, there was a cult of Athena Aiantis, where the goddess was worshipped in some connection with Ajax. This is a strange cultic pairing, particularly in light of the common contention between the two in

⁴⁶ For the epithet in this episode: *Iliad* 15.471, 15.560

⁴⁷ Strabo 13.30; Farnell (1921) 309: "As regards his cult in the Troad, we cannot connect it with any tribal traditions brought hither by later colonists, but directly with the influence of the great epic that was all pervasive in this locality...[It was] according to Pliny, dedicated by the Rhodians who had no peculiar ancestral connexion with him."

⁴⁸ Paus 1.35.5; The presence of a Mysian (Asia Minor) guide on Salamis may indicate that there was a market for Ajax cult 'sacred tourism'. Mysia is located in the northwest corner of Asia Minor, near the traditional location of Troy.

myth.⁴⁹ It is certainly more puzzling considering that Athena is the ever-present patron goddess of Ajax's great rival, Odysseus.⁵⁰ Pausanias also had difficulty accounting for this cult, and offers his own opinion that Ajax must have fashioned the cult statue of Athena there.⁵¹ Besides these two cult sites attested in ancient geographies, the primary locations of Ajax's hero cult were in Athens, and on the island of Salamis itself, his traditional ancestral home.⁵²

Ajax's association with Salamis was ancient, and regular cult in his honor on Salamis likely was established during the eighth and seventh centuries.⁵³ The *Iliad* attests to his Salaminian nationality at 2.557 and 7.199. The connection between Ajax and Salamis is archaic, despite the accusation that 2.557-58 were Athenian interpolations.⁵⁴ The lines read, "From Salamis, Ajax led twelve ships, he placed them, leading them where the troops of the Athenians were set up."⁵⁵ The spurious aspect of these lines is not that Ajax hailed from Salamis. Rather, the problem is whether Ajax set up his ships alongside the Athenian ships, and whether, as Solon claimed, this is legitimate Homeric evidence for an Athens-Salamis connection. Furthermore, there is no reason to challenge the authenticity of 7.199.⁵⁶ Ajax's connection with Salamis, then, either in Homeric poetry or in local tradition, extends at least as far back as the 8th century, and it is possible

⁴⁹ Consider the *Little Iliad*, where Athena conspired to defeat Ajax in the contest for the arms of Achilles. Also Aeschylus' *Ajax* trilogy evidently depicted the goddess assisting with the disgrace and suicide of Ajax (fr. 83). Finally in Sophocles' *Ajax* the goddess calls Ajax her enemy and says that laughing at him is the sweetest laughter (οὐκ οὖν γέλωσ ἡδιστος εἰς ἐχθροὺς γελᾶν; 79). See ch. 3 for Sophocles' *Ajax*.

⁵⁰ Some scholars have sought to link the creation of this cult with Megara's territorial squabble with Athens over the island of Salamis, cf. Farnell (1921) 308-9.

⁵¹ Paus. 1.42.4 he records that his Megarian guides did not show him anything about the Athena Aiantis cult

⁵² Archaeologist Yiannis Lolos has recently uncovered a Mycenaean Era palace on Salamis that he has termed "The Palace of Ajax". The findings are currently unpublished but have been featured in the media. See Paphitis, Nicholas. "Archaeologist links ancient palace with Ajax." *USA Today*. March 29, 2006; http://www.usatoday.com/tech/science/2006-03-29-ajax-palace_x.htm

⁵³ Farnell (1921) 307-8

⁵⁴ Plutarch *Solon* 10 records that Solon composed and inserted the line himself.

⁵⁵ Αἶας δ' ἐκ Σαλαμῖνος ἄγεν δυοκαίδεκα νῆας, ἰστήσε δ' ἄγων ἴν' Ἀθηναίων ἴσταντο φάλαγγες.

⁵⁶ Kirk (1985) 207-209 and (1990) 260

that his worship as a cult hero or as an ancestor on Salamis could have begun even earlier. In any case, during the historical period, there is no doubt that Ajax received heroic honors at Salamis.

In addition to merely being traditionally connected to the island, there was also a *heroon* and a *temenos* on Salamis where Ajax received regular worship. Pausanias records that on Salamis “there is still a temple of Ajax and a statue made of ebony.”⁵⁷ He also investigated local legends about Ajax. On display was the stone on which Telamon sat while watching his children sail away to Troy. One of the most interesting local legends that Pausanias preserves is that when Ajax died, a flower first appeared on the island which was “white and tinged with red, both flower and leaves being smaller than those of the lily; there are letters on it like to those on the iris.”⁵⁸ This type of sign and local tradition again illustrates the mythic and ancestral connection Salaminians felt toward Ajax. Not only was he the legendary heroic king of Salamis, his death served as an explanation for botanical phenomena, and his persistent worship on the island ensured his continued favor and protection.

In addition to his *temenos* and cultic rites on Salamis, Ajax was also honored with an athletic competition called the *Aianteia*. The games were either established or expanded after 480 BC to show gratitude for the naval victory. Farnell claims the games

⁵⁷ Paus. 1.35.3 ἔστι δὲ...ἔτι...ναὸς Αἴαντος, ἄγαλμα δὲ ἐξ ἐβένου ξύλου The connotation of the ἔτι appears to be that the temple, as well as remains of a marketplace, appeared to Pausanias to be of great antiquity.

⁵⁸ Paus. 1.35.4 Translation by Jones (1918) 189. The Greek reads: λέγουσι δὲ οἱ περὶ τὴν Σαλαμίνα οἰκούντες ἀποθανόντος Αἴαντος τὸ ἄνθος σφίσι ἐν τῇ γῆ τότε φανῆναι πρῶτον, λευκὸν ἔστιν, ὑπέρυθρον, κρίνου καὶ αὐτὸ ἔλασσον καὶ τὰ φύλλα, γράμματα δὲ ἔπεστιν οἷα τοῖς ὑακίνθοις καὶ τούτῳ. The letters on the flower seem to spell out ΑΙΑΙ, a traditional Greek cry of lamentation. In Sophocles' play, *Ajax*, line 430-3, Ajax conjectures that this cry is the derivation of his unlucky name. cf. Garvie (1998) note ad loc. p. 165.

originated during the archaic period.⁵⁹ By the second century BC, celebrations included a procession, sacrifice, gymnastic competition, torch-race and boat-race—as Kearns puts it, “an elaborate festival for a hero.”⁶⁰ The games held especial importance for Attic ephebes, who were responsible for maintaining the festival.⁶¹ This particular development likely took place after the battle of Salamis and an expansion of the games under Athenian influence and funding during the prosperous years of the mid-fifth century BC. It is at least highly unlikely that Attic ephebes would have played a major role before the Athenian acquisition of Salamis in the sixth century and the establishment of Ajax as an eponymous hero in 508 BC.

Although Ajax was a major cult figure on the island of Salamis, his cult was of great importance in Attica and in Athens itself. He was not honored as a native Athenian hero, however, and the origin of his cult in Attica is controversial. It is certain, however, that the establishment of Ajax’s cult in Athens is linked to the prominence of the *genos* of Salaminioi. The arrival of the Salaminioi in Athens is unclear, and the question of whether they were originally Salaminian settlers, transplants or Attic natives will likely never be decisively answered.⁶² The Salaminioi provided the priests for several important cults in Athens, including the cult of Eurysakes, a cult possibly located on the acropolis, and the cult of Athena Skiras at Phaleron.⁶³ Robert Parker points out that the mystery of their origins is heightened by the fact that they appear to be closely connected with

⁵⁹ Farnell (1921) 308

⁶⁰ Kearns (1989) 141; and esp. Deubner *Attische Feste* (1932) 228, quoting: *IG II²* 1028.27

⁶¹ Farnell (1921) 308, Burkert (1985) 208, Deubner (1932) 228, Parker (1996) 153

⁶² Ferguson (1938) discusses the main theories. cf. Kearns (1989) 71; Parker (1996) 312 ff.

⁶³ Ferguson (1938) 5-8 for a translation of a Salaminian inscription referring to their various priestly duties; Athena Skiras is also the cult name of Athena on the island of Salamis itself, *Hdt.* 8.94

authentically Salaminian cults as well as with ancient Athenian rituals and festivals.⁶⁴ Their self-identification as parvenu citizens helped to define their role within the polis and characterized the cult of Ajax as one of a closely related outsider, adopted and integrated into the Athenian polis structure.

The Salaminioi considered themselves to have descended from Eurysakes and Philaios, the legendary sons of Ajax who immigrated to Athens from Salamis.⁶⁵ Local tradition claimed Eurysakes as the founder of a tribe at Melite and Philaios as the founder of the Philaidai at Brauron. The Philaidai boasted some of Athens' most famous and influential citizens, including the family of Peisistratus, Miltiades and Cimon. The legends of the arrival of Eurysakes and Philaios are linked to Athens' struggle with Megara for control over Salamis.⁶⁶ According to Plutarch, Solon argued that when Eurysakes and Philaios arrived in Attica, they offered the island of Salamis to the Athenians. Regardless of the verifiability of the claims of the Salaminioi to be actual Salaminian immigrants, it was nonetheless a great boon to the Athenian pursuit of Salamis that Salaminian cults and heroes had already been adopted in Attica by the sixth century BC.

The cult of Eurysakes at Melite was established by the Salaminioi and was complete with a *heroon* and a sacred *temenos*.⁶⁷ In Athens Eurysakes was a hero special to the Salaminioi, who honored him as a founder and as their common ancestor. The cult of Eurysakes is one that gave the Salaminioi a common identity and bound the genos

⁶⁴ Parker (1996) 312 ff.

⁶⁵ The legends are discussed by both Plutarch and Pausanias. In *Solon* book 10, Plutarch offers Philaios and Eurysakes as the sons of Ajax, whereas in Paus. 1.35.2, Philaios is listed as the son of Eurysakes and the grandson of Ajax.

⁶⁶ Higbie (1997) provides a recent discussion of the controversy and the unique role played by hero cult

⁶⁷ Paus. 1.35.3; Kearns (1989) 70-71, 141

together. As Kearns reasons, if we suppose that, “for the Salaminioi the important thing is to be Salaminian, it is clear that the worship of Eurysakes is of assistance. He helps to define their identity, and so his importance to the *genos* goes beyond the merely coincidental...”⁶⁸ Robert Parker adds, “The cult of Eurysakes, a Salaminian abroad *par excellence*, was doubtless a main focus for the *genos*’ sense of ex-patriate identity—if that indeed is what they were.”⁶⁹ Besides providing an ideological and psychological identity, the Eurysakeion also served as a physical center and ‘headquarters’ for the *genos*, and was where tribal decrees were set up. At some point, Ajax came to be worshipped alongside his son at the *hieron* in Melite. Eurysakes is not known in Homer as a son of Ajax, and it is possible that the original cult was in honor of a personified, tutelary force of a ‘broad shield’. Most probably he was eventually connected to Ajax because Ajax’s shield is his most recognizable characteristic.⁷⁰

It is not certain when Ajax began to receive heroic honors in Attica. Some, such as Ferguson, place the date at 508 BC when he was incorporated in Cleisthenes’ reforms as one of the ten eponymous heroes, and not earlier. He writes, “In the sixth century [Ajax] was too strongly rooted [on Salamis] to be appropriated by the Athenians...”⁷¹ Ferguson’s article revealed inscriptional evidence that the Eurysakeion was used as the *hieron* and ‘headquarters’ of the Aiantis tribe.⁷² Ferguson reasons that the mythological connection between Ajax and Eurysakes made the Eurysakeion an obvious place for the Aiantis tribe to hold meetings and display their tribal decrees. He does not allow,

⁶⁸ Kearns (1989) 71

⁶⁹ Parker (1996) 314

⁷⁰ Ferguson (1938) 15-16

⁷¹ Ferguson (1938) 17

⁷² *Ibid.* 18 Ferguson rejected previously held notions that the Athenian tribe of Aiantis held their meetings at a tribal center and *heroon* on Salamis, arguing that it “would have been most inconvenient for the great majority of the phyletai” (18).

however, that this could have happened before the Cleisthenic reforms. But other scholars argue that it is likely that Ajax was worshipped alongside his son even before the institution of the eponymous tribal heroes.

Kearns, for example, theorizes that Ajax had been incorporated already when the hero of a cult at Melite, devoted to a hero 'of the broad shield', was personalized into Eurysakes, "Ajax's (post-Homeric) son." She also reasons that, "This identification would almost certainly take place during the long sixth-century quarrel with Megara over Salamis, so that Ajax's cult was probably introduced at Eurysakes' sanctuary at Melite well before his adoption as eponymous [hero]."⁷³ Kearns agrees with Shapiro, who argued that the cult of Ajax in Athens pre-dates the tribal reforms and was used as evidence to defend Athens' claims of hegemony over Salamis. Shapiro states that it "is the clearest example in Attika of an epic hero being pressed into the service of political propaganda between rival *poleis*."⁷⁴

There is no doubt that an existing cult of Ajax in Athens would have proven a deeper tie between Athens, the Salaminioi and the island of Salamis itself, deeper even than the cult of Eurysakes. However the potential political motivation does not prove that a pre-Cleisthenian cult of Ajax was maintained in Athens. According to Aristotle, however, Cleisthenes took the ten eponymous heroes from already existing hero cults.⁷⁵ It seems unlikely that Ajax would have been chosen without an already established cult center in Attica, namely at the Eurysakeion. Moreover, the Eurysakeion was located

⁷³ Kearns (1989) 82

⁷⁴ Shapiro (1989) 154

⁷⁵ Arist. *Ath. Pol.* 21.6 τὰ δὲ γένη καὶ τὰς φρατρίας καὶ τὰς ἱερωσύνας εἶασεν ἔχειν ἐκάστους κατὰ τὰ πάτρια. ταῖς δὲ φυλαῖς ἐποίησεν ἐπωνύμους ἐκ τῶν προκριθέντων ἑκατὸν ἀρχηγῶν, οὓς ἀνείλεν ἢ Πυθία δέκα. Ajax and Hippothon (Eleusis) being the only two not native to Athens.

within the deme Melite, which was territory assigned to the new tribe Kekropis.⁷⁶ It therefore seems unlikely that a newly created tribe would establish their headquarters and cult center within the territory of another tribe without an already established cult practice. This fact, considered alongside the obvious political reasons for an Ajax cult in Athens during the sixth century BC, implies that the most likely scenario is that Ajax was already worshipped at the *hieron* of his son before the Cleisthenian reforms, and that the Salaminioi superintended his cult.⁷⁷

Despite the debate about when Ajax first came to Athens as a cult figure, his cult enjoyed an honored and invigorated status after being included among the ten eponymous heroes. Herodotus points out that Ajax was the only one of the new heroes who was not a native to Attica, but that he was included because he was ἀστυγείτονα καὶ σύμμαχον, ξείνον ἐόντα⁷⁸ “a neighbor and ally, though he was a foreigner.” It is a testament to the importance of Ajax and his fame as a warrior-king in Homeric poetry that he was able to establish such a prominent cult in Athens, in the face of so great an abundance of native Attic heroes.⁷⁹ Statues of Ajax were put on display along with the other heroes in the Agora and his worship expanded beyond the traditional Salaminian *genos* to include other segments of society. His status as a hero in Attica grew from an adopted Salaminian and Homeric hero, worshipped alongside his son, into an official civic tribal founder, the

⁷⁶ Shapiro (1989) 154

⁷⁷ Shapiro also points out on page 156 that the first detectable portrayals of Ajax as an Athenian in vase-painting come from the end of the sixth century.

⁷⁸ Hdt. 5.66

⁷⁹ Attic hero cults are not only extremely ancient and diverse in type and nature, but they are also generally very abundant. Kearns' *The Heroes of Attica* (1989) is a testament to this. Within Attica are found the Menidi tholos, cited often by archaeologists as evidence for continued grave cult at a Mycenaean site through the fifth century BC. Additionally, the cult of Erechtheus on the Acropolis is often cited as evidence that Homer knew about hero cult. cf. *Iliad* 2.546-52 and *Od.* 7.78-81. Additionally the hero at the academy is reputed to be of pre-Homeric date, see Price (1979) 226. Parker (1996) writes, “Nothing is more characteristic of classical Attic religion than its abundance of hero-cults” (275).

regularly honored and ever-present identifying figure of an Attic phyle. The new civic nature of the cult of Ajax made his cult even more important. The Salaminian hero was thus fully adopted as an Attic and Athenian polis hero, essential to the cultural and psychological identity of the city. Ajax was theirs, and likewise, they were his heroic descendents and were upheld and protected by the force of his cult. His identifying characteristics, and, indeed his portrayal in art and poetry also began to take on new civic and tribal dimensions, and would have been more meaningful to members of his tribe. By identifying themselves with their tribal founder, members of Aiantis were repeatedly drawing the mythical past forward into their own time, as well as linking themselves to a great figure from a greater era. As Kearns remarks, "the coincidence in name signified a coincidence in substance, and the hero was in some senses the projection of the group itself onto the plane of myth or cult or both, and its expression in a unified, individualized form."⁸⁰

Although the origins of Ajax's worship in Attica are somewhat uncertain and controversial, his status in the fifth century is beyond doubt. By the beginning of the fifth century BC Ajax had stepped over from Salamis onto the mainland and was established as an officially Athenian cult hero, with a shrine and a statue even in the middle of the agora.

⁸⁰ Kearns (1989) 83

2

Ajax and Pindar: The Hero of Epinician

Pindar's victory odes are preserved for us as the premier example of Greek epinician poetry. The majority of the lyrics that remain were written to commemorate victorious athletes in the four great Panhellenic games, the Olympian, Pythian, Nemean, and Isthmian. His poems, typically locally performed but also potentially diffused at a Panhellenic level, provide his patrons with widespread praise, and lasting and resounding honor. Pindar is in the business of honoring the victory and the victor, augmenting and preserving the prestige of the family and the polis, and providing enjoyable songs suitable for the context of a victor's celebration festival.¹ His poems ensured that the glory of the athletic victory would last for all time, and their performance diffused the excellent reputation of the laudandus throughout Greece.

Pindar writes praise poetry within a living tradition of heroic song. In the poetic world of Pindar's odes the heroes of the mythic past press forward into the present time. Similarly, the laudandi of Pindar's poems are inserted into the poetic tradition of the heroes. Their deeds and athletic victories are contextually and conceptually linked with the deeds of myth and their renown and honor is made concomitant with the glory of Greece's most famous poetic figures. Telamonian Ajax, the object of this study, features

¹ For epinician poetry as literally a business, and the economy of praise poetry, see Kurke (1991)

prominently in Pindar's odes. Strikingly, Pindar takes up the story of Ajax with an occasionally offended and combative tone.

Though he is working within a continuous tradition of heroic song, one that was constantly composing and recomposing tales about the mythic past, Pindar is nonetheless highly ambivalent toward prior poetry. He is dependent on the poetic tradition for its mythic material and as the means by which knowledge of the mythic past was preserved. However, Pindar is often critical of the tales that some of the oral tradition had canonized. He is keenly aware that the poetic tradition is not infallible, and poetry is capable of preserving lies, malicious gossip, and of unjustly honoring unworthy men.²

As a praise poet, Pindar takes care to distribute praise and blame in his poetry to those who actually deserve either praise or blame.³ Because poetry is such an effective means for the preservation and diffusion of a hero or an athlete's reputation, the possibility that poetry could preserve lies and deception is extremely disconcerting for Pindar. What if poetry had somehow gotten it wrong and had dishonored a figure who actually deserved praise? How should a later poet receive and respond to a poetic tradition that unjustly condemns a praiseworthy hero, and is it wise to contradict the received poetry in an attempt to set the record straight? The story of Ajax is a primary avenue through which Pindar explores these questions and articulates his own anxiety about poetry's two-sided potential to confer both benefit and disgrace.

By the fifth century BC, the period of Pindar's poetic activity, Ajax was well known as both a popular hero of cult and as a famous hero of epic poetry. His cult, as we examined in the first chapter, was rising in prominence and was established in various

² cf. *Olympian* 1.28-34 on the capability of poetry, with its *charis* to preserve lies.

³ cf. Walsh (1984) 42-43; Pindar *Nemean* 8.39: αἰνέων αἰνητὰ, μομφὰν δ' ἐπισπείρων ἀλιτροῖς.

forms on the island of Salamis, in Athens, and in other areas of the Greek-speaking world. The first chapter also demonstrated that Ajax's cults and ritual honors were in no small way engendered by his fame as one of the greatest heroes in Panhellenic epic.

However, the treatment of Ajax in epic poetry is not uniformly positive; it is fraught with tension, ambiguity, and seeming contradiction. On the one hand, in the *Iliad*, Ajax is second only to Achilles, and displays his heroic excellence in several famous scenes. On the other hand, in the *Odyssey*, Odysseus assumes the role of the foremost epic hero and Ajax has already met his disgraceful end after his failure to win the arms of Achilles. He appears, memorably, in *Odyssey* 11. 543-567, already a departed shade, having been defeated in the judgment over the armor, albeit still maintaining vestiges of his characteristic stalwart pride.⁴ Other Panhellenic Trojan Cycle epics also recorded his downfall.⁵ According to Proclus' summaries as well as epic fragments culled from various scholia, the *Aethiopis* narrated the death of Achilles, a quarrel between Odysseus and Ajax over his armor, and Ajax's subsequent suicide. The *Little Iliad* added that before killing himself, Ajax went insane and slaughtered herds of captured livestock.

Pindar is troubled by the tension between the positive and negative treatments of Ajax in prior poetry and he variously praises and blames Homer for his multifarious treatments of Ajax. But Pindar is an unequivocal advocate of Ajax's greatness, and he uses the story of Ajax to explore his relationship with previous poetry: his tentative adoption, recomposition of, and responses to prior poetic traditions. I shall argue that Pindar's response to traditional poetic treatments of Ajax was informed and influenced by

⁴ In this passage, Ajax, famously, turns away and responds nothing to Odysseus because he was angry over the victory that Odysseus won (κεχολωμένη εἵνεκα νίκης, ἢ τήν μιν ἐγὼ νίκησα δικαζόμενος παρὰ νηυσὶ ἢ τεύχεσιν ἄμφ' Ἀχιλλῆος... *Od.* 11. 544-546).

⁵ See West (2003) 108-117 for the *Aethiopis* and 118-143 for the *Little Iliad*

Ajax's post-Homeric development into a hero of cult. The consistent greatness of Ajax as an object of hero cult enabled Pindar to criticize and correct the troubled ambiguity of the poetic tradition.

Pindar responds to prior poetic presentation of Ajax primarily in three odes, *Isthmian 4*, *Nemean 7*, and *Nemean 8*, although he appears in other odes as well.⁶ In *Isthmian 4*, Pindar praises Homer, who, by means of his excellent poetry, preserved Ajax's immortal fame. On the other hand, primarily in *Nemean 7*, but also in *Nemean 8*, both of which were written for Aeginetans, Pindar criticizes and discredits Homeric poetry for its deceptiveness and its malicious treatment of Ajax.

Before examining Pindar's assessments and responses to 'Homer', it is prudent to first explore what 'Homer' likely signified to Pindar. Because Pindar variously celebrates and discredits Homer for his treatment of Ajax, some critics have theorized that Pindar was confused about the authors of various epics or meant 'Homer' to refer variously to the poet of the *Iliad* and not the *Odyssey*, or vice versa. Additionally, scholars have wondered whether Pindar considered poems such as the *Aethiopsis* and the *Little Iliad* to have been composed by 'Homer'. In essence, there has been a long search for the identity of "Pindar's 'Homer'".⁷

⁶ For example, Ajax appears in *Nemean 2.13-15, 4.48; Isthmian 5.48, 6.19-54*.

⁷ Fitch (1924), Nisetich (1989) and Nagy (1990) all discuss this question in varying levels of depth and intricacy. Their treatment of the problem often reveals more about their theories on the composition of the Homeric odes than Pindar's meaning. Fitch argued that Pindar predated the canonical division of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* as Homeric and the other Cyclic poems as the products of other poets (65). Nisetich believed that Pindar knowingly referred to different poets as 'Homer' (10) but that "What 'Homer' means to Pindar is, in the last analysis, the poetry that has managed, for good or for ill, to reach into all men's hearts by its persuasive power" (23). Nagy widened the scope and argues that "Homer is representative of all epic (15) but that epic really means a "continuum of epic tradition" (416).

Frank Nisetich's argues that Pindar uses 'Homer' to refer variously to 'Homer of the *Iliad*' and 'Homer of the *Odyssey*'.⁸ He asserts, for example, that, "Pindar's praise of 'Homer' in *Isthmian* 4 does not include the poet of the *Odyssey*".⁹ He reasons that in this passage Pindar is praising only the poet of the *Iliad* as 'Homer', because "Ajax in the *Iliad* is second only to Achilles, a position never questioned, let alone challenged, within the poem itself."¹⁰ Conversely, when Pindar criticizes Homer in *Nemean* 7 for honoring Odysseus above Ajax, Nisetich claims that Pindar is responding to the 'Homer' of the *Odyssey* only. He reasons that Pindar must have only the Odyssean poet in mind, because it is in the *Odyssey* that the poetic voices of Homer and Odysseus seem to blend together with a unified purpose. Additionally, Nisetich points out, "there is nothing in Pindar's description of events in *Nemean* 7 that can be traced to any source other than *Odyssey* 11."¹¹

Nisetich's analysis is helpful in pointing out that the Homeric poems do not represent a uniform and consistent perspective, but his arguments ignore the fact that Pindar would not likely have encountered the Homeric epics the way we do today, as complete and distinct texts. Furthermore, Nisetich's conclusions portray Pindar as a hyper-literary poet, engaging in literary debates with prior individualized poets. But, as Elroy Bundy has established, Pindar was an encomiast who was focused primarily on

⁸ Nisetich (1989) 11-12 Additionally Nisetich argues that Pindar does not include the poets of the *Aethiopsis* and the *Little Iliad* as 'Homeric'. contra Fitch (1924) 58 who argues that Pindar has the poet of the *Aethiopsis* in mind as 'Homer', because the *Aethiopsis* included the simplest version of Ajax's defeat and suicide. For the most recent edition of the Epic Fragments and their summaries see West (2003).

⁹ Nisetich (1989) 10

¹⁰ Ibid 11

¹¹ Ibid 16

praising his patron.¹² As such, Pindar was conscious of a poetic oral and mythic tradition, and was positioning himself and his clients within and against the received epic material.

Gregory Nagy has sought to elucidate 'Pindar's Homer' by focusing on the oral poetic tradition. He claims that, "For Pindaric tradition, it is clear that Homer is representative of all epic, not just the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*..."¹³ When Pindar variously praises and blames 'Homer' he is referring not necessarily to a single poet, but to the living tradition of epic poetry, with 'Homer' serving as its *de facto* author.¹⁴ In this view, Pindar was not confused about which authors wrote which poems. Rather, when he expresses varying assessments of Homeric claims about Ajax in *Isthmian 4* and *Nemean 7*, he is illustrating his own concerns about poetry's capacity to praise and blame with ambivalent examples he observes in the poetic tradition.

Nagy's approach aligns more closely with Pindar's aims and anxieties as an encomiastic poet. Pindar necessarily works within a poetic tradition since he wishes to insert the laudandus into that tradition and ensure the immortality of his renown. Nagy shows that "Homer" is Pindar's name for the poetic tradition. If Pindar both praises and blames "Homer", that is because he has observed that the poetic tradition itself is troublingly ambiguous and capable of disgracing those that are worthy of praise.

It is a striking fact that Pindar's very different estimations of Homer in *Nemean 7* and in *Isthmian 4* both center on the figure of Ajax. As we turn now to examine the relevant odes, beginning with Pindar's positive estimation of Homer's treatment of Ajax in *Isthmian 4*, it will become clear that even in the midst of celebrating poetry that honors

¹² cf. Bundy (2006 digital version) 4: "there is no passage in Pindar and Bakchulides that is not in its primary intent encomiastic—that is, designed to enhance the glory of a particular patron."

¹³ Nagy (1990) 15

¹⁴ Thus, in this study, unless referring specifically to the ascribed poet of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, 'Homer' will be used as Pindar uses it, interchangeably with 'poetic tradition'

Ajax, the sinister side of Ajax's story is never far from the mythic consciousness of Pindar. Additionally, this chapter will show that for Pindar, Ajax's hero cult honors are an important corrective influence for the complex ambivalences of the oral tradition.

I. Ajax and Pindar: A reflection on the poetic tradition

Isthmian 4 was written to celebrate the victory of Melissos of Thebes in the Pancration. Bowra dates the ode to 476 BC, though others have placed it slightly later.¹⁵

The ode begins by praising the victor's family for their hospitality (1-13) and their past successes at athletic contests (24-30). The references to Ajax begin at line 31:

ἔστιν δ' ἀφάνεια τύχας καὶ μαρναμένων,
πρὶν τέλος ἄκρον ἰκέσθαι·
τῶν τε γὰρ καὶ τῶν διδοί·
καὶ κρέσσον' ἀνδρῶν χειρόνων
ἔσφαλε τέχνα καταμάρψαισ'· ἴστε μάν
Αἴαντος ἀλκὰν φοίνιον, τὰν ὄψια
ἐν νυκτὶ ταμῶν περὶ ᾧ φασγάνῳ μομφὰν ἔχει
παίδεσσιν Ἑλλάνων ὅσοι Τροίανδ' ἔβαν.

ἀλλ' Ὅμηρός τοι τετίμακεν δι' ἀνθρώπων, ὅς αὐτοῦ
πᾶσαν ὀρθώσαις ἀρετὰν κατὰ ῥάβδον ἔφρασεν
θεσπεσιῶν ἐπέων λοιποῖς ἀθύρειν.
τοῦτο γὰρ ἀθάνατον φωνάεν ἔρπει,
εἴ τις εὐ εἶπη τι· καὶ πάγκαρπον ἐπὶ χθόνα καὶ διὰ πόντον βέβακεν
ἐργμάτων ἀκτὶς καλῶν ἄσβεστος αἰεὶ.

(31-42)

There is an obscurity of fortune also for men who contend,
Before they arrive at the highest goal;
For fortune might give some of this and some of that¹⁶
And the surpassing skill of lesser men trips up a better one;
Truly you know the blood-stained might of Ajax,
Which late in the night he cut around his sword,
Holding blame against the sons of the Hellenes, those who went to Troy.

But Homer has honored him among men,
Who, setting every virtue straight like his staff,
Uttered divine words for future men to play.

¹⁵ Bowra (1964) 408

¹⁶ The translation of this line is based on Race (1997) 167

For if someone says something well,
It goes forth as an immortal sound;
And the ray of fine deeds has gone
Upon the all-fruitful earth and through the sea, unquenchable forever.

Pindar continues by wishing that the same favorable Muses might inspire him to praise Melissos just as Homer praised Ajax. In this passage, Pindar lauds Homer's treatment of Ajax for recording Ajax's greatest accomplishments and ensuring that they would be celebrated by future generations (θεσπεσίων ἐπέων λοιποῖς ἀθύρειν 39). By selecting the example of Ajax, Pindar exalts poetry's efficacy for preserving undying glory despite the vagaries and unknowable vicissitudes of fortune.

In *Isthmian 4*, Pindar celebrates the power of poetry to preserve the fame and good reputation of heroes, even ones whom obscure fortune did not always favor. Ajax is an example of a κρέσσον' (34), a better man who is tripped up by the skill of his inferiors. Pindar only alludes to the story of the contest for the arms of Achilles, and he does not narrate it explicitly, nor does he name Odysseus as the figure represented by 'the weaker men', the ἀνδρῶν χειρόνων of line 34. His point, rather, is that when men, particularly athletes, contend, they make themselves vulnerable to the dark side of competition, that is, to unseen circumstances (ἀφάνεια τύχας 31), and even to unfairness and injustice. Sometimes weaker men use their craftiness to defeat their betters, and Ajax's situation is a prime example. Pindar is not implying that Melissos has also been the victim of unfair treatment. Rather, Melissos is connected to Ajax because they are both great men who have been exposed to inscrutable fortune, and both have been honored in song. Pindar uses the mythic disgrace of Ajax as a foil to his fame in Homeric poetry to indicate poetry's capacity to bestow fame and honor to those who are truly deserving of praise.

He begins by declaring that surely, we the audience, know about Ajax's bloody death (ἴστε μάν | Αἴαντος ἀλκὰν φοίνιον...35-35b). We know about this story no doubt because we have heard it sung in epic poetry. But Pindar begins the next verse with the words ἀλλ' Ὀμηρός τοι τετίμακεν δι' ἀνθρώπων (37). The adversative thrust of ἀλλά in this instance seems to imply the sense of "regardless" or "despite the previous fact..." Pindar is not so bold as to completely deny the story of Ajax's suicide; he, as always, is hoping to avoid the blame that accompanies deception, and he cannot deny a widely accepted story like Ajax's suicide.¹⁷ Pindar points out that in spite of Ajax's disgraceful failure and infamous death, Homer, because of his skillful poetry (εἴ τις εὖ εἴπη τι 41), has set things right (ὀρθώσας 38) by securing Ajax's reputation as a famous hero and has ensured that men to come will sing of Ajax's virtues.¹⁸ Pindar's use of Ajax in this passage exemplifies his lofty view of poetry's power and his aspiration to lay claim to the same poetic prowess and prestige that immortalizes the renown of heroes, even heroes with a dark side like Ajax. It is significant for Pindar that even when praising Homer's poetry for honoring Ajax in *Isthmian 4*, he cannot escape an allusion to the shameful darker side of the Ajax myth. Pindar knows very well that Homeric poetry preserved these dark and disgraceful tales just as much as it preserved Ajax's fame and glory.

¹⁷ Ledbetter (2003) has argued that Pindar has "a simple conception of poetic truth as historical accuracy" (69). By this she means that when Pindar strives for truth in his poems, he is striving for poetic correspondence with actual historical/mythical events. In the case of Ajax, at least, it is an indisputable 'fact' within the mythic tradition that he lost the contest over the arms of Achilles to Odysseus and that this defeat led to his suicide. The details of the defeat and suicide do vary, however. For Pindar's anxiety about telling the truth, as well as the dangers of poetic deception, see *Nem.* 7. 20-24 and *Ol.* 1. 28-34.

¹⁸ In this statement at least, Pindar is likely recalling the *Iliad*, wherein Homer recorded Ajax's most famous exploits and greatest deeds such as his duel with Hector and his defense of the Achaean ships. Nisetich (1989) points out that, "Ajax in the *Iliad* is second only to Achilles, a position never questioned, let alone challenged, within the poem itself" (11). This, however, led Nisetich to make claims that Pindar did not equate the 'Homer' of *Isthmian 4* with the poet of the *Odyssey* or any of the Cyclic epics.

These two passages very neatly employ contrasting symbols to emphasize poetry's redemptive qualities. The first verse, lines 31-36, highlights the obscure and unknown (ἀφάνεια 31), darkness (τὰν ὄψι' ἐν νυκτὶ 35-6), and blame (μομφὰν 36). All of these images elucidate the struggle of the athlete and the disgraceful fate of Ajax. The darkness of the earlier verses is dispelled when Pindar describes the immortal voice of poetry as a "forever unquenchable ray of fine deeds" (ἐργμάτων ἀκτὶς καλῶν ἄσβεστος αἰεὶ 42). Additionally, the craft or skill of lesser men (ἀνδρῶν χειρόνων...τέχνα 34-5) contrasts with the authoritative voice of Homer that sets matters right (ὀρθώσας 38) with "divine words" (θεσπεσίων ἐπέων 39). By using striking imagistic contrasts of darkness and light, and human skill and divine inspiration, Pindar emphasizes the power of poetry to rehabilitate and to correct the reputations of former men.

In *Isthmian* 4, Pindar rejoices at poetry's power to correct a dark and disgraceful end and to preserve the glorious fame of Ajax. In *Nemean* 7 and 8, however, Pindar broods over poetry's sinister aspects. He laments that the very same power inherent in poetry that enables it to preserve fame also gives it the capacity to immortalize infamy. He reacts against a poetic tradition that has passed down disgraceful stories about Ajax and unconscionably bestowed greater praise to Ajax's rival Odysseus.

Nemean 7 is one of Pindar's most complicated odes, not least because of Pindar's attack on Homer. This ode, significantly as we shall see, was written for an Aeginetan patron, in honor of Sogenes, a victor in the Boy's Pentathlon. Bowra and Burnett both

offer 467 BC as the ode's date, based primarily on an emendation of the scholia.¹⁹

Pindar's assault on Homer's presentation of Odysseus begins on line 20:

...ἐγὼ δὲ πλέον' ἔλπομαι
λόγον Ὀδυσσεός ἢ πάθαν διὰ τὸν ἀδυεπὴ γενέσθ' Ὅμηρον·
ἐπεὶ ψεύδεσὶ οἱ ποτανᾶ <τε> μαχανᾶ
σεμνὸν ἔπεστί τι· σοφία δὲ κλέπτει παράγοισα μύθοις. (N. 7. 20-23)

But I suppose that the account of Odysseus is greater
Than his experience, due to sweet-speaking Homer;
Because he has some solemnity in his lies and in his wingèd devices,
His misleading skill deceives with myths.

In *Isthmian* 4, Pindar celebrated poetry's power to preserve the truth about the fine deeds of noble men. Here, however, Pindar's anxieties about poetry's darker side come to the fore. He highlights the dangerous infallibility of the poetic tradition. Especially dangerous, however, is poetry that is skillfully and artfully made. Homer is a good poet because he has solemnity, and clever skill, even "wingèd words". Nonetheless, Pindar criticizes the content of Homer's poetry. Pindar argues that Homer has exaggerated the deeds of Odysseus, and that his fame and glory do not correspond to his actual excellence, but have only been achieved because of lies (ψεύδεσὶ, 21; μύθοις, 22).²⁰ The songs of Homer that glorify Odysseus are significantly not called "divine words" as they are called in *Isthmian* 4,²¹ but instead he even uses the word μαχανή (22), which more closely echoes the τέχνη of lesser men, which he says "trips up their betters" (*Isth.* 4.34-5). In this ode, then, Pindar attacks Homer's poetry as merely a scheming contrivance of a fallible man.

¹⁹ Bowra (1964) 410-11; Burnett (2005) 185. The scholiast's date reads: κατὰ τὴν τεσσαρεσκαίδεκάτην Νεμεάδα, which is the impossible year 547.

²⁰ μῦθοι is Pindar's term for false stories perpetuated in poetry. cf. *Olympian* 1. 29; cf. Slater (1969)

²¹ What he calls Homer's songs about Ajax in *Isthmian* 4. 39

In Pindar's estimation, Homer favored the wrong hero. Pindar feels that Ajax truly was the greater hero, and that Homer must have been lying in order to construct such glorifying songs about Odysseus, especially those that honor him above Ajax. Pindar implies that Homer is guilty of the very same craftiness and lying as the hero he honors. In effect, Homer perpetuates Odysseus' own deceptive stories.²² Pindar explains why Odysseus was unworthy of being honored above Ajax in the lines that immediately follow:

... τυφλὸν δ' ἔχει
ἦτορ ὄμιλος ἀνδρῶν ὁ πλείστος. εἰ γὰρ ἦν
ἔ τὰν ἀλάθειαν ιδέμεν, οὐ κεν ὅπλων χολωθείς
ὁ καρτερὸς Αἴας ἔπαξε διὰ φρενῶν
λευρὸν ξίφος· ὃν κράτιστον Ἀχιλλεύς ἄτερ μάχα... (23-27)

Most of the throng of men have a blind heart,
For if they had seen the truth, mighty Ajax would not have fixed
The smooth sword through his guts, bitter over the arms;
Ajax, who was greatest in battle, save Achilles...

Pindar argues in this passage that Ajax is the victim of foolhardy men who awarded the prize to the lesser Odysseus. What is so distressing about this fact to Pindar, is that the poetic tradition, which he names Homer, has not only preserved this story, but has even exaggerated the deeds of Odysseus, garnering him (at the expense of Ajax) undeserved honors and undying glory in Panhellenic epic.

In *Nemean* 8, Pindar takes his attack on previous poetry even farther and he shows his anxiety about the presence of both truth and lies in the poetic tradition. The capacity of this tradition to confer both praise and unjust blame underlies Pindar's anxiety as a poet who seeks to offer only praise, particularly, only deserved praise.

²² Nagy (1990) 424: "Homer is being slighted here only to the extent that he is being accused of becoming a perpetuator of the words of Odysseus..."

In a transitional passage in *Nemean* 8 Pindar pauses in the midst of his verse to indicate that he is preparing to broach a new subject. His anxiety about doing so is apparent, but nevertheless he feels reasonably confident enough to continue.

ἴσταμαι δὴ ποσσὶ κούφοις, ἀμπνέων τε πρὶν τι φάμεν.
πολλὰ γὰρ πολλὰ λέλεκται, νεαρὰ δ' ἐξευρόντα δόμεν βασάνω
ἐς ἔλεγκον, ἅπασ κίνδυνος· ὄψον δὲ λόγοι φθονεροῖσιν,
ἄπτεται δ' ἐσλῶν αἰεὶ, χειρόνεσσι δ' οὐκ ἐριζει. (N. 8.19-22)

I stand with light feet, catching my breath before speaking.
For many things have been said in many ways,
And to give new inventions to the touchstone
For testing is completely risky. For words are a delicacy to those with envy—
Attached always to noble men, but not challenging the weaker.

This passage is a striking example of Pindar's anxiety as a poet. As we saw in *Isthmian* 4, poetry can be a great tool for dispensing immortal κλέος. But in this passage, Pindar confronts poetry's potentially sinister results. According to these lines, Pindar hesitates for two reasons. The first is that he is unsure about recording the verses that follow because they are either opposed to, or different from other tales that have already been told (20-21), that is, they are new inventions. Pindar is very concerned with avoiding lies in his poetry, and he reveals his fear that the novel story that follows may be rejected as a lie. Pindar's second anxiety is that once the new story has been told, it will incite envy (21-22). Fear that his odes will elicit jealous responses from other men is a common theme in Pindar's epinicians,²³ but he is more concerned about giving honor where it is due. Pindar believes firmly that his poetry should give fitting honor to those who deserve it, and cast blame upon the blameworthy. Additionally, he hopes that by doing this well, that is accurately and artfully, he too will garner praise and renown as a poet, and avoid future blame for praising undeserving men.

²³ Burnett (2005) 171-172 catalogues some of the most significant examples.

Just as in *Nemean 7*, in *Nemean 8* it is the story of Ajax's disgrace and suicide that heightens Pindar's anxieties. After having prefaced these lines with a discussion of the danger (ἅπας κίνδυνος 21) of confronting the mythic tradition, Pindar reveals the story that put him on guard:

κείνος καὶ Τελαμώνος δάψεν υἷον, φασγάνῳ ἀμφικυλίσαις.
ἢ τιν' ἄγλωσσον μὲν, ἦτορ δ' ἄλκιμον, λάθα κατέχει
ἐν λυγρῷ νείκει· μέγιστον δ' αἰόλῳ ψεύδει γέρας ἀντέταται.
κρυφίαισι γὰρ ἐν ψάφοις Ὀδυσσῆ Δαναοὶ θεράπευσαν·
χρυσέων δ' Αἴας στερηθεὶς ὅπλων φόνῳ πάλαισεν.
ἢ μὰν ἀνόμοιά γε δάοισιν ἐν θεορῷ χροῖ
ἔλκεα ῥῆξαν πελεμιζόμενοι
ὑπ' ἀλεξιμβρότῳ λόγχῃ, τὰ μὲν ἀμφ' Ἀχιλεὶ νεοκτόνῳ... (23-30)

This (envy) also devoured the son of Telamon, rolling him about his sword.²⁴
Indeed, oblivion held down the speechless, but stout hearted one
In the baneful quarrel; the greatest prize was offered to a nimble lie.
In secret votes the Danaans honored Odysseus;
And Ajax, robbed of the golden armor, wrestled with slaughter.
Indeed, with a mortal-protecting spear, they tore dissimilar wounds
In the hot skin of their enemies, while they were being driven back,
When they were around fresh-slaughtered Achilles...

Here, Pindar introduces Ajax as a victim of envy, for he truly was a greater warrior than Odysseus in battle. This paints the hero in a more sympathetic light than the epic accounts of the story, and a favorable retelling of Ajax's tale would have been welcomed by the ears of Pindar's Aeginetan patron and audience,²⁵ due to their fondness for and perceived connection with the hero. Presenting Ajax in this way provides Pindar with a chance to counteract the deleterious effects that prior poetry had on Ajax's reputation.

²⁴ The antecedent of κείνος, I take to be a supplied φθόνος, supplied also as the subject of the verbs ἄπτεται and ἐρίζει in line 22. cf. Burnett (2005) 172: "Envy is the understood grammatical subject..."

²⁵ The ode was composed for Deinias of Aegina, victor in the Diaulos. The date of the ode is unknown, Bowra argues that it is late, composed perhaps in 459 (1964) 412; Nisetich (1989) writes: "With a closer tie to Ajax and a correspondingly warmer interest in his fate and reputation, the Aeginetans would have appreciated seeing Odysseus' own account, which blurs the line between the respective merits of the two heroes, discredited" (14).

In this passage, he argues that Ajax was undone by a lie. Odysseus, the worse man, was skilled in speech,²⁶ and he received the armor because the envious Danaans, awarded it to him in a secret vote. This indicates why Pindar was so anxious about broaching the topic of Ajax's fate. Pindar is a poet dependent upon the mythic material of the oral tradition, but he is nonetheless aware that the oral tradition has preserved lies and unworthy accounts. It is risky for Pindar as a poet to attempt to work his way truthfully through a tradition that is fraught with lies and envious slander. By describing Ajax as speechless or wordless (ἄγλωσσον 24), Pindar indicates that he means to take up Ajax's defense, and to become the artful and winsome tongue of the actually deserving hero. Pindar's epinicians correct the false tales preserved in epic and provide Ajax with an account that fits his excellence.

Pindar felt strongly enough about the invalidity of Homer's claims about Ajax and Odysseus that he ran the risk of contradicting established epic 'truth'. In *Nemean* 7 and 8 Pindar discredits Homer as the lying poet, the voice that preserved the specious tales of Odysseus, epic poetry's arch-deceiver. It was Pindar's intention to correct the false tales of the past, cast blame at liars and the perpetrators of lies, and give glory and honor to Ajax, to whom it was actually due, both within the context of the myth during the judgment of the arms, and poetically in the songs that were repeatedly performed afterwards. Pindar establishes himself as Ajax's poetic advocate, and offers his poetic talent to revive Ajax in poetry. Pindar is the ideal poet to take up Ajax's case because of his supreme poetic skill, his natural ability, and his intimate relationship with the muses.²⁷ Additionally, by demonstrating that he can rehabilitate a hero who was disgraced by such

²⁶ Recall the skill: τέχνα καταμάρψαισ' ἀνδρῶν χειρόνων of *Isthmian* 4.34-35

²⁷ cf. *Olympian* 2. 83-88

a widely respected poet as Homer, Pindar shows his ability to ensure and preserve the lasting renown of his patrons. Nisetich writes, "What happened between Ajax and Odysseus is not something that merely happened in the past. It goes on happening, to Ajax through the influence of the Homeric tradition, and to men like Ajax through the inability of their fellows to distinguish truth from falsehood. It goes on happening, in other words, in poetry and in life."²⁸ It is therefore imperative for a praise poet like Pindar to offer a corrected version of the myth, and to see that praise is given to the justly deserving.

Still, Pindar was nevertheless planting his feet on unsure ground when he undertook to question the poetic value of not only Homer, but the entirety of the received poetic tradition. Why did Pindar term this "running a risk"? On the one hand, Pindar is dependent on the poetic tradition for his mythic material. The poetic tradition comprised all the memory that remained from the mythic past, and Pindar found himself hemmed in by its various whims and favoritisms. It would be quite risky indeed for a poet to cast aspersions at the majority of his sources. On the other hand, Pindar was living and composing within a living tradition of heroic song. He was not a rhapsode performing and re-performing consolidated poems, but was actively composing new material as the inheritor of a rich and variegated tradition. We have examined how Pindar repeatedly advocates on behalf of Ajax. We have not yet, however, considered in much detail why he does so. Why, if he was content to merely receive and reiterate other myths from the poetic tradition, did Pindar feel the need to challenge it and correct Ajax's poetic

²⁸ Nisetich (1989) 16

reputation? Why was Pindar certain that the received oral tradition contained lies and that his poetry was more accurate?

Pindar was enabled and impelled to reject previous models and elevate Ajax above his prior presentations primarily because of two post-Homeric developments: the development of local saga tradition about Aiakid heroes, including Ajax, and the establishment and prominence of Ajax's hero cult. Hero cult helps to correct Ajax's previous reputation, and serves as a guide for that correction in poetry.

II: Local Saga and Local Cult: The Case for Ajax's Greatness

Pindar's odes take place within a continuum of heroic song, but the epic tradition is not the only influence for his mythology. When Pindar petitions for a poetic rehabilitation of Ajax, he is attempting to set a local tale against the Panhellenic epics, or as Nagy has described it, "The local tradition, as represented by Pindar, is making its bid for Panhellenic status by paradoxically laying claim to the kind of absolute *aletheia* already claimed by Panhellenic poetry."²⁹ *Nemean 7* and *8*, the two odes that defend Ajax against Homer's slander, were both written for Aeginetan victors.³⁰ Patrons of Aegina, if we can judge from Pindar's extant material, represent some of his most frequent clients and we know of twelve poems written for them.³¹ An important theme common to these

²⁹ Nagy (1990) 423-424

³⁰ Various theories have been proposed about why Pindar wrote so many odes for a handful of victors from a relatively small, inaccessible, and traditionally uncelebrated island. It has been proposed that the elite families of Aegina were of moderate wealth, which precluded them from expensive statue dedications and chariot victories, and were a *nouveau riche* merchant aristocracy who commissioned victory odes in their eagerness to enhance their status as descendants of mythic heroes (Hornblower (2007) 294-308). Another theory holds that Pindar favored the Aeginetans because of their gracious hospitality, their shared Dorian lineage, and perhaps because of a strong tradition and skilled practice of choral dancing and performance on the island (Ibid 297).

³¹ Hornblower (2007) 293; Sometimes the figure is listed at eleven extant odes, with '*Isthmian 9*' existing only as a fragment. Burnett (2005) provides a complete treatment of each ode individually with an introduction and translation. She provides four introductory chapters about Aegina, the local mythic traditions, Aeginetan art, and the trend that the Aeginetan odes are largely written for boy victors.

odes is the frequent evocation of the Aiakidai, and mythic interludes that tell the story of Aegina's legendary king Aiakos, his sons Peleus, Telamon and Phokos, and their famous sons who fought in the Trojan War, Achilles and Ajax. One reason that Ajax appears so often in Aeginetan odes is because local saga tradition claimed him as a descendent of the Aeginetan hero Aiakos. Pindar's odes are imbued with this local mythic material.

Myths connecting the Aiakidai with Aegina seem to have arisen locally, and Pindar was familiar with a local saga tradition that connected Aiakos to three sons: Peleus, Telamon, and Phokos. This detail is a post-Homeric development, and likely independent of the compositional process of Homeric poetry. Within the Homeric poems themselves, Telamon and Ajax are never related to Achilles, Peleus or Aiakos.³² Achilles and Peleus are recorded as Aiakidai, but Ajax is never included.³³ Additionally, Telamon is never identified as the son of anyone, and Burnett has recently given credence to the theory that Ajax's typical patronymic may just as readily indicate something like "Ajax the Protector".³⁴ It is impossible to know for sure when the stories about Ajax and his mysterious father Telamon were incorporated and popularized in the local Aeginetan saga tradition.³⁵ A common theory is that this connection may have been made during the 7th century BC during disputes between Megara and Aegina for hegemony over Salamis, and intensified during the 6th century BC during the dispute between Megara and

³² The connection between Peleus and Aiakos seems to be more ancient than the Telamon one, however, it also seems to predate a connection between Aiakos and Aegina. This led later Aeginetan poets to explain why Peleus wound up in Thessaly, instead of taking up his father's crown on Aegina. For the murder of Phokos, see Pindar *Nemean* 5. 1-19; and for a discussion of the mythic adoption see Burnett (2005) 17-27

³³ Higbie (1997) 293-294

³⁴ Burnett (2005) 25. Based on a derivation from *τελαμών* or 'belt-strap'

³⁵ In *Nemean* 5.14-18, Pindar alludes to the event, the murder of their half-brother Phokos, that led to the emigration of Peleus and Telamon from Aegina. This explains why Achilles, the Thessalian hero *par excellence*, is an Aiakid, as well as Ajax, whose Salaminian origin is never in question.

Athens.³⁶ In any case, Pindar accepts the connection as a given, and never contradicts it in his poetic corpus.

That the poems are fraught with references to Aiakos and the Aiakidai could be evidence that the patrons and elite of Aegina were eager to be connected to the mythic past, perhaps in a desire to rival their famously autochthonous Attic neighbors. Burnett theorizes along those lines when she writes that the aristocracy of Aegina could not, “as Dorian lords among a Dorian people...pretend to a superiority of blood. Consequently, the story-tellers of Aegina began very early to patch together a mythic cloak, a combination of borrowed ‘Aiakid’ traditions with basic local legend, which should lend a distinguishing identity to the island lords.”³⁷ The local myth and tradition of a legendary founder-king ‘Aiakos’ was very strong at Aegina, and his hero cult at a shrine in the island’s polis is well attested.³⁸ The cult was associated with mysterious rites and it was a carefully guarded secret that the *Aiakeion* was also the king’s tomb.³⁹ It is likely that many of Pindar’s odes were performed at festivals or celebrations near the shrine.⁴⁰ In *Isthmian* 5, an ode written, probably shortly, after 480 BC, Pindar declares, “τὸ δ’ ἐμόν | οὐκ ἄτερ Αἰακιδᾶν κέαρ ὕμνων γέυεται.” (My heart does not taste of any song without the Aiakidai),⁴¹ thereby illustrating, perhaps, Pindar’s own awareness of his poetic tendency to extol the deeds of the famous Aeginetan founder-ancestor.

³⁶ Burnett (2005) 23 n. 52; The Aeginetans never seemed to link themselves ancestrally with Salaminian Ajax with a view toward making a territorial claim against Athens. The strong poetic tradition on Aegina linking them with Ajax seems rather to derive from the enjoyment and prestige associating the hero with the island and its fifth century lords.

³⁷ Burnett (2005) 17

³⁸ Paus. 2.29.8-9; Hdt. 8.64

³⁹ Burnett (2005) 17-20 discusses the site and the cult

⁴⁰ Hornblower (2007) 307; Currie (2005) 58 and n.71; scholars have theorized that *Nemean* 5 and 7 were performed at the shrine. See *Nemean* 5. 53-54

⁴¹ *Isthmian* 5. 19-20 Later in this ode, Pindar praises the Aeginetan sailors who fought at Salamis, a passage explored well in Cole (1992) 34-35: “Too little about Phylakidas and too much about the Aeginetan sailors

The local saga tradition about the Aiakidai was also intimately linked with local hero cults. In addition to his familiarity with Aeginetan sagas that had adopted Ajax as one of their own, Pindar was influenced by the prominence of Aiakid hero cult. Pindar is troubled by Ajax's unfavorable, or, at least, inconsistent, treatment in epic because as a cult hero, Ajax had consistently proven praiseworthy. Pindar was familiar with Ajax as a cult hero, and in *Nemean 4*, he writes, "Ajax holds ancestral Salamis..." (Αἴας Σαλαμῖν' ἔχει πατρώαν 48), employing a common idiom used to describe the territory of a hero and emphasizing Ajax's ancestral ties to the Aeginetan people.⁴² Furthermore, as we explored in the first chapter, Ajax developed into a popular and respected cultic hero, first on the island of Salamis, and later at Athens. He was also known in various cultic forms in other locations throughout Greece. The first chapter of this study emphasized the role of the diffusion of epic poetry in promulgating hero cult practices and engendering the worship of epic heroes.

In Pindar, however, the Ajax we encounter is a hero who was poorly served by his epic reputation. In the first half of the fifth century, particularly in the areas surrounding Salamis, that is, Attica, Aegina, and Megara, the cult of Ajax was well known, widely recognized and respected, and gained increased prominence after the victory in the naval battle at Salamis, where Aeginetans also played a critical role.⁴³ Additionally, the

would run the risk of disappointing the victor and his friends; the reverse might result in a failure, through oversistence, to fulfill the goal of enhancing the standing of Phylakidas and his family within the larger community at whom the poem was directed, whether this consisted of the city as a whole or was confined to the invited guests at some private or semi-private ceremony."

⁴² This line falls within a catalogue recording the deeds of other famous Aiakid heroes and is syntactically parallel to the following line wherein Achilles holds the island in the Black Sea, where he was believed to have gone to the Isles of the Blest and received hero cult. Present tense forms of ἔχω are frequently used to denote the territory held by cult heroes. See Henrichs (1993) 175 esp. n. 38 for this usage. *Nemean 4* was written for Pytheas of Aegina.

⁴³ Although it is not entirely certain that *Nemean 7* and *8* were written after 480, it is more likely than not that they were. In *Isthmian 5*, Pindar broaches the topic of Salamis in an ode for an Aeginetan patron. The

performance of epinician odes on Aegina would likely have taken place near the hero cult shrine and tomb of Aiakos, Ajax's grandfather according to Aeginetan tradition. Currie argues that, "Epinician poetry was thus, potentially, anchored to hero cult at both ends of its production: at the games where the victory was won, and at the victor's city where the ode was, most often, performed."⁴⁴ The cultic presence of Ajax would have permeated any allusion to him within Pindar's odes, particularly when they were being sung amidst men so intimately acquainted and related with the Aiakid hero. Pindar attacked the way that Ajax is treated in Homeric poetry because time had revealed that Ajax was a powerful, and respectable hero, worthy of cult. Through the fame of his cultic afterlife, the hero of the victory in the naval battle at Salamis and the mythic relative of Aegina's founder-king established that he deserved poetry worthy of his post-epic greatness.

Ajax was honored in epic as a great hero. He was, after all, second only to Achilles. However the epic tradition also incorrectly conferred inappropriate glory to Odysseus, Ajax's enemy, and ultimately confined Ajax to second place even after the death of Achilles. According to Pindar, the story of Ajax's disgrace was repeated and exaggerated beyond the true account.⁴⁵ Only in his hero cult, however, was Ajax's true excellence clearly evident. Pindar's odes provide the ideal medium for the reestablishment of Ajax's heroic greatness in poetry. Within the victory ode, Ajax can be praised outside of the epic context, and extolled for his own intrinsic worth. In epic, however, the quality of a warrior is always measured within the community of the other

bravery of the Aeginetan sailors at the battle was well attested and they took especial pride for their role in the victory.

⁴⁴ Currie (2005) 58

⁴⁵ For this phrasing, see Pindar *Ol.* 1. 28b: ὑπὲρ τὸν ἀλαθῆ λόγον. In *Ol.* 1, Pindar describes a very similar situation to Ajax's. Pelops has been slandered by envious mortals and 'charis' has made the unbelievable story believable. Pindar undertakes in that ode, to provide a more pious explanation for the Pelops story.

epic heroes and they are typically valued in comparison with one another. For example, Ajax is second to Achilles, and, in the epic context, he unjustly falls behind even Odysseus. Pindar's praise poetry honoring Ajax corrects the way honor was distributed within epic by singling out Ajax's inherent and individual excellence. In this way, Pindar's praise for Ajax also mirrors the honor conferred upon the hero through his cult. For in cult, Ajax was honored and revered for his own particular greatness, for his tutelary power, and for his relationship to the ancestors and founders of the local people and cities, and not for his value relative to the other characters of Homeric poetry.

Pindar observed that Ajax was a great hero, that his cult was widespread, popular, and even influenced the outcome of naval battles against Greece's most fearsome enemy.⁴⁶ Pindar saw that the poetic tradition swirling around Ajax did not correspond to the prominence and sanctity of his cult. The poetic tradition dealt with Ajax unfairly, because he truly was deserving of Achilles' arms, and earlier poets unjustly preserved this story and glorified the lesser man.⁴⁷ This piqued Pindar's already intense anxiety about poetry's ability to either preserve fame or disgrace. Pindar uses Ajax to explore his concern that poetry can be used variously to celebrate undeserving men, and even lie about praiseworthy men. Despite his ambivalence toward received poetry and his anxiety about his own poetic program, Pindar never wavers in his support of Ajax. In two odes written for Aeginetan patrons, *Nemean* 7 and 8, Pindar attacked previous epic poetry, discounted the myths as envy inspired lies, and set out to sing the praise that Ajax truly deserves. He aligned his versions of the Ajax myth with the saga tradition that was

⁴⁶ See above pp. 10-11, 13; Hdt. 8. 64

⁴⁷ That Ajax truly did deserve the arms as Pindar claims, was even related to Pausanias while he was on Salamis. Aeolians there told him that Achilles' arms were cast ashore at Ajax's tomb in the Troad after Odysseus suffered a ship wreck. Paus. 1.35.4

popular locally at Aegina, but more importantly, he was emboldened to praise Ajax and repudiate Homer because of Ajax's role as a cult hero. Ajax's fame as a cult hero influenced Pindar's rehabilitation of Ajax as a hero in poetry, enabled him to write freely and boldly, and guaranteed that Pindar himself would be esteemed for setting the poetic tradition aright and proclaiming the excellence of the formerly dishonored hero.

In Ajax, Sophocles explores the struggle between the hero and the community. Sophocles depicts the Ajax story and depicts a hero dishonored by losing the war. In the play, Ajax's dignity is lost through his madness and killing of his own men, and who takes his own life in a stirring expression of his despair against fate and refusal to be shamed by his Sophocles' great tragedian adds a new dimension to the story in one of its most striking and sinister portrayals of the hero's humiliating downfall, including a vivid description of how he slaughtered the herds, murdering them for the Greek community. Sophocles prepared his dark tragedy as a play for the Athenians, specifically for an audience of fifth century Athenians.

For Athenians, however, Ajax was one of the most respected and beloved heroes. He was the super hero hero of the city's struggles and as such was an important figure for the city's identity and the role of the polis. He was the defender and savior of the nation and the city of Athens. The story of Pindar, which we described in the previous chapter, was one of the other aspects of Ajax's story. In contrast with Pindar, who had the hero as a symbol of heroism and glory, Sophocles' Ajax is a tragedy to reveal the dark power of the hero. Through Sophocles, the hero is informed by Ajax's anti-heroic story, which is a

3

The Tragedy of the Cult Hero

In *Ajax*, Sophocles explores the strife that arises between the hero and the community. Sophocles expands the Ajax story and depicts a hero dishonored by losing the contest for the armor of Achilles, disgraced by his madness and failure to exact revenge, and who takes his own life in a stunning expression of his stalwart intractability and refusal to be shamed further. Sophocles' presentation and interpretation of the Ajax story is one of the most shocking and sinister portrayals of the hero's humiliating downfall, including a vivid description of how he slaughtered the herds, thinking them to be the Greek leadership. Sophocles prepared his dark recomposition of the Ajax myth specifically for an audience of fifth-century Athenians.

For Athenians, however, Ajax was one of the most revered and celebrated cult heroes. He was the eponymous hero of one of the city's ten tribes and as such was an important figure for the civic, communal, and mythic identity of the polis. He was also the mythic ancestor of the Salaminioi, one of the most ancient families in Athens. The odes of Pindar, which we examined in the previous chapter, do not avoid the dark aspects of Ajax's story. In contrast with Pindar, Sophocles insists on emphasizing them and exploits their shocking nature to reveal the savage power of the hero. However, Sophocles, like Pindar, is informed by Ajax's post-Homeric development into a

prominent cult hero, and the play explores what it means for the fifth-century polis to bestow hero status to archaic and sinister heroes like Ajax, integrating a figure into the society of the polis that is essentially antithetical to the democratic community values of the city.

Throughout the drama, Sophocles poses questions about the proper relationship between mythic heroes and the fifth-century polis. How do fifth-century citizens compare, interact, and relate with the mythic past, with its legendary heroes and the superhuman forces they embody? Sophocles explores such questions in his tragedy, and, I argue, they expose some of the very same tensions experienced ritually via hero cult. Some of the themes that Sophocles explores in his play, such as the community's role in bestowing honor, the mutability of human lives and relationships, and the burial of the hero, can be illuminated by understanding the significance of Ajax's hero cult for the play.

First I will argue that Ajax's status as a city, tribal, and ancestral hero in Athens and in Salamis influenced Sophocles' formulation of the myth. This point has been controversial, but I will show that Sophocles' *Ajax* evinces various traditional features of the cult of heroes. Secondly, I will offer an interpretation that emphasizes how the play dramatizes the transition from a heroic/Homeric value system into one more closely related to fifth-century polis society. Within the play, there is a transition from a world governed by the heroic code, an ethos that values the acquisition of personal glory and honor (κλέος and τιμή), and that defines justice as helping friends and harming enemies, into a world consisting of communities that require cooperation, compromise, and submission to laws and governments. Ajax figures as an intransigent representative of the

archaic world and the play questions whether he ought to be integrated into the new order, and if so, how. I suggest that hero cult was a powerful ritual avenue for fifth-century Greeks to incorporate mythic heroes into the polis system and that this paradigm illuminates the significance of Ajax's burial, the debate over his corpse, and the implications of Ajax's integration into polis society. Finally, I argue that the play depicts that it is actually beneficial for the polis to incorporate the heroes into fifth-century society.

I. Hero Cult and Sophocles' *Ajax*

Though it has been controversial, most scholars have recognized that an understanding of Ajax's status as a cult hero and eponymous tribal hero in Athens is important for interpreting the drama. The point is commonly asserted in commentaries and introductions to the play as a way of placing the drama within its fifth-century Athenian context. Ajax was one of ten tribal heroes in Athens, as we have already examined, and his cult had significant implications for the group identity of many Athenians. His cultic honors were maintained with eminence and distinction in Athenian civic ritual and ceremony. Furthermore, his cult was highly significant for fifth-century Greeks because of the role he was believed to have played at the battle of Salamis. These points are well attested by other sources and it has been common practice since Jebb's introduction of the play in 1893 to note these and other relevant pieces of information about Ajax's hero cult ritual as a way of illuminating the possible perspective of an Athenian audience member and developing an understanding of the knowledge, opinions, and feelings a fifth-century Greek may have already had when watching the play.¹

¹ Jebb (1893) xiv, He also discusses prior presentations of Ajax's story in literature; Stanford (1963) ix, xlv makes this point, and Ajax's role as tribal hero in Athens was the first reason that Stanford describes him as

Plainly Ajax was a highly renowned cult hero who figured powerfully in the consciousness of fifth-century Greeks, Athenians in particular. Some commentators however, have questioned the significance of this fact for seeking an interpretation of Sophocles' play. Notably, H. D. F. Kitto rejected the suggestion that when Athenians watched Ajax onstage, they would have Ajax the cult hero in their minds. He argues that Athenians "were intelligent people, not bound fast by the formulas of their religion. Cult was one thing, epic poetry, tragedy and comedy were other things, and they did not obstruct each other."² His interpretation of the play demands that Ajax be depicted not as a religious figure, but as nothing more than a fallible man who contrasts with Odysseus, and that the drama contrasts Ajacian and Odyssean answers to the Socratic question, "How are we to live?" (πῶς δεῖ ζῆν;).³

Kitto rejects the significance of Ajax's cult flat out, saying, "the assumption is illegitimate."⁴ This reflects his New Critical perspective that strove to separate the literary creation from non-literary influences such as religion and politics. Kitto may also reveal a strong secularizing bias when he says that Athenians could separate their religion and their literature because "they were intelligent people... Surely we are not to imagine that thoughts of a cult interposed themselves between an Athenian audience and a public recitation from the *Iliad*."⁵ Since Kitto's time, however, scholarship of tragedy has sought to reconnect the dramatic and religious elements of the festival, and it is no longer considered unsophisticated to argue that religion and Athenian drama were intimately

a great hero to fifth-century Greeks; Garvie (1998) 5-6 lists these and other facts, including the role of Ajax in the land squabble with Megara over Salamis.

² Kitto (1956) 182

³ Ibid. 182-3, 197-8

⁴ Ibid. 182

⁵ Ibid. 182

connected.⁶ Furthermore, recent approaches to ancient Greek culture indicate that archaic poetry and religious sentiment were often intertwined and the same characters and concepts permeated both spheres of Greek life. Indeed, we have already examined in Chapter 1 how epic poetry fostered the cults of epic heroes.⁷ Ajax was a revered and politically significant hero in Athens, and it is more likely than not that any Athenian audience member would make the connection between the Ajax on the tragic stage, the Ajax of epic poetry, the Ajax depicted on vase painting, and the Ajax honored by various types of cult.⁸ To argue *a priori* that this is impossible indicates an outdated conception of the relationship between poetry, art, and ancient religion.

Another reason that some critics have resisted the connection between Sophocles' presentation of Ajax and the cultic figure is that, assuming Sophocles' character had a religious dimension, the playwright would have been obligated to display him more sanctimoniously than he has in fact done. Instead of a religious figure who commands pious respect, Sophocles presents a cruel and suicidal warrior, who deceives his friends and family and then abandons them to their own fates. According to these critics, this portrayal of Ajax would have offended the religious sensibilities of the Athenians, and that Sophocles, after disgracing the religious figure, would then have been obligated to rehabilitate him.⁹

⁶ Consider Burkert (1966) "Greek Tragedy and Sacrificial Ritual"; Easterling (1988) "Tragedy and Ritual"; and Winkler and Zeitlin eds. (1990) *Nothing to do with Dionysos?*

⁷ See above pp. 8-9

⁸ Something of the significance of Ajax to the Athenian psyche is revealed by the fact that *Ajax* was by far the most popular of Sophocles' plays. cf. Stanford (1963) lxii, 239-244

⁹ Winnington-Ingram (1980) 57-72, He denies that the play rehabilitates the hero sufficiently to support the claim that Ajax should be viewed as a religious figure. He has in mind positions like of Rosenmeyer (1963) 186-187, Rosenmeyer, however, goes so far as to argue that Ajax killed himself anticipating his own heroization and went through with it in order to secure it. I would not push the argument to this point.

R. P. Winnington-Ingram presents a further reason why hero cult does not seem to have been a formative consideration for Sophocles. He writes, "If there is a hint of hero-status here, it would not seem to have much prominence...there is so little hint in the play of that posthumous power to help and to harm..."¹⁰ He emphasizes instead (as I do as well), the change from a heroic context into a political one, but he is more interested in understanding how this change affects concepts of justice in Greek society.¹¹ This chapter, however, shall argue that the cultic dimension of Ajax is essential for understanding the import of this social transition.

Other scholars, however, defending the significance of hero cult for the play, have argued that Ajax is depicted with posthumous cultic force. Peter Burian, in a perceptive and illuminating article points out that in lines 1168-1184 Teucer ritually imbues the physical corpse of Ajax with supernatural power. Teucer endows Ajax's corpse with the power to protect his son Eurysakes as a suppliant and to curse any enemy who would attempt to dislodge the child before Teucer is able to bury the body. The lines are worth quoting in full:

καὶ μὴν ἐς αὐτὸν καιρὸν οἶδε πλησίον
πάρεισιν ἀνδρὸς τοῦδε παῖς τε καὶ γυνή,
τάφον περιστελοῦντε δυστήνου νεκροῦ.
ὦ παῖ, πρόσσελθε δεῦρο, καὶ σταθεὶς πέλας
ικέτης ἔφασαι πατρὸς ὅς σ' ἐγείνατο.
θάκει δὲ προστρόπαιος ἐν χεροῖν ἔχων
κόμας ἐμὰς καὶ τήσδε καὶ σαυτοῦ τρίτου,
ικτήριον θησαυρόν. εἰ δέ τις στρατοῦ
βία σ' ἀποσπάσειε τοῦδε τοῦ νεκροῦ,
κακὸς κακῶς ἄθαπτος ἐκπέσοι χθονός,
γένους ἅπαντος ῥίζαν ἐξημημένος,
αὐτῶς ὅπως περ τόνδ' ἐγὼ τέμνω πλόκον.
ἔχ' αὐτόν, ὦ παῖ, καὶ φύλασσε, μηδέ σε
κινησάτω τις, ἀλλὰ προσπεσῶν ἔχου.

¹⁰ Winnington-Ingram (1980) 57-8, n. 2

¹¹ Ibid. 69

ὕμεις τε μὴ γυναῖκες ἀντ' ἀνδρῶν πέλας
παρέστατ', ἀλλ' ἀρήγεται ἔστ' ἐγὼ μόλω
τάφου μεληθεῖς τῷδε, κἂν μηδεὶς ἐᾷ.

(1168-1184)

And indeed just at the critical moment the
wife and child of this man are present nearby
to attend to the burial of the wretched corpse.
O child, come here, and being set near as a
suppliant, take hold of your father who begot you.
Sit as a suppliant holding in your hands
the hair of three, mine, hers, and your own,
a suppliant treasure. If anyone from the army
should tear you away from this corpse by force,
may that wretch be wretchedly cast out from the land unburied,
the root of his entire family being mowed down
just like how I cut this lock of hair.
Hold it, o child, and guard, and let no one
move you, but falling upon him, hold yourself.
You, stand nearby, not women, as opposed to men,
but help him, until I should come
to take care of his funeral, even if no one allows it.

Burian writes, “In these lines we can trace an unparalleled and extremely affecting interweaving of three separate ritual acts—supplication, an offering to the dead and a solemn curse.”¹² In this passage, the body of Ajax itself has become a cult site, a place where a suppliant can find protection. Additionally imagery of the tomb and funerary references dominate this passage, indicating the importance of the tomb for hero cult and establishing the dire and frantic need to bury the hero. Most significantly, Ajax’s corpse has been endowed with the power to harm his enemies. Teucer lays a curse on anyone who would attempt to remove Eurysakes. Charles Segal adds, “It is as if the resting place of the hero’s body is being reconstituted as a holy place before our eyes.”¹³ Burian concludes with the statement, “Sophocles evokes, by the subtlest of suggestions, Ajax’s heroic power to extend his curse on his enemies and his blessing on his loved ones from

¹² Burian (1972) 152

¹³ Segal (1981) 143

the world below, at the very moment when the question of his burial rages most passionately.”¹⁴

This is not the only passage where the power of the dead to harm the living is invoked in the play. In lines 1154-5 Teucer responds to Menelaus’ metaphorical warning with a more straightforward retort, “O man, do not treat the dead evilly, for if you do, know that you will be ruined” (ὄνθρωπε, μὴ δρᾶ τοὺς τεθνηκότας κακῶς· εἰ γὰρ ποιήσεις, ἴσθι πημανούμενος). Again, in the closing lines of the play, Teucer reinvoles Ajax’s curse against the Atreidae: “Therefore may the highest father from Olympus, the remembering Fury, and completion bearing Justice destroy the wretches wretchedly” (Τοιγάρ σφ’ Ὀλύμπου τοῦδ’ ὁ πρεσβεύων πατήρ μνήμων τ’ Ἐρινὺς καὶ τελεσφόρος Δίκη κακοὺς κακῶς φθείρειαν 1389-91). And he then refuses to let Odysseus touch the body during the funeral, “lest it be an insult to the dead” (μὴ τῷ θανόντι τοῦτο δυσχερὲς ποῶ 1395). These lines coupled together so closely indicate that Ajax’s curses maintain efficacy after his death and that even though he is dead, he remains sentient and powerful in some way, for it is still somehow possible for him to take offense at Odysseus.

Both Kitto and Winnington-Ingram minimize the importance of Ajax’s hero cult for the drama because according to their interpretations, after presenting the hero acting ignominiously, the play does not rehabilitate Ajax in a way that would be sufficiently appropriate for a cult hero.¹⁵ I agree with both that the second half of the play does not

¹⁴ Burian (1972) 156

¹⁵ Winnington-Ingram (1980) 57-9; Kitto (1956) 181-3; 183: “But no one suggests for a moment that he was not guilty of a monstrous and indefensible crime” He holds that this would be necessary for Ajax’s heroization. Indeed several commentators who argue for a cultic understanding of Ajax do emphasize the need to rehabilitate the hero in order to make him suitable for heroization, assuming that a virtuous life and

constitute a rehabilitation of Ajax per se. However, it is an error to assume that, being a semi-divine figure, Ajax must be depicted as infallible, or at least virtuous. In fact, heroes rarely are virtuous, and never need to be rehabilitated, only propitiated. It is the very fact that Ajax was intractably savage and capable of carrying out superhuman paroxysms of violence and rage that establishes him as an efficacious force after death, a force that deserves and demands ritual honor.¹⁶ Rosenmeyer writes, "The assumption seems to have been that the excess of vitality which made these men so dangerous in their mortal phase could now be counted on to benefit those whose powers are more circumscribed. Ajax, in Athens, was such a demon."¹⁷

In fact, Ajax's story as Sophocles presents it, contains many parallels with typical heroization narratives. One common trend is that the community fails to bestow deserved honor upon the hero, resulting in an outpouring of violence and the hero's disgraced and dishonored death. The hero then continues to exert hostile power from beyond the grave until the initiation of his cult and the receipt of deserved τιμή (the word typically associated with the honor bestowed by hero cult practice). An additional common trend that finds expression in *Ajax* is the hostility between a god and the hero, exemplified by Athena's antagonism toward Ajax and shocking declaration that 'the sweetest laughter is to laugh at one's enemies' (οὔκουν γέλως ἥδιστος εἰς ἐχθροὺς γελᾶν; 79).¹⁸

good deeds were necessary for canonization. cf. Easterling (1988) 89-109; March (1993) 1-36; Segal (1981) 142

¹⁶ cf. Visser (1982) 403-428 for the Greek religious practice of worshipping hostile forces, even using them against former enemies. She cites Cimon of Athens (406) and others, notably Kleomedes of Astypalaea (414-5). For Kleomedes see above p. 8 and Paus. 6.9.6-8

¹⁷ Rosenmeyer (1963) 187

¹⁸ See Nagy (1979) 289-297

Other scholars besides Burian have noted lines that suggest the relevance of Ajax's cult.¹⁹ Albert Henrichs notices a reference to cultic memorial practice in the lines of the chorus. They use an active form of the verb ἔχω (to have, to hold). This usage commonly describes heroes who hold the land in which they are buried, whence they exert their power and influence. The chorus says in lines 1164-7:

ἀλλ' ὡς δύνασαι, Τεῦκρε, ταχύνας
σπεύσον κοίλην κάπετόν τιν' ἰδεῖν
τῷδ', ἔνθα βροτοῖς τὸν ἀείμνηστον
τάφον εὐρώεντα καθέξει.

But, Teucer, hurrying as much as you can,
hasten to see some hollow trench²⁰ for him
where, **he will hold** his moldering grave
always remembered by mortals.

Henrichs points out that by reversing a well known Homeric formula, “the earth will hold” (γαῖα καθέξει),²¹ Ajax is endowed with active possessive power. “According to Sophokles...it is Aias himself who ‘will hold/occupy’ (καθέξει) his tomb—a signal...of the special power of the cultic hero, which resides with him in his tomb.”²² Henrichs demonstrates that although the verbs ἔχω and κατέχω are often used to describe a corpse, the earth or the tomb is generally the subject, and that otherwise, if the deceased is the subject, the verb is used passively. There is, however, one striking exception to this rule, particularly adopted in tragedy, where the verb is used actively with the deceased as the subject. Henrichs writes:

¹⁹ cf. Seaford (1994) 129-30 Seaford includes passages potentially indicative of Ajax cult and ritual, such as Teucer's invitation to the entire army (1381-99), the connection between Eurysakes and the ancestral cult shrine in Melite to the same hero, the lamentation of Ajax's mother through the whole city (851), the frequent invocation of Athens and Salamis (861 et al.).

²⁰ The hollow trench ‘κοίλην κάπετόν’ is repeated in line 1403, when Teucer is preparing the funeral. This is also an echo of the last lines of the Iliad, where the Trojans set the body of Hector into a hollow trench: ἐς κοίλην κάπετον θέσαν (*Il.* 24. 797). For this and other echoes linking Hector and Ajax in Sophocles' play, see Easterling (1984); Brown (1965), Zanker (1992)

²¹ See *Iliad* 16. 629, 18. 332; *Odyssey* 13. 427, 15.31

²² Henrichs (1993) 171

In the context of heroic tombs and hero cult, the tragedians invested *κατέχειν* with a more dynamic meaning, 'to occupy, possess, control,' which puts the hero squarely in charge of his tomb... Aischylos and, even more emphatically, Sophokles thus stress the notion, central to hero cult, that there is life after death and that the cultic hero 'possesses' (*κατέχει*) his tomb in the same manner in which a god inhabits and controls his territory. It is this control, I suggest, that differentiates Aias from the ordinary dead and defines his cultic status.²³

Henrichs thus demonstrated that the fate of Ajax the tragic hero was closely linked to his hero cult status. His analysis shows that the poet was aware of the significance of burial for the hero's cult.

Ajax's cultic status in Athens, therefore, is important for an interpretation of the drama, and Sophocles seems to invoke Ajax's heroic cult deliberately. However, Kitto and Winnington-Ingram were correct to emphasize that the heroization of Ajax is not the central climax of the play, as it is for example in *Oedipus Coloneus*.²⁴ The heroization of Ajax is an important concept to think *with*, however, while examining the themes and progression of the play, and so, we must determine how exactly Ajax's hero cult is significant for the drama.

II. The Tension between the Hero and the Community

In cult, the participants are continuously and regularly reminded of the greatness of and their dependence on a mythic hero, an archaic, superhuman force. Additionally, cult takes place within community settings and is established by corporate groups. What we observe in hero cult, then, at a very basic level, is an attempt by a community body to interact with some higher force, often one that is embodied in a hero from the mythic past. The community thus is constantly exploring its relationship with the mythic past through its representatives, the heroes.

²³ Ibid. 174- 5 cf. Lloyd-Jones and Wilson (1990) 229 for the usage of *κατέχει* in Sophocles

²⁴ Kitto (1956) 182: "In the *Oedipus Coloneus* heroization is specifically made part of the play, in the *Ajax* it is not."

Hero cult practices developed and were formalized at the same time as the Greek polis, and in fact hero cults were highly influential in the formation of the polis during and after the 8th and 7th centuries BC. However, the archaic nature of hero cult contained many elements that are seemingly inconsistent with the polis, such as the religious glorification of individuals and the preference for personal glory over the greater good of the city. Tragedy is uniquely equipped to explore the tension between archaic religion and society and the demands of the polis on citizens, and I offer that Sophocles was also exploring these issues through his drama, *Ajax*.²⁵ The same tensions and attempts to incorporate the archaic past are highlighted, both ritually in cult, and dramatically in Sophocles' play.

The drama of the final scenes of the play does not lie in suspense over whether or not Ajax was going to be buried. Sophocles was not toying with the mythical tradition. Ajax was buried in the Troad according to every single prior account in the poetic tradition. He will assuredly be buried in Sophocles' play. The debate about whether and how to bury the hero is ultimately more significant than whether or not the burial will actually be attained, a thing which we can assume will happen. Sophocles depicts reasons why burying Ajax could be objectionable and considers whether there are circumstances when the city actually should deprive a man of the honor and the elemental human respect of burial.²⁶ But Ajax is not just a man whose humanity demands that he be buried. He is also a hero and the play presents reasons why it is necessary for a polis community to honor heroes. In *Ajax*, Sophocles dramatizes the transition from the heroic world into

²⁵ cf. Vernant "Tensions and Ambiguities in Greek Tragedy" in Vernant and Vidal Naquet (1988): 29-48 esp. 30-38

²⁶ The Atreids for example claim that Ajax does not deserve burial because he refused to follow laws (cf. 1069-70) and he attempted to murder the Greek leadership (1055-56).

the political one and uses the heroic status of Ajax to explore the response of polis-based society to heroic figures. Ultimately, the play concludes that the city must be able to accommodate and absorb archaic elements, and even celebrate savagely antinomian and intractably individualistic heroes like Ajax.

Bernard Knox's seminal 1961 article has cast a long shadow over the interpretation of Sophocles' *Ajax*. Knox sees the central conflict of the play as the fiercely individualistic hero, Ajax, confronting a world that no longer operates according to the heroic value system. In a famous speech, Ajax realizes the mutability of life, human relationships, and value systems: "All things unseen long and immeasurable time brings forth, and having been revealed, they are hidden..." (ἅπανθ' ὁ μακρὸς κἀναρίθμητος χρόνος φύει τ' ἄδηλα καὶ φανέντα κρύπτεται: 646-7). But Ajax tragically decides to kill himself rather than accept the changes of the world around him, refusing to change himself to accommodate a non-heroic system. Knox writes, "His death is the death of the old Homeric (and especially Achillean) individual ethos which had for centuries of aristocratic rule served as the dominant ideal of man's nobility and action, but which by the fifth century had been successfully challenged and largely superseded...by an outlook more suitable to the conditions of the polis..."²⁷

Knox's observations are very helpful for identifying the struggle that occurs between the characters and within the mind of Ajax throughout the play. The play does in fact dramatize the transition from a society organized according to a heroic ethos into one governed by community-established systems of authority, similar to the polis. My analysis extends Knox's interpretation, however, because I would like to move beyond a

²⁷ Knox (1961) 20-21

reading that focuses solely on the tragedy of Ajax and his incompatibility with a changing world. Rather, I emphasize that the play examines how the city should respond to figures like Ajax, ones that are, in fact, incompatible with a corporate city ethos. The second half of the play represents a transition and an exploration of further issues relevant in fifth-century Athens. It explores how post-heroic, fifth-century men should view the heroes, figures who champion an ethos antithetical to corporate polis values. The play also illuminates the role of hero cult in the polis's response to heroes and to the passing of the heroic age. Let us look now at the play to see how this transition and conflict is dramatized.

The play opens with a disorienting and shocking series of revelations. Athena appears onstage to aid Odysseus in his hunt for their common enemy, Ajax, who has been accused of slaughtering the herds. Odysseus' words summarize the surprising beginning, "For we know nothing clearly, but we wander" (ἴσμεν γὰρ οὐδὲν τρανές, ἀλλ' ἀλώμεθα 23). Athena reveals that Ajax, angry over Achilles' arms, set out to kill the Greek leaders, but that she drove him into a frenzy and caused him to slaughter the herds, thinking they were men. Athena then calls Ajax out of his tent, much to the chagrin of Odysseus, but she demands it, asking, "Is not the sweetest laughter to laugh at one's enemies?" (οὐκ οὐν γέλωσ ἥδιστος εἰς ἐχθροὺς γελᾶν; 79). Athena is Odysseus' divine ally, and Ajax's antagonist, but she is also the divine representative of the heroic code. It may be shocking to see her delight in the disgrace of her enemy Ajax, but this would have been the delight of anyone who truly lived to the fullest extension of the heroic injunction to help one's friends and harm one's enemies.

Summoned from his tent, Ajax hails Athena as his ally, and tells her that Odysseus, his “sweetest” (ἡδίστος 105) prisoner, sits inside, echoing Athena’s fierce espousal of the heroic code in line 79. Ajax also reveals that the cause of his outrage is that he has been dishonored (ἀτιμάω 98). The significance of τιμή for Ajax runs throughout the play and it is often contrasted with the laughter of his enemies. In this passage and others, Ajax generally personalizes what is ultimately a community function. Instead of recognizing that it was the community that dishonored him, Ajax believes the Atreidai and his other enemies personally insulted him, and that they are now laughing at him. This reflects Ajax’s heroic worldview that emphasizes individual glory.

As Odysseus watches Ajax’s ruin unfold before him, he resembles the audience member of any tragedy, witnessing the spectacle of a great man blindly falling from honor. Instead of rejoicing at the devastation of his enemy, he sympathizes with him, pitying him. Athena is surprised at such an understanding, commiserative response. This reveals that Odysseus does not hold to the same heroic value system that Athena espouses, to laugh at one’s enemies (79). Instead, Odysseus says, “I pity this wretch, all the same, though he is my enemy...” (ἐποικτίρω δέ νιν δύστηνον ἔμπαρ, καίπερ ὄντα δυσμενῆ 121-122). The tragedy suggests that this is the enlightened response any fifth-century, polis-dwelling man, represented by Odysseus, should strive for when he witnesses the tragic fate of his fellow human being. Already the most sympathetic character is one who has left behind the heroic ethos and shifted toward a post-heroic worldview.

After Odysseus and Ajax depart, the chorus enters. They begin by connecting Ajax to Salamis, his ancestral home and the site of his most famous hero cult. Their

choral segment expands upon the concept of the hero and what the hero means for weaker men like them during the transitional period, declaring, “We have no strength to defend ourselves against these things without you lord” (χήμεις οὐδὲν σθένομεν πρὸς ταῦτ' ἀπαλέξασθαι σοῦ χωρὶς, ἄναξ· 165-166). In fact, the very presence of a chorus of Salaminian sailors demonstrates the passing of the heroic age. They are characters who would barely be worth mention in the *Iliad* and who certainly are never given a serious or sympathetic voice. Their dependence on Ajax and their fear serves as a foil to the Iliadic spirit Ajax embodies. The prominence of their plight in this play corresponds to the rise of the average citizen within the polis. They are consistently referred to as Athenians. When Tecmessa enters she calls them “Erechtheidai” (ναὸς ἀρωγοὶ τῆς Αἴαντος, γενεᾶς χθονίων ἀπ' Ἐρεχθειδῶν 201-202) linking them to the most deeply rooted figure in the autochthonous self-identity of Athenian citizens. Later in the play, the chorus members express their wish to see their home, to “see Holy Athens” (τὰς ἱεράς ὅπως προσείπομεν Ἀθήνας 1221-1222).

When Ajax reemerges, he is no longer blinded by madness, but instead sees clearly the disgrace he has brought on himself. However, he is obsessed with personal glory, and he determines to kill himself because he has failed to achieve the honor he believes he deserves. His constant lament is on account of his ἀτιμία.²⁸ He pays no heed to any argument, and is neither concerned with love for his consort, nor for the safety of his men. He is moved only by the anticipated reaction of his father (434-440), for his son Eurysakes (545-560), and by the arrangement of his future burial (574-582), three

²⁸ cf. 426, 440; in 367, he laments the laughter he imagines his enemies must be enjoying at his expense

paramount concerns for a Homeric hero. He leaves the stage stubbornly bent on taking his own life to maintain what shreds of dignity he still holds.

When Ajax returns, however, he begins with the introspective and probing lines we have already mentioned, which form the center of Knox's interpretation of the play. In his famous speech, Ajax realizes that the heroic world has passed away, and decides that he must go with it. Knox has argued that the political language in the speech indicates an awareness of a shift in governing systems. The Atreidai, for example, are called "archons" (ἄρχοντες εἰσιν 668). Additionally, the phrase "cycle of night withdraws" (ἐξίσταται δὲ νυκτὸς...κύκλος 672) employs a verb frequently used in political contexts for resignation or withdrawal.²⁹ Finally Ajax acknowledges the ultimate failure of the heroic code of helping friends and harming enemies. He realizes that in this post-heroic world, the line between friends and enemies has become blurred and inconstant (678-683). Knox points out that, "A world in which friends and enemies change places...is no world for Ajax."³⁰

The chorus and Tecmessa are fooled by Ajax's ambiguous and introspective language into believing he has had a change of heart. But the confusion only serves to heighten the dramatic power of Ajax's death scene. Sophocles uses this dramatic irony to increase the tension of the messenger speech scene in lines 719-814, when the messenger explains, first to the chorus, and then to Tecmessa, that Ajax is doomed. The messenger tells how Ajax had incurred the wrath of the goddess because, although he was born with a human nature, he does not think according to his humanity (ὅστις ἀνθρώπου φύσιν βλαστῶν ἔπειτα μὴ κατ' ἀνθρώπων φρονῆ. 760-61). Indeed Ajax seems to transcend

²⁹ Knox (1961) 24

³⁰ Ibid. 17

humanity and he conceives of himself in superhuman terms, rejecting divine aid (767-69), and inciting the stereotypically heroic antagonism of the goddess.

Ajax's final scene is his death speech. He prays to Zeus that Teucer would be the first to find his body so that he will not be exposed by his enemies (826-30) and he calls on Hermes to escort him to death. He then curses his enemies and asks the Furies to destroy them, refusing to relinquish his hatred and desire to harm his enemies even in death (835-844). He ends his speech by connecting himself to his ancestral homeland Salamis and "famous Athens" (κλειναί τ' Ἀθῆναι 861), significantly connecting himself at his moment of death to his two most prominent cult sites.

Immediately after his death scene, the question of his burial is the most pressing issue to Tecmessa, the chorus, and Teucer. Tecmessa covers the body straight away and laments that Teucer is not yet present, so that he could help in the burial preparations (συγκαθαρόμῳσαι 922). Tecmessa realizes that the death of Ajax only means hardship for her and for the chorus and that it will lead to derision and disgrace, once again linking corporate laughter to the disgrace of the hero (οἱ δ' οὖν γελόντων κάπικαιρόντων κακοῖς τοῖς τοῦδ' 961). It is a central irony that a character as fiercely individualistic as Ajax is dependent upon the recognition of the community in order to gain the honor he deserves, whereas his disgrace is embodied consistently in the laughter of his individual enemies, both divine and human.

Teucer enters and laments the death of his heroic brother. He is interrupted by the chorus, who urge him to hurry up and bury the corpse because an enemy approaches, an enemy who perhaps will be laughing (καὶ τάχ' ἄν κακοῖς γελῶν 1042-3). The enemy is Menelaus and his immediate command is that Ajax must not be buried (1047-8). This

begins a war of words between the Atreidai and Teucer about whether or not Ajax should be buried. Knox writes about these lines, “The last half of the play shows us a world emptied of greatness... The unheroic tone of the end of the play (with its threats and boasts and personal insults) has often been criticized as an artistic failure; surely it is deliberate... A heroic age has passed away...”³¹

The debate scene between Teucer and the Atreidai indicates clearly that the level of discourse and human interaction has shifted (Ajax might say degenerated) from one based on heroic deeds to one based on political systems and laws. As Knox argued, the heroic world disappears, but in its place, something resembling the polis has arisen. Menelaus argues that neither a city nor an army would ever have success without respect for the laws (1073-6). Teucer and Menelaus argue in terms familiar to fifth-century Athenians (στρατηγός 1106, 1116; ἄρχω 1107; σύμμαχος 1098; ψήφος 1135; δικαστής 1136), and their retorts reveal the unheroic context of the debate.

Agamemnon’s arguments are even more arrogant than Menelaus’. He spends his speech insulting the slavish birth of Teucer and his barbaric speech (1226-63). Teucer responds by reminding Agamemnon of all the great deeds of Ajax, his various duels with Hector (1272-87), and of Agamemnon’s own shameful family history (1291-98). The lowbrow exchange of insults is ended only by the sudden appearance of Odysseus.

Odysseus enters and puts an end to the squabble. He describes the corpse as brave (ἀλκίμος 1319) and then argues that Agamemnon should allow the burial. He points out that to do so would be a disgrace to justice (ὥστε τὴν δίκην πατεῖν 1335) because despite the fact that Ajax was “most hateful” (ἔχθιστος 1336) to him, it would be wrong

³¹ Ibid. 2

to dishonor him (ἀντατιμάζω 1339), because Ajax was the best of the Argives (ἄριστον Ἀργείων 1340). Odysseus declares, “Likewise he would be unjustly dishonored by you as well” (ὥστ' οὐκ ἂν ἐνδίκως γ' ἀτιμάζοιτό σοι 1342). Odysseus echoes Ajax’s frequent lament that he had been dishonored by the leadership. In these lines Odysseus agrees with Ajax, that Ajax truly was the greatest after Achilles. He argues that though Ajax was a hated enemy to him, he nevertheless deserves to be honored by all because of his intrinsic greatness. Odysseus realizes that another transition has occurred, the shift from death to life. It is acceptable to hate a good man while he lives if he is your enemy, but if he should die, that is another matter. A good man deserves honor even in death (ἄνδρα δ' οὐ δίκαιον, εἰ θάνοι, βλάπτειν τὸν ἐσθλόν, οὐδ' ἐὰν μισῶν κυρῆς 1344-5).

Agamemnon understands the reason behind this argument but points out that, “It is not easy for a tyrant to show reverence” (τόν τοι τύραννον εὐσεβεῖν οὐ ῥάδιον 1350). Odysseus is thus the champion of moderation and of a properly ordered society. He has learned and adopted the lesson that Ajax could not accept, that friends can become enemies and enemies can become friends. Odysseus offers to aid Teucer with the burial, because, “Just as much as I was an enemy, I am so much now a friend” (ὅσον τότ' ἐχθρὸς ἦ, τοσσόνδ' εἶναι φίλος 1377). He understands the inevitable mutability of life. He himself witnessed how rapidly Ajax was ruined and destroyed and he now understands how the greatness of Ajax did not die with the man, but that it demands honor after his death. The state of man is alterable then, even after death, and Odysseus determines to give honor where it is truly deserved.³² Teucer, on the other hand,

³² cf. Taplin (1979) 126; Taplin argues that Ajax realized the potential to return to greatness even after death, “I can only suggest that when he talks about himself we are to take him to be talking about the time

understood the intractable spirit of Ajax, and knowing that Odysseus remained his enemy to the end, and does not allow Odysseus to touch the body during the funeral.

The play ends with the preparations for the funeral. Everyone friendly from the army is invited (1396-7) and Teucer prepares the ritual elements of the honored burial in his last lines (1402-17). In the closing lines, the chorus echoes the theme of the inevitability of changing fortunes, “not even a seer knows how he will fare in the future” (οὐδείς μάντις τῶν μελλόντων ὅ τι πράξει 1419-20).

The debate over the corpse of Ajax reveals the shift from a heroic society into one governed by poleis and the play demonstrates how post-heroic communities should respond to the heroes. The Atreidai staunchly hold that the community should not honor figures like Ajax. In fact, they hold that the community should actively dishonor him by preventing his burial. At an elemental human level, this seems barbaric and unconscionable, but it is also a seemingly reasonable conclusion for a community trying to assert its corporate values against dangerous individualistic figures.

Sophocles therefore makes a case for the burial of the hero, and, simultaneously, for the value to the community of honoring heroes. Understanding Ajax’s status as a cult hero illuminates the tensions between this archaic form of honor and the polis, with its democratic laws and offices. Odysseus serves as the sensible and enlightened man, and he demonstrates to Agamemnon why it is important for the community to honor men like Ajax.

after his death. He sees, that is — and this is my greatest departure from Knox — that his name and presence will not cease to exist the moment that he dies; that his corpse and his τιμή and his power to help or neglect his dependants, all at present at such a low ebb, will, instead of ending with his death, continue and indeed revive. He realizes that the see-saw of human affairs, so memorably expressed by Athena at 131-2, may tip even after death, and that, since he is now down at his lowest, he can only go up.”

Odysseus recognized that Ajax was not just a normal man; he was a great man. He was mighty, brave, and the best of the Greeks that came to Troy after Achilles (1332-45). Odysseus recognizes that Ajax was truly excellent and therefore fundamentally deserving of not just a burial, but of an honored burial, such as mortals give to the best men (καὶ τὸν θανόντα τόνδε συνθάπτειν θέλω καὶ ξυμπονεῖν καὶ μηδὲν ἐλλείπειν ὄσων χρὴ τοῖς ἀρίστοις ἀνδράσιν πονεῖν βροτούς 1378-80). Odysseus in no way argues for a return to the heroic system that fostered men like Ajax. Rather, he demonstrates that the polis community needs to have the ability to honor great men, even, and perhaps especially, men who were fiercely independent, self-glorifying, and frighteningly powerful figures from the heroic past.

Sophocles dramatizes the tension between the hero and a community. Odysseus points out that even inimical heroes deserve honor for their intrinsic excellence, nobility and greatness, as he says, “His excellence conquers me, more than his hatefulness” (νικᾷ γὰρ ἀρετὴ με τῆς ἔχθρας πλέον 1357). Thus the play demonstrates that the city should honor heroes because of their fundamental excellence simply because it is right to do so, even heroes whose lives are contrary to the ideals of the polis. Odysseus recognizes that when the city honors heroes, it does not undermine its own law, rather, it fulfills justice.

At line 1335, Odysseus says that to withhold honor from Ajax would be to “trample on justice” (τὴν δίκην πατεῖν). At line 1363, he tells the Atreids that all the Greeks would consider them just men if they allowed the burial (ἄνδρας μὲν οὖν Ἕλλησι πᾶσιν ἐνδίκους). Though Menelaus and Agamemnon argued that Ajax could not be buried because it would undermine the law,³³ Odysseus has argued that justice

³³ cf. 1073-74

demands it. Ajax is clearly not portrayed in this play as a role model, an example to be emulated. He is savage, uncompromising, and abrasively self-obsessed. Odysseus realizes that honoring the hero does not mean that the city sanctions all of his behavior, and therefore it does not undermine any laws to honor the deceased hero. On the contrary, it is actually just to honor true excellence and it must be possible for the city to accommodate and incorporate outlying figures like Ajax. Additionally, once they have been integrated, the city can reformulate heroes into figures that are useful for promoting and stabilizing polis society.

The final scenes of the play reveal that honoring great men actually benefits the city. Odysseus recognizes the superhuman excellence of Ajax but also realizes their shared humanity. Bestowing upon Ajax the honor that his outstanding greatness deserves, in addition to the respect due to his humanity, reminds citizens of their own mortality, and of their weakness compared to the might of the hero. Honoring the hero also emphasizes the distinct otherness of the hero. The citizen is reminded of his own frailty, and his dependence and reliance on the strength of the city and its corporate power. Honoring heroes simultaneously increases the force of that corporate strength by bringing citizens together, and uniting them to a common purpose. It gives them a focal point of group identity, and a figure to rally behind. The hero is a figure by which communities can define themselves, and that the community can celebrate as their own.

Sophocles' drama, which is so rife with the very tensions that hero cult generates and with the presence of Ajax's heroic personality, concludes with just such a celebration of the hero's greatness. Teucer invites anyone who would wish to join him to honor Ajax

by attending the burial. He then enters into a hymn that reiterates the might of Ajax, and unites the community together to celebrate the hero:

ἔτι γὰρ θερμοὶ
σύριγγες ἄνω φυσῶσι μέλαν
μένος. ἀλλ' ἄγε πᾶς φίλος ὅστις ἀνήρ
φησὶ παρῆναι, σοῦσθω, βάτω,
τῷδ' ἀνδρὶ πονῶν τῷ πάντ' ἀγαθῷ (1411-1415)

...for still do his warm
pipes blow black might upwards.
But come all who are present who
say they are a friend, hasten, come,
toiling for this man, who was entirely good.

Though Ajax is dead, his veins still pour out his dark might. Literally this refers to the blood draining from his still-warm corpse. However, the words are also a figure of his inimitable power, present even after he has departed physically. As Teucer sings out the preparations for the funeral, he calls all of Ajax's friends, his φίλοι, to hasten to join with him in honoring Ajax. The community that was about to rupture into violence in response to Ajax's crimes has now found greater unity and purpose by celebrating him, together with his family. Just so, the city that struggles to come to terms with the egregious actions of heroes is ultimately strengthened by honoring them. The play thus depicts how a modernizing polis should receive and respond to powerful archaic features of Greek society like the heroes. Cult provides the city a means to embrace and honor savage and uncivilized heroes from a bygone era. *Ajax* reveals that heroes demand honor, and that though the city might struggle over the tensions inherent in its own history and cultural development, ultimately the greatness of the hero will prove ineluctable, and the hero will be honored.

Conclusion

During the 8th and 7th centuries BC, the formative eras preceding Classical Greek civilization, intense consideration and speculation about the heroes permeated various strains of Greek culture. The heroes were remembered and celebrated continuously through the recitation and dissemination of epic poetry. Also during this period, ancient Greek religious practices began to be solidified. One of the most characteristic traits of religious practice throughout a great number of the various regions of the Greek-speaking world was the cultic worship of heroes. The poetic consideration and celebration of heroes developed during the same cultural milieu as their ritual honors. The roots of both practices remain shrouded in pre-history, and it is difficult to ascertain the original relationship between the two. These two cultural traditions emerge recognizably during the historical period, however, and represent the culmination of centuries of composition and recomposition of poetry and ritual formulation honoring the heroes. This study has focused on one of these very heroes, Ajax, who was featured in epic poetry and was honored as a cult hero.

The first chapter explored the practice of hero cult in general and then examined the cult of Ajax specifically. Because the Homeric poetry that has been preserved and

that is encountered today represents a codified version of a nebulous tradition that developed over centuries, it is difficult to determine the role of epic poetry in the development of hero cult practices. However, in the cases of some heroes, particularly heroes who were celebrated in epic and honored in cult, it seems that poetry, if it did not actually engender their cultic honors, encouraged, fostered, and popularized their hero cults. Ajax is one of these figures. The cultural preeminence of the Homeric poems established Ajax as a prominent hero in Greek society and increased the sanctity and importance of his cult. It is a testament to the influence of Ajax's greatness in epic poetry that Ajax was worshipped at various cult sites, notably at his traditional ancestral home on Salamis and in Athens, where he was adopted as an eponymous tribal hero. Ajax's fame as a hero of epic poetry was therefore influential in the development and prominence of his cultic honors.

In addition to this, during the fifth century, Ajax's notability as a revered cult hero affected the reception of epic poetry and informed the reconsideration of his story in new poetic compositions. In the second chapter, we explored why Pindar was intrigued by the Ajax myth and compelled to question the trustworthiness of the poetic tradition. Pindar is highly anxious about poetry's ability to preserve either praise or blame, and the potential that either may be done falsely. Pindar is also an unequivocal advocate of Ajax's innate greatness. This reflects Ajax's notoriety and popularity, especially on the island of Aegina, where many of Pindar's patrons lived. Additionally Ajax was celebrated as a considerable tutelary force after the Battle of Salamis in 480 BC. Chapter two concluded that Pindar challenged the veracity of the poetic tradition about Ajax because Ajax as a figure of cult had risen in sanctity and in importance above his treatment in the poetic

tradition. Ajax's hero cult therefore influenced Pindar's composition of poetry about Ajax, as well as informed Pindar's ambivalent stance toward prior poetry. For Pindar, Ajax's cult is an effective corrective for his negative portrayal in epic, and Pindar was guided by Ajax's cult in his poetic correction of the myth.

In the third chapter we examined how Sophocles was also influenced by the cultic status of Ajax. Ajax held a significant religious and civic presence in Athens as one of the ten eponymous tribal heroes. Chapter three first examined passages of the play that indicate that Sophocles understood Ajax as not merely a hero of poetic myth, but as a powerful cultic hero, who remained sentient and potent even after his suicide. It is clear from several of these passages that Sophocles was informed by Ajax's status as cult hero. Sophocles' *Ajax* also explores the civic value of honoring and celebrating savage and fiercely individualistic, glory-obsessed heroes like Ajax. The play dramatically demonstrates that though the age of heroes has passed and the age of the polis has dawned, and although heroes often are antithetical to polis society, the polis must nevertheless be capable of integrating and incorporating the heroes. The play reveals that heroes have an intrinsic greatness that demands honor, and that it fulfills justice and is beneficial for the polis to grant it. Honoring heroes reminds citizens of their own dependence on forces greater than themselves and simultaneously strengthens that very force by uniting the citizens behind the common rallying point of an inspiring heroic figure.

This study has primarily been an exploration of the relationship between the presentation of Ajax in Greek poetry and his status as a cult hero. We have seen how epic poetry preserved the memory and heightened the glory of epic heroes, many of whom

were also worshipped in cult. However, the interface between poetry and cult did not come to a close at the beginning of the historical period. The cults of Ajax influenced his presentation and characterization in other areas of Greek culture. In two different genres of fifth-century poetry, the epinician ode and Athenian civic tragedy, Ajax's hero cult status was important for his poetic depiction and assessment. Pindar, the encomiastic poet, finds cause to praise Ajax and to quell the strength of any poetry dishonoring him, correcting blameworthy stories that had been preserved in the poetic tradition. Sophocles, a tragedian, explores how the polis should respond to heroic figures like Ajax. In contrast with Pindar, Sophocles does not minimize disgraceful aspects of Ajax's story, but—like Pindar—he absolutely acknowledges Ajax's praiseworthiness. His play reveals that it is the city's hero cult rituals that offer heroes, even uncivilized ones, the honor they necessarily deserve, and that it is beneficial and satisfying to celebrate them. For both Pindar and Sophocles, cult helps to determine and locate the praiseworthy aspects of a hero, and the significance of a hero's cultic status is used to reinterpret prior poetic traditions.

This reflects the nature of ancient Greek religious practices, which were generally not codified, nor governed by sacred texts and orthodox doctrines. Rather, there is and had always been a free and developmental exchange of ideas and influence between various areas of Greek thought, especially between poetry and religious practice. While the weighty figures of cult are honored ritually through sacrifices, in poetry their importance is exalted and their memories are celebrated through the lasting permanence of the enjoyable words. Both practices however, honor heroic figures of myth. They are both parallel expressions of Classical Greek civilization seeking to understand, relate to,

and interact with its own traditions about its mythic origins, and in fact with its conception of its own identity. This study has examined ways in which these two distinct streams of Greek culture, both emanating from the spring of the mythic past, ultimately, and perhaps inevitably, repeatedly crossed paths and how the commingling of these two forces finds vivid expression in the variegated literature of the fifth century BC.

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