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Integrating the Panathenaic Games into the Framework of Democracy

The political atmosphere of Athens in the 5th century BCE was radically different from that only a century prior. Seeded by the Solonic reforms, the former aristocracy of Athens dominated by archons from politically entrenched families gave way to the radical democracy that sought to involve every citizen of the state at some level. A gradual political change would have been matched by a gradual change in the general culture and practices of Athens. However, while the Athenian political landscape might have changed quickly, there was no correspondingly abrupt shift in the cultural traditions and practices of Athens, which had descended from and (thus represented) aristocratic values. Thus, the radically democratic government would need to maintain these traditions in order to have historical legitimacy, but change what the traditions represented so that they would be seen as celebrations of democracy and democratic values, despite their roots in aristocracy. One such heralded tradition was the Panathenaic festival, and the accompanying Panathenaic Games.¹

The Panathenaic Games arose during the reign of Peisistratos in 566 BCE, though their socio-mythical and historical origins stretch farther back to the ages of deeply seated aristocratic rule of Athens. Quickly after their inception, they became an important part of Athenian culture and, with the Panathenaic festival, extolled the values and triumphs of the city.² These games were prominent both visually and

¹ Davison (1958) 31.

² Neils (1994) 15.

culturally and thus had a large implicit influence on the population in terms of values. The transition to a radical democratic political system required that the games be made to fit more into the values of democratic Athens despite their roots in aristocratic traditions. Through the organization of the games, such as their tribal components, or the splitting of prizes amongst various winners, and the usage of public space as hosting areas for the games, the Athenian government was able to frame the Panathenaic games in such a way that they represented the values of Athenian democracy, despite their aristocratic roots.

To understand the overall transition from aristocratic to democratic values that the Panathenaic games were made to fit, first aristocratic and democratic values must be defined. Aristocratic values are those that are in line with the political system of Athens pre-5th century BCE. Aristocratic values are the status quo that people such as Solon, Ephialtes, and Pericles actively fought against. Aristocratic forms of government held that power was best concentrated in a select few people, and aristocratic values matched this belief. Aristocratic values emphasized the power of one over the general public and especially valued the ancient/rich families of Athens over all others. The Areopagus being the original seat of power of Athens, and being made up of archons, “chosen on the basis of birth and wealth qualifications”³ exemplified this. Symbols of aristocracy and aristocratic values thus included a rich heritage, association with kings/royalty, and any type of horse-rearing or horse competition – as these were all symbols of extravagant wealth and the people who held it – aristocrats who were made

³ *Ath. Pol.* 3.6.

prominent in the Athenian aristocratic political system and thus were held in regard by aristocratic values.

Democratic values can be seen as those in conflict against aristocratic values. Indeed, many of Athens' internal political struggles can be seen as clashes between policies that interest an already politically entrenched elite class and those that encourage participation by all Athenian citizens.⁴ Democratic values are the underlying ideals that influenced the changes of the Athenian constitution as described by Aristotle in *The Athenian Constitution*. Solon's reform of the Athenian class system as based on wealth⁵ and his creation of the *Boule*⁶, Cleisthenes' creation of the ten Athenian tribes to share power amongst the people⁷ and creation of the ostracism⁸ all demonstrate a greater focus on the whole of Athens' citizen-class rather than just the elite, wealthy aristocrats. Democratic values are thus those that encourage egalitarianism and humility amongst the citizenry of Athens; if no citizen is by default better in the public sphere (barring some economic variables), then no citizen should seem better than any other in life. Since most offices in the state were chosen by lot⁹ there was also a large emphasis on every citizen's role in maintaining the well-being of Athens itself, which is civic democratic duty. The politics of democratic Athens defined the democratic values that themselves sought to encourage participation in and acceptance of the politics that begat them.

⁴ Plut., *Per.* 7.

⁵ *Ath. Pol.* 7.3.

⁶ *Ath. Pol.* 7.4.

⁷ *Ath. Pol.* 21.2.

⁸ *Ath. Pol.* 22.2.

⁹ *Ath. Pol.* 43.1.

The Panathenaic festival, a large ordeal that involved the entire city of Athens, had a large historical and social role in Athenian culture. At its core it was a celebration of the state of Athens and all of their accomplishments: both military and cultural.¹⁰ The Panathenaic festival encompassed every aspect of the Athenian culture and populace, “in its fullest flowering it was a festival calculated to appeal to all levels of society, and to involve as many as possible in the worship of the city's chief deity.”¹¹ This wide appeal falls right in line with the encouragement of the care of the state by the people, a fundamental tenet of democratic values. Everyone included could thus share the victories of the state and feel pride in themselves as having had a role in Athens’ victories and glory. Nowhere was this civic pride and duty more felt than the Panathenaic procession, the capstone of which was the set of Periclean-built temples on the Acropolis. These monuments, publicly-built and maintained, remind the citizenry of the strength of their government as well as their own role in keeping the government strong. The public display of public works is a common theme in the promotion of Athenian democratic values as such usage of space evokes a sense of civic pride and a reminder of civic duty in the populace.

Civic pride also involves pride in history, which itself might not be a reminder of democratic values. In fact, the history of Athens is often quite the opposite, filled with tales of good kings and powerful rulers – times when the city was governed by a select aristocratic few such as Draco or his predecessors. The need to reconcile aristocratic backgrounds with democratic values can be seen in the roots of many Athenian events. The Panathenaia, for example, is historically

¹⁰ Neils (1994) 15.

¹¹ Neils (1994) 12.

associated with Erectheus¹², so much so that the most important role of the Panathenaia, the presenter of the peplos, is not chosen by lot but picked out of a noble family supposedly descended from Erechtheus himself.¹³ This inherently nondemocratic choice is an odd exception to the overall presence of democratic values in the Panathenaia. The presence of aristocratic values is an archaic residue of the roots of various Athenian traditions. The Panathenaic games, being a part of the Panathenaic festival, inherit the festival's cultural position as well as its democratic merits and aristocratic roots. As their own institution though, they bring in other aristocratic backgrounds and offer more opportunities to represent democratic values.

The Panathenaic games stretch, in spirit, back to the funeral games of the *Iliad*. In Book 23, Homer details how the aristocratic leaders of the Greek camp come together to compete in games to honor the dead Patroclus. Many of the games described: running, wrestling, and especially chariot racing, were held at the Panathenaic games as well.¹⁴ Greek games in general appear to derive from these ancient funeral games that would honor individuals, most relevant though, is that these individuals were always aristocrats. The noble-elite of society would hold these games to honor the individuals in private, not public settings. Those who, not only were wealthy enough to be hoplites or maintain horses for chariot-races, but also considered themselves descended from mighty heroes such as Demophon of Athen, would be run. These aristocrats were who the games were for. Though this

¹² Davison (1958) 25.

¹³ Neils (1994) 12.

¹⁴ Johnston (1987) 128.

historical precedence could provide a source of pride and legitimacy in the Panathenaic games, it still takes away from the democratic value of the institution, which is of utmost importance in state-run events. The tradition of funeral games was passed down through the aristocracy such that, as recent as in the eighth and seventh centuries, "Athletics, and ritualised competition of all kinds, did not form an integral part of community or state consciousness... but instead remained the preserve of the aristocracy."¹⁵ For the Panathenaic games to maintain their prestige but represent democratic values, their image would have to be redefined and their motivations steered away from private aristocratic events.

The Panathenaic games were made to represent democratic values by careful planning of the spaces in which various games were held. Similar to how the Periclean buildings on the Acropolis invoked civic pride and acted as a reminder of civic duty, most of the Panathenaic games were held in public areas often in the middle of the city. Archaeological excavations of the Agora and related parts of Athens¹⁶ have shown evidence for racing posts in the Agora and on the Panathenaic Way (the road of the procession). These posts were most likely used to host the footraces of the Panathenaic games. If these races were held in the Agora, then they were publicly viewable and thus had a very inclusive audience, an aspect of democratic values that was earlier discussed. Though the audience might know the historic roots of the footraces (the aristocratic funeral games) the games' current context in the space they were held would have been a democratic contrast to the privacy of the aristocratic games, and so the footraces would ultimately have

¹⁵ Morgan (1990) 208.

¹⁶ Shear (1975) 364.

been made to represent democratic values. Additionally, the posts, or at least, the slots the posts would be held in would always be present in the Agora, so even when the games were not being held, people would see them and be reminded about the glory of the games and the strength of their state such that it could put on such incredible games. This again, is an example of civic pride due to the public display of the games – civic pride, as opposed to hubristic self-pride, being an important democratic value.

There were some games that not only had aristocratic roots, but were inherently symbols of aristocracy themselves, horse-related events were the most common of such in the Panathenaic games. Horse events, such as the chariot races were arguably pay-to-win events, as the richest participant could breed and buy the best horse as well as afford to keep that horse the healthiest amongst all competitors.¹⁷ Such emphasis on the individual is counter to the democratic values of Athens as it distinguishes a person, not for their merit but for their monetary boasts. But, the movement of these chariot races to outside of the city¹⁸ shows that Athens still held respect for its past and treasured its traditions. The citizens though, would not constantly be reminded of the chariot races, as they were held outside the city, and the audience might not have been as large as that for the footraces, so the footraces received more attention from the populace and thus democratic values received more attention from the populace than aristocratic ones.

The way the games were organized also encouraged democratic values despite the aristocratic roots of the Panathenaic games. Chiefly, we can see that

¹⁷ Osborne (2004) 214.

¹⁸ Neils (1994) 8.

many prizes were awarded for each competition¹⁹, causing there to be no winner-takes-all event. This de-emphasized the role of the individual and spread the victory around a greater amount of people. By de-emphasizing the individual victor, the practice of awarding multiple prizes minimized the aristocratic individual focus of victory in the Panathenaic games and thus promoted the democratic value of spreading the power/influence of victory.²⁰

People were required to compete in the Panathenaic games with their tribes rather than for themselves alone, this de-emphasized the individual and promoted solidarity and the good of the group, just as the creation of the tribal system in the first place sowed the seeds of Athenian democracy. Tribal competitions, like the awarding of multiple prizes, spread out the victory, which helped to keep anyone from gaining too much influence and kept people somewhat more humble than aristocratic competitions might have. But, the tribal competition dynamic also had a more historical reason for its use. The roots of the Panathenaic games were the funeral games, which continued as private funeral games for deceased aristocrats. The Panathenaic games continued this tradition, but shifted the focus of the worshipped deceased from aristocrats to the eponymous heroes of the tribes themselves.²¹ The spirit of honoring the deceased (and thus the legitimacy of continuing old traditions) remained, but the shift in focus allowed the values represented to be democratic, rather than aristocratic. The organization of the competition into tribal components allowed a sense of inclusion in the games

¹⁹ Johnston (1987) 128.

²⁰ Osborne (2004) 215.

²¹ Thompson (1961) 76.

without the feeling of pure individual might that came with an aristocratic victory. Victors were representatives of their tribes rather than themselves, and this emphasis on the collective good again demonstrated democratic, rather than aristocratic values.

The rhetoric in which the Panathenaic games were framed also aided in reframing the aristocratic roots of the games in the Athenian democratic mindset. The focus on the roots of the games was changed, they were seen as games for soldiers as well as aristocrats. With the games seen in the context of military preparation for all citizens, they began to take on a new democratic tone. Competitive contests were seen as practical, they encouraged the training of skills needed for defense of Athens, the common good, a democratic virtue. Even the chariot races were seen as encouraging the cavalry and so even the aristocrats could contribute their wealth towards the common good, after all democratic values don't shame wealth, they rather see "wealth as something to be properly used, rather than as something to boast about."²² The city, in framing the contests as competitive practical skills promoted the collective interest of the state while still encouraging individuals to be ambitious (as long as that ambition was directed in a way that benefitted the state).²³ This sort of doublethink between encouraging individual ambition and direction that ambition towards the good of the state rather than thoughts of sedition surrounded the rhetoric of the Panathenaic games.²⁴

²² *Thuc.* 2.36

²³ Osborne (2004) 217.

²⁴ Osborne (2004) 220.

A sharp change in government is not normally matched by an equal change in culture, and democratic Athens was no different. The cultural institutions of fifth century Athens had to respect their aristocratic roots (as the aristocratic families still made up part of the Athenian government) while emphasizing democratic values such as the collective good, the de-emphasis individual, and fostering feelings of civic pride and duty. The Panathenaic games are rooted deep in aristocratic practices, with precedent stretching all the way back to the *Iliad* which is a national treasure amongst all Greeks. The games were important to the people of Athens and had to be maintained. By changing the emphasis/goals of the games, organizing the competitions into tribal units and displaying most of the games publicly, the Athenian government was able to integrate the historical legitimacy of the Panathenaic games into the framework of their democratic values.

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