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The Cult of Heroes and the *Ajax* of Sophocles*

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Introduction

Scholars and critics alike have long expressed a sense of disappointment with the second half of the *Ajax* of Sophocles. After Ajax commits suicide in the middle of the play, it is said, we lose all interest in what follows. We are told that the second half does not have much to do with the first; and, to make matters worse, the second half is mainly an uninteresting political debate (from our point of view) over whether the body of Ajax should receive a proper burial. An ancient scholiast even goes so far as to suggest that Sophocles had simply run out of things to say: "Because he wanted to prolong the play beyond the suicide of Ajax, Sophocles loses the tragic tension and becomes a bore" (Kitto 180). No scholar today would be so blunt as to call Sophocles a bore; but the same feeling, that the second half of the play is a failure, persists. Moore, for instance, writes that after the death of Ajax there is "a sense of diminished tragic feeling...a disastrous lowering of tone" (5). "The wrangle at the end," he adds, "seems unduly prolonged and at times undignified" (5).

The most common response to this perceived shortcoming has been to explain the play as having a "diptych structure," with two halves joined loosely together, but in such a way that each comments on and serves to deepen the meaning of the other.[1] Thus Tyler writes that the first half of the play is concerned with the

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[1] To the best of my knowledge, the words "diptych form" first appear in T.B.L. Webster, *An Introduction to Sophocles*, 2nd ed. (London: Oxford University Press; London: Methuen & Co. Ltd. 1969), p. 103. It is used extensively by A.J.A. Waldock in his *Sophocles the Dramatist*

adversarial relationship between Ajax and Athena, while the second half is concerned with the adversarial relationship between Ajax and the Greeks. "Because Ajax is the target of two distinct sets of adversaries, the play may be said to have a double plot" (33). Interpretations along these lines may well be correct, for we should not expect Sophocles to have written only masterpieces that sustain their emotional intensity from beginning to end. On the other hand, however, our sources indicate that the *Ajax* was Sophocles' most popular play in the ancient world; and the diptych interpretation does little to account for this fact.

In response to the widespread feeling that "with the suicide of Ajax, the principal interest has disappeared," Jebb proposed that we should try to understand that for the Athenians Ajax was not just a character in a tragedy, but a "sacred hero," whose life and death were being reenacted on the stage. The original audience would therefore have been deeply concerned over the issue of his burial, and the second half of the play would have been of deep and absorbing interest to them (xxxii).[2] A major stumbling block stands in the way of this thesis, however, one which has prevented its widespread acceptance. "There is not a word of any of this [talk of cult] in Sophocles' play; Jebb's theory lies open to the objection raised most pointedly by Perrotta: '*della consacrazione ad eroe, del culto dell'eroe Aiace, nella tragedia non si parla affatto*" (Burian 151). Winnington-Ingram is similarly dismissive of any attempt to make sense out of the play by taking into account the cult of Ajax. There simply are not enough indications given, he writes, that would lead us to think that Ajax will be consecrated as a hero after his death (57).[3]

If we are to understand the *Ajax*, then, it would be helpful for us to determine once and for all whether Sophocles intended his Ajax the character in the play to have any links with Ajax the sacred hero. Indeed, that is the very question that I have tried to answer in the following pages. My conclusion is that Sophocles must have thought of Ajax as a sacred hero, and that the play is more satisfying and easier to understand when Ajax is perceived as such.

To substantiate this central claim, I have divided the paper into two main parts. In the first half, I present a summary of the current state of our knowledge on hero cults. Such an effort will necessarily involve us in matters that do not have to do with

(Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1966), pp. 49-79. Waldock notes on p. 61 that "Every diptych, as I say, has its defenders, and the *Ajax* is no exception to this rule. Professor Bowra, for instance, feels that we have dealt sufficiently with the problem of its structure when we have recognized that Sophocles had two themes in mind. There is, first, the ruin of Ajax; next, there is the rehabilitation of his character after death."

[2] See also pp. xxx-xxxii for Jebb's discussion on the relevance of hero-cult to our understanding of the unity of the play.

[3] Also see his footnote on p. 58: "The point is rather that there is so little hint in the play of that posthumous power to help and harm on which *Oedipus Coloneus* is as insistent as *Ajax* is reticent."

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the play itself, matters such as Greek religion and the reforms of Cleisthenes. But the phenomenon of hero worship appears to have been unique to the Greeks. It is almost entirely alien to the Judeo-Christian concept of religion. An extra amount of effort is thus required from us in trying to understand hero cults and the meaning that they had for their practitioners. But there is no other way. As Lloyd-Jones rightly observes, "These tragedies can only be understood if one has some understanding of the religion that lies behind them" (4).

In the second half of the paper, I return to a consideration of the *Ajax* of Sophocles in light of the knowledge of hero cults presented in the first half. I shall argue that although there is no direct mention of hero cults *per se* in the play, there are enough hints and suggestions that lead us to conclude that Sophocles did indeed perceive Ajax as a sacred hero, and that the performance of the *Ajax* was akin to a ritual re-enactment of the life and death of Ajax the sacred hero on the stage. Such a performance would have provided the Athenians with reasons for worshipping Ajax, and brought them emotionally closer to a great hero that they all worshipped.

I. The Cult of Heroes

What, then, is a sacred hero? This is an easy question to ask, but a difficult one to answer; for our knowledge of heroes and hero cults derives from a bewildering variety of sources, ranging from literature to history, from funerary remains to historical inscriptions. One can easily get lost in such a thicket of information. To make the following discussion easier to follow, I have divided it into five parts: (a) the origins of hero cults; (b) the civic importance of hero cults; (c) the religious importance of hero cults; (d) ritual procedures involving hero cults; and finally (e) the requirements for becoming a hero.

(a) The Origins of Hero Cults

Like the origins of tragedy, the origins of hero cults are obscure and lost in the mists of time. But scholars are in general agreement that hero cults begin to proliferate in the eighth century BCE, when the Greeks were beginning to emerge from what has come to be known as the Dark Age of Greece (ca. 1100-800 BCE).[4] According to Morris, the Greeks of that time must have inferred, from the awe-inspiring remains of the Mycenaean Age (ca. 1300-1100), that in the past the earth had been populated by a race of supermen and giants (750). Perhaps they believed that the spirits of these

[4] For example, see Walter Burkert, *Greek Religion,* trans. John Raffan (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985), p. 203: "Hero graves honoured with a cult are traceable from the last quarter of the eighth century."

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extraordinary figures were able to do either harm or good, depending on whether they were treated with contempt or respect. Acting on such a belief, they began to worship the spirits of these heroes, placing offerings near their graves and providing them with cults. Thus archaeologists have discovered, in the vicinity of many Mycenaean tombs, votive offerings inscribed with words such as "I am the Hero's" (Snodgrass 181).

This hypothesis—that hero cults emerged out of a sense of contrast between the men of the present and those of the past—is strengthened by a consideration of numerous passages found in many commonly read authors. As Currie notes:

> In Greek literature the mythical heroes, although men, are regularly opposed to the men of the present. In Homer this opposition is underlined by the formula 'such as men are now' (*Iliad* 5.304 οἷοι νῦν βροτοί εἰσι, etc), in Hesiod by their qualification as 'the previous race' (*Works and Days* 160 προτέρη γενεή), and in Herodotus by an (implied) antithesis of 'the so-called human race' (3.122.2 τῆς δὲ ἀνθρωπηίης λεγομένης γενεῆς) with the race of heroes. (45)

(b) The Civic Importance of Hero Cults

In today's world, most of us (at least those living in modern democracies) believe strongly that religion is a private affair, a matter of conscience: we feel that the government has no right to tell us what form of religion we are to practice. But in ancient Greece, notes Parker, religion was above all a social affair. It was "taken for granted" that religion was "'eminently social,'" he writes, citing with approval the observations of Durkheim (1). Whatever gods and heroes the polis worshipped as a whole, the citizens were expected to worship as well.

The power of the state to shape religious practices can be seen in the matter of hero cults as well. Our evidence indicates that the *polis* ideology must have strengthened the already strong feelings held by the Greeks toward their heroes. In the case of Athens, in roughly 510 BCE, Cleisthenes passed a set of laws stipulating, among other things, that the Athenians were no longer to be divided into four tribes, as they had been in the past, but ten (Parker 102). Each of these ten tribes was named after an eponymous hero, according to the *History* of Herodotus (5.66), with one of the tribes named after Ajax. The effect of Cleisthenes' reforms was to "mix up" the Athenian citizens, as Aristotle says, so that those from various demes and regions ended up worshipping the same eponymous hero (Parker 104). When it was necessary to sacrifice to their heroes, or to hold games and funerals in front of their tombs, the citizens would come from different parts of Athens and converge at the tomb of their hero. The effect of all this was to promote social cohesion (Seaford 78-86). The law brought together citizens from different parts of Attica, thus breaking the hold which a strictly local community such as a deme might have had over its inhabitants. It also encouraged members of each tribe to participate in its religious rites as a group, so that the tribal members celebrated together and mourned together.

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(c) The Religious Importance of Hero Cults

How strongly did the Greeks, the Athenians in particular, believe in the reality of their heroes? This is in some ways the hardest thing for us to answer. But we have no reason to doubt that the Greeks would have believed any less in the existence of their heroes than they did in their gods. Indeed the heroes and the gods were often mentioned in the same breath, so that the phrase "the gods and heroes" became a standard refrain. Themistocles, for example, declared after the victorious battle of Salamis that "It is not we who have done the deed but the gods and heroes" (Herodotus 8.109). Indeed, it may even have been the case that the Athenians felt closer to their heroes than their gods; for "the gods are remote, the heroes are near at hand" (Burkert 207). Moreover, when waging war against a city that worshipped the same god (e.g. Zeus), an Athenian could never be sure that the god in question was on their side; he could be positive, however, that his heroes were, for the heroes, buried in their graves, were no less bound to the land than the citizens were emotionally attached to it. As Rohde writes, all our sources indicate "with overwhelming distinctness how strong at that time was the belief in the existence and potency of Heroes even among men of education" (115).

(d) Information about Ritual Procedures

The center of hero worship was the tomb of the hero, a mound of some sort or other in a prominent place, in which the bones of the hero were thought to reside. It was believed that wherever the remains of the hero were, there resided the hero's spirit. Thus unlike the Olympian gods, who could easily travel from Olympus to Ethiopia for some errand (as Poseidon does in the first book of the *Odyssey*), the heroes were bound fast to their graves. Their influence was strictly local. As Kearns writes, "Zeus Meilichios and Aphrodite Ourania were worshipped in dozens of places all over the Greek world. No hero (with a few exceptions of ambiguous rank, like Heracles) could claim that" (3).

This aspect of hero cult is well illustrated by the famous story told by Herodotus concerning the bones of Orestes (1.67-68). When the Spartans were fighting against their neighbors the Tegeans, they were told by the priestess at Delphi that to win the war they would have to bring back the bones of Orestes. However, for a long time thereafter the Spartans could not find his bones, which were located in Tegea, and as a result they continued to suffer defeat after defeat in their battles against the Tegeans. Eventually, a certain Lichas discovered the whereabouts of the bones, and by bringing them back from Tegea to Sparta he also brought the powers of the hero Orestes with him:

> He dug up the grave and collected the bones, and away he went, bringing them with him to Sparta. And from that time, whenever the two peoples made trial of one another in war, the Lacedaemonians had much the better of it, and indeed,

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by now, the most of the Peloponnesus was subject to them. (Herodotus 1.68)

In front of the tomb of the hero, worshippers would place food offerings and the heroes were "imagined as sharing feasts with the living." Laments for the dead heroes were sung, recounting their life and death in song (Seaford 111-115).

(e) Requirements for Heroization

In essence, a sacred hero was someone who has died and who is worshipped and prayed to after his death. As Rhode writes, "The Heroes have once been living men; from being men they have become Heroes, and that only after their death" (117). The first requirement for becoming a hero, then, was for one to have died. Not all those who died, however, became heroes. Only a small number of the dead achieved such exalted status. It was mostly famous characters from (what we call) mythology who became heroes, figures such as Theseus and Ajax, whose words and deeds were also celebrated in poetry. On the other hand, we do find some entirely nameless heroes, identified only by the location in which their bones are interred. We find on one inscription, for example, a hero referred to simply as "the hero at Hale" and another one as "the hero at Antisara" (Ferguson 7).

According to Burkert, "It is some extraordinary quality that makes the hero" (208). Therefore, a second requirement for becoming a hero was for one to have been especially outstanding in his lifetime, perhaps because one had received the special attention of the gods, or perhaps because of some great crime.

An additional requirement for becoming a hero, of course, is acceptance of the hero by his community. This is in some ways an obvious point, for a little bit of thought will tell us that without acceptance by a community, a hero would receive no sacrifice, there would be no one to attend to his grave, and he would soon be forgotten, as the vast majority of people have been forgotten. What is perhaps less obvious is that many heroes, because of their extraordinary qualities, were outcasts in their own lifetimes; only after they have died are they reintegrated into their own communities. This aspect of hero cult is perhaps best illustrated by the story of Cleomedes, an outstanding athlete who one day went mad. In his madness, "he attacked a school which had about sixty children; he pulled down the pillar that supported the roof, and it fell in and killed the children" (Knox 56-57). Afterwards, the villagers who had tried to find his remains were told by the priestess of Apollo at Delphi to "honor him with sacrifices as one no longer mortal" (Knox 57). Thus heroes often start out as outcasts; their wrath, which had been turned against their own community while they were alive, is turned after death to those outside the group. The hero becomes the protector of his group, and for this he is honored with sacrifices and all the trappings befitting a hero.

Such then is a brief sketch of some of the more salient aspects of hero cults, presented in the hopes of making what is an unfamiliar practice less foreign to a modern reader.

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II. The *Ajax* of Sophocles

We are now in a better position to answer our initial question concerning Sophocles' view of Ajax. We know that Greek tragedies were performed in a religious context, and that members of each of the ten tribes participated in the choruses. We know that Sophocles was a pious man, for he served as a priest of the hero Halon (Zimmermann 57). Ancient sources indicate that he was himself also given the status of a hero after his death, something he no doubt would have found immensely gratifying (Knox 54-55). We also know that the Athenians took their heroes seriously; that for them Ajax was not a character dreamed up by the poets, but a living presence, with the power to help or hurt them, depending on how he was treated. Thus prior to the battle of Salamis, according to Herodotus, the Athenians called on none other than Ajax and his father Telamon to come to their aid (8.64); and after it was over, they offered Ajax a trireme as an expression of their thanks (8.121). It is highly unlikely, then, that Sophocles did not conceive of Ajax as a sacred hero; that would be the equivalent of a professed Christian writing a play about the resurrection, a play moreover which was to be performed during Easter, in the presence of a group of Christians, without actually believing in the divinity of Christ.

But we cannot rely only on analogies and arguments from probability to make our case; and in the following pages I would like to point out instances in the text that lead us to believe that Sophocles did indeed intend for his audience to perceive Ajax as a sacred hero. But before we begin, we recall that to become a hero, it was necessary for a man to die first; thus it would have been difficult, if not impossible, for Sophocles to portray a living hero on the stage. The question therefore is this: does Sophocles give us any indication, before the play is over, that Ajax is on his way to *becoming* a hero?

He does. The evidence to support such a contention is varied and has to be culled carefully from the entire play, but we can say at the outset that it falls under three headings: (a) An especially significant scene, comprising lines 1163-1185,[5] suggests that shortly after his death Ajax is already starting to acquire the powers of a sacred hero; (b) language within the play suggests that Sophocles saw Ajax as being "saved"; and (c) Sophocles has gone out of his way to create strong emotional ties between Ajax and Athens, which suggests that he wanted to use the past to make sense out of the present, to use the life and death of Ajax to give the Athenian audience additional reasons for them to worship Ajax. Taken together, these three reasons make it hard for us to deny that he saw Ajax as a sacred hero. Let us now consider the three items one by one.

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[5] In this paper the text of Sophocles is that of Hugh Lloyd-Jones as printed in his Loeb edition.

(a) Lines 1163-1185

The context in which these lines are spoken is briefly as follows. After Ajax commits suicide at 866, his wife Tecmessa and the chorus of Salaminian sailors are inconsolable with grief. Teucer, the half-brother of Ajax, enters the stage at 971, having just returned from an expedition to nearby Mysia (*Ajax* line 720). He, Tecmessa, and the chorus engage in an extended lament, reminiscent of the one that we find at the end of Aeschylus' *Persians*. At this juncture we might be inclined to think that the *Ajax* will end, like the *Persians*, with the sounds of lamentation, to the familiar cries of "alas, woe is me, I am lost, etc" (Heath 199). But then Menelaus makes his entrance for the first time at 1042. He tells the mourners harshly, and in no uncertain terms, that they will NOT be allowed to bury Ajax. His body will instead be left on the "pale beach" to become "prey for the birds" (*Ajax* line 1065). This is the exact outcome that Ajax had hoped to avoid, for before his death he had prayed to Zeus to summon Teucer to bury him, so that "I shall not be seen first by some enemy and cast out as prey for dogs and birds" (*Ajax* line 830). Thus with the entry of Menelaus the lament is brought to an abrupt end and a new crisis emerges: Will Ajax receive a proper burial?

After arguing over the issue with Teucer, Menelaus leaves the stage, saying that he does not want to engage in debate when he can use force (*Ajax* line 1160). In anticipation of a great battle, the chorus cry out:

> ἔσται μεγάλης ἔριδός τις ἀγών.
> ἀλλ᾽ ὡς δύνασαι, Τεῦκρε, ταχύνας
> σπεῦσον κοίλην κάπετόν τιν᾽ ἰδεῖν
> τῷδ᾽, ἔνθα βροτοῖς τὸν ἀείμνηστον
> τάφον εὐρώεντα καθέξει. (*Ajax* lines 1163-1167)
>
> There will be a struggle arising from a great dispute! Come, as quickly as you can, Teucer, hasten to find a hollow trench for this man, where he shall occupy the dank tomb that shall ever be remembered.[6]

By speaking these lines, according to Henrichs, the chorus in effect verbally construct a heroic tomb for Ajax (170). This is achieved mainly by altering the usual sense in which a single word is used. In describing the burial of someone, standard usage is to say that it is the earth which will hold the dead, which implies, according to Henrichs, "the passive condition of being interred in the earth" (173). But here the chorus reverse the common collocation. Rather than saying that the earth will hold Ajax, the chorus claim that it is Ajax who will hold (καθέξει) his tomb. Given the familiarity of the audience with hero cults, it seems likely they would have understood quite easily what Sophocles is implying here, namely, that Ajax would soon become one of the heroes,

[6] For citations from the *Ajax*, I have used the translation of Hugh Lloyd-Jones. See Sophocles, *Sophocles: Ajax, Electra, Oedipus Tyrannus*, ed. and trans. Hugh Lloyd-Jones (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994).

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for only a hero had the power to transcend the usual condition of death, as noted by Henrichs.[7] In addition, we are told that the tomb of Ajax "shall ever be remembered." These words, too, are suggestive of something highly unusual. The chorus seem to be thinking of the future, to the day when funeral rites—in the form of sacrificial offerings, libations, feasts, laments, and so on—will be performed in front of the tomb of the hero Ajax, to commemorate his memory forever.

This process of the heroization of Ajax continues in the lines that follow. In anticipation that Menelaus will soon return with an armed band of soldiers, Teucer advises Tecmessa and the young Eurysaces, Ajax's son, to sit by the body of Ajax and ask it for protection. Teucer says to Eurysaces: "Boy, come here, and standing close by, clasp as a suppliant the father who begot you" (*Ajax* lines 1173-1175). He adds that if anyone from the army tries to drag Eurysaces away by force, to hold on tightly to the corpse. Then he cuts off a lock of his own hair as he tells Eurysaces and Tecmessa to do the same: "Sit there in supplication, holding a lock of mine and one of hers and thirdly one of your own, a store of instruments for supplication!" (*Ajax* line 1175). Finally he pronounces a curse on all those that attempt to use force: "if any of the army tries to drag you by force away from this corpse, may that man perish out of the earth without burial" (*Ajax* lines 1175-1177). In Teucer's speech to Eurysaces, as first noted by Burian, "we can trace an unparalleled and extremely affecting interweaving of three separate ritual acts—supplication, an offering to the dead and a solemn curse" (152).

In other words, shortly after his death, Ajax is already starting to acquire the ability to protect suppliants that only the gods and heroes possessed. The scene is somewhat unusual, Burian writes, because the ground on which Ajax lies has nothing unusual or sacred about it, and therefore it should not have any sacrosanct powers to ward off evil and offer protection to suppliants. It is also somewhat unusual in that here the suppliant (Eurysaces) is also asked to offer protection to the object of his supplication. But these anomalies do not cancel out the symbolic significance of the scene. As Burian writes:

> The difficulty here is not simply that the supplication does not take place on consecrated ground, although that seems to be without parallel. The larger paradox is that an unburied body provides asylum for a suppliant, and that the suppliant in turn protects the body by taking refuge at it. The child, by seeking protection from the seemingly helpless warrior, reveals that Ajax is not helpless after all. Indeed, the body becomes in effect a hallowed place, for it is recognized to have the power of a hero's tomb even before the question of his burial is settled. (154)

Thus lines 1163-1185 suggest that Sophocles did indeed mean to suggest that Ajax was on his way to becoming a hero. It is as if there is a transitional time period in

[7] Cf. Henrichs, p.175: "Sophokles thus stresses the notion, central to hero cult, that there is life after death and that the cultic hero 'possesses' his tomb in the same manner in which a god inhabits and controls his territory."

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which Ajax changes from being a mere mortal, and then a corpse, and then a hero—and that we are allowed to witness this miracle of transfiguration. Once we learn to see things in this way, other bits and pieces of the text also take on added significance. For instance consider the picture of Tecmessa and Eurysaces sitting pitifully by the side of the corpse of Ajax. Taplin notes that this situation forms a "tableau," a still image "which captures or epitomizes a particular state of affairs" (101). And as it is "held still for a long time, for over 200 lines in fact" (Taplin 108), it makes quite a strong impression on us: we come to feel that there must be something uncanny about the corpse of Ajax, otherwise it could not have the power to protect a defenseless child and woman against the wrath and might of two of the most powerful generals on the Greek side.[8]

(b) The Salvation of Ajax

Other passages in the text can also be read to suggest that Ajax does not die in the usual sense of the word: rather, he dies and then becomes a hero. Consider these lines spoken by Ajax to the chorus:

> When Teucer comes, tell him to have care for me, and to be loyal to you; for I must go the place I have to go now. And do you what I tell you, and perhaps you shall soon learn that, even though I am now unfortunate, I have been saved. (*Ajax* lines 691-693)

In speaking these words, Ajax is being less than sincere; for as he himself has characterized his situation, it is impossible for him to go on living, and in fact he has no intention of doing so. He is hated by the other Greeks and cannot reasonably be expected to continue staying with them in Troy (*Ajax* line 460); nor can he sail back to Salamis, because he cannot bear to see the look of disappointment on his father's face: "the thing is not to be endured" (*Ajax* line 466). Indeed, for Ajax, who always prided himself as being "the bold, the valiant, the one who never trembled in battle among enemies" (*Ajax* lines 362-364), his present humiliation is intolerable. The Greek leaders deprived him of the arms of Achilleus, which Ajax thought belonged rightfully to him; and so he wanted to kill off the Greek leaders in return. But after being temporarily blinded by Athena, he ended up butchering their defenseless cattle instead. This has made him the laughingstock of the whole army: "Ah, the mockery!" (*Ajax* line 367). He is "hated by the gods" (*Ajax* line 458) as well. The only way out of his present predicament is for him to die.

Yet instead of telling the chorus that he intends to kill himself presently, he gives them the false impression that he will soon be "saved." His intention is to

[8] Cf. Bowra, *Sophoclean Tragedy*, p. 50: "The pathos and insistent claims of the dead body are reinforced by the child Eurysaces and Tecmessa, who kneel in silence by it and suggest that the dead man is waiting to be justified and restored to honour." As cited by Burian, "Supplication and Hero Cult in Sophocles' *Ajax*," p. 155.

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prevent them from interfering with his planned suicide. And in this regard he is entirely successful. The chorus is overjoyed to hear his words; they "thrill with longing" and "leap up in delight" (*Ajax* line 693). They are sure that he has had a change of heart and will find a way to reconcile himself with the other Greeks: "I would say that nothing was unpredictable, now that Ajax, beyond our hopes, has repented of his anger against the sons of Atreus and his great quarrel!" (*Ajax* lines 715-718). They are mistaken, of course. They have not predicted anything correctly; nor has Ajax reconciled himself to the Greeks: before he commits suicide he asks the Erinyes to destroy the sons of Atreus (*Ajax* lines 835-838) and the entire Greek army (*Ajax* line 846).

Thus Ajax has successfully deceived the chorus. On another level, however, we can also say that Ajax is here pointing to the future and telling the chorus exactly what will happen to him after he dies: he will become a hero and in that sense he will be "saved." Here it might be objected that Ajax is not "saved" in a Christian sense, that Christian notions of salvation are entirely alien to Greek religious thought. This is certainly true. But it should also be noted that Sophocles is not using the word "saved" in a Christian sense. For Ajax himself, salvation comes in the form of his restored honor; as Garvie notes in his commentary on the words "I have been saved":

> The speech [of Ajax] ends emphatically with the most striking ambiguity of all. From the point of view of everyone else in the play this is a lie: Ajax will not be saved at all. But his standards are different, and for him death *is* his salvation, the only means of preserving his *arete*. (192)

And as Wigodsky further notes, salvation for Ajax also means a proper burial—one that will indicate his acceptance and reintegration into the community (154-158). Henrichs argues, rightly in my view, that Ajax does not know that in fact he will soon become a hero.[9] Thus it is likely that even though Ajax *thinks* he is lying to the chorus, he is in fact unwittingly telling them the truth and making a prophecy about the future. These lines should then be read as another instance of that famous *Sophoclean irony*, where a speaker says more than even he/she is aware of.

At this point let us consider the issue of the burial of Ajax and its relation to his salvation more closely. We know from other Greek texts that proper treatment of the dead was thought to be in accordance with what was right; denying the dead a proper burial was, conversely, considered a grave crime. In the *Iliad*, for example, we are told that Zeus is upset with Achilleus, because even though he has already killed Hektor, he refuses to release his body to the Trojans so that it can be properly buried (see especially *Iliad* 22.114-117)[10]. Similarly in the *Ajax*, Odysseus tells Agamemnon

[9] Cf. Henrichs, p. 176: "Unlike Aias, Oidipous is portrayed as a prospective cult hero who while still alive is conscious of the fact that he will one day exercise the dual power of the cultic hero from his tomb. By contrast, Aias dies without the slightest awareness of his future status; it is Teukros who recognizes and activates the supernatural power invested in his brother's corpse. Aias dies without the slightest awareness of his future status."

[10] Citations of the *Iliad* are from Richmond Lattimore's translation. See Homer, *The Iliad of*

that "you cannot dishonor [the body of Ajax] without injustice; for you would not be destroying him, but the laws of the gods. It is unjust to injure a noble man, if he is dead, even if it happens that you hate him" (*Ajax* lines 1341-1345; cf. also line 1092). We also know from other Greek texts, as well as from our own experience, that burial of the dead can provide the living with a "sense of closure." Thus we feel it is deeply fitting that the *Iliad* should conclude with the words, "Such was the burial of Hektor, breaker of horses" (*Iliad* 24.804). And in a similar vein, if the body of Ajax had really been left to rot we would have felt a sense of repugnance; thus it is also fitting that the play ends with his burial as well.

So much having been said, however, we are still left with the question: does the heroization of Ajax actually *depend* on his burial? What happens if his body really does become prey for birds and wild dogs? As has already been noted, the presence of the bones of the heroes was generally thought to be central to hero cults. We find confirmation of this in other plays of Sophocles as well. In *Oedipus at Colonus*, the blind Oedipus, near death, tells Theseus that his "miserable body" will confer many "benefits" on Athens (*Oedipus at Colonus* lines 576-578).[11] But the precondition for this is that Oedipus must be buried. After Theseus asks him when these benefits will be revealed, Oedipus says, "When I die and you give me burial" (*Oedipus at Colonus* line 583). Thus burial seems to be a condition of hero status. Whether Ajax is properly buried is thus really the central crisis of the entire play, as noted so long ago by Jebb:

> So when an Athenian audience heard the Atreidae insisting that the corpse of Ajax should be 'food for the birds by the sea,' and Teucer insisting that it should be duly buried, the interest of the dispute for them did not depend merely on the importance of burial as a condition of peace for any departed spirit. The question involved much more than that, —viz., the whole claim of Ajax to the sanctity of a 'hero'—one with which so many traditions of Athens were bound up. (xxxii)

It is not enough, then, that Ajax be "symbolically" and "verbally" heroized. His final status as a hero still depends very much on his burial. But whether he will be buried or not is not settled until the very end of the play; this uncertainty creates a great deal of dramatic tension and helps to unify the two parts of the play.

(c) Ties that Blind

In his monumental study of Greek cults, Farnell noted that in the ancient world Ajax was worshipped at five different sites: the Troad, Salamis, Athens, Megara, and Byzantium (305-311). And in the *Ajax* we are told that after Ajax dies, his body is

Homer, trans. Richmond Lattimore (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951).

[11] Citations of *Oedipus at Colonus* are from the translation of Hugh Lloyd-Jones. See Sophocles, *Sophocles: Antigone, the Women of Trachis, Philoctetes, Oedipus at Colonus*, ed. and trans. Hugh Lloyd-Jones (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994).

interred somewhere in the Troad. Taken together, these two bits of information seem at first to weaken Jebb's claim, for if Ajax was buried in the Troad, and if he was worshipped at several different locations besides Salamis/Athens, what right did the Athenians have to claim him as their own? We noted earlier in our discussion that the tomb of a hero was the locus of its power. This being the case, could the Athenians really expect Ajax to confer his blessings on them? If they could not, then much of the reasoning supporting Jebb's theory collapses.

On closer inspection, however, these objections actually strengthen Jebb's argument considerably. For it seems that Sophocles, too, was aware of these difficulties, and that he went out of his way to strengthen the ties binding Ajax with Athens. He was, in fact, rewriting history in order to confer legitimacy on Athenian claims to Ajax. He was not alone in this regard; the Athenians continually practiced this type of myth making on an institutional scale, as is well known. In Homer, for example, the connection between Ajax and Athens is tenuous at best; the only instance where the two are mentioned in the same breath occurs in Book 2 of the *Iliad*, where we are told that "Out of Salamis Aias brought twelve ships and placed them next to where the Athenian battalions were drawn up" (*Iliad* 2.556-7). But these lines form part of what is known as the Catalogue of Ships, comprising *Iliad* Book 2, 494-579. And as Wilcock notes, the entire Catalogue of Ships must have been "inserted into the *Iliad*" at a later date (205). Thus it seems likely that the bond between Ajax and Athens was forged much later—by the Athenians. Sophocles, in the *Ajax*, not only stresses this connection repeatedly, he often conjures it out of thin air. Consider the following instances.

We are told in the play that Athena, the patron goddess of Athens, is the one who drives Ajax mad. In the mythical tradition, there is no mention at all of her doing such a thing. By making Athena responsible for Ajax's madness, Sophocles indissolubly joins Athens and Ajax together. It might be objected that the reason why Athena makes Ajax go mad does not bring Ajax any credit, since she is punishing him for his arrogance. That is true as far as it goes. But this, too, is a myth invented by Sophocles; we do not know of any other account that explains Ajax's suicide in terms of the anger of Athena. It might also be said that in making Ajax mad, Athena is helping him; for if he had not gone mad, he could have ended up killing many a Greek hero, which would have ensured that he lived in infamy forever. We are also told that in spite of her anger toward him, Athena is angry at Ajax for one day only. She also plays a role in ensuring that he is "saved," as we have seen. In any case Sophocles has strengthened the connection between Ajax and Athena significantly. We might even say that Athena has Ajax kill himself, so that she can claim him on behalf of Athens.

We are told that when Ajax commits suicide, some of his last words are "O light, O sacred plain of my own land of Salamis, O pedestal of my native heart, and you glorious Athens, and the race that lives with you, streams and rivers here, and plains of Troy do I address; hail you have given me sustenance!" (*Ajax* lines 858-859). Here again a deep emotional link is forged between Ajax and the Athenians; we can

only imagine how thrilled the Athenian audience must have felt to hear themselves addressed by their own sacred hero with such words.

The chorus of Salaminian sailors is also portrayed as being extremely close to Ajax. Whereas the other Greek forces taunt him and cannot wait to lay their hands on him, the chorus remain loyal to him to the end—and beyond. When they first appear on the stage, they sing: "Son of Telamon, you who occupy the seagirt pedestal of Salamis, when you prosper I rejoice. But when the stroke of Zeus assails you…I am greatly anxious and fearful" (*Ajax* lines 134-137). Their fortunes are thus shown as inextricably tied up with those of Ajax. The close connection of the chorus with Athens and Salamis is also stressed; for example at 1216-1222 the chorus lament, "I wish I were where the wooded cape, beaten by the surf, projects over the sea, beneath the high plateau of Sunium, so that I could salute sacred Athens!" (cf. also *Ajax* lines 596-598).

Ajax entrusts his great seven-hide shield to the young Eurysaces (*Ajax* lines 575-578), which Eurysaces is to bring back with him to Athens. If the shield became a relic that was part of the cult of Ajax, the Athenian connection would be even stronger; unfortunately we do not know enough about the cult of Ajax to know whether his shield was ever a part of it.[12]

Earlier on it was observed that the heroization of Ajax is very much in doubt until the end of the play. That is why the language of his salvation is couched in uncertain terms: "perhaps you shall soon learn that, even though I am now unfortunate, I have been saved" (*Ajax* lines 691-692); "perhaps with a god's help we might become his saviors" (*Ajax* lines 779-780). *We might become his saviors*: with these words, a heavy responsibility is laid on the chorus and Teucer. The dead, pitiful Ajax needs their help; they alone can help him become the hero he was destined to be. Thus Sophocles shows the Athenians that Ajax needed them as much as they need him—they depend on one another: "for little men are best supported by the great and the great by smaller men" (*Ajax* lines 160-161).

Thus, as we have seen, there are many passages in the *Ajax* that serve to link the play directly with the Athenian audience watching the events in the play unfold. Let us now take stock of these ties that bind. In recent years, many scholars have observed that Greek tragedies often take the form of etiological myths—which are stories that "confirm, maintain the memory of, and provide authority for tribal customs and institutions" (Kirk 19). The *Ajax*, it seems to me, is also an etiological myth: it provides authority for the Athenian worship of Ajax. Let us say that someone were to ask an Athenian the question, What right does your city have to claim Ajax as your own? The Athenian could answer somewhat as follows. The Athenians had every right to worship Ajax and claim him as their own, because they were with him in the beginning, and they were with him in the end; because they loved him, and stood by him, when all the other Greeks rejected him and persecuted him; because Ajax was from Salamis, which

[12] Farnell notes on p. 307 that according to Pausanias, in the chapel of Ajax at Salamis "stood his image wrought in ebony." No mention is made of any shield, however.

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was part of Athenian territory; because his only son Eurysaces ended up in Salamis, in accordance with his wishes; because Athena, the patron goddess of Athens, singled him out for attention; and finally, because the Athenians alone ensured that he became a hero in the first place. All excellent reasons; but we must remember that these reasons have been invented, or, if not invented, given the right emphasis, by Sophocles. They did not exist in their present form, not until Sophocles brought them into being. And he did so because from the beginning to the end he thought of Ajax as a sacred hero. The entire play serves to legitimize the worship of Ajax.

Conclusion

Such, then, are the reasons why I believe we should retain Jebb's thesis and make the imaginative attempt to perceive Ajax as a sacred hero. If we compare the portrayal of Ajax with other Sophoclean heroes, the case becomes even stronger. The life of Oedipus, for example, contains many points of similarity with that of Ajax. Both are driven out from the community to which they originally belonged—Ajax by the other Greeks at Troy, Oedipus by the Thebans. Both figures are also portrayed as being in some sense not quite well: Ajax suffers from madness; Oedipus is polluted because of his incest and patricide. The two also both suffer a great deal because of the interference of the gods in their lives. But somehow at the end of their lives, Ajax and Oedipus both are transformed into heroes, with the power to bless their friends and harm their enemies. The life of Philoctetes is also strikingly similar in outline to the lives of Ajax and Oedipus. Having been abandoned by the other Greeks because of his festering wound, he is forced to suffer on an island by himself for ten years. We are told also that he suffers "by the will of the gods" (*Philoctetes* lines 192-193; cf. also line 1326)[13]. But it is his destiny, as Heracles tells him, "after these sufferings to make your life glorious" (*Philoctetes* line 1422). These three figures (Ajax, Oedipus, and Philoctetes) are in turn similar to Heracles, whose sufferings perhaps exceeded those of all others, but who achieved the greatest glory in the end: "how many labours I endured to go through to win eternal glory" (*Philoctetes* line 1418). All these heroes are made of the same cloth, and there is no reason why Ajax should have been any different. Indeed, Ajax conforms to the archetype of the hero, as described by Frye in his *Anatomy of Criticism*: "In myth, the hero is a god, and hence he does not die, but dies and rises again" (215).

[13] Citations of the *Philoctetes* are from the translation of Hugh Lloyd-Jones. See Sophocles, *Sophocles: Antigone, the Women of Trachis, Philoctetes, Oedipus at Colonus*, ed. and trans. Hugh Lloyd-Jones (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994).

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神聖英雄崇拜與索發克里斯的《埃阿斯》

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十九世紀末，英國學者傑布（Richard Jebb）對於索發克里斯（Sophocles）的悲劇《埃阿斯》（*Ajax*）提出了新的看法：他認爲想要了解該劇本，首先必須知道劇中主角埃阿斯（Ajax）與當時雅典人所崇拜的「神聖英雄埃阿斯」（Ajax the sacred hero）有著密不可分的關係。一個多世紀以來，許多學者對於這樣的說法提出批評。他們宣稱《埃阿斯》劇本當中毫無證據支持傑布的觀點。本論文重新探討傑布的看法，並主張他當初所言甚是。本論文共分爲兩部分：第一部分討論「神聖英雄」的意涵；第二部分則是討論《埃阿斯》當中支持此一觀點的例證。

關鍵字：索發克里斯　埃阿斯　神聖英雄崇拜　傑布　原因神話

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The Cult of Heroes and the *Ajax* of Sophocles

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In his commentary on Sophocles' *Ajax*, Richard Jebb proposed that to understand the play properly we must learn to perceive Ajax as a sacred hero, in the full religious sense of the term. Jebb's theory, however, has been rejected by many scholars, on the grounds that there is insufficient textual evidence to support such a view. This paper reconsiders the evidence and argues that Jebb was right after all. In the first half of the paper hero cults are considered in some detail. In the second, textual evidence is adduced to support Jebb's original thesis.

Keywords: Sophocles Ajax hero cult Jebb etiological myth

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