

Ethnicity, the Polis, and the Negotiation of Identity in the Argolid, 500-440 B.C.

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Classical scholarship has conventionally focused on the polis as the fundamental constituent body of the Ancient Greek world, and has operated on the presumption that local identity was intrinsically tied to the urban political community. In this model, ethnic identity is merely vestigial, a remnant of Bronze Age tribal allegiances, and quickly fades in importance as urban communities begin to emerge. Of late, however, scholars such as Jeremy McInerney and Jonathan Hall have posited a radically different approach in which the *polis* did not supplant the *ethne* as the foundation of communal allegiance. Rather, the *ethne* continued to form the basis of communal identity into the Archaic and early Classical periods. As McInerney aptly notes, “the Greeks never stopped thinking of themselves as a people composed of different tribes,” and they continued to identify themselves and others in relation to *ethne* which were decidedly not contingent on the political structures with which they were associated.¹ These *ethne* themselves were far from static and unchanging; they shifted and evolved in response to the social and political context, resulting in a concept of identity which is constantly constructed, negotiated, and infinitely susceptible to change as well as deliberate manipulation. This constant negotiation of ethnic identity permeated the Greek world and remained present in social and political discourses not out of old tribal attachment but, again to quote McInerney, “because tribal identities serve some useful purpose in the present.”² As seen in Argos and the Argolid during the fifth century, these ethnic identities played a definitive role in political and social developments, and especially in the process of consolidation during which the unified Argive democracy was formed. This period can perhaps be best understood as one in which conflicting identities vied with each other, clashed, and were ultimately fused into a newly coherent community through the reconciliation of previously disparate components. The relationship between *ethnos* and *polis* was often uneasy, tumultuous, and bloody, though ethnicity, when redefined through a process of synthesis and integration, proved to be a critical source of cohesion for the new Argive democracy.

At the dawn of the fifth century B.C., Argos held a loose hegemony over the neighbouring *poleis* of the Argolid maintained predominantly through military dominance rather than through more formal bonds of association. In terms of ethnic composition, the Argolid was a remarkably diverse corner of Greece with a wide variety of easily identifiable *ethne* living within a relatively small geographic area. As Jonathan Hall’s ethno-

1 Jeremy McInerney, *The Folds of Parnassos: Land and Ethnicity in Ancient Phokis* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1999), 6.

2 McInerney 1999, 9.

graphic analysis of the Argolid circa 500 B.C. concludes, Argos itself was “a typically Dorian” city, writing in the Doric dialect, dividing its tribes amongst the three traditional Dorian tribes, and worshipping Apollo Pythaeus as the patron god of the city itself.³ Despite the predominantly Dorian population of Argos and some areas of the Argolid, they were neither the only nor oldest sizeable ethnic group in the region. In an instance of ethnic dispersion which supports McInerney’s argument for the continued importance of ethnic identity well into the Archaic period, the Argolid was organized along ethnic divisions which shaped the political and religious landscape of the region.⁴ The surrounding cities of Mykenai, Tiryns, and Midea were almost entirely Herakleidai in ethnic composition, and Dorians are not recorded in the literary tradition of either Mykenai or Tiryns.⁵ Accordingly, each ethno-regional group in the Argolid had their specific religious devotions: at Mykenai, Hera was the principal deity and Mykenai traditionally controlled the Heraion, Apollo Pythaeus was the principal deity of Argos proper, in the region of Tirynth Herakles was most frequently worshipped, and both Hera and Herakles figure prominently in Herakleid ethnic groups.⁶ To add 1<?> Hdt .6.77-8; Aris. *Pol.* 1302b33; Paus. 2.20.8-10. to the diversity, groups of Akhaians, Pelasgids, and some Dryopes were also present throughout the Argolid, as well as small groups of Ionians in Hermione and Epidaurus. Each *ethnos* worshipped their own dynastic heroes, further contributing to the ethnic and cultic diversity of the plain which at the time was under a primarily Dorian hegemony.⁷

Although the literary sources provide little in the way of direct evidence of the precise governmental structure of Argos at the time, certain elements of its political institutions can be inferred by comparison with the larger trajectory of Argive governmental development. The ancient sources are frustratingly vague on the exact chronology of the process, but it is clear that by at the latest c.570-60 B.C., the Temenid dynasty had lost control of the city as a result of some form of popular revolution against the inept or abusive rule of the Herakleidai Temenid kings, described by Diodorus and Plutarch.⁸ The precise constitution which emerged from this popular revolution is not explicitly described by the sources, although Herodotus’ reference to a *basileus* who continued to exercise military command at the time of the Persian War hints at the persistence of some vestiges of the monarchical system.⁹ This persistence, however, was only titular, as city officials, according to epigraphical sources dated to c.560, appear to have been elected rather than dynastically appointed.¹⁰ Essentially the only continuous thread uniting the ancient sources on the matter is the role of popular discontent in the transition away from the Temenid monarchy at Argos,

3 Jonathan Hall, *Ethnic Identity in Greek Antiquity* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1997), 69-71, 99.

4 McInerney 1999, 4-8; Hall 1997, 69-70.

5 McInerney 1999, 4-8; Hall 1997, 69-70.

6 Charalambos Kritzas, “Aspects de la vie politique et économique d’Argos au cinquième siècle av. J-C,” in *Polydipsion Argos*, ed. Michel Piérart, (Athens: École Française d’Athènes, 1992), 239.

7 Hall 1997, 87.

8 Hdt. 6.127; Diod. fr. 7.13.2; Plut. Lyc. 7.

9 Hdt. 7.149.

10 Eric Robinson, *The First Democracies* (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1997), 83.

though only Pausanias explicitly states that the monarchy ended after Melatas.¹¹ Although the Temenid dynasty had by all accounts been overthrown by 500, Argos had not yet developed a full-fledged democracy and, as Eric Robinson suggests, “perhaps a polity, with its mixture of contrasting institutions, offers the safest hypothesis.”¹² It was thus with an unclear constitutional hybrid of monarchical and oligarchic, or early democratic, institutions holding military sway over the ethnically heterogeneous population of the Argive Plain that predominantly Dorian Argos entered the fifth century, though its control was at best tenuous.

The *status quo ante* of loose Argive dominion of the Argolid, and more importantly, the ethnic composition, governmental structure, and regional perception of Argos, was shattered by Sparta’s defeat of Argos at the Battle of Sepeia in c.496. The events of the battle itself are discussed primarily by Herodotus, and echoed by Pausanias, Aristotle, and Plutarch. According to the literary tradition, Cleomenes, having consulted an oracle assuring him of success, invaded the Argolid and met the Argive forces at Sepeia, near Tirynth.¹³ Following a protracted battle, the Argives were utterly defeated with the catastrophic loss of what Herodotus describes as six thousand citizens, a number which, even if exaggerated, nonetheless represents a substantial portion of the Argive citizen body.¹⁴ The unity of the sources ends with Cleomenes’ victory at Sepeia; authors disagree about the aftermath of the battle and its impact on the constitutional structure of Argos, prompting a contemporary scholarly debate that has reached little consensus. Herodotus describes the so-called “servile interregnum” in which, because of the greatly depleted citizen body, slaves intermarried with Argive citizens and took control of governmental affairs and offices, remaining in power until the maturation of the surviving sons of Argive citizens who later expelled the slaves and began a conflict between the two groups.¹⁵ Aristotle, in a discussion of how changes in factional influence and demographics incites constitutional change, cites Argos as a supporting example with a brief description of how after Sepeia, the Argives were forced to admit serfs to the citizen body to restore their numbers. Plutarch contradicts Herodotus by asserting that the Argives did not intermarry with slaves but rather admitted the best of *perioikoi* into the citizen body.¹⁶ Despite the lack of consensus amongst ancient and contemporary scholars, nevertheless certain conclusions can be made: the scale of the Argive defeat at Sepeia fundamentally changed the demographic composition of the city by depleting the dominant citizen body, allowing for the emergence of a previously inferior group (of some sort) to governmental prominence. The defeat also necessitated a radical restructuring of the Argive political organization and institutions.

Argos emerged from the tumultuous years after Sepeia greatly weakened and diminished in power and influence. With the loss of a substantial part of its citizen body,

11 Paus. 2.19.2.

12 Robinson 1997, 83.

13 Hdt. 6.77-8; Aris. *Pol.* 1302b33; Paus. 2.20.8-10.

14 Hdt. 6.78.

15 Hdt. 6.83-4; Robinson 1999, 85.

16 Aris. *Pol.* 1303a; Plutarch, quoted in Robinson, 85.

it subsequently lost control over the neighbouring cities and groups of the Argolid. In the power vacuum following Sepeia and the collapse of Dorian power that this entailed, the other communities of the Argolid rapidly began asserting their independence. Despite Argos' declared neutrality during the Persian War, Mykenai and Tiryns defiantly sided with the Greeks and sent detachments of troops against the Persians who are listed on the Victors' Column and recorded by Diodorus.¹⁷ Mykenai proceeded to assert its independence, as epigraphic evidence indicates, by retaking control of the Heraion and its games. Meanwhile Argos itself had earlier been beset by internal disagreement over the war between Athens and Aegina, and later by being forced to pay a tithe for having remained neutral against the Persians.¹⁸ During this period of Argive weakness old assertions of independence re-emerged in the form of political and religious practices that indicate a rejection of the previous Dorian Argive hegemony in favour of more local ethnic traditions. Despite being greatly weakened, Argos gradually rebuilt over the course of a decade during which the sources frustratingly fall silent, though it can be safely inferred that Argos was cognizant of its fading influence in the Argolid and by around 470 began attempting to exert pressure on its *perioikic* neighbours to return to the fold.¹⁹

Argos' attempts to re-consolidate control of the Argolid was met by strong resistance by the inhabitants of Tiryns, Mykenai, and presumably other communities, informed by a reinvigorated sense of distinctness and independence from Argos. At around 478, as Diodorus tells us, war broke out between Argos and Mykenai precisely because of this newly resurgent sense of ethnic and political independence. As he writes: "the Mycenaeans, on account of their country's ancient high repute, would not subordinate themselves to the Argives like the other cities throughout the Argolid."²⁰ With the support of its remaining allies, Argos proceeded to defeat and destroy Mykenai, and we can also infer that the Argives destroyed Tiryns, retook Midea, and reconsolidated control of the Argolid.²¹ Argos was unquestionably successful in its campaign of reconsolidation, though the sources again are silent regarding the aftermath of the Argive victory and the sweeping reorganization of the Argolid that occurred in the following decades. Michel Piérart, discussing the aftermath, posits two possible models of Argive control: first, a 'desertification' model in which Argos completely destroyed the recalcitrant communities, transplanted most of their populations, and took control of their land, or second, a 'synoecistic' model in which Argos gradually incorporated neighbouring communities into the Argive political fold.²² While Argos did by all accounts destroy the physical *poleis* of Mykenai and most likely Tiryns, as

17 Diod. 11.3.3.

18 Diod. 11.3.3; Kritzas 1992, 232.

19 Kritzas 1992, 233; Michel Piérart, "L'attitude de l'Argos à l'égard des autres cités de l'Argolide," in *The Polis as an Urban Centre and as a Political Community*, ed. Mogens Herman Hansen, (Copenhagen: Special-Trykkeriet Viborg, 1997), 328-330.

20 Diod. 11.65.2-3.

21 Piérart 1997, 329-330; Strabo 8.6.11; Paus. 8.27.1.

22 Piérart 1997, 331.

McInerney is quick to assert that the communal identity of an *ethnos* is not contingent on political or urban structures, but in many ways supersedes them. Thus, the ethnic communities of Mykenai and Tiryns, as well as numerous others in the Argolid, can be presumed to have survived the destruction of their physical political structures with their identity and traditions intact.²³ Argos, for its part, had emerged from the decades following Sepeia drastically changed in terms of demographic composition, and although it had militarily defeated Mykenai and others, the Argives must have been aware that they could not continue to dominate the plain through military intimidation alone, but that some other deeper, more permanent strategy of integration was necessary. In considering the actions following Argos' victory, it will become clear that Argive reorganization of the plain was not only synoecistic in its political policy, but also involved integrating the disparate communities it had now reconquered by incorporating - and at times appropriating - their ethnic identities into the new Argive federation in a process that can perhaps be considered 'synethnic.'

Until relatively recently the process by which the Argolid was consolidated into a coherent democratic unit remained unknown, as there existed in the literary sources a large gap between the Argive reconquest of the Argolid and its reappearance during the Peloponnesian War as a unified democracy. The discovery of three engraved bronze plaques in a bronze workshop located north-west of Argos have, however, shed new light on our understanding of the consolidation and democratization of the Argolid during the years following the destruction of Mykenai. All three plaques have holes for nails at each corner, implying that these plaques were mounted on public buildings, and after detailed analysis two of the plaques have been dated by to roughly 450, the third to roughly the end of the fourth century B.C.²⁴ The first two are most pertinent to the present discussion, as they are concerned with administrative and financial matters which prove to be critical to our understanding of the organization of the early Argive democracy.²⁵ In the first, a group of previously unmentioned Argive magistrates (*duodeka*) disperse large sums of money to twelve groups that have since been termed "phratries," the names of some of which had not previously been found at Argos. The sums of money themselves are unequal, implying selective distribution to certain phratries. The second discusses the distribution of funds which are to be spent on the games of Hera, other funds dispensed to a board of magistrates to be spent as a contribution mandated by law, and further sums to be dispensed to the officials themselves without interest.²⁶ The structural implications of the text of the inscriptions are far-reaching.

On the level of governmental organization, the model of Argive democracy that emerges is one that is remarkably similar to the Cleisthenic reforms at Athens and, as Kritzas and Piérart assert, "semble assez artificiel et trahit l'intervention d'un législateur."²⁷ The artificiality of the system itself fits neatly into the trajectory of constitutional reforms at

23 McInerney 1999, 24-27.

24 Kritzas 1992, 234-5.

25 Kritzas 1992, 235.

26 Kritzas 1992, 235-6.

27 Kritzas 1992, 235-6; Piérart 1997, 333-334.

Argos in the decades prior to the composition of the inscription. As the epigraphs indicate, there were twelve magistrates, representing the twelve phratries, named as recipients of the funds and classified according to the rubric of the four phylai of Argos. Thus, the newly re-structured Argive democracy was composed of four phylai, each with twelve phratries, with elected magistrates from each. What is perhaps most striking about the phylai mentioned is the presence of a completely new tribe, the Hymnathioi, an exclusively Argive tribe name that represents a non-Dorian addition to the traditional tribal structure of Argos, implying that this new tribe was created for the newly integrated citizens of the Argolid.²⁸ Similarly striking are the names of the phratries within the Hymnathioi, which are an interesting combination of references to traditional Argive figures such as Daiphontes and Temenides as well as new geographic names such as the phratry of the Nauplidai, presumably from nearby Nauplia.²⁹ The names of the phratries within the new tribe thus represent a conscious synthesis of traditional Dorian and Herakleidian figures with the new ethno-regional communities integrated into the Argive democracy. Further consideration of the redistribution of land during the consolidation of the Argive democracy shows that such ethnic considerations were not simply token nods to tradition but were critical to the successful integration of new citizens and communities through the construction of a newly fused ethnos in the Argolid.

The manner in which confiscated and conquered land was redistributed and administered during the consolidation of the Argive democracy provides a strong indication of the ethnic and religious sensitivity that underscored the entire process of integration. As Piérart and others have concluded, rather than simply confiscating all of the land it had conquered, Argos instead redistributed a portion of the land amongst the four tribes of the new federation.³⁰ Another portion was distributed amongst the shrines and sanctuaries of the Argive plain and dedicated to their respective gods and goddesses.³¹ Although the land distributed to the temples was most likely a concealed source of governmental revenue, the titular distribution of it to the temples represents a delicate effort at appeasing the various local cult practices of the Argolid's *ethne* as well as a gesture of integration with Argos, not domination by it. The third plaque, dated to the fourth century, discusses the consecration of these lands "by the ancients" to various deities, which were then parcelled into individual tenants.³² The subsequent list of gods to whom the land was given is quite interesting, as it includes Hera, Herakles, Apollo Pythaeus, and Alektryon. Considering that the primary god traditionally worshipped by the Dorian Argives was Apollo Pythaeus, the inclusion of the others is striking given their connection with the other *ethne* of the Argolid: Hera with the Herakleidai of Mykenai, Herakles with the Herakleidai of Tirynt, and Alektryon, another member of Herakles' family, which had a traditional connection to the Eastern

28 Kritzas 1992, 235-6; Piérart 1997, 333-334; Hall 1997, 69.

29 Kritzas 1992, 236-7.

30 Piérart 1997, 333-6.

31 Piérart 1997, 333-6; Kritzas 1992, 234.

32 Kritzas 1992, 236-7.

Argolid.³³ Rather than simply imposing the traditionally Argive cult of Apollo Pythaeus on the newly conquered, the Argives instead elected to integrate their ethnic religious traditions into the new Argive state to provide a source of ethnic and religious unity. The Argive democracy pandered to the religious traditions of the various Argolid *ethne* through the system of land benefaction, which was ultimately connected to the new Argive democracy.

This process of integration of various *ethne* into the new Argive federation was not limited to territorial reassignment but extended into the realm of cultural synthesis. Jonathan Hall, when discussing the problems of Archaic mythical reconstruction in the Argolid, writes “the ... problem is the remarkable Argive propensity for rapid mythological innovation.”³⁴ Dorian and Argive mythical and ethnic identity was remarkably malleable, and a strong indication of this ethnic flexibility is the remarkable speed and fervour with which the fledgling Argive democracy incorporated Hera - who was never previously a prominently worshipped deity in Argos proper - into the Argive mythical and cult traditions. With the Argive defeat of Mykenai, Argos regained control of the Heraion, the principle sanctuary of Hera on the Peloponnese and the traditional *lieu de culte* of the Myceneans.³⁵ Rather than maintaining the primary worship of Apollo, the Argives instead massively expanded the importance of Hera in the ritual calendar, spiritual life, and physical presence of the Argive democracy as a method of appeasing and incorporating the Herakleidae. The choice of Hera was particularly shrewd as it simultaneously appealed to the communities of Mykenai and Tiryns due to their Herakleidic connection. As Jacques des Courtils notes in his analysis of fifth-century Argive architecture, around 460 B.C., Argos began a large public building campaign which included the construction of many temples in the countryside and most notably the sizeable expansion of the Heraion and its surrounding complex. Interestingly, during these renovations a new style of architecture emerged which included Ionian as well as traditionally Doric elements in a physical manifestation of the fusion that was occurring.³⁶ To augment Hera’s newfound importance to Argos, the Argives rebuilt the ‘Sacred Way’ that previously led from the Heraion to Mykenai, so that it now led from the Heraion to Argos. Thus, the Argives integrated the cult traditions of their surrounding communities and built what Hall describes as a “confederate sanctuary for all the communities of the Argive plain.”³⁷

To further strengthen Hera’s new place of prominence in the Argive pantheon, at around the same time as the renovation of the Heraion, the Games of Argive Hera were cre-

33 Kritzas 1992, 236-7; Hall 1997, 96.

34 Jonathan Hall, “How Argive Was the ‘Argive’ Heraion? The Political and Cultic Geography of the Argive Plain, 900-400 B.C.,” *The American Journal of Archaeology* vol. 99, no. 4 (October, 1995), 580.

35 Hall 1995, 610-12.

36 Jacques des Courtils, “L’architecture et l’histoire d’Argos dans la première moitié du cinquième siècle av. J.-C.,” in *Polydipsion Argos*, ed. Michel Piérart (Athens: École Française d’Athènes, 1992), 249.

37 Hall 1995, 613.

ated and given great importance in the city's ritual and civic life.³⁸ The oldest archaeological evidence of the Games of Hera dates from around 460 B.C., and consists of celebratory victory inscriptions dedicated to the goddess. Between 460 and 420 B.C., five prize inscriptions have been found honouring the winners of the games.³⁹ Pierre Amandry, in his analysis of the inscriptions, asserts that the creation of the games signalled an end to the traditional rivalry between Argos and Mykenai, and the correspondence between the creation of the games and the renovation of the Heraion implies a far-reaching effort on the part of the government to make previously Mycenaean cults appear as newly Argive.⁴⁰ It was around 460 that the image of Hera appears for the first time on Argive currency. Furthermore, literary fragments contemporaneous with this cultic realignment have led Hall to suggest that Argos intentionally rewrote its own 'mythohistory', and that of its surrounding *ethne*, in an effort to forge a mythological tradition to support the new federation. For instance, Hellenikos' "engineering of Argive myths detached Io from the ancestry that served to connect her to the communities of the Eastern plain and gave her instead an Argive father."⁴¹ This mythohistorical fusion of previously disparate ethnic traditions is echoed in the titular organization of the Argive democracy, and by all accounts seems to have worked quite well: later in the fourth century, Argos commissioned a series of statues at Delphi which included Perseid heroes amongst Argolid *ethne* in addition to the traditional Proitid heroes of Argos proper.⁴²

The success of the process of ethnic and political fusion of the communities of the Argolid is best indicated by the subsequent unity with which Argos is portrayed in sources describing the Peloponnesian War. By as early as 421, less than fifty years after the process of re-consolidation began, Thucydides describes a unified – and above all highly democratic – Argos negotiating treaties which are subject to ratification by the citizen body with Corinth, Mantinea, and several other *poleis*.⁴³ It merits mention that Argos was so commonly perceived as democratic that the oligarchic Boeotians hesitated to join the new Argive coalition, fearing that the rest of the Greek world would readily adopt the newly democratic identity of the Argolid as well.⁴⁴ In 420, Argos and Athens negotiated a treaty using terms and formulae common to the two democracies, thus after six decades of relative obscurity Argos had returned to prominence within the Greek community.⁴⁵ The ethnic and cultural fusion of the Argolid endured into the Hellenistic period and beyond, documented by the persistence of the games of Hera, the inscription from the fourth century noting the 'ancient' distribution of land, and the later bestowing of "the honours of Herakles

38 Pierre Amandry, "Sur les concours argiens," in *Études Argiennes: Supplément VI du Bulletin de Correspondance Hellénique* (Athens: École Française d'Athènes, 1980), 233.

39 Amandry 1980, 234.

40 Amandry 1980, 235-9.

41 Hall 1995, 612.

42 Hall 1995, 612.

43 Thuc. 5.28.

44 Thuc. 5.29-32.

45 Thuc. 5.41-7, cf. Paus. 5.13.1.

and Perseus” on prominent Romans.⁴⁶ As we have seen, throughout the first half of the fifth century, concepts of ethnic identity, and their religious and mythical components, were far from being irrelevant legacies of a bygone tribal era. Ethnic communities in fact outlived their physical *poleis* and played a critically influential role in political and social integration. The artificial intervention so prominent in the political reorganization of the Argolid also extended into the realm of ethnicity, and by careful consideration – and at times elegant manipulation – of ethnic identity, the previously-fractured Argolid was rapidly forged into a unified ethnic and political community through the construction of a new Argive *ethnos*.

46 Hall 1997, 98.

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