

§16. Pushing Athens

Then, too, they that possessed the well-built city of Athens,
 realm of Erechtheus, mighty of soul, whom one time Athena,
 daughter of Zeus, had fostered, when Earth, grain-giver, had borne him.
 Also in Athens she gave him her own rich shrine for a dwelling.
 Still are Athenian youths, as the years roll round in their courses,
 ever accustomed with bulls and with young rams slain to appease him.
 All these levies were led by Peteus' son, brave Menestheus.
 Nowhere like unto him was there any of earth-born mortals
 skillful to marshal both chariots and warriors, bearers of bucklers,
 Nestor alone was a rival, for he by birth was the elder.
 Black ships fifty in number with this chief followed to Troia.

– *The Athenian entry in the Catalogue of Ships, Iliad 2:546-556*

The Homeric poems at the Panathenaea were part of Athenian cultural propaganda, and it has been claimed that when they were introduced, Athens added lines to increase the role played in the story by Athens and its heroes. There is little to this, but not nothing. Here are some of the possible additions.

Athens

Its entry in the Catalogue of Ships has been expanded to include the divine origin of Athens and its sacrifices. The original entry probably consisted of three lines: the first, seventh, and last of those quoted above:

Then, too, they that possessed the well-built city of Athens,
 All these levies were led by Peteus' son, brave Menestheus.
 Black ships fifty in number with this chief followed to Troia.

From this the rest has grown.

Menestheus

Some claim that since Menestheus, the Athenian general, plays no great role in the Iliad, it has not been rewritten to give him (and Athens) more glory. And indeed, Menestheus accomplishes nothing. When he appears, his contribution blends narratively into that of others; he does not long occupy our attention. Thus, Agamemnon sees Menestheus in 4:327-328, but his scolding for hanging back from the war gets merged with the later interpolated scolding of Odysseus; Menestheus makes no reply. In the original text, it was Diomedes' henchman Sthenelos (also scolded) who replied. Menestheus fears the Lycians in 12:33, at 12:373 he asks the Aiantes for support, but the subsequent fighting features only them. He and a comrade carry Amphimachos out of the battle in 13:195, but all we hear of next is, once more, the fighting of the Aiantes. Menestheus and his men join the Boeotians in 13:690, and his comrade is killed in 15:331, but how much glory does any of that reflect on Athens?

What *has* been done is to magnify Menestheus in the Catalogue, 2:553-555.

Theseus

Menestheus got back from Troy, and ruled in Athens. He was succeeded¹ by Theseus, of Minotaur fame.² Theseus is said by Nestor in 1:265 to be among “the strongest generation of earth-born mortals.” This is not in all manuscripts, and was probably interpolated.³ Hee, then, is one bit of Athenian propaganda.

Territory

Like the Domesday Book, the Catalogue was consulted in later times when boundaries and rights were in dispute. The issue here is the position of Salamis. Here is a repeat of the relevant part of the Catalogue from the overview on p39:

(4, 527f) Locris, Aias of Oileus; (5, 536f) Euboeia; Elephenor; (6, 546f) Athens, Menestheus; (7, 557f) Salamis, [Telemonian] Aias

from which it is easy to see how the two Aiantes might have become mixed up in later ages. Kirk **Commentary** 1/207, “the motive was obviously to associate the Salaminians closely with the Athenians . . . This became a matter for warm debate in antiquity. Aristarchus is known to have athetized [2:558] on the strong ground that in the rest of the poem the Salaminian contingent was not closely associated with the Athenians.” But this is merely to say that the Catalogue does not describe the Menis, a fact we have already noted.

Kirk continues (1/209), “That leaves the well-known story referred to by Aristotle (Rhet a 15.1375 vb 30), that in the quarrel between Athens and Megara over possession of Salamis in the 6th century, the Megarians claimed that the Athenians had inserted this couplet [2:557-558] in their own interest into the text of Homer, and proposed another version . . .” Whatever use was later made of it this part of the Catalogue is not improved by the suggested amendments. The tension between the Catalogue, the Menis, and the ambitions of later states, will have to work itself out as best it can.

Pisistratus

Finally, be it noticed that the name of Nestor’s younger son Pisistratus in Odyssey 2-4, which so jars on the ear of a present reader (“Now where have I heard *that* before?”), might have been meant to give the lesser “Homeric” work its own connection with Athens and its leaders.

It helps this suggestion if we recall that the historical Pisistratus, the Greek tyrant who died in 527, claimed descent from the Nereids; that is, from the Neleus who was himself the father of Nestor.

¹For the house of Aeneas as succeeding that of Priam at Troy, see §5.

²Theseus united the surrounding peoples under the leadership of the state of Athens, and almost incidentally, is said to have abducted the very young Helen.

³Bolling **Ilias** ad loc. This is the only appearance of the name Theseus in the Iliad.