The Oath of the Ephebes as a symbol of democracy—and of environmentalism

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Classical Inquiries

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About

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For example:
Inscribed on the surface of the stele that is pictured here is the wording of the so-called Oath of the Ephebes. This oath, it is argued here, connects the ideals of democracy with the ideals of environmentalism as it was understood in the ancient Greek world. Such an understanding, it can also be argued, needs to be studied for its relevance to the environmental crises confronting the world today.

[Essay continues here...]

Replica of a 4th-century marble stele bearing the Athenian Oath of the Ephebes and the Oath at Plataea. As Danielle Kellogg, cited below in my argumentation, informs me, this replica in fact stands in front of the library at Brooklyn College, where she is Associate Professor and Department Chair of Classics. Image via Flickr, under a CC BY-NC-SA 2.0 license.

Besides the ancient Greek literary attestations for the Oath of the Ephebes (Lycurgus 1.76, Stobaeus 43.48, Pollux 8.105), there is also an epigraphical attestation, and I will be concentrating here on this most valuable of sources. The text is most readily available as Inscription number 88 in the collection of Greek historical inscriptions edited by P. J. Rhodes and Robin Osborne (2003).

This inscription contains two consecutive texts inscribed on the surface of a marble stele, dated to the mid-fourth century BCE. The first text, at lines 5–20, is the so-called Oath of the Ephebes, while the second, at lines 21–51, is the Oath at Plataea. The wording of the introduction to the whole inscription, at lines 1–4, indicates that the stele containing the two inscribed texts was dedicated by a priest in charge of regulating the worship of two divinities, Arês and Athena Areiâ, in the Attic dêmos ‘deme’ of Akharnai. In the pediment of this marble stele, above the inscription, is sculpted in relief the image of a round shield, and, on the side, a helmet, a breastplate, and shin-guards—so, we see here the ‘gear’ of the Athenian citizen-soldier.
Here is the original Greek text of the Oath of the Ephebes, as written at lines 5–20 of the inscription, followed by my own literal translation, where I often resort to strings of hyphenated English words to render individual Greek words that resist one-on-one equivalences:

This is the Oath [horkos] of the ephebes [ephebêoi], which the ephebes [ephebêoi] have to swear. I will not bring disgrace upon my shield-and-the-rest-of-my-gear [hopla], which are sacred [hiera] [for me], and I will not abandon the fighter-who-stands-next [to me], no matter where I am stationed-in-the-battle-line. I will protect all things that are sacred [hiera] and all things that are divinely-sanctioned-for-human-use [hosia]. The land-of-my-ancestors [patris] I will leave [to the next generation] in a condition that is not diminished but instead greater and better than it had been before. And I will do so both by myself and together with everyone else. And I will truly listen to those who are authorized-, year after year, -to-bring-things-to-completion [krainin] with sound mind [en-phonôn], and I will also listen to the laws [thesmoi] that have been set and to whatever laws will be set with sound mind [en-phonôn] for the rest of time. If anyone tries to destroy them, I will prevent it both by myself and together with everyone else. And I will honor [timîn] the sacred-things [hiera] of-the-ancestors [patria]. Witnesses [histores] [to the oath] are: [the] gods [theoi] Aglauros, Hestia, Enoû, Arês and Athena Areî, Zeus, Thalô, Hêgemonê, Hêraklês; [also] [the] boundaries [horoi] of the land-of-my-ancestors [patris]; [also] [the] wheat, barley, grapevines, olive-trees, fig-trees.

At first sight, the text of this Oath seems to be primarily militaristic in emphasis, centering on the hopla ‘gear’ of the Athenian citizen-soldier or hoplitês ‘hoplite’ and corresponding to the visual indications of the same gear as sculpted into the pediment of the inscribed stele. Such militarism in the first text of the inscription is neatly symmetrical with what we find in the second text, featuring the Oath at Plataea. In terms of the inscription, the second text is understood to be quoting the words of an oath that had once upon a time been uttered in unison by Athenian hoplites before they started fighting in one of the greatest battles of ancient Greek history. It was the Battle of Plataea in 479 BCE, where the invading army of the Persian Empire was decisively defeated by the combined military forces of Athens, Sparta, and other Hellenic states.

In the course of this second text, there has been considerable debate among Classicists about questions of authenticity: is the wording of the Oath at Plataea really authentic? The incendiary term “forgery” keeps recurring in the course of this debate, as conscientiously tracked by Danielle Kellogg (2008). As Kellogg argues, however, and I agree with her, the texts of the two Oaths need to be viewed in the historical context of the mid-fourth century BCE, where the memories of the glory-days of Athenian victories in the early fifth century BCE were being revived at a time when the very survival of Athens was gravely threatened. And to remember the glory days of Plataea, Salamis, Marathon, and Artemisium is to re-enact those times. Aeschines (2.75) says it explicitly, using the words mémmêșai ‘remember’ and múmêșai ‘re-enact’ in the context of these four great Athenian military successes (...) μμυμοίοι - μμμηχοί...). So, by remembering the words of the Oath at Plataea and by swearing the oath all over again in times of crisis, you hope one day to re-enact the victory and thus to experience once again all the glory days of Athens.

Here it becomes most important to ask this question about the Athenian victory at Plataea and about other such victories in the early fifth century. These military successes of Athens were a victory for what? When we take a close look at the surviving sources stemming from the mid-fourth century BCE, we can see the answer most clearly: such successes were viewed as a victory not so much for the political power of Athens but rather for its cultural identity, the centerpoint of which was the Athenian democracy. The Athenian statesman Lycurgus says it explicitly in one of his public orations, delivered in 330 BCE, where he actually refers to the Oath at Plataea (1.79–80) and where he says outright that ‘the Oath is what holds together the democracy’ (τὸ συνεχὸν τὴν Δημοκρατίαν ὄρκος οτιπτ., 1.79).

What goes for the Oath at Plataea goes also for the Oath of the Ephebes, I argue. The Athenian ephebes, too, like the Athenian hoplites at Plataea, upheld the Athenian democracy by swearing their Oath. And, in this case, there is no question about the authenticity of the wording as best preserved in the inscription that I have quoted and translated. As Danielle Kellogg argues, and I agree with her, the wording must be older—considerably older—than the text of the inscription itself.

As we consider more closely the wording of the Oath of the Ephebes, we can now even begin to see that the military aspect of the oath—where you swear that you will never desert your fellow-warriors—is only one part of the big picture, which envisions a democracy defended by its citizen-soldiers. And, besides the citizens who defend the city, there are also citizens in the making. These are the ephebôi ‘ephebes’, as they are called at lines 5–6 of the Inscription. They are young pre-adults—that is what the word means, ‘those who are on-the-cusp-of [epi-] adolescence [hêbê]’. And now these ephebes are being initiated into the status of adult citizen-soldiers. Their initiatory activities involve patrolling the environment that literally surrounds the city of Athens, as we see most clearly in a passing reference by the orator Aeschines (2.167).
to his youthful days as an ephebe who served with his fellow ephebes as a peripolos ‘patroller’ of Attica, that is, of the overall countryside controlled by the city of Athens. That is what it was like in the days of Aeschines, who is speaking here in the middle of the fourth century BCE.

To protect the city, the ephebes as citizens-in-the-making were protecting the periphery of the city, which was of course the countryside, where their term of service to the state, patrolling and bivouacking throughout Attica, was witnessed not only by the divinities of Nature but also by the agricultural self-expressions of the countryside, such as the fields of wheat and barley, the vines with their clusters of grapes, the groves of olive-trees, the figs. The ephebes protected the natural resources of Athens, pledging to make this beloved environment even better and greater than ever before.

That is why I think that the Oath of the Ephebes is a symbol not only of the democracy that was so cherished by the Athenians but also of the environment that gave life to the democratic city.

Appendix

On the relevance of the Oath of the Ephebes to the mission of Harvard’s Center for Hellenic Studies, with twin headquarters in Washington, DC, and in Nafplion, Greece.

As we have seen, then, it was a custom in Classical Greece for the youth of Athens, the epēboi ‘ephebes’, to take an oath to sustain the environment that they patrolled as civic initiates, and to make it stronger and better for the next generation. I will now argue that this Oath of the Ephebes is relevant to the ideals promoted by Harvard’s Center for Hellenic Studies (hereafter CHS).

For well over ten years now, the CHS has taken advantage of its dual institutional presence in the US and in Greece to promote dialogue about four—and soon, we hope, five—Hellenic ideals by way of international conferences, publications, digitization initiatives, and educational programs:

(1) Democracy  
The CHS has supported a Harvard-based summer school program on governmental formations from Antiquity to the present (Ancient China, Rome, Athens, Byzantium, Ottoman Empire), involving such Harvard professors as Emma Dench, Michael Puett, Dimitar Angelov, and myself (Gregory Nagy). In the course of this program, the CHS has been sustaining two scholarships annually for students from Fudan University in Shanghai for the purpose of working out systematic comparisons between Chinese and Mediterranean cultural contexts.

(2) Philosophy  
The CHS has established an annual seminar on political theory in Nafplion, involving faculty and students from Harvard (Social Studies). In cooperation with the Onassis Foundation, it has organized the 2012 Athens Dialogues at Harvard, bringing together researchers from different disciplines to discuss Ancient and Modern philosophy. A key participant was Harvard’s own Sean Kelly. Building on these programs, and inspired by the research of such eminent Harvard figures as Danielle Allen (currently a Senior Fellow of the CHS), Richard Tuck (currently on the Administrative Board of the CHS), and Mark Schiefsky (currently Associate Director of the CHS), our team aims at developing a broader research agenda on the relevance on ancient Greek thought to modern political theory, and at drawing comparisons with non-Western philosophical traditions, especially those of China and India.

(3) Theater  
Taking as its base text the essay of Nietzsche entitled “The Birth of Tragedy,” a team of literary theorists and experts in performance arts is planning to tackle interdisciplinary approaches to Theater in all its variations.

(4) Athleticism  
The CHS has established, and plans to expand, a Curriculum (and annual conference series) on “Sports, Society, and Culture,” in cooperation with the Greek International Olympic Academy, focusing on the idealized athleticism of Ancient Greece, its pivotal relationship to ideas of citizenship, and the ways in which modern movements of “Olympism” have sought to recapture these ideas.

(5) Environmentalism  
The time has come, I hope, to integrate into the ongoing study of the four ideals just listed with new initiatives in studying the cultural legacy of this fifth ideal, ancient Greek environmentalism, which as I have tried to show was considered to be a vital aspect of democratic society.

Taken together, these five ideals form the basis of an “Ecology of Civilization,” which is at the heart of the Center’s mission—and of “Greekness” or Hellenism itself. Or, to say it in terms of the environmentalism that was defended by the youth of Athens in taking their oath, the preservation of the environment is fundamental to the very idea of democracy.

Bibliography

