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Archaic Tyranny in Asia Minor

Summary :

Archaic tyranny in Asia Minor was a rather similar phenomenon to Archaic tyranny in continental Greece, that is the result of a permanent competition between the strongest aristocrats —even if one cannot forget that the Persian presence was an influent actor of this aristocratic game, which could have weighted a lot in the political balance.

DATE

Archaic period

GEOGRAPHICAL POSITION

Asia Minor

1. Definition of tyranny

Archaic tyranny has formerly been defined as a political regime by the emergent Greek political thought of the 5th century BC. The word appearance in the Archaic poetry is sporadic and the interpretation of Archaic tyranny in our studies has been mostly dependent on Classical Greek conception of the past.

In a famous passage, [Herodotus](#) reports the discussion that would have opposed the Persian responsables of the coup d'État that set an end to the usurpation of the Magis Smerdis.¹ What kind of regime would be best to establish in Persia: monarchy, isonomy, tyranny or oligarchy? [Dareios](#) strongly argued in favour of the monarchy and won his colleagues to his opinion. Historians have long noticed the anachronical tone of a discussion that fits better with the political ambience of the Athenian 5th century than with 6th century Persia. Herodotus sets forth the number of governors as distinction between the different sorts of regime: one alone, a small group or the entire population. To this first taxonomic principle was soon adduced another one that assesses positively or negatively the governor's role.

Systematic application of these two principles appeared in Platonic political philosophy. Plato defined three fundamental forms of government: monarchy, the rule of a small group, and the government of the masses. Depending on the good or the bad side of these forms of government, Plato distinguished, in the first case, between kingship and tyranny, in the second, between aristocracy and oligarchy, but left to democracy a unique position.²

To Aristotle we finally owe the well-known classification between six different regimes; this question concerns the whole "Politics", and in particular the Book III. According to Aristotle,³ if rulers rule for the common interest, constitutions are necessarily good; if they rule for their own interest, constitutions are deviations. Adding to this principle the traditional distinction of the number of governors, Aristoteles defined the six classical regimes, as it will be used by all political philosophers or historians, from Dicearcus and Polybius to Gustave Glotz (1928) and Victor Ehrenberg (1932). Kingship, aristocracy and republic belong to the good regimes; tyranny, oligarchy and radical democracy to the bad. Tyranny was thus defined as a form of government in which the power belongs to only one person ruling for his own interest.

Such was the way historians, ancient and modern, conceived archaic tyranny. The definition of these political categories was developed aside of an historical vision of the past. Each regime was assigned to a precise period and ancient historians thought of a cyclic historical scheme. Since Plato⁴ and Aristotle⁵ there was a definite idea about the regular succession of political regimes. In the remotest past, in the time of heroes and of foundation of cities, kingship was the regular form of government. With time, there were more men equal in virtue so that aristocracy succeeded kingship after a revolution. Soon people get more and more interested in money and neglected the common wealth; rulers became oligarchs. These regimes evolved to tyranny, when one of the rulers, searching support from the masses, monopolised the head of the state. When people get tired of an autocratic rule, a revolution sanctioned the passage to democracy. Monarchy, aristocracy, oligarchy and tyranny were thus classified as typical regimes of the Archaic period, and democracy was thought to be characteristic of the Classical period. From kingship to democracy, the political



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history of Greece seems clear for many historians since the 5th century BC.

According to Aristotle, tyranny was the worst of the six regimes, the only one in which the governor rules despotically the community for his own interests. Comparatively to other regimes, tyranny was far away from a true constitution, some say at the edge of the political. For Aristotle the tyrant was apolitical, his rule could not be described in political terms and, not the less, the city he rules was no more a polis.

Modern historians have long been totally dependent on this presentation. So tyranny became a specific kind of government and many studies were consecrated to this topic.⁶ The first 19th century enquiries adopted the Aristotelian presentation and casted the theory of usurpation of power by the tyrant. In 1922 P.N. Ure developed a modernist economic vision of tyrants, seeing in them entrepreneurs and industrial capitalists who use their capitals to reach the head of the State. In the 1930s and 1940s, historians were deeply influenced by totalitarian ideologies. The tyrant was therefore presented as the chief of the popular party; acquired to the cause of the poor and of the middle class of the hoplites, he was supposed to solve all social, economic and political crisis, not by personal ambition but by political foreseeing. On the contrary, Helmut Berve simultaneously denied that the tyrant had other motives than personal ones and developed a strictly individualist conception of archaic tyranny, as a form of government essentially external (even opposed) to the city, its political institutions and historical development. Historians have since oscillated between these two conceptions of the “demagogic leader” and the “lonely risk-taker”. Meanwhile, tyrants were always seen as anti-aristocratic leaders casted, according to Aristotle, as defenders of the poor against the rich oligarchs. By repeated attacks against his fellow aristocrats, the tyrant would have precipitated the destruction of the old aristocracy of birth and would have anticipated the coming of democracy. For thirty years, however, some historians have been trying to go beyond this opposition between tyrant and [aristocrats](#) and setting new paths to explore ancient Greek history.

2. Tyranny and Aristocracy

In 1972, E. Kluwe called Peisistratos’ tyranny a “variation of aristocratic rule” and in 1979 K.H. Kinzl presented the governments of Pheidon, Cleisthenes of Sicyon and Peisistratos as particular manifestations of aristocratic regimes. Aristocracy and tyranny would then be two very similar phenomena. This was the starting point of Michael Stahl’s brilliant thesis (1987). He questioned the available documentation on the Athenian tyrants, Peisistratos and his sons, and concluded that the nature and development of the Athenian tyranny was intimately bounded to aristocratic behaviour. In ancient Greece, aristocrats were not, as Bourriot (1976) and Roussel (1976) have convincingly demonstrated noble men who owed their social position to their “genos”, i.e. to their mythic ancestors. Aristocrats were men who, whatever their original social condition, tried to climb the social levels by increasing their symbolic capital. “Always be the best and surpass the others”, claimed Homer.⁷ That was the only definition of aristocracy that matches reality, with actually no blood impeachment. There was thus a permanent social competition (agon) between all the members of the civic community; aristocrats were those who managed to be at the top of the pyramid.

H. Sancisi-Weerdenburg recently defined tyranny as “a process of accumulating informal power and personal resources which eventually, but slowly and gradually, without a clear demarcation point, led to a dominant position in the community and to a monopoly of power”.⁸ Tyranny thus emerged only when one man was so strong in all fields that no competition was anymore possible between the elite. The tyrant so monopolised the head of the state and the political power until another man, a small group or the entire civic community got back the lead. Political strife (stasis) between all the members of the community was the normal and permanent state of Archaic cities, not a momentaneous time of crisis. As the Athenian history teaches us, the relationships between tyrant and aristocrats were not always dominated by the former. The normal aristocratic game of competition kept on going, sometimes with collaboration (Miltiades and Cleisthenes were both archons during the time of Peisistratid rule), sometimes with radical opposition (exile of the Alcmaeonids in Delphi). Contrary to Aristotle’s political theory, tyranny was not inscribed beyond the boundaries of regular and institutional rules of Archaic cities. Actually tyranny was a major step in the process of politization, i.e. of transformation of a social community into a political State. Lastly Loretana de Libero (1996) examined city by city all the regimes that ancient or modern historians called tyranny. She concluded that the story of Archaic tyranny was in the same time a story of Greek aristocracy.



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3. Kingship and Tyranny

Historians also explored the relationship between kingship and tyranny. Pierre Carlier warned us that the distinction between the two regimes was in fact not so clear to Archaic poets than to Classical political philosophers.⁹ Pedro Barceló (1993) studied the occurrence and use of those words designating monarchical rule in Ancient Greece, considering how kingship and monarchy became essential categories of Classical political thought. Actually “monarchos” and “monarchia” are Greek words, of which Archaic signification fits closely the meaning of “tyrannos” and “tyrannis”, which are of foreign origin (see below). If “basileus” designated a clearly defined institution, of which content varied from city to city, “tyrannos” and “monarchos” were only polemical terms, sometimes used by Archaic poets to discredit their opponents. In Archaic “staseis”, people called “tyrannos” could actually held an office of “basileus” in the organization of the State. Meanwhile no negative meaning is necessarily associated to the word in the works of [Archilochos](#) of [Paros](#) or [Alcaios](#) of [Mylene](#), even if no tyrant known by inscriptions (Cypselos, Hipparchos, Peisistratos the Young ...) called himself “tyrannos” in the dedication-except in the Arkedike’s funerary epigram in [Lampsakos](#), who proudly claimed to have been daughter, sister, wife and mother of tyrants.¹⁰ Consequently, tyranny appears to be institutionally inexistent in Archaic Greece and Barceló argued for abandoning this concept forged by the Classical Greek political thought for the study of ancient societies. However, in spite of institutional definition, tyranny was a social and political reality: in many Archaic cities, aristocrats reached the head of the State, monopolising all honours. So tyranny could be a meaningful and sensitive analytical tool in the study of Archaic society. But we have to abandon the traditional image of the tyrant, enemy of the aristocrats and supporter of the poor, designed to be aggressive or extravagant.

4. Tyranny in mainland Greece

Tyrannical behaviours were those of aristocrats and it does not make sense to speak of a specific tyrannical policy. Athenian tyranny, regarding which we have much more information than for the others, has recently been critically reviewed (Sancisi-Weerdenburg 2000). In Athens there was no consistent building policy supposed to compete with others (and particularly Ionian) tyrants at the time of Peisistratos’ rule; building activity only began under the Peisistratidai, even if one cannot assure their involvement in the process. Contrary to the general view, there is no proof that the Athenian tyrants had a cultural policy to the advantage of poets; one can even seriously doubt that they ordered to put Homeric poetry down in writing. Tyrannical behaviours included all means of increasing personal prestige and influence, which is the basis of the natural aristocratic attitude. For a would be tyrant or an already established one, interpersonal relations are compulsory to gain support in his community as well as abroad. Peisistratos’ wedding with Megacles’ daughter gained him the possibility to come back to Athens. His marriage with the Argive Timonassa, daughter of Gorgilos of Argos but also former wife of Archinos of Ambrakia, assured him a military support, which was fruitful at the battle of Pallene as well as his guest relations with Lygdamis of Naxos.

5. Tyranny in Asia Minor

In Asia Minor, many cities were said to be ruled by tyrants in Archaic times. But no Archaic text or inscription from [Ionia](#) assures the existence of an institutional office called tyranny and our information depends exclusively from later authors, beginning with Herodotus. Samian tyranny is particularly well known through the figure of Polykrates, even if we cannot forget his successors Maiandrios, Sylosson and Aiakes. Hippias of Erythrai¹¹ names Amphiclos and Polytecnos as tyrants, who ruled jointly the [Chios](#) island probably in the 7th century; they helped the Erythraean aristocrats Ortyges, Iros and Echaros to settle a tyranny in Erythrai. Later, Strattis of Chios joined [Dareios’ expedition against the Scythians](#).¹² Several archaic tyrants are known from [Miletus](#), but only [Histiaios](#) and [Aristagoras](#) are actually historically documented personalities. In [Ephesos](#), texts give us the name of seven tyrants, some rather well known, the others being only names without any detail. Most of our information about Ephesos probably comes from Baton of [Sinope](#), who wrote in Hellenistic times a book on Ephesian tyrants, deeply aristotelizing.¹³

The origin of the foreign words “tyrannos” and “tyrannis” is probably Lydian, even if the etymology is not quite clear (see Labarbe 1971). It is a fact that the presence of a great empire, Lydian first then Persian, in the immediate vicinity of the Asiatic Greeks could have encouraged the emergence of monarchical forms of government at the head of Ionian cities. Since Gyges, Greeks fought frequently against Lydian and Herodotus¹⁴ tells us that by the time of [Croesus](#) all the Ionian Greeks were submitted to Lydian rule.



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The defeat of Croesus in 547 against Cyrus the Great and the installation of a Persian **satrapy** in [Sardis](#) reinforced the foreign domination exercised upon the Greek cities. Contacts between Greeks and Persians and control by Persians of Greeks could be facilitated by the presence at the head of each city of a unique chief. So was probably the situation in 513 when Dareios crossed the Danube and attacked the [Scythians](#), taking with him a contingent of Greeks commanded by tyrants of medizing cities. According to Herodotus, there were, among others not mentioned by the Historian, Miltiades of Chersonesos, Daphnis of Abydos, [Hippoklos](#) of Lampsakos, Herophantos of Parion, [Metrodoros](#) of Proconnesos, [Aristagoras of Cyzicus](#), Ariston of Byzantium, Strattis of Chios, Aiakes of Samos, [Laodamas](#) of [Phocaea](#), Histiaios of Miletus, Hegesistratos of Sigeion, Pheidon and [Aristagoras of Kyme](#).¹⁵ For most of them, it is however impossible to say anything about their mode of government in their home cities. One can imagine that tyranny in Asia Minor was a rather similar phenomenon to Archaic tyranny in continental Greece, that is the result of a permanent competition between the strongest aristocrats —even if one cannot forget that the Persian presence was an influent actor of this aristocratic game, which could have weighted a lot in the political balance.

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1. Hdt. 3.80-82.
 2. Pl. *Plt.* 291d-292a.
 3. Arist. *Pol.* 1279a-1279b.
 4. Pl. *R.* 8-9.
 5. Arist. *Pol.* 1286b.
 6. For a full bibliographic account, see Libero, L. de, *Die archaische Tyrannis* (Stuttgart 1996) p. 11-19.
 7. Hom. *Il.*6.208
 8. Sancisi-Weerdenburg, H., "The tyranny of Peisistratos", in Sancisi-Weerdenburg, H., (ed.), *Peisistratos and the Tyranny. A Reappraisal of the Evidence* (Amsterdam 2000) p. 14.
 9. Carlier, P., *La royauté en Grèce avant Alexandre* (Strasbourg 1984) p. 234-239.
 10. Th. 6.59.
 11. *FGrHist* 421 F 1.
 12. Hdt. 4.137.
 13. *FGrHist* 268 F 3.
 14. Hdt. 1.27.
 15. Hdt. 4.138.

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	Tyrant http://www.livius.org/tt-tz/tyrant/tyrant.html

Glossary :

	satrapy, the
1. Administrative division of the ancient Persian state. 2. The office of a satrap and the period of his government.	

SOURCES

Herodotus, *Histories*, Books 3 and 4.