1 An outline history of Athens to the death of Alexander the Great

The basis of Athenian history

1.1 The first incident we are able to recount in the political history of Athens occurs some time after 640. It tells how a one-time Olympic victor called Kylōn attempted a coup during a major religious festival. It failed. Kylōn escaped, but his followers, though promised safe conduct, were killed. From that point on, those who killed them and their descendants were regarded as accursed. We know about this episode because Hērodotos and Thucydides, both writing in the late fifth century (8.41–2), needed to explain the curse to their readers in order to make later events at Athens comprehensible.

1.2 In writing the history of fifth-century Athens, modern scholars effectively repeat the narratives offered to them by Hērodotos, Thucydides, and Xenophōn, supplemented by later writers. Hērodotos, who was not an Athenian but from Halikarnassos (Bodrum, western Turkey), narrated the wars against Persia of 490 and 480–479, in which Athens played a major part. Thucydides, an Athenian who was sufficiently involved in Athenian public and political life to serve as *stratēgos*, dealt with both the so-called *Pentēkontaetia*, the 'fifty years' from the Persian Wars to the outbreak of the 'Peloponnesian War' between Athens and Spartē (431), and the war itself. His narrative breaks off in 410, but another Athenian, Xenophōn, who was also a military man, deliberately started his account of Greek affairs (the *Hellēnika*) from the point at which Thucydides' account ended. Xenophōn provides a narrative of the rest of the war and of the political upheaval in Athens immediately after the end of the war in 404 (8.43).

1.3 In writing the history of Athens *before* the fifth century, however, modern scholars have to piece together a story from accounts handed down *after* the fifth century, like the tradition about Kylōn. This was preserved because, among those who killed his followers, had been members of the controversial Alkmeōnidai family ('sons of Alkmeōn'); and it was politically useful for (some) Athenians (and some other Greeks) to remember that the Alkmeōnidai were accursed. Other figures whose names survive from seventh- and sixth-century Athenian politics do so because their names were attached to laws or institutions which continued in use; or because the story of their political careers could act as a warning about what sort of behaviour to watch out for among the politically ambitious. From the fourth century

onwards, it became quite popular to write accounts of the early history of Athens (known as *Atthides*) (8.44), especially among men with an axe to grind who were themselves active in public life (such as Androtiōn and Phanodēmos). Though none of these accounts survives intact, we know of some of them because they were quoted by later writers. These writers picked up such oral stories as were circulating in their time, as Hērodotos and Thucydides had done, but unlike those fifth-century historians they did not subject them to any critical judgement. Instead, they tried to string them together into something which could count as a history. Inevitably this involved systematising what was unsystematic and inventing hypotheses to fill the gaps. Their accounts need therefore to be handled with particular care.

1.4 We can often cross-check the reliability of what Hērodotos or Thucydides says about fifth-century Athenian history by comparing their accounts with other contemporary writing, e.g. the comic dramas of Aristophanēs or the texts of Athenian inscriptions. But when it comes to what they and later writers say about *earlier* Athenian history, we have very few such checks. Scholars therefore argue from what seems most *likely* to have happened. However, while it is unlikely that stories such as that about Kylōn were complete inventions, there is no doubt that they have been elaborated in the telling. Consequently, we are not now in a position to know exactly where truth lies in any particular story. What is important, however, is that the stories which Hērodotos and Thucydides tell about the earlier history of Athens are stories that were *current in the fifth century*. In other words, whether or not Kylōn's attempted coup happened in precisely the way that Hērodotos and Thucydides describe it, fifth-century Athenians told each other that that was how it happened. For the Athenians, these stories *were* their past, and it was in the belief that their past was like this that they took the decisions that they did.

1.5 For us, a different story of Athens' past is also available. This is the story revealed by archaeology. Thucydides shows a faint awareness of the possible importance of archaeology when he claims that the first inhabitants of the Cycladic islands came from Kariā (south-west Turkey). He draws this conclusion because graves discovered on Dēlos during his lifetime contained arms of Karian type and were constructed in the same way as Karian graves of his own time. But this is a rare insight, and to all intents and purposes archaeology is a modern discipline. The story it tells, however, is not the sort of story told by texts. Archaeology reveals something of what was being built or made from non-perishable materials, but working out why what was being built or made took a particular form or changed over time is as difficult as trying to decide which parts of a traditional tale may be true. Nevertheless, we know a great deal more about the history of Athens than was known to the Athenians themselves.

1.6 To understand the world of classical Athens properly, we need to know both what happened in Athens and what the Athenians *thought* had happened. The account that follows will, in consequence, attempt both to summarise what we

1.1 The entrance (*dromos*) of the Mycenaean beehive (*tholos*) tomb at Akharnai.

think we can know of Athenian prehistory and history, and to indicate what the stories were that Athenians themselves told about their past.

Prehistoric Athens

1.7 A single site in Attikē is known to have been occupied in the mesolithic period (9000–7000). At Athens itself, the earliest occupation dates to the early neolithic (7000–6000). At this period, on the basis of the evidence currently available, the most heavily settled part of Greece was not southern Greece but Thessaly. But around 3000, Greece was transformed – from being a peninsula of Balkan Europe into a network of coasts and islands in close connection with each other and with the world of the eastern Mediterranean. This transformation can be associated with the development of sea-transport and consequent improvements in communication. At about the same time, metalworking technology was discovered and developed, and new farming practices arrived from Anatolia (modern Turkey).

1.8 The new technologies and improved communications led to stability, prosperity, and bigger communities. Large settlements – to all intents and purposes 'towns' – grew up shortly before 2000, and soon after 2000 palace complexes appeared in Crete (the so-called Minoan palaces). Comparable developments follow in mainland Greece around 1500, with elaborate palaces constructed at Mycenae, Tiryns, Thebes, Pylos and elsewhere. Modern scholars have come to talk of this period as 'Mycenaean' after the most important site. At Athens itself, the Akropolis was developed as a Mycenaean centre, and extensive tunnelling in the rock secured its water

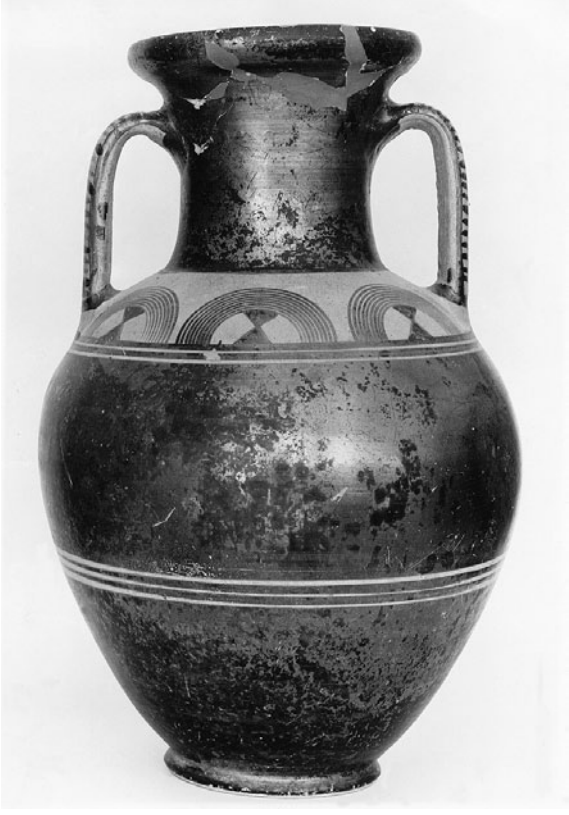
supply. Elsewhere in Attikē (the territory of classical Athens), major Mycenaean burials are known from Akharnai and Thorikos, and traces of buildings with Mycenaean frescoes survive at Eleusīs.

1.9 We know much more about society in the late Bronze Age (2000–1100) than the earlier period because of the development of figurative art (i.e. art depicting human and animal figures) and because the writing system that we call 'Linear B', adopted in the Mycenaean palaces, has been deciphered. This is a syllabic rather than an alphabetic script, but the language which it records is Greek. (The slightly earlier Linear A is undeciphered but does not record Greek.) Palaces kept extensive economic records in this script, and a large number of the clay tablets upon which these records were written, both at Knōssos in Crete and at Pylos, were baked and preserved when the palaces were destroyed by fire. We can justifiably talk of 'palace societies' because these records show how closely palace officials centralised and controlled economic activity, although the precise nature of the political organisation remains obscure.

1.10 Figurative decoration appears in the late Bronze Age on pottery, metalwork, and gems, but above all on painted frescoes. How the scenes relate to life is a topic of much debate, but it seems certain that both religious and political rituals are represented. Since we possess fresco fragments from Egypt depicting Cretan traders and find Cretan goods widely scattered elsewhere, there must have been close and extensive links between Crete and the lands bordering the eastern Mediterranean. Much of that contact was peaceful, involving exchange of goods and ideas; but there is some evidence also for more hostile encounters, reflected in the tradition of a war between Greeks and Trojans which came to be a major theme of Greek epic poetry, above all in Homer's *Iliad* c. 700 BC.

1.11 Excavation of Troy, close by the Hellespont, was undertaken precisely because of this tradition of a Trojan War. It has revealed a city which developed and grew from 3000 to 1100, and had strong links to its east as well as to the west and the Aegean. We cannot be certain which of the city levels revealed by the excavation might have faced attack from invading Greeks, but there is no doubt that this city was indeed an important point of contact between Greek and Anatolian worlds. To that extent, at least, the epic tradition proves to be based on historical reality. So, too, epic tradition describes in some detail, and accurately, some objects known (only) from the late Bronze Age c. 1200, such as the famous boar's tusk helmet worn by Odysseus in *Iliad* 10. Such memories can have survived only if the epics that come down to us stand in a continuous tradition begun at that time. As a result, scholars have attempted to distinguish historical 'layers' within epics in the same way that they distinguish archaeological layers in the soil (this part of Homer seems to reflect the ninth century, this the eighth century, etc.).

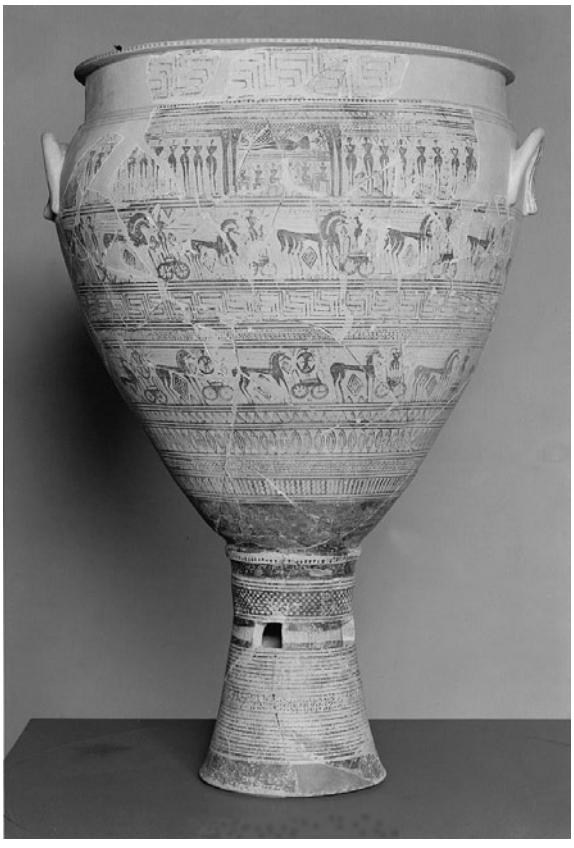
1.12 The continuity of epic tradition is important because shortly after 1200, following the destruction (we do not know why) of the Mycenaean palaces,



1.2 An example of so-called 'Protogeometric' pottery from Athens.

there seems to have been massive discontinuity within the Greek world. At Perati on the east coast of Attikē, for example, large numbers of people seem to have settled for a time with an eye to using it (in part) as a staging post from which to leave Attikē and move east (graves at Perati reveal goods of eastern Mediterranean origin). They did not stay long. Within half a century or so, mainland Greece seems to have become isolated and to have lost the skills of writing, figurative art and many specialised metalworking techniques. Many settlements were abandoned.

1.13 Nevertheless, Athens, which had itself played no special part in late Bronze Age history, and had a modest role in epic poetry to match, is one of relatively few sites which was continuously occupied; and it appears that it was from Athens that the new distinctive pottery style, known as Protogeometric, spread. Between 1100 and 700 the primary working metal changed from bronze to iron, while goods found in Attic graves tell us something of Athens' fortunes at this time: many burials dated 900–800 are remarkably wealthy, and demonstrate new metalworking techniques that can have been learned only from the eastern Mediterranean.



1.3 Athenian monumental wine-mixing bowl (*krātēr*), used as a tomb-marker and showing the laying out of the corpse (see 5.81) and a procession of men in armour.

1.14 Then, following 800, dramatic changes can be seen. Figurative decoration reappeared on Athenian pottery; and around 750 Athenian potters began to produce, in at least one Athens cemetery, very large vases with scenes of funerals, chariot processions, ships, and fighting, to stand on and mark graves. Such outsize vases suggest an attempt by some people in the society to distinguish themselves from others, but at the same time numbers of burials rose sharply. This is partly because the population was increasing, but also because more social classes now partook in formal burial rituals. The increase in burial numbers is seen both in Athens and in cemeteries in Attikē, where a number of new settlements arose. Shortly before the middle of the century, Greeks adopted the alphabet used by the Phoenicians, adapting it to have some signs represent vowel sounds (8.2). By 700 Athenians were using writing to communicate with the gods but also for more frivolous purposes: the earliest substantial Athenian writing occurs on the shoulder of a jug and identifies it as a prize for the dancer who 'sports most elegantly'.

The beginnings of Athenian history

1.15 In both Protogeometric (1000–900) and middle Geometric (850–760) periods, Athenian pottery was widely distributed, but late Geometric (760–700) Athenian pottery seems rarely to have been sold abroad. Some containers for olive oil manufactured in Attikē did get widely exported around the Mediterranean in the period 750–700, but it is not at all certain that Athenians travelled with them. But while Athens seems to have turned inwards (for reasons to be discussed), other Greeks, and particularly men from Corinth and from Euboia, seem to have been busy not only sailing throughout the Mediterranean but settling on the coasts of Sicily and southern Italy. Tracing these settlements is much easier than understanding how they came about. Scholars have disputed whether Greeks were attracted abroad by opportunities to gain better agricultural land; or were compelled to leave Greece because of the threat of starvation; or were sent abroad by a community decision; or were involved in exchange of goods with non-Greeks and realised that this could be more profitably and securely achieved if they had staging posts abroad and permanently resident agents. Whatever lay behind their foundation, these settlements abroad (once misleadingly entitled 'colonies') kept close ties with one, sometimes two, cities – but never, until just before 600, with Athens.

1.16 There may have been both positive and negative reasons why groups of Athenians did not lead settlements abroad. The positive reasons include the size of Attikē (2,500 sq. km) (2.3). Athenian tradition held that Attikē had once had a number of independent cities, but that these had been brought together by Athens' mythical king Thēseus in an act of *sunoikismos* ('unification'). But archaeology, on the other hand, suggests that during this period Athens itself was founding new settlements in Attikē. During the period 800–700 further new villages were settled, and even after this there was significant scope for further settlement. The negative reasons may include some sort of Athenian crisis shortly after 700. The number of graves from Attikē that can be dated between 700 and 600 is very much smaller than the number of graves from Attikē that can be dated between 750 and 700. This is likely to represent exclusion from formal burial – surely for some significant reason – rather than catastrophic population decline. At the same time the style and subject matter of painting on Athenian pottery changed markedly, and the new fashion was for scenes which involved individual rather than communal endeavour.

1.17 What kind of political régime Athens enjoyed in the eighth and seventh centuries is not clear. The Homeric *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, now often thought to have reached more or less the form in which we have them only after 700, imply familiarity with monarchic government, but also seem to understand situations where, as on Odysseus' Ithaka, a son did not necessarily inherit his father's throne. The city of peace pictured on the shield that Hēphaistos made

for Akhilleus (*Iliad* 18) has justice dispensed by elders upon the decision of the people. By contrast, in the more or less contemporary *Works and Days* of the Boiotian poet Hesiod, justice was in the hands of *basileis* (traditionally translated 'kings'), who were not necessarily hereditary rulers but were certainly officials of some sort. Also, tradition held that, by 650, Athens had acquired her first 'archons' (*arkhontes*, s. *arkhōn*) – annually appointed office-holders. In the classical period Athens had nine of these, each with distinct duties (6.23). The archons included one named the *basileus* and one named *polemarkhos* ('leader in war'). The *polemarkhos* retained some military responsibility until the battle of Marathōn in 490, but subsequently had only judicial duties. The year was named after one of the archons, the 'eponymous' archon, and all who served as archons automatically became members of a council which met on the Areopagus hill, just north-west of the Akropolis (6.38). Thucydides' account of Kylōn's conspiracy makes reference to the nine archons, Hērodotos' to the 'presidents of the naucraries' (apparently some sort of finance division). Contemporary inscriptions from elsewhere sometimes reveal complex bureaucratic structures, in which successive officials were made responsible for seeing that officials below them in the hierarchy did their job properly.

1.18 This suggests that, by about 600, Athens was developing a non-hereditary governmental system of some sophistication, an impression confirmed by the text of a law ascribed to one Drakōn. This law survives because it was reinscribed on stone as part of a review of the Athenian law-code at the end of the fifth century. The law concerned procedure in cases of accidental killing. It reveals the existence of plural *basileis* and of a body of fifty-one *ephetai* ('hearers of appeals'?) who made the final decision. Drakōn's law left an important judicial role for the family of the victim (potentially including cousins as well as the direct line) and for the kinship group known as the phratry (3.53–4; 5.14) – though it has often been thought that one of the important advances made by Drakōn was *reducing* the jurisdiction of family and kin and increasing the role of the state.

1.19 The attempted coup by Kylōn, the cursing of those responsible for the death of some of his followers, and Drakōn's laws – all this suggests that there was some discontent in Athenian society in the late seventh century, and that the community attempted to do something about it. In other Greek communities in the seventh century, we have evidence that people were worried that officials were turning their office into a permanent power base and that individuals were setting themselves up above the constitution. They became known, in a term which the Greeks perhaps borrowed from Lydiā, as *turannoi* ('tyrants'). That individuals could do this implies that they were able to call on support from outside the ranks of those involved in running these cities. We do not know what the issues were which divided these other communities, though flagrant injustice is likely to have been one cause. But, in the case of Athens, authors writing after 400 believed that the root of the

problem was that 'the poor had become enslaved to the rich', and that the problem had been sorted out in the 590s by one Solōn.

1.20 Nothing is heard of Solōn in Thucydides, while Hērodotos calls him a wise man, but tells us nothing substantial about his achievements. He came into the spotlight only in the local fourth-century histories of Athens; and our best source for this fourth-century view of Solōn comes from *The Constitution of the Athenians*, written as part of an Aristotelian research project on the constitutions of Greek cities. The author of this research work painted a general picture of Solōn's political achievements and then sought to support his views by quoting from Solōn's own poems. The poetic language that Solōn employed to advertise his ideas and defend his actions does not make it easy to understand exactly what he did. He talks of 'freeing the black earth', of pulling up boundary stones, and of bringing back to Athens men who had been sold into slavery and no longer spoke the Attic tongue. He paints himself as a man of moderation:

> To the People (*dēmos*) I have given such privilege as is enough,
> Neither taking away nor adding to their honour;
> While those who had power and were famed for their wealth,
> For them I took care they should suffer no injury.
> I stood, holding out my strong shield over both,
> And I did not allow either to triumph unjustly. (Solōn, fr. 5)

For all the obscurity of detail, however, some of Solōn's principles and achievements are clear. He made it impossible for men to agree to be enslaved if they could not pay their debts. He distributed political power according to wealth, leaving some official posts to the wealthy but giving even the poor some political and judicial role. He introduced a law-code that was far more comprehensive than the laws of Drakōn, and showed a particular concern for property rights. Whether this legislation followed a more general abolition of debt or redistribution of land is much disputed. Nevertheless, it is certainly the case, first, that debt never became a political problem in classical Athens; second, that property in land seems to have been much more evenly distributed in classical Athens than in most other societies; and finally that, after Solōn, the 'sixth-parters' (*hektēmoroi*, peasants who had to give a sixth of their produce to their overlord), were never heard of again. (This is a subject of great concern for *The Constitution of the Athenians*.) Some form of citizen Assembly (*ekklēsiā*) probably already existed in Solōn's time, but he seems to have given it a more formal role in matters of state, with regular meetings. He also invented a formal Council (*boulē*) of 400 – a sort of steering committee – to prepare business for it. The *ekklēsiā*'s actual powers and working relationship with the *arkhontes* at this time remain obscure.

1.21 If Solōn's economic reforms changed Athens for ever, his political reforms did not prevent civil conflict. *The Constitution of the Athenians*, again, told

1.4 Panathenaic *amphorā*. This example dates to c. 530 BC.

of a series of problems, culminating in attempts by Peisistratos to take power as *tyrannos*. The story of Peisistratos' three attempts to seize power was told by Hērodotos as a text-book warning against the deceitful tricks played by the politically ambitious. First, Peisistratos got himself a body-guard by claiming to be in danger from his enemies, and then used that to seize power. Next, he deceived the Athenians into thinking that he had the particular favour of their patron goddess Athēnē, and tricked one of the other major political leaders into thinking he wished genuinely to collaborate with him. Finally, he bought military support from outside, and attacked the Athenian army when it was not expecting it. *The Constitution of the Athenians*, while repeating these stories from Hērodotos, also retailed the tradition that Peisistratos was a mild and wise ruler. Both traditions reflected the uses to which stories of a 'tyrant' were put in subsequent history – on the one hand to frighten people about the political ambitions of certain individuals, and on the other to point to the virtues of strong government.