

*Septem contra Thebas*¹

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THE *Septem* carries the stamp of greatness: in the entrance-song of the chorus (for instance) and in the sombre rhetoric of the so-called *Redepaare*. Indeed, throughout we catch what Longinus called 'the resonance of a great mind'. It has, moreover, a feature which was not to be found in the *Persae* and will not be found in the *Supplices*: the dramatic issues are focused upon an arresting individual figure. Eteocles has been called 'the first Man of the European stage', and the play 'our earliest tragedy of character'.² Yet what *is* the character of Eteocles? The question has fascinated recent writers, but no agreement has been reached upon the answer.³ This great play and this great dramatic figure continue to baffle us.

1. Much of the following article remains more or less as I drafted it in 1964 at the Institute for Advanced Study at Princeton, to which I owe such a debt of gratitude as will readily be understood by all who have had the privilege of membership. I have had the benefit of comments on various drafts from a number of friends.

2. H. D. F. Kitto, *Greek Tragedy*³, p. 54. 'The first clearly studied individual character in dramatic literature' (Gilbert Murray, in the preface to his translation). 'Der erste "tragische" Mensch der Weltichtung': O. Regenbogen, *Hermes* 68 (1933), 69, who deliberately avoids the word 'Charakter'.

3. A number of more specialized articles are cited with full details in subsequent footnotes. The following publications (all since 1958) are cited by name of author only or (in some cases) by name and date: H. H. Bacon, 'The shield of Eteocles', *Arion* 3.3 (1964), 27-38; Anne Burnett, 'Curse and dream in Aeschylus' *Septem*', *GRBS* 14 (1973), 343-68; R. S. Caldwell, 'The misogyny of Eteocles', *Arethusa* 6 (1973), 197-231; H. D. Cameron, 'The debt to Earth in the *Seven against Thebes*', *TAPA* 95 (1964), 1-8; "'Epigoni" and the law of inheritance in Aeschylus' *Septem*', *GRBS* 9 (1968), 247-57; 'The power of words in the *Seven against Thebes*', *TAPA* 101 (1970), 95-118; *Studies on the Seven against Thebes of Aeschylus* (The Hague 1971); R. D. Dawe, 'Inconsistency of plot and character in Aeschylus', *PCPS* 189 (1963), 21-62, esp. 31-42; C. M. Dawson, *The Seven against Thebes by Aeschylus*, transl. with comm. (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey 1970); K. von Fritz, 'Die Gestalt des Eteokles in Aeschylus' *Sieben gegen Theben*', *Antike und moderne Tragödie* (1962), 193-226; L. Golden, 'The character of Eteocles and the meaning of the *Septem*', *CPh* 59 (1964), 78-89; *In praise of Prometheus* (1966), 42-61; A. Hecht and

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There are difficulties. The *Persae* is complete as a single play; the *Oresteia* is a complete trilogy. The remaining extant plays of Aeschylus are truncated works of art which cannot be fully understood in isolation from their lost companions. The *Septem* was the last play of a trilogy; it was preceded by the *Laius* and the *Oedipus*, and of these plays we know little. As though this were not obstacle enough, there is grave suspicion – amounting in the view of many to virtual certainty – that the ending of the play, as we find it in the manuscripts, is not genuine. It seems that, for some later revival, an interpolator has modified the archaic simplicity of the action by adding a theme from the *Antigone* of Sophocles. But, even if we decide to excise the suspect passages, we cannot be quite sure how much of the original ending survived the interpolator's activities. Our approach to the interpretation of this play must therefore be modest, and discussion is bound to be interrogative and discursive. We can afford to neglect no evidence, no suggestion, but must beware of imposing patterns of interpretation. Without the earlier plays, the problem may well be insoluble.

Laius had been warned by the oracle of Apollo that he should die without offspring, if he was to keep his city safe. He disobeyed, and Oedipus was born, to kill his father and wed his mother. Having discovered the truth, Oedipus blinded himself; and then he cursed his sons. They quarrelled. Polynices, in exile, brought a foreign army against his native city. Thebes is besieged and about to be assaulted. Eteocles leads the defenders. It is with the last phase only of this well-known legend that the *Septem* deals, and its action is of extreme simplicity. The play opens, unlike the *Persae* and the *Supplikes*, with a spoken prologue. Eteocles addresses the citizens: it is a general's speech before battle. He is joined by a spy, who tells him that the attack is imminent and that seven Argive

H. H. Bacon, *Seven against Thebes*, transl. (London and New York 1973); G. M. Kirkwood, 'Eteocles *oiakastrophos*', *Phoenix* 23 (1969), 9–25; A. Lesky, 'Eteokles in den Sieben gegen Theben', *WS* 74 (1961), 5–17; G. R. Manton, 'The second stasimon of the *Seven against Thebes*', *BICS* 8 (1961), 77–84; Brooks Otis, 'The unity of the *Seven against Thebes*', *GRBS* 3 (1960), 153–74; H. Patzer, 'Die dramatische Handlung des *Sieben gegen Theben*', *HSCP* 63 (1958), 97–119; A. J. Podlecki, 'The character of Eteocles in Aeschylus' *Septem*', *TAPA* 95 (1964), 283–99; T. G. Rosenmeyer, 'Seven against Thebes: the tragedy of war', *Arion* 1.1 (1962), 48–78; E. Wolff, 'Die Entscheidung des Eteokles in den *Sieben gegen Theben*', *HSCP* 63 (1958), 89–95.

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champions will lead their forces against the seven gates of Thebes. Eteocles prays, and the prologue is over. The chorus enters, not sedately marching, but dancing and singing to the excited dochmiac metre. They are the virgins of Thebes, panic-stricken by the sounds of the enemy; and they have come to throw themselves upon the altars of the city’s gods in passionate prayer. Eteocles rebukes them for indiscipline (in a scene which we shall have to consider with some care). At the end, saying that he will himself fight at one of the seven gates, he leaves the stage. After a choral ode, the Spy and Eteocles return in haste. The Spy has discovered the order of battle of the invaders: that is, he now knows which Argive champion will assault which gate. Each warrior is described – his bearing, his words, the blazon upon his shield; and against each Eteocles announces the dispatch of an appropriate defender. Six attackers and six defending champions. But at the seventh gate is Polynices. This is the dramatic climax of the play. Eteocles recognizes the working of his father’s curse and prepares to fight his brother in single combat. The chorus pleads with him, unavailingly, and he leaves the stage in full armour. They then sing of the Erinyes which is accomplishing the curse of Oedipus; they sing of the disobedience of Laius and so place the present crisis in relation to the disastrous history of the house. During their song the battle is decided. A messenger brings the news that the city is saved, but the two brothers have slain one another. Their bodies are brought on, and the play (the genuine play) ends with a lyric lamentation, or *threnos*.

The summary is flat – deliberately flat, to avoid taking issue on matters of controversy. Except that the spuriousness of the closing scene has been assumed. And on this something must be said, though it can be said briefly here. The manuscripts contain, first (861–74), an entry of Antigone and Ismene to lead the lamentations over their brothers and then, later (1005–78), the entry of a herald, who, speaking on behalf of the community, forbids the burial of Polynices. Antigone plays her familiar Sophoclean role and defies the edict, supported by half the chorus, and two separate funeral processions move off. (What fate awaits Antigone we can only surmise.) Here are two separate questions. The first is whether Aeschylus introduced the sisters at all, and it is of minor importance: some critics who reject the Herald accept Antigone and

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Ismene. Since this has little effect upon the general interpretation of the play, no words need be wasted on it. It is different with the Herald-scene. The real argument against the genuineness of this scene is not linguistic or stylistic (though such objections have been raised), but dramatic. It has seemed to many in the last degree improbable that at the very end of a trilogy Aeschylus would raise a new issue – and fail to carry it to a proper conclusion. And, since there was motive and opportunity for interpolation, it has seemed preferable to believe that the trilogy was not murdered by its own creator. As it stands in the manuscripts, the close of the trilogy is ragged. The *Oresteia* leaves no loose ends; and such evidence as we have suggests that the Danaid and Promethean trilogies also solved their problems in a rounded conclusion. It is of course an assumption, founded on a subjective judgment, that Aeschylus in 467 was writing trilogies upon the same principles of art and thought as in 458, but it is the assumption one prefers to make.⁴

This view also assumes that, if the interpolated passages are removed, we are left with a conclusion which is artistically satisfactory, consistent with what we know or can reasonably conjecture about the trilogy as a whole. For the content of the lost

4. H. Lloyd-Jones, 'The end of the *Seven against Thebes*', *CQ* 9 (1959), 80–115, sought to demonstrate, not that the suspected passages are undoubtedly genuine, but that the objective evidence adduced against them falls short of establishing that they are spurious. The weight of recent opinion is against their authenticity: cf. esp. E. Fraenkel, 'Zum Schluss der "Sieben gegen Theben"', *MH* 21 (1964), 58–64; R. D. Dawe, 'The end of *Seven against Thebes*', *CQ* 17 (1967), 16–28; P. Nicolaus, *Die Frage nach der Echtheit der Schlusszene von Aischylos' Sieben gegen Theben* (Diss. Tübingen 1967). 'Recent writers agree that the essential question is whether a new theme is likely to have been introduced at the end of a trilogy' (Cameron (1968), p. 249). For me the answer is clearly 'no', certainly not in this way. 'Was folgt aus dem so unerbitterlich formulierten Verbot? Nichts folgt, ganz und gar nichts; nichts geschieht, nichts wird oder kann geschehen' (Fraenkel, 'Zum Schluss...'). As to the sisters, whom W. Pötscher, 'Zum Schluss der Sieben gegen Theben', *Eranos* 46 (1958), 140–54, tried to rescue, I would only say that, if Aeschylus introduced them, he did not do so with the anapaests which stand in the text. It is simply incredible that the lines 854–60 – one of the finest and most moving sustained metaphors in the whole of Aeschylus – were separated from the *threnos* they were written to lead into by this poor stuff. If no sisters, 996f. should be deleted with Wilamowitz and Fraenkel. (Recently, Hecht and Bacon, pp. 7f., have maintained that 'the scene is integrated with the entire design of the play', but I am not convinced.)

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plays our most important evidence is in the second *stasimon* (720–91) – the choral ode which intervenes between the departure of Eteocles for the battle and the news of its outcome.⁵ In its explicit reference to past generations it is unlike any other feature of the surviving play; and its purpose is, obviously, to place the immediate action in a long perspective, to pull the threads together in preparation for the final act, which closes not this play only, but the trilogy as a whole. The ode is constructed with great care and with characteristic Aeschylean symmetry.

It opens with a word of fear; and fear was the key-note of the chorus’ earlier songs – fear for the city and for their fate as citizens. What they now fear is the Erinys, the grim goddess that is like to accomplish the curse of Oedipus upon his sons (720–6). ‘I shudder at the destroyer of a *house* (τὰν ὀλεσίοικον)’. At the end (790f.), after the terms of the curse (or something close to them) have been given, the ode concludes with the words: ‘I tremble lest the swift Erinys bring it to accomplishment.’ This is the familiar ring-composition. But, in addition, rather more than half-way through the ode (764f.) there is a third word of fear (followed immediately by a third reference to curses, a third word of accomplishment).⁶ And the fear is different. ‘I fear lest along with the princes the city be subdued.’ What has intervened to cause this change in the object of fear is the story of Laius and his disobedience. His disobedience to Apollo, who thrice spoke in his Pythian shrine to say that it was by dying without progeny that Laius would keep his city safe (θνᾶσκοντα γέννας ἄτερ σῶζειν πόλιν). We can be sure that in these or similar terms the audience had heard the oracle before (perhaps in the prologue of the *Laius*). The terms were chosen with care, so that neither Apollo nor Aeschylus was committed to the final destruction of the city. Oracles are traditionally ambiguous. This oracle might mean that the city would certainly be destroyed, if Laius had offspring: it was not excluded, however, that, if the family that should never have come into

5. For a careful examination of the ode see Manton, who conducted a series of seminar discussions on the play at the University of London Institute of Classical Studies in May 1960: after this lapse of time it is hard to be sure what I owe to him and to other participants.

6. Curses, 725, 766, 787; fear: 720, 763, 790; accomplishment: 724, 766, 791. The theme of wealth also appears at the beginning, middle and end of the ode: see pp. 33f. below.

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being perished, the city would be saved.⁷ One thing is certain: since the birth of Oedipus, the city has been in jeopardy.⁸ Thus, when the Messenger announces that the city has been saved (πόλις σέσωται), the words of the oracle (σώζειν πόλιν) are clearly recalled.⁹ But, if the city has been saved, the princes are dead and their ill-fated family has come to an end.¹⁰ The fates of both city and family have been in the balance; and of this double issue there is a double outcome. There is, as the Messenger says, cause for rejoicing and for tears, and his words are picked up by the chorus (814ff., 825ff.).

The *polis*-theme which runs through the *Septem* – and must have run through the trilogy – is underlined by the metaphor of the ship of state, of the ship in storm (there is no better example of a recurrent metaphor in Aeschylus). It is used with economy, and thus the more effectively, at salient points: in the first words of Eteocles (1ff.); towards the end of the Spy's first speech (62ff.); in the choral ode which follows the departure of Eteocles (758ff.); in the first words of the Messenger (795f.).¹¹ It is specially associated with Eteocles. Eteocles is steersman of the ship of state; he is lord of the Cadmeians (Καδμείων ἄναξ) and so first addressed (39). But he is also 'son of Oedipus' and so addressed by the chorus (203). Thus the two issues are both focused upon him; his words and actions and decisions affect them both. In the earlier part of the play we see him primarily in his 'political' role. As king of Thebes,

7. Cf. Manton, p. 80. The oracle in this form was no doubt the invention of Aeschylus. What was the question, and in what circumstances was it put? Better than the commonplace enquiry of childless couples, it would suit a consultation on the safety of the city (cf. Herodotus 6. 19). In any case the answer, as Manton points out, is paradoxical, 'since normally a king would regard it as his duty to provide for the carrying on of his own guardianship of the state by begetting a son'.

8. And was certainly jeopardized on a previous occasion by the Sphinx: see pp. 29f. below.

9. The passage 803–21 has suffered dislocation, and scholars are not agreed upon a remedy: see most recently H. Erbse, 'Interpretationsprobleme in den Septem des Aischylos', *Hermes* 92 (1964), 19–22; C. W. Willink, 'A problem in Aeschylus' *Septem*', *CQ* 18 (1968), 4–10. Both 804 and 820 open with πόλις σέσωται, followed by a reference to the fate of the royal brothers. If not both, then at least one or the other is genuine.

10. Line 828 (ἀτέκνους); cf. 690f.

11. The same comparison is used by Eteocles at 208–10. Dawson, pp. 18f., reviews the passages, together with related metaphors of wind and wave. Cf. also Kirkwood, pp. 19–22.

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he speaks as the situation requires (λέγειν τὰ καίρια, 1), and his generalship is wise. When he speaks and acts as son of Oedipus, will his words and deeds be as timely? It seems as though Aeschylus may have intended to invite this question. It is perhaps worth noticing a contrast brought out in the earlier part of the play. Note the words of the Spy at the end of his first speech (67f.): ‘through my clear reports you will have knowledge of the state of the external foe (τὰ τῶν θύραθεν) and will come to no harm’. As defender of his city against this external enemy, we see Eteocles as vigilant (3), undeceived (38) and well-informed (40, 67), saying as well as doing what is seasonable. May it not be that in his role as the accursed son of Oedipus, caught off his guard, caught in a trap, summoned to deal with a foe internal to his house, internal to himself, he will display a different quality?¹² Perhaps it is no accident that the Spy, as he leaves the stage after announcing that Polynices is at the seventh gate, is made to recall the prologue by reverting to ‘the ship of state’ (651f.).¹³

His speech (631–52) is the great hinge upon which the structure of the play turns; and his final words round off the whole first portion of the play. The sharp, the shattering, contrast between what has gone before and what comes after is enhanced by the extraordinary way in which Aeschylus has handled the exposition of this play – with a boldness only an ‘archaic’ poet would have dared to employ. Though the occasion of the war is the quarrel between

12. Cf. Bacon, pp. 29f.: ‘there is a danger “outside” which must not be let in, and a danger “inside” which must not be let out’; Caldwell, p. 205. Bacon points out that images of storm and animality are used of both the internal and the external enemy.

The expression τὰ τῶν θύραθεν recurs in 193, contrasted in the following line with ἐνδοθεν; since 194 is so true of Eteocles and his house, Aeschylus may have intended a double meaning. (If, with Headlam, reading ὀφέλλεται, we could translate 193 as ‘things outside are going as much as possible in our favour’, the point would emerge more clearly, but this is a doubtful sense for the verb.) The contrast recurs at 201f.: the women should leave ‘external’ affairs to the man, their place is within the house. But the house will be the source of danger, in relation to which Eteocles will need – and will reject – their counsels.

13. It is commonly, and perhaps rightly, held that 619 is spurious. It may seem uncalled-for as a comment on the Delphic oracle. If it was ‘dragged in’, it was in order to remind the audience of line 1, before the seasonableness of Eteocles’ speech is put to the final test. Dawson, *ad loc.*, defends the line, also with reference to 1, but on rather different grounds.

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Eteocles and Polynices, and though the climax of the action is to be their single-combat, no word is spoken of the quarrel, nor is Polynices named or his presence in the invading army mentioned, until the play has run more than half its course (576ff.). Though the quarrel and the duel are the working-out of the curse of Oedipus, that curse is only mentioned once in the earlier portion of the play, when Eteocles (69ff.), praying the gods to save the city, joins to Zeus and Earth and the city's gods the name of the Erinyes that is his father's Curse. Then the theme drops out until (655) Eteocles recognizes in the conjunction of himself and his brother at the seventh gate the fulfilment of that curse. From then on, it is never out of mind.¹⁴ This arrangement makes for a sheer dramatic effect of great power, for a moment of 'astonishment' (ἐκπληξίς) such as Aeschylus loved; and this might be explanation enough. But it has made critics ask in what the unity of the play resides, if it has unity; and what is the relationship between the Eteocles of the first part and the Eteocles of the second part, if they are related. It may be worth while to list some of the views which have been held upon these questions.

Aeschylus has taken from different versions of the myth two themes which are not really consistent and has combined them mechanically to fill out the action of his play (Wilamowitz). He has made Eteocles play different roles as each scene demanded, being interested in the dramatic effect of individual scenes rather than in the consistency of the whole (Howald). There is no inconsistency, no change in the bearing of Eteocles, who is from first to last the unselfish patriot, and who accepts the pollution of a brother's blood as the last and greatest gift he can make his country (Pohlenz). The complete change in Eteocles from the calm patriot of the first half to a man lusting after his brother's blood is the best possible evidence of the power of the Erinyes now suddenly working upon him (Solmsen). There are these views and variations upon them.¹⁵ Closely related to this controversy is

14. Lines 655, 695, 700, 709, 720ff., 766, 785ff., 819, 833, 841, 887, 977; cf. 987.

15. U. von Wilamowitz: e.g. *Aischylos Interpretationen* (Berlin 1914), pp. 66f.; *Griechische Verskunst* (Berlin 1921), p. 199. E. Howald, *Die griechische Tragödie* (Munich 1930), p. 73. M. Pohlenz, *Die griechische Tragödie*² (Göttingen 1954), pp. 91ff., 145. F. Solmsen, 'The Erinyes in Aeschylus' *Septem*', *TAPA* 68 (1937), 197-211 - an article which initiated a generation of debate. Add the view of Golden, for whom Eteocles is from first to last a self-seeking politician with no real belief in the Erinyes.

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another. To what extent should we regard Eteocles as a free agent? Is the decision that he shall fight his brother at the seventh gate his own or imposed upon him by the gods? Or do his own desires go along with the decrees of destiny? Are we right to speak of a *decision*? What did he decide and when did he decide it? Perhaps it will be best to take this last question first. It involves, for one thing, the effect and significance of the most striking single feature of the play.

Aeschylus liked to build an imposing feature in the middle of his plays (or rather later): the Darius-scene in the *Persae*, the Cassandra-scene in the *Agamemnon*, the great *kommos* in the *Choephoroi*. So here, in the centre of the play, 300 lines – nearly a third of the whole – are taken up with seven pairs of speeches (with brief lyrics between each pair): the Spy describes one by one the seven Argive champions at the seven gates and Eteocles names a Theban to oppose each one of them. (It is convenient to refer to this scene by the German term *Redepaare*.) The scene is unrealistic (and provoked a jibe from Euripides),¹⁶ but the day is doubtless past when it had to be defended from the charge of being undramatic. The drama resides primarily in the fact that Eteocles does not know, though the audience and the reader foresee, that he will meet his brother at the seventh gate; and, as each Theban champion is posted to meet an adversary who is not Polynices, the more certain it becomes that the brothers will meet, so that we see Eteocles, as it were, being forced down a narrowing tunnel towards his doom. If, as Kitto suggested,¹⁷ there are always good reasons why Eteocles should not post himself at one of the first six gates (and particularly if the sixth chance, because of the virtues of Amphiaraus, proves to be no chance at all), there is a strong effect of dramatic irony. The idea is attractive, but has met

16. *Phoen.* 751f.: cf. *Arethusa* 2 (1969), 139, n. 18.

17. *Greek tragedy*³, pp. 50f. Kitto is excellent on the general effect of this scene, but goes too far when he speaks of Eteocles as ‘a man of acute moral perceptions’, who appoints against each attacker ‘the man best fitted by his moral character to meet that particular assailant’. Neither the attackers nor the defenders are quite so clearly differentiated as that. A special importance seems to attach to Tydeus (and Kitto may be right that the first person singular in 397 suggests, for a moment, that Eteocles will go against him), and to the virtuous Amphiaraus against whom he cannot go; and it may not be accidental that these, together with the seventh gate, are the three cases in which a future tense is used (see n. 19). (Delete 472, with Fraenkel and Page.)

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a powerful challenge.¹⁸ When did Eteocles make his choices? He states (at 282ff.) that he will post seven champions, himself included, to the seven gates ‘before the swift and hasty-rumoured words of a messenger arrive and set all ablaze under pressure of need’. This is explicitly said, and (so the argument goes) it should be assumed, in default of evidence to the contrary, that it is carried out and that, therefore, when he meets the Spy, his postings have already been made; and, since the Argive order of battle has been determined by lot (55f., 376), it is the gods, not Eteocles, who have paired the two brothers at the seventh gate; and it is this divine appointment that he recognizes by his outburst at 653ff. This view also has its attraction, but encounters a difficulty. Having described the first of the Argive warriors, the Spy asks: ‘Whom will you post against him?’; and in due course Eteocles replies: ‘I will post against Tydeus the good son of Astacus.’ τίν’ ἀντιτάξεις τῷδε; , τόνδ’ ἀντιτάξω (395, 408). That the Spy, who cannot know what has been happening, should use the future tense is natural enough. But surely, if Aeschylus wished it to be clear that the postings had already been made, the one thing he should not have done was to make Eteocles use the future tense of the very first posting. In fact different tenses are used in different instances: three futures, two perfects, an aorist and a present; and this has perplexed the commentators. More perhaps than it need have done. Taking the tenses at their face-value, a spectator will suppose that Eteocles has been interrupted at his work, that some champions have been posted and some not. It could even be that, as Lesky suggests, he aimed deliberately to combine two impressions both vital to the effect of the scene – the sense of an inexorable destiny, the sense that something is developing before our eyes. And the second impression *is* vital. Indeed it is hard to see that there is any real advantage, dramatic or religious, in making the conjunction of Eteocles with Polynices arise automatically from decisions taken prior to this scene. The duel is in any case contrived by the Erinyes. How much better that the spectator should feel that the Erinyes has been working under his very eyes, through words and decisions of a character upon the stage!¹⁹

18. By Wolff and Patzer in *HSCP* (1958).

19. My criticism of the Wolff–Patzer view follows much the same lines as A. Lesky in *WS* (1961) and *Die tragische Dichtung der Hellenen*³ (Göttingen 1972),